THE BLACK CIVIL WAR SOLDIER

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A VISUAL HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND CITIZENSHIP

DEBORAH WILLIS

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Half title art: Alexander Herritage Newton (*left*) as a quartermaster sergeant with the Twenty-Ninth Connecticut Infantry, ca. 1865. Standing next to him is Daniel S. Lathrop (1846–1924), who served at the same rank in the regiment. (Photographers: James Horace Wells and David C. Collins of New Haven, Connecticut; carte de visit; Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)

Frontis: Sergeant Henry F. Steward, 1863. (Hand-colored ambrotype; from the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment photographs, Massachusetts Historical Society, photo 2.162)

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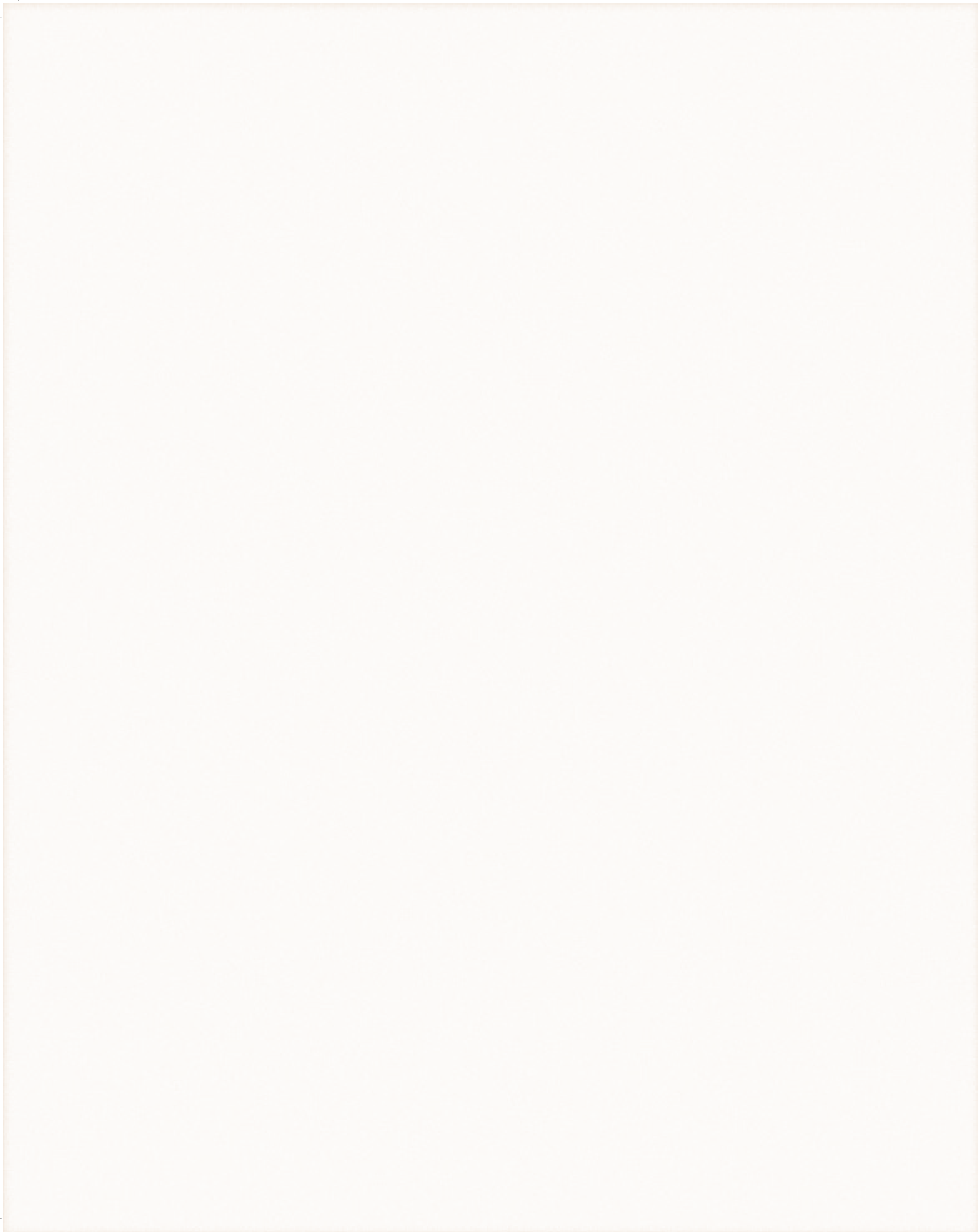


PREFACE

Memory, personal and public, as viewed through the experience of photography, shaped the history of the black Civil War soldier. This book synthesizes that history—both difficult and desired. We seek out memorials about slavery and the Civil War in the North and the South. We are engrossed in public debates about the relevance of monuments from Stone Mountain to Grant's Tomb. We visit historic sites such as Gettysburg, the African American Civil War Museum, and the Cyclorama in Atlanta, searching for new stories, and many people attend Civil War reenactments and Juneteenth celebrations. A number of films over the past few years—from *12 Years a Slave* and *Belle* to *Lincoln*, *Django Unchained*, and *Harriet*—have sought to tell an accurate story about slavery and freedom. Now that a large number of records are finally being digitized and becoming accessible, I believe it is important to reveal both the heroic and the horrific moments.

There is something about looking at images that forces me to question the narratives of the past. I have long been puzzled by the imagery of black peoples, and I have tried to make sense of the story that has been told. For decades, we have been taught to look at photographs as objects, but now, thanks to new scholarship, we are encouraged to consider the idea of postmemory and listening when we view photographs.[1] Images represent visual responses to what we may have been told about a period and prompt such questions as, How was black male identity formed by images of soldiers in uniform? In addition to reading images closely, I wanted this book

to include the invisible voices—arising from slave narratives and contemporary letters—of the people who are not typically researched. It was important for me to incorporate new voices and images in order to grapple with a history that is often exclusionary. Photographs and words function as a testimony that reflects people's bravery, pride, and determination and reminds us of the toll of war.

Photography first appeared in the United States in the 1840s, a time when images were more accessible than ever before. The photograph became the mechanical visual evidence that slavery existed, as did its resistance. Indeed, I believe the story of that resistance can be found in the photographs of black Civil War soldiers. That was the impetus for this book, which examines the public's memory of the Civil War and how the presence and lack of images of black soldiers influence our modern perceptions of the war in the archive. It weaves a narrative about the early years of American photography, focusing on iconic moments of the war and the role black Americans played in shaping the visual narrative of freedom. As the curator Okwui Enwezor asserts, "There is something to be said for historical returns, the way past events play on our memories,"[2] as we pay homage to historical and iconic images. What amazes me is the overlapping of historical narratives—from popular culture to literary texts—that make visible the racialized and gendered readings often depicted as "truths."

Unexpected and informative sources for my research include pension records and various periodicals whose focus was general interest, civil war, abolitionism, and religion. For example, a file in the pension records documents the story of Susan Brewster, wife of Henry, whose applications to receive her husband's pension were repeatedly denied. While giving a lecture at Carnegie-Mellon in Pittsburgh, I met the historian Millington Bergeson-Lockwood, who told me about his own research while using the pension records and introduced the complicated story of the Brewsters to me. In 1905, at the age of fifty-seven, Susan sent her only photograph of her husband along with her petition, requesting its return.[3] Sadly, the photograph is still filed at the US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions, having never been returned. Henry Brewster was a blacksmith and a tailor; in the photograph, he holds a ruler and wears a long coat. Susan's story is long and complicated; she tried many times to prove her marriage to Henry and his service in the war. The following is her initial affidavit.

Original Petition for Pension
State of New York
Columbia County

Susan Brewster having been duly sworn deposes and says that she is the widow of Henry M. Brewster late private in Co. E 55 Mass. Vol. Infantry, that he enlisted under the name of Henry M. Forrest as a private at Newberryport Mass Feb 14, 1865. He was born in Lee, Mass. about 1835. His father's name was Fredrich Brewster. Henry M. Brewster was a colored man at the time he enlisted he was a blacksmith. After he left the army he did laboring work as long as he was able. My full name is Susan Brewster. My maiden name was Susan Whitford. I was married to the soldier at Pittsfield Mass. Dec 6, 1867 by the Rev. Mr Miller. we lived together from the time of our marriage to his death at Sommers, Ct. Lee, Mass, Hartford, conn. We had one daughter born at Hartford conn. April 18th 1883. He had lost the sight of his left eye & ?? of his right eye. He was troubled with his kidneys from the time he left the army to his death, which was from acute Bright's disease. He was discharged for disability at US Hospital Beaufort, S.C. July 10, 1865. He died April 19th 1899. Subscribed and

Signed: Susan Brewster
Dated: 26th Day of June 1905.
Harold Wilson Jr. Notary Public
Columbia County, New York[4]

Portrait of Henry Brewster, ca. 1870s. (National Archives Pension Records)

Numerous women—mothers, wives, and daughters—believed in the fight for freedom as their sons, fathers, and husbands left the plantations all over the South. They recognized not only their sons' and husbands' role but also their own role in their quest. The historian Tera Hunter helps to visually frame the experiences of wives: "While women asserted claims of 'citizen wife' or 'soldier's wife,' they were not readily granted either. And yet their carefully chosen self-descriptions defined how they were at once vital to and undervalued by the Union. They spoke about their contributions and sacrifices as though they had, like their husbands, 'entered the army.'"[5] For example, Letty Barnes wrote to her husband, Joshua, of the Thirty-Eighth US Colored Infantry (USCI),

> My dear husband
> I have just this evening received your letter sent me by Fredrick Finich you can imagin how anxious and worry I had become about you. And so it seems that all can get home once in awhile to see and attend to their familey but you I do really think it looks hard your poor old Mother is hear delving and working like a dog to try to keep soul and body together and here am I with to little children and myself to support and not one soul or one dollar to help us I do think if your officers could see us they would certanly let you come home and bring us a little money.
>
> I have sent you a little keepsake in this letter which you must prize for my sake it is a set of Shirt Bossom Buttons whenever you look at them think of me and know that I am always looking and wishing for you write to me as soon as you receive this let me know how you like them and when you are coming home and beleave me as ever
>
> Your devoted wife
> *Letty Barnes*

It appears from the records in the National Archives that Joshua Barnes received his buttons and was granted leave to visit his family.[6]

The archive speaks. If we search, if we listen, it can reveal worlds of brutality and kindness, of shame and glory. In this book, I want you to see and hear the world of the black soldiers and the wives and mothers of the Civil War.

INTRODUCTION

Once [you] let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, US, let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket; and there is no power on the earth, or under the earth, that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.

—Frederick Douglass, abolitionist and orator

I feel more inclined daily, to press the army on further and further; and, let my opposition be in life what it will, I do firmly vow, that I will fight as long as a star can be seen and if it should be my lot to be cut down in battle, I do believe . . . that my soul will be forever at rest.

—Sergeant Charles Brown, Union army

My position as an officer of the United States, entitles me to wear the insignia of my office, and if I am either afraid or ashamed to wear them, anywhere, I am not fit to hold my commission.

—Alexander T. Augusta, MD

Portrait of Richard Eatheridge (hand-colored) and letter (see facing page), ca. 1860s. (Carte de visite and letter; Collection of Jacob Loewentheil and Stephan Loewentheil)

H.Qrs [illegible] U.S.C.I.
Brigade Santiago [illegible]
Aug 21st [illegible]

Major

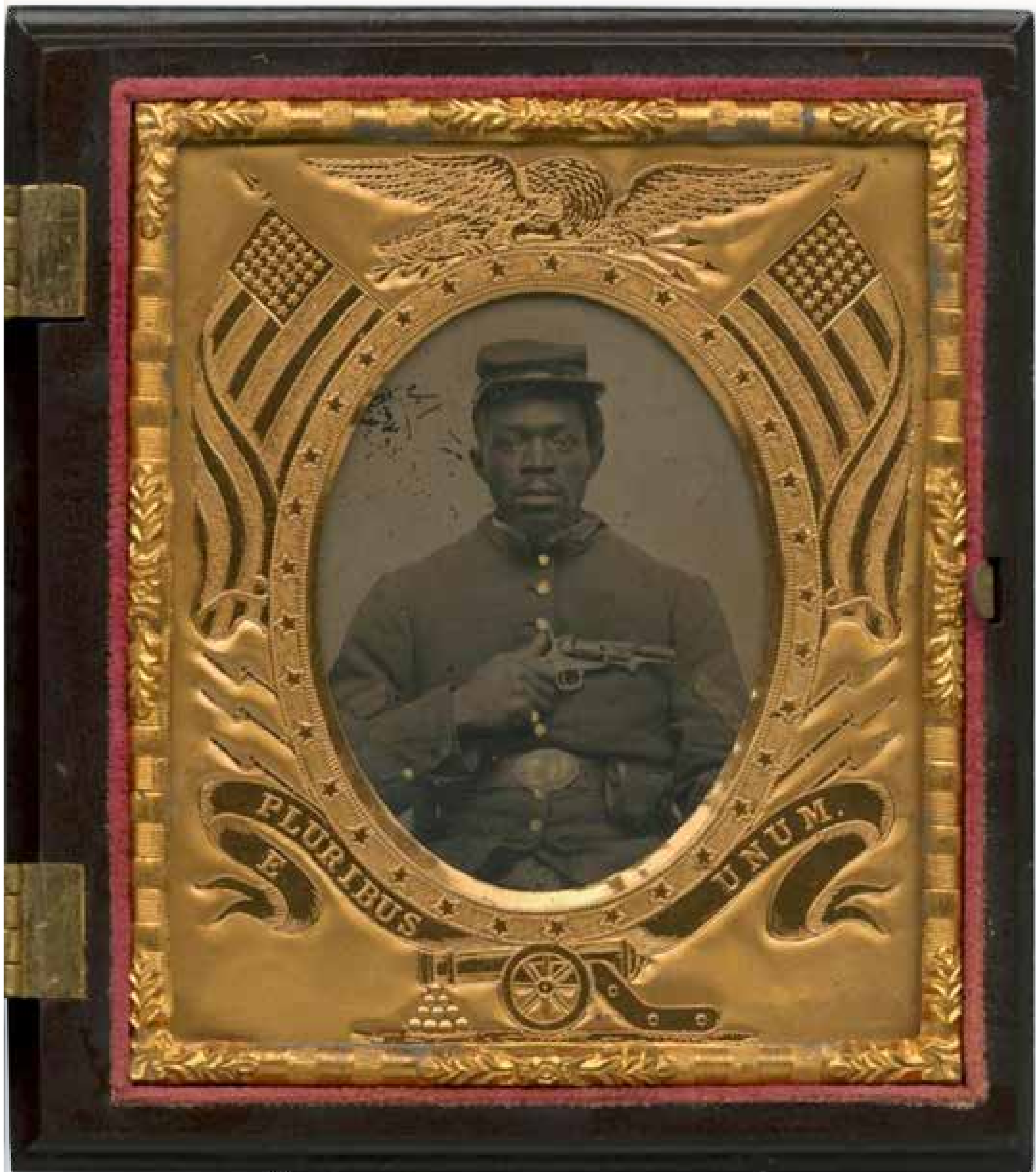
I have the honor to send herewith my kind regards for your future welfare trusting that in days to come the enclosed [illegible] may be the means of bringing to you pleasant recollections of days past when you devoted all in your power for the rights and elevation of the colored race and I trust that you may receive your just reward in Heaven is the constant prayer of

Yours &c humble servant
Robert H. [illegible]
H.Qrs [illegible] C.C.

To Bvt Maj Oren A Hendrick
[illegible] C.I.

Portrait of Oren A. Hendrick (reproduction). (Collection of Jacob Loewentheil and Stephan Loewentheil)

Tintype with cover glass of an African American Union soldier with a mustache and beard, holding a pistol across his chest; in black thermoplastic case with brass hinges and red velvet liner, preserver and mat, brass decorated with eagle, two American flags, cannon, and "E Pluribus Unum" set in a red velvet liner. His buttons and belt buckle are hand-colored in gold paint.

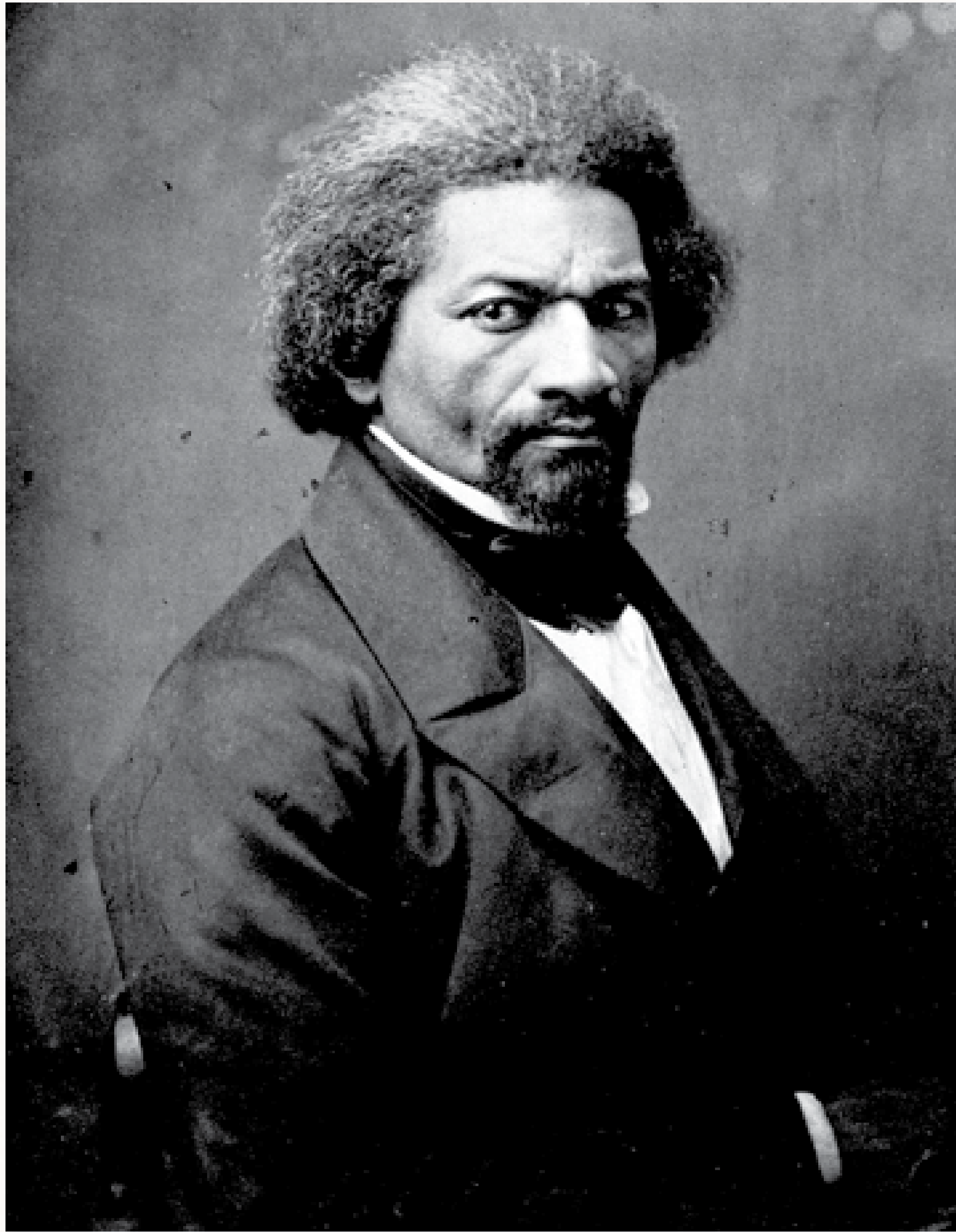


The hand-coloring on the buckle reads backward "SU," which when considered that the image is reversed, reads "US," the traditional inscription on Union Civil War belt buckles. (Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift from the Liljenquist Family Collection, 2011.51.12)

The epigraphs to this chapter, by Frederick Douglass, Sergeant Charles Brown, and Alexander T. Augusta, frame the black Civil War soldier in patriotism and manhood.[1] When we read text and images from the war in this way, we imagine in an instant the sense of bravery and pride that accompanied the very act of pinning and wearing that emblematic eagle and brass button. Portraits of black soldiers, whether taken in a photographic studio, on a battleground, or on a campground, are connected to the concept of democracy and citizenship expressed by Douglass. As the authors of *Picturing Frederick Douglass* explain, "It was the Civil War that inspired Douglass to write and speak on photography. . . . Like many Americans, he believed that photographs and pictures greatly contributed to secession and a war over slavery. During the Civil War years, Douglass penned four lectures on photography and 'picture-making.'"[2] Viewing photography as a form of activism, he connected the making of an image to the affirmation of humanity. "Douglass spoke about the transformative power of pictures to affect a new vision for the nation," asserts the art historian Sarah Lewis. "[He] argued that combat might end complete sectional disunion, but America's progress would require pictures because of the images they conjure[d] in one's imagination."[3]

With this book, I too seek to engage that sense of activism and highlight the various acts of courage by black men, both bonded and free, during the Civil War, as well as the rewards they received. Just as critical are the low points for those who fought in the war—from inequities in pay to discriminatory practices in the field to inadequate health services. These are experiences shared by all the soldiers, no matter their backgrounds. By examining diary pages, letters, and news items, I want to build on the stories that their portraits "tell"—to focus a lens on their hopefulness and the sense of what could be won from loss. These personal memories reach through the decades and centuries to tell us about individual feelings of love and longing, responsibility and fear, commitment and patriotism.

Black soldiers desired to communicate with their loved ones through letter writing as soon as their units were mustered into the army. Women like Frances Beecher and Susie King Taylor taught soldiers of color to "read and write while they were stationed at Beaufort and Jacksonville," Beecher said. A white woman, she was the wife of Colonel James Beecher, commander of the Thirty-Fifth US Colored Infantry. As she recalled,



Half-length portrait of Frederick Douglass, ca. 1860s. (Unidentified photographer; Collection of the New-York Historical Society)

Portrait of Susie King Taylor, 1902. (Courtesy East Carolina University; 3a03574)

> My mornings were spent in teaching the men of our regiment to read and write, and it became my pleasing duty and habit, wherever our moving tents were pitched, there to set up our school. Sometimes the chaplain assisted, and sometimes the officers; and the result was that when the men came to be mustered out each one of them could proudly sign his name to the pay-roll in a good legible hand. When enlisted, all but two or three of them were obliged to put a mark to their names as written by the paymaster . . . while their eagerness to learn and the difficulty that many found in learning were very touching. One bright mulatto man particularly worked at his letters for two years, and then could only write his own name; while others learned at once. Whenever they had a spare moment, out would come a spelling-book or a primer or Testament, and you would often see a group of heads around one book.[4]

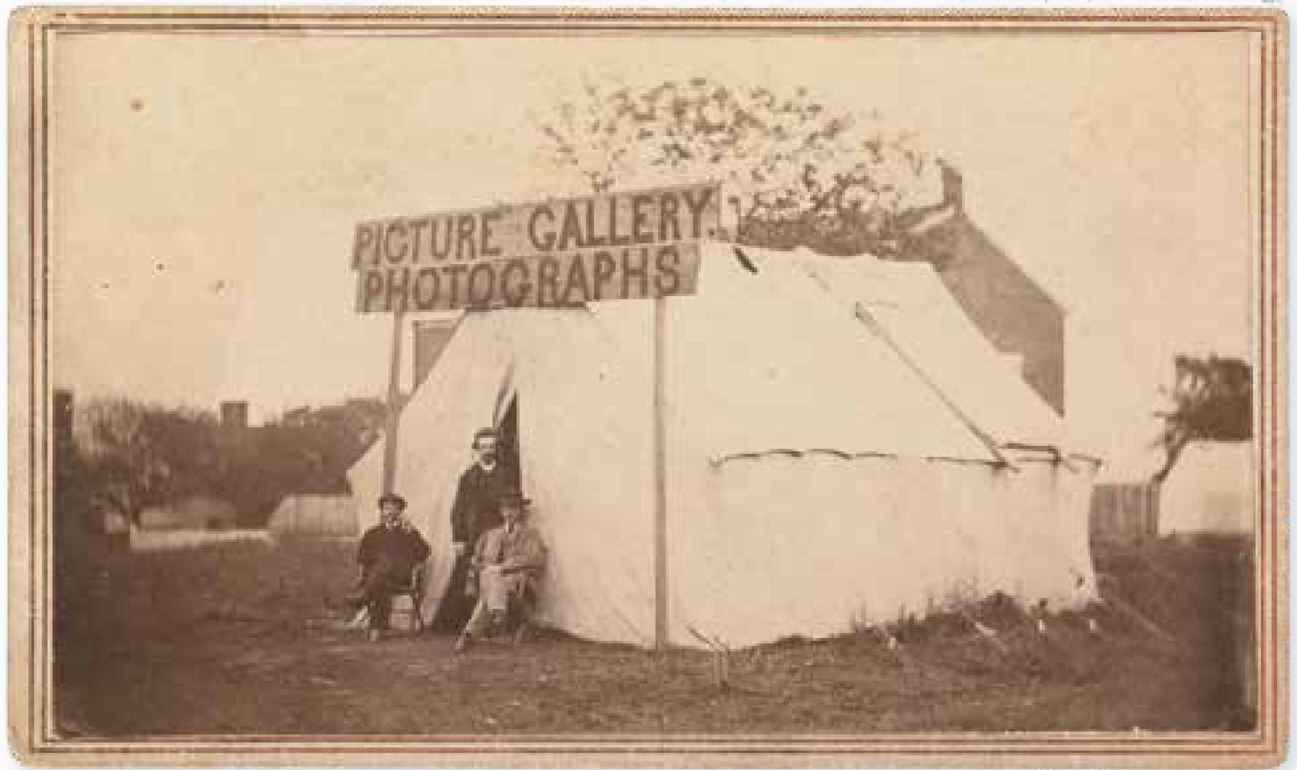
Taylor, a black woman who had escaped from slavery, in 1862 lived on St. Simons Island, off the coast of Georgia, and found work as a nurse, laundress, teacher, and cook for the First South Carolina Volunteers. She taught children and adults how to read, using Bibles and other books sent from the North, and wrote about teaching black soldiers: "I taught a great many of the comrades in Company E to read and write, when they were off duty. Nearly all were anxious to learn. My husband taught some also when it was convenient for him."[5]

I learned about the reality of the Civil War from the letters of black soldiers and the photographs that frequently accompanied them. Black soldiers wrote to and received letters from black nurses and teachers, wives and mothers, girlfriends and daughters, and doctors (who supported and protested the war), as well as white officers and their wives. Some letters were written by the soldiers themselves; others were dictated to an unnamed scribe. They convey the importance of family and family ties, the urgent need to belong, losses caused by the war, and abuses inflicted on enslaved relatives left behind. "Through all their letters flows a current of dignity and pride," notes Edwin Redkey. "There is an unmistakable note of achievement and self-confidence."[6] Such letters, and pages from diaries, hold the legacy of African American resilience.

That people memorialized these experiences through photographs indicates the urgency of the moment. Having a photograph taken

was indeed a self-conscious act, one that shows the subjects were aware of the significance of the moment and sought to preserve it. Photographs were a luxury; their prevalence shows their importance as records of family, position, identity, and humanity, as status symbols. A soldier or a sailor who posed in front of a painted backdrop in a photo studio paid extra to have the flag carefully hand-colored. In the North, ambrotypes and tintypes cost from $0.25 for the smallest images to $2.50 for the largest—approximately $6 to $60 in today's dollars. In the South, black soldiers had few opportunities to

Portrait of a soldier with rifle, ca. 1860s. (Quarter-plate ambrotype; courtesy of Greg French and Collection of Greg French)



Picture gallery photographs, 1860s. (Unidentified artist; albumen silver print, carte de visite; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York purchase, Alfred Stieglitz Society Gifts, 2013; accession number 2013.57)

sit for a portrait. Commercial portrait photographers were few in the Confederate states, and photographic supplies were frequently not available. A limited number of Southern photographers held onto their businesses by raising prices to compensate for the high price of photographic supplies and the inflated Confederate dollar.[7]

In the 150-plus years since the end of the Civil War, books on the topic frequently have focused on the stories of politicians or landowners, the economy of slavery, or the reasoning that led to the war. Other books detail the tactics of the battles that took place in the North and the South or the strategies of the military leaders on both sides. Still others praise the heroism of the men who fought and, through extraordinary effort and determination, earned fame, glory, and monuments for themselves and their combat units. Some of these books overlook the contributions made by the black soldiers who fought and died for their own families and for freedom.

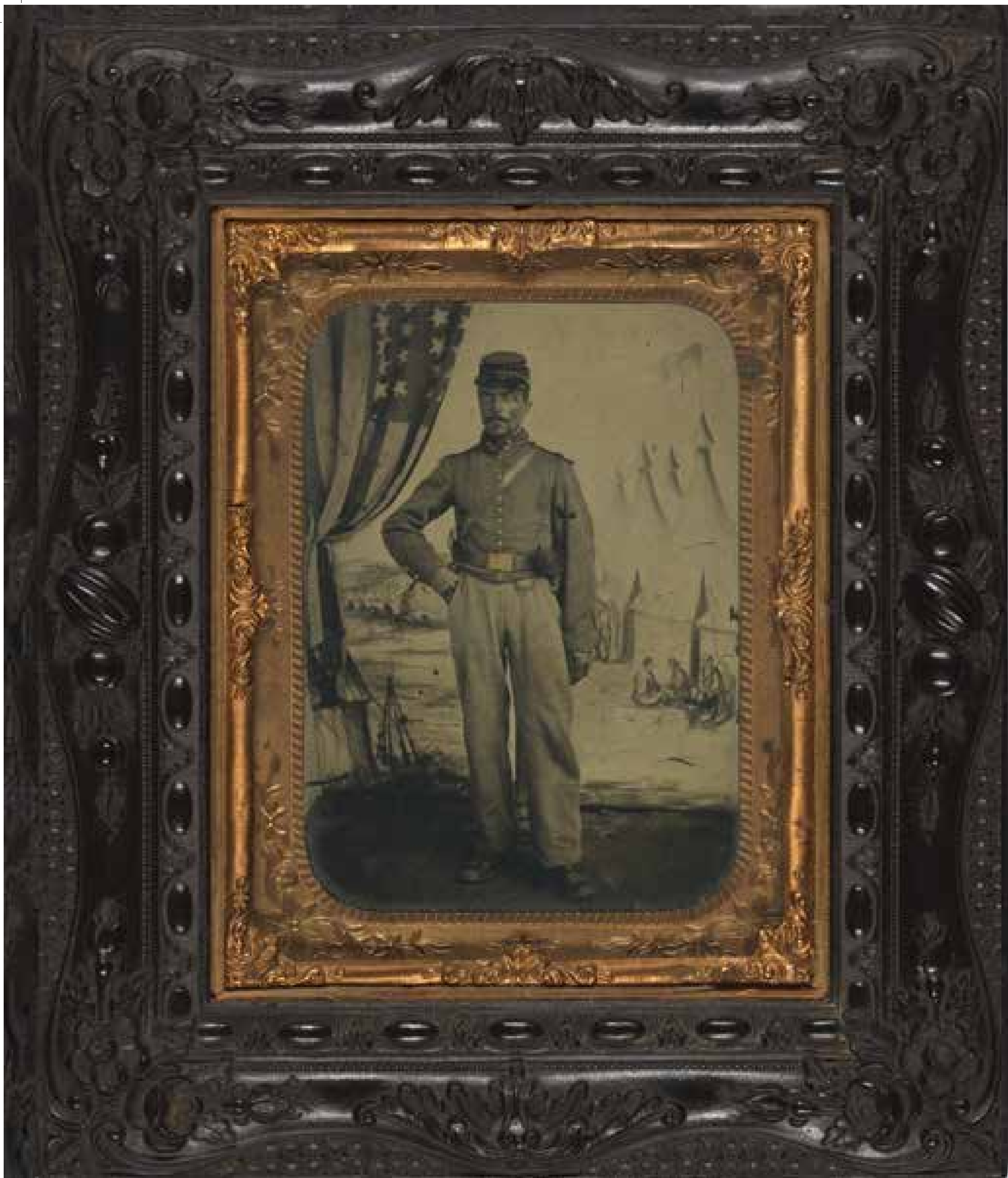
Double portrait of a Civil War soldier (seated and standing). (Plate ambrotypes; courtesy of Greg French and Collection of Greg French)

Quarters of Provost Marshall, Civil War, Port Hudson, Louisiana. (Louisiana Collection, State Library of Louisiana; Hp000582)

Group portrait of guard of US Civil War soldiers in Port Hudson, Louisiana. (Louisiana Collection, State Library of Louisiana; Hp001117)

Take, for example, the story of heroism and profound determination shown by Captain Andre Cailloux of the First Louisiana Native Guard, who died as he led his troops into battle at Port Hudson, Louisiana, on May 27, 1863 (one of the most important strategic battles of the war). His story is inspiring yet tragic, and his bravery and his death greatly affected people in his hometown, who gave him a public funeral. "Cailloux's death had a profound impact on people of color in New Orleans," writes Stephen J. Ochs. "To blacks, this funeral for one of their own attested to their capacity for patriotism, courage and martial valor. . . . Women of color donned crepe rosettes in mourning. . . . His body lay in state for four days in the hall of the Friends of the Order. . . . The coffin was draped with the American flag on which rested Cailloux's sword and belt, uniform coat and cap."[8]

Unfortunately, there are no known photographic portraits of Cailloux or his feats of heroism; however, descriptions of his bravery and achievements can be found in numerous articles and books, and his life has been reimagined through artist renderings. Using photographs to study the Civil War challenges the historical record in numerous ways. In searching for ways to include Cailloux's story in this book, beyond descriptions of his funeral by people who were there, I realized it was important to employ new methods, to use



Portrait of an unidentified African American soldier in Union artillery shell jacket and shoulder scales in front of painted backdrop showing military camp with flag, 1861 and 1865. (Quarter-plate tintype, hand-colored; Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division; LC-DIG-ppmsca-37532 LC-DIG-ppmsca-27532)

Double portraits of a Connecticut soldier and his wife. (Cartes de visite; courtesy of Greg French and Collection of Greg French)

Portrait of husband and wife, ca. 1860s. (Tintype; courtesy of Greg French and Collection of Greg French)

Tenth Army Corps, a Union army regiment composed of self-emancipated men, in formation, near Beaufort, South Carolina, 1863–64. (Photographer: Samuel A. Cooley; stereograph; Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division; LC-DIG-stereo-1s04441LOT 14110-5, no. 51 (H))

images of unidentified soldiers posing in uniforms and free and bonded women dressed fashionably and in work garments. In this way, I could complete the story of the importance of the clothed black body.

Since 2010, the United States has seen a boom in publishing, documentaries, and lectures on the Civil War; some of the works and presentations feature newly discovered photographs, many included in these pages. However, personal documents and photographs from that period do more than tell us about soldiers on the battlefield. These words and images also shape our ideas about black families and black identity during the Civil War and the years that followed. In the past twenty years, more and more researchers and scholars digging into Civil War archives have revealed alternative narratives about the experiences of the black men who fought the battles, worked the camps, built the bunkers, suffered the wounds, and died on a daily basis on hundreds of battlefields. The Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Howard University's Moorland Spingarn Research Center, the Charles L. Blockson Afro American Collection at Temple University, Yale University, and the National Archives are just a few of the important resources for researching the history of photography and the Civil War, as is the scholarship conducted using their collections. For example, the wartime and postwar experiences of wives, children, and surviving soldiers come alive in the letters and photographs that form the Pension Fund records at the National Archives and in images from W. E. B. Du Bois's 1900 Paris exhibition *A Small Nation of People*, now part of the collections at the Library of Congress.

This book returns the voices to these men and women, whose lives in some cases had long been forgotten, whose bodies lie unidentified, and whose voices have been silenced for decades. Letters between loved ones, friends, foes, and fellow soldiers help us to resurrect their views about the war and the circumstances in which they found themselves.

[CHAPTER ONE]

1860–61

THE WAR BEGINS

There were debates about the need for political change and quietly spoken rumors of war in the United States during the autumn of 1860. The controversy surrounding the presidential election of 1860 brought much of the discussion out into the open. Although the black population in the United States has rarely been recognized as a participant in the conversations, there was much discussion in the cotton fields, plantation houses, tobacco barns, churches, and masonic halls. I imagine that enslaved blacks overheard the feverish political discussions among whites, passed information on to other blacks, and became pro-Lincoln very early, associating him with their freedom. Many enslaved blacks and servants were united in their opinion—they associated war with emancipation. When Abraham Lincoln won the election, black people listened intently for the next development. This is found in the letters that black men and women wrote directly to President Lincoln. The decisions made in Washington, DC, and on the battlefields during the Civil War had a major impact on their daily lives.

On December 21, 1860, as a direct consequence of Abraham Lincoln's election as president, the state of South Carolina formally seceded from the Union—an act that ignited the flame that would become the War between the States. Seven states joined South Carolina to form the Confederacy; four more states seceded after the war began in April 1861. President Lincoln called for seventy-five thousand new troops for the Union army; however, African American men were

excluded from this initial call-up. Many who eventually fought for the Union had to protest to the government to allow them to serve. Before the war, a large number of free black people—journalists, farmers, religious leaders, abolitionists—had advocated for black participation in the military. They understood that it was vital for black people to be engaged fully and that the armed services provided a direct route to that goal. Even though that call did not come until 1863, the inclusion of black servicemen had a direct impact on everyone.

In my search for details about the 1860-61 period, I turned to correspondence and other accounts from white officers and surgeons and letters that black people sent to editors of newspapers sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. Now housed in archives or documented in books, newspapers, and journals, these are fascinating descriptions of the early days of the Civil War. Blacks sought their freedom and freedom for others. Black people were often endangered by both armies and were vulnerable as they left plantations and homes without weapons or shelter of any kind. Traveling through swamps, over dusty trails, and across rivers, families seeking freedom carried all of their possessions, clothing, food, and other items in sacks, on their backs, or in wagons following Union troops or to escape their plight. Although the Union Army did not initially welcome black people, that attitude had changed as early as May 1861. By January 1862, the Lincoln administration was already engaging black people to support the war effort in many ways.

There was no ambiguity in the war's beginning. Two Southern men, one representing the Confederacy and the other representing the Union, exchanged three courteous and respectful letters: the first, an invitation/demand; the second, a rejection of that invitation; the third, an attack. General P. G. T. Beauregard, of the Confederate States of America, announced the precise date, time, and place of the beginning of the war when he composed the third letter to Major Robert Anderson of the United States.

To: Maj. Robert Anderson
Commanding at Fort Sumter

April 11, 1861

Dear Sir,

I am ordered by the Government of the Confederate States to demand the evacuation of Fort Sumter. My aides, Colonel Chesnut and

Captain Lee, are authorized to make such demand of you. All proper facilities will be afforded for the removal of yourself and command, together with company arms and property, and all private property, to any post in the United States which you may select. The flag which you have upheld so long and with so much fortitude, under the most trying circumstances, may be saluted by you on taking it down. Colonel Chesnut and Captain Lee will, for a reasonable time, await your answer. I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant.

G. T. Beauregard
Brigadier-General, Commanding
Headquarters Provisional Army, CSA
Charleston, SC

To: G. T. Beauregard
Brigadier-General, Commanding
Headquarters Provisional Army, CSA
Charleston, SC

April 11, 1861
General:
I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication demanding the evacuation of this fort, and to say, in reply thereto, that it is a demand with which I regret that my sense of honor, and of my obligations to my Government, prevent my compliance. Thanking you for the fair, manly, and courteous terms proposed, and for the high compliment paid me, I am, general, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

Robert Anderson
Major, First Artillery, Commanding
Fort Sumter, SC

April 12, 1861, 3.20 a.m.
Sir:
By authority of Brigadier-General Beauregard, Commanding the Provisional Forces of the Confederate States, we have the honor to notify you that he will open the fire of his batteries on Fort Sumter in one hour from this time. We have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servants,

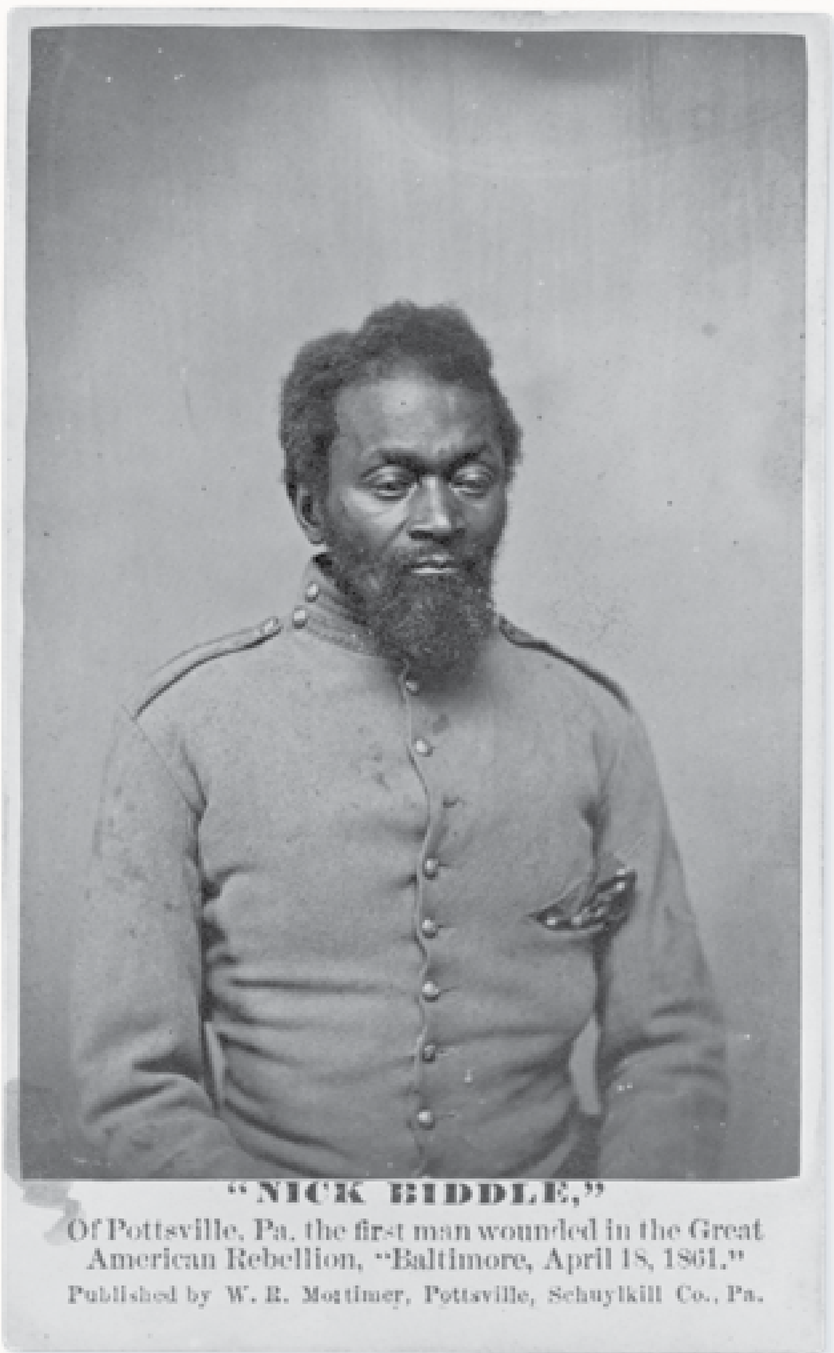
James Chesnut, Jr., Aide-de-Camp
Stephen D. Lee, Captain, C.S. Army, Aide-de-Camp[1]

Abraham Lincoln with, from left, Colonel Alexander S. Webb, Chief of Staff, Fifth Corps; General George B. McClellan; Scout Adams; Dr. Jonathan Letterman, Army Medical Director; an unidentified person; and standing behind Lincoln, General Henry J. Hunt. (Photographer: Alexander Gardner, 1862; Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, PRES FILE—Lincoln, Abraham—Portraits—Meserve no. 44, LC-USZ62-2276)

During the period leading up to this exchange between the commanders of the opposing forces in Charleston Harbor, hundreds of black men were working as laborers for each side. They repaired the structures at Fort Sumter for the federal government and upgraded and expanded the facilities at Fort Moultrie and Castle Pinckney for the Confederate army.

The war formally started on April 12, 1861, with that attack on Fort Sumter. Lincoln realized that the Confederates' next target would be the Capitol, the seat of the federal government and the Union itself. Seventy-five thousand men—the maximum number the Constitution allowed federal authorities seeking to put down a rebellion—were formally called on April 15, 1861, by the secretary of war, for a ninety-day enlistment in the Union army. Each state's armed forces provided its quota, and the troops moved south to defend the nation. On April 18, 1861, five volunteer militia companies from Pennsylvania marched through the city of Baltimore on the way to defend the Capitol in Washington, DC. These soldiers were attacked by a mob of local citizens who were sympathetic to the Confederate cause. A sixty-five-year-old black soldier, Nicholas Biddle (ca. 1796–1876), the apparent target of the attack, was hit in the face with a brick, and someone in the crowd yelled derogatory epithets because he was a black man wearing a uniform. Bloodied but not otherwise seriously injured, Biddle was helped to his feet by white soldiers and continued the march to Washington, DC, where the regiment camped and waited for further orders. Biddle was reportedly the first man to shed blood during the Civil War. Four men from Pennsylvania were also attacked.

> When the soldiers at last arrived at Camden Station [in Baltimore], violence erupted. They were pelted with stones, bricks, bottles, and whatever else the vehement mob could find; some were even clubbed and knocked down by a few well-landed punches. A few more determined Confederate sympathizers lunged at the unarmed Pennsylvanians with knives and drawn pistols. "Powder had been sprinkled by the mob on the floor of the [railroad] cars," wrote First Defender Heber S. Thompson (1840–1911) of Pottsville, "in the hope that a soldier carelessly striking a match in the darkened interior of the car might blow himself and his comrades to perdition." . . . For the idealistic volunteers from



Nicholas Biddle, "the first man wounded in the Great American Rebellion," Baltimore, April 18, 1861. (Carte de visite; Charles L. Blockson Collection, Temple University Libraries)

> Pottsville, Allentown, Reading, and Lewistown, it was a trying ordeal and one that diminished the romanticized notion of the glories of soldiering. Soon, all the men were boarded and the train sped south toward Washington. Of all the injuries sustained during the harrowing ordeal, the most serious was Biddle's. Because he was Black, Biddle was prevented from being mustered in as a soldier. Not to be deterred, however, he [had] marched off to war as the orderly (an attendant to an officer) of Captain James Wren (1825–1901), the commanding officer of the Washington Artillery. Biddle had been associated with the company since its formation in 1840 and was so highly regarded by Wren and the members of the Washington Artillery that he was considered one of their own and even permitted to wear the company's uniform.[2]

According to numerous historical accounts, President Lincoln and others from his Cabinet greeted the soldiers on Capitol Hill and noticed the injured Biddle among the other soldiers the following day.

The next day, April 19, 1861, a troop train carrying the Sixth Massachusetts Infantry regiment on the way to Washington was attacked by another Baltimore mob, larger this time and armed with guns. Having heard an account of the attack on the Pennsylvania Militia that had taken place the previous day, Colonel Edward F. Jones, the commander of the Sixth Massachusetts Infantry, had fully armed his regiment and prepared the men for the inevitable encounter with a Baltimore mob. His official report on the events of the nineteenth follows.

> Report of Col. Edward F. Jones, Sixth Massachusetts Militia.
> Hdqrs. 6th Regiment, 3d Brig., 2d Div., M.V.M., Capitol,
> Washington, April 22, 1861.
>
> In accordance with Special Orders, No. 6, I proceeded with my command towards the city of Washington, leaving Boston on the evening of the 17th April, arrived in New York on the morning of the 18th, and proceeded to Philadelphia, reaching that place on the same evening. After leaving Philadelphia I received intimation that our passage through the city of Baltimore would be resisted. I caused ammunition to be distributed and arms loaded, and went personally through the cars, and issued the following order:

> "The regiment will march through Baltimore in column of sections, arms at will. You will undoubtedly be insulted, abused, and, perhaps, assaulted, to which you must pay no attention whatever, but march with your faces square to the front, and pay no attention to the mob, even if they throw stones, bricks, or other missiles; but if you are fired upon and any one of you is hit, your officers will order you to fire. Do not fire into any promiscuous crowds, but select any man whom you may see aiming at you, and be sure you drop him."[3]

Four soldiers were shot and killed. The soldiers were ordered to open fire, and in the ensuing fight, several Baltimore citizens were killed as well. Led by the city's mayor and chief of police, the Union soldiers fought their way through the streets of Baltimore and on to Washington, DC. The incident came to be known as the Baltimore Riots.

From the earliest days of the war, black men strived to prove their worthiness as soldiers and fighters. A primary way to accomplish this was to stand in front of a camera and be photographed, to be depicted as men who had made a choice to be free. As soon as they were given their gear—from uniforms to forage caps to weapons—they posed for photographs, holding their weapons as if they were props that signified the future. Standing alone or in groups, they held flags, rifles, and banners and looked directly into the camera lens, sending a message of undeniable patriotism, commitment, and courage.

A letter written by a black soldier, William Henry Johnson, helps us envision a significant battle in Virginia. Johnson's letter was one of several that he published in 1861 in a weekly newspaper, the *Pine and Palm*, whose front-page banner promoted its mission: "Devoted to the interests of freedom, and of the colored races in America." The *Pine and Palm*'s editors—the white abolitionists James Redpath, G. Lawrence Jr., and R. J. Hinton—were based in Boston and focused their interests on the concept of freedom. Redpath's goal was to convince the US government to abolish slavery and embrace Haiti, the first black-ruled nation in the Western Hemisphere. He promised his readers they would be enlightened by his newspaper, which was published in English and French.

> We do not believe in a distinctive Nationality, founded on the preservation of any race, as a *finality*. We believe in Humanity, not in Black men or White men; for the fusion of the human races is the destiny of the future. We stand by man as man; not by the Saxon because we are Saxon; nor by the Negro because we are an Abolitionist. What we assert, as our belief, is this only—that, at this stage of the world's progress, the fact of a powerful Negro Nation is a lesson imperatively needed in order that the African race, wherever it exists, may be respected as the natural equal of other families of man. We do not believe that the inculcation of the doctrine of fraternity alone will accomplish this result; for without a physical basis, this class of truths require centuries for their universal acceptance.[4]

Born a free man, William Henry Johnson was the war correspondent of the *Pine and Palm* during the first year of the Civil War—initially with the Army of the Potomac during the three-month campaign. He had been forced to leave Philadelphia in 1859 to escape imprisonment for having assisted self-emancipated men, women, and children to escape to the North. He moved to Norwich, Connecticut, and was a resident there when the war broke out. Not being allowed to enlist as a soldier because he was black, he joined a Connecticut regiment as an independent man. The regiment, unable to formally enlist him, allowed him to arm himself and accompany the regiment to the front. He then joined the Burnside Expedition and served in North Carolina.[5]

> [From] William H. Johnson
2nd Connecticut Infantry
Washington, DC
>
> July 24, 1861
We have met the enemy in this pro-slavery war—we have fought two great battles—one of the longest and most sanguinary ever fought in America. The first, on the 18th, lasted from 11½ a.m. until 5 p.m., and our loss was great. The second, on Sunday the 21st, was commenced at 8 in the morning, and we were defeated, routed and driven from the field before 1 p.m. We lost everything—*life, ammunition, and honor*. We were driven like so many sheep

> into Washington, disgraced and humiliated. One week ago we marched into Virginia with the Stars and Stripes proudly floating in the breeze, and our bands playing Yankee Doodle. We had but one thought, and that was of success.
>
> What! 50,000 brave and Union-loving men get beaten? No, it could not be. No one would have believed it for a moment, who saw the firm and soldierly tread of Uncle Sam's men, and the glittering of their bayonets as they moved onward and passed through Fairfax Court House, and tore down the Secession flag, and hoisted the Stars and Stripes in its place. No one would have believed it who saw the burning of Germantown, and the general havoc made along the line of march, and saw the backs of the fleeing reels, as they went pell-mell before our advance guards. But we were all disappointed and the under-rated enemy proved too much for us.
>
> It was not alone the white man's victory for it was won by slaves. Yes, the Confederates had three regiments of blacks in the field, and they maneuvered like veterans, and beat the Union men back. This is not guessing, but it is a fact. It has angered our men, and they say there must be retaliation. There is much talk in high places and by leading men, of a call being made for the blacks of the North; for Africa to stretch forth her dusky arms, and to enter the army against the Southern slaves, and by opposing, free them. Shall we do it? Not until our rights as men are acknowledged by the government in good faith. We desire to free the slaves, and to build up a negro Nationality in Hayti; but we must bide our own time, and choose the manner by which it shall be accomplished.[6]

The following account from an enslaved man who was forced into service was recorded by a reporter, writing for the *Reading (PA) Journal*, and sections were later published in *Douglass' Monthly* in March 1862. The man describes how he helped to load a Confederate artillery battery at Bull Run and later gave the Union army information about the locations of Confederate soldiers in Virginia:

> My name is John Parker, I was born in King and Queen's county Virginia, I do not know my age. My master's name was Benjamin Wilson; he failed in business, and when he broke up they seized 130

William Henry Johnson. (John Muller, "Dr. William Henry Johnson: Albany [NY] Correspondent of *The North Star,*" *The Lion of Anacostia* [blog], April 16, 2018, https://thelionofanacostia.wordpress.com/2018/04/16/dr-william-henry-johnson-albany-ny-correspondent-of-the-north-star/)

Negroes—of which I am one—and sold them at auction market in Richmond. I was bought by Thomas Griggs, a Colonel in the Rebel army for $1000. I stayed with my new master until war broke out, then he and his sons went away to the war, leaving an overseer to manage us. In two weeks our overseer also went to the war. We had good times then, and eat up everything we could get. Not long after, our mistress and her two daughters packed up and went off. Our master had told us to stay at the plantation until he came back, and that if any d—d Yankees showed themselves in his absence, to

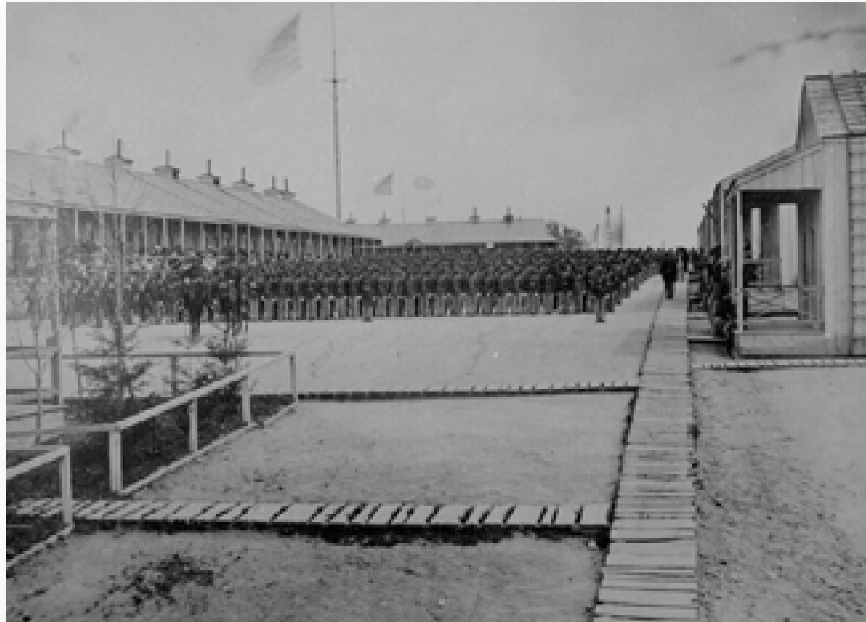
shoot them. Our master had also before this sent us to Winchester and Fredericksburg to work upon the batteries and assist at the trenches. Ten of us then went to Richmond and worked for a considerable length of time upon the batteries and breastworks on James River. When they were done with us we returned to the farm and found our overseer at home. We worked on smoothly until the excitement about the expected battle at Bull Run arose. They said that all the colored people must then come and fight. I arrived at Junction two days before the action commenced. They immediately placed me in one of the batteries.

There were four colored men in our battery, I don't know how many there were in the others. We opened fire about ten o'clock on the morning of Sunday the 21st; couldn't see the Yankees at all and only fired at random. Sometimes they were concealed in the woods and then we guessed our aim. My work was to hand the balls and swab out the cannon; in this we took turns. The officers aimed this gun; we fired grape shot. The balls from the Yankee guns fell thick all around.

In one battery a shell burst and killed twenty, the rest ran. I felt bad all the time, and thought every minute my time would come; I felt so excited that I hardly knew what I was about, and felt worse than dead. We wish to our hearts that the Yankees would whip, and we would have run over to their side but our officers would have shot us if we had made the attempt. I stayed at my place till the order came for all to retreat, then everyone ran thinking that the Yankees were close upon our heels. I followed the retreat a good piece, but as soon as our officers found out that the Yankees were also running as fast as we were, they ordered a halt, and the Black Horse Cavalry (which lost a great number in the fight) stopped all the fugitives and turned in pursuit of the United States troops but the general was a little "skittish" about following him, and they didn't care to press forward upon them very sharply. . . . I stayed about here for two weeks, we worked until the next Friday burying the dead—we did not bury the Yankees and our men in the same hole, we generally dug a long hole 8 or 9 feet deep and threw in a hundred in each pit. We were afraid of another attack from the Yankees, and prepared ourselves as well as we could to meet them again, but they didn't come. I then left . . . with six of my master's men to go home. . . .

> When we got back we found all the cattle and mules gone, and corn all grown up with weeds, but we didn't care for that, all we wanted was a chance to escape. There were officers prowling round the neighborhood in search of all the Negroes, but we dodged round so smartly, they didn't catch us. . . . I staid with my wife from Saturday night until Monday morning, and then returned to my master's; I was afraid to stay long in the neighborhood for fear of the officers, so I left and came nearer the American lines. I found the U.S. soldiers at Alexandria, who gave me two papers, one for myself and one for my wife; they asked me whether I could get my wife, I said I would try. I then went back, and finding her, I gave her the paper and told her to come to the Chain Bridge at a certain time and I would meet her, but I found out they wouldn't allow me to pass over there, so I fixed another plan to get to my wife over, I was to meet her in a canoe and ferry her across, but I missed her though, and I think she must have gone too high up the river. When I had given her up I went along up the river and came up with some of the pickets in Gen. Banks' division, near Frederick, Md. I was afraid, but they welcomed me and shouted, "Come on! Don't hurt him!" Some of the pickets were on horseback, they gave me a suit of clothes and plenty to eat, and treated me well. They wanted me to stay and go down into Virginia and tell them all about where the batteries were, but I was afraid to try that country again, and said that I was bound for the North, I told them all I knew about the position of the other army, about the powder mill on the Rappahannock river, &c. They let me go. . . . I left at night and travelled for the star, I was afraid of the Secessionists in Maryland, and I only walked at night. I came to Gettysburg in a week, and I thought when I saw the *big barns*, that I was in another country. . . . I am going from here to New York where I hope to meet my wife, she has two girls with her; one of my boys is with my master, and the other, who is 14 years old, I think was taken to Louisiana. My wife and I are going to travel from New York to Canada.[7]

Black soldiers expressed in their own words their desire to fight for the Union. Alexander Herritage Newton wanted to fight as much as any volunteer in the ranks. Not legally permitted to join the army in 1861 because he was a black man, he went on his



The Twenty-Sixth US Colored Volunteer Infantry on parade, Camp William Penn, PA, 1865. The camp, which was fully operational by July 4, 1863, served as the training ground for eleven regiments comprising nearly eleven thousand men in its two years of existence. (Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries)

own accord. “I engaged myself for the great Civil War, the War of the Rebellion,” he wrote, adding, “I went into the company of the Thirteenth Regiment, of Brooklyn. I went to the front, as the United States was not taking Negro troops.” Newton knew firsthand the plight of men and women of African descent. “Although free born, I was born under the curse of slavery, surrounded by the thorns and briars of prejudice, hatred, persecution and the suffering incident to this fearful regime.” He faced the stark realities of racism in New Bern, North Carolina.[8]

Newton left the South at age nineteen in 1857. He worked his way as a ship’s cook to New York. In Brooklyn, he reunited with his mother, Mary, who had moved there earlier in the decade. She contacted abolitionists who helped her buy the freedom of her husband, Thadde. As a teenager, Newton participated in the Underground Railroad movement. “I was, of course, deeply interested in this means of travel,” he wrote, “and tried to get all the passengers for this railroad that I could find.” He writes, “My boss-foreman, H. E. Bryan, had disobeyed his master and was threatened to be whipped.

Alexander Herritage Newton (*left*) as a quartermaster sergeant with the Twenty-Ninth Connecticut Infantry, ca. 1865. Standing next to him is Daniel S. Lathrop (1846–1924), who served at the same rank in the regiment. (Photographers: James Horace Wells and David C. Collins of New Haven, Connecticut; carte de visit; Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)

I assisted him to a place of safety. In all the slave holders' dwellings, slaves were employed in the house." Newton devised a ruse to dress him in women's clothing and hid him in the kitchen of the house, which was rarely searched. A reward was posted for the capture of Bryan, but he was never found. Newton later explained, "At last things quieted down and we found opportunity to put him on this mystic train and send him to a clime where he enjoyed his freedom. This was indeed a daring attempt of mine, but it was in me to do it with a great deal of delight. And from that day to this, I have been proud of this one feat of my boyhood life which was on the side of right and humanity."

Laws prohibited the enlistment of blacks; however, Newton attached himself to the Brooklyn Thirteenth. He did not note his exact role. The regiment made it as far as Annapolis, Maryland, when authorities ordered it to Baltimore, where citizens had recently rioted against Union troops passing through the city. Its three-month term of enlistment ended in August 1861. The federal government activated the Thirteenth again for brief stints in 1862 and 1863. It appears that Newton accompanied the regiment both times. The latter mobilization, organized to resist the Confederate invasion of the North that culminated in the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, ended after state officials recalled the regiment to quell draft riots in New York. The Thirteenth arrived a day after the angry mobs were broken up. Newton got caught in the lingering violence. He married in 1859 and started a family that grew to include a son and daughter. "Newton rejoiced at the election of Lincoln in 1860 and welcomed war. 'I had no ill feeling for the Southern white people, some of them had been my best friends; but this was not a personal matter, but a question of national issue, involving the welfare of millions, and my soul was on fire for the question, Slavery or No Slavery, to be forever settled and that too as soon as possible.'"[9]

Men like William H. Johnson, John V. Givens (a black activist from New York City), and Alexander Herritage Newton found ways to join the Union army and sent letters to black newspapers describing the impact that the war had on migrating black families in the war zones.[10] Givens had been active in the city's Masonic Mount Olive Lodge and lectured for the Masons in Connecticut. In 1863, he became a recruiter of black soldiers and an officer in the city's Loyal League.[11] At the beginning of the war, it was the policy of the Lincoln

administration to return all "fugitive slaves" either directly to the plantations or to professional slave catchers. Givens worked with a New York regiment to get into the field, where he could oppose this policy. Givens, like Johnson, used his position to rescue formerly enslaved people, who were known as "contraband."[12] He reported on his contraband rescues and military activities in Virginia and Maryland at a meeting at New York's Shiloh Presbyterian Church, then ministered by Henry Highland Garnet.[13] He later worked with the New York State Militia. Givens wrote the following letter to the *New York Weekly Anglo-African*.

[From] John V. Givens to Thomas Hamilton
Headquarters of the 9th Regt., N.Y.S.M.
[New York State Militia]
Gen. Bank's Division

[October 12, 1861]
Mr. Editor:

I need not tell you of our march through Maryland and into Virginia, nor of the devastation that met the eye at every point, nor of our long and tiresome marches of days and nights, of our surprises, skirmishes and so on, but that more directly concerns you and I, and our people everywhere.

After leaving Camp Cameron in Washington, on the 11th of June, we took up our line of march for the Potomac and Monocacy Junction. About every other house on our line of march we found deserted. But what struck me most was to see the singular conduct of the slaves towards us, they ran from us as though we were the plague—but I have since ascertained that their owners have instructed them that the Northerners came to take them and sell them for their own benefit. And some of the slaves believed their masters; but there were others that did not, and those would follow the regiment until they got a birth as cook or officer's servant.

The colored churches on the whole line of our march were closed with the exception of Quin's Chapel, (Methodist,) in Frederick. They had orders to discontinue their services, but as the Union troops occupy Frederick, they have not obeyed the orders but continue their services.

The colored people of Frederick have more advantages of education than they do in any part of Maryland, Baltimore not

excepted. They have eight colored churches, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and a great number of them belong to the Catholic church. But still slavery casts her dark and gloomy mantel over all of this.

After six weeks marching and camping we arrived at Sandy Hook, opposite Harpers Ferry, and there we lost our first men in a skirmish. The rebels had evacuated Harpers Ferry five days before we got there. But they left a picket guard behind them, but they also left in double quick as they saw our troops advancing. We continued our line of march on the Maryland side of the Potomac to Williamsport, and from there, on the 14th of July we crossed the Potomac into Virginia. We were then under that rebel General [Robert] Patterson. And let me remark here that the Wisconsin regiment was two miles in the advance of the New York Ninth, when they fell in with the rear guard of the rebels retreating towards Martinsburg. They had a fight at the falls—and with the rebel prisoners they took fourteen colored men in uniform, and armed to the teeth, fighting the Union troops, one they killed outright and three others were wounded. They were not slaves but free black men that were pressed into the rebel service; and before we got to Martinsburg we got forty colored men who had deserted from the rebel ranks and came over to us. Some were barbers, shoemakers, carpenters, and waiters, and were forced to leave their families and join the rebel ranks—many of them left at the first opportunity and come to us, but how disappointed they were when they found that they could not fight in our ranks against their oppressors!

When we entered the city of Martinsburg we saw that desolation had spread its broad hands over everything and everywhere—famine, pestilence and death walked boldly from house to house. The Union troops entered Martinsburg twenty-five thousand strong, and occupied the city for a week, we then took up our line of march for Bunker Hill, and there I commenced my work. We left Bunker Hill for Charleston, and whilst on our march the rebels passed us on a road running parallel with ours, but General Patterson would not let us give them battle. So, as you know, General [Joseph E.] Johnston passed us without either of us striking a blow. We entered Charleston and what a sight presented itself, hundreds of colored men and women in the streets

with their children; some in their mother's arms, some of the men armed and shouting and thanking God that we had come at last to free them. Most of their masters had ran off at our approach and left all behind them. The slaves had helped themselves, and now stood ready with open arms and shouts to receive their deliverers, who they believed had come for the sole purpose of freeing them. But what pen can describe the revulsion of their feelings when they were told that we came "not to free the slaves, but to preserve the Union as it was, with its millions of suffering slaves!" why, Mr. Editor, when the slaves heard that they cursed the Union troops in their hearts, and some with tears in their eyes begged us not go away for now they had committed themselves against their masters—and if we went away their masters would come again and do worse than kill them; I could not bear the sight of their disappointment, so left them and visited the Court House where that murderous crew tried the noble John Brown; I visited the prison that held the hero, and looked at the old gallows in the prison yard that was honored by having so illustrious a charter die upon it—and visited the very spot that the hero was hung upon. I thought the shade of that venerable hero stood beside me and said, "the hand of Providence appears to move slowly but it moves; so wait patiently, the clouds are lifting, the signs are standing forth in bold relief." Here let me add, that the land they hung him on belonged to an old colored man named John Welcome, and this same John Welcome owned the horses and the cart that the hero rode upon to that fatal tree; and I also add that this same John Welcome drove the horse and cart himself to the murdering. The only piece of cannon they had on that memorable day, is now in Philadelphia, in possession of the Pennsylvania Regiment of three months volunteers. They captured it the day we entered Charlestown and have since left and returned home bearing the cannon with them as a trophy. We left Charlestown after campaigning for a week and then entered Harpers Ferry, remained there two weeks and again crossed the Potomac and entered Sandy Hook. Nothing worthy of note occurred until I reached Buckiestown. There two slaveholders entered the 29th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers and gave Sergeant Stark of Company G and Corporal Harry Millard, five dollars each to catch two slaves for them that were then in the camp cooking; they succeeded in doing so, when the colored

men interfered, but were driven off with the swords and pistols of the captains.

I shall in my next letter, give the condition of our people here.

John V. Givens[14]

As revealed in the letters from men like Johnson and Givens during the early months of the war, free black men in the North became increasingly aware of the plight of the enslaved and sought ways to join the Union army, to report on and come to the aid of this vulnerable population of brave men and women desperately seeking freedom.

This is the letter General Benjamin Butler, commanding officer at Fort Monroe in Virginia, sent to General Winfield Scott, commanding general of the Union army, explaining how to respond to enslaved men, children, and women when encountering them on plantations; Butler sent the letter before the first major battle of the war, the First Battle of Bull Run:

Commander of the
Department of Virginia to the
General-in- Chief of the Army
[Fortress Monroe, Va.]

May 27, 1861

Sir:

Since I wrote my last dispatch the question in regard to slave property is becoming one of very serious magnitude. The inhabitants of Virginia are using their negroes in the batteries, and are preparing to send the women and children South. The escapes from them are very numerous, and a squad has come in this morning to my pickets bringing with them their women and children. Of course these cannot be dealt with upon the theory on which I designed to treat the services of able-bodied men and women who might come within my lines, and of which I gave you a detailed account in my last dispatch. I am in the utmost doubt what to do with this species of property. Up to this time I have had come within my lines men and women with their children—entire families—each family belonging to the same owner. I have therefore determined to employ, as I can do very profitably, the able-bodied persons in the party, issuing proper food for the support

> of all, and charging against their services the expense of care and sustenance of the non-laborers, keeping a strict and accurate account as well of the services as of the expenditure, having the worth of the services and the cost of the expenditures determined by a board of survey, hereafter to be detailed. I know of no other manner in which to dispose of this subject and the questions connected therewith. As a matter of property to the insurgents it will be of very great moment, the number I now have amounting, as I am informed, to what in good times would be of the value of $60,000. Twelve of these negroes, I am informed, have escaped from the erection of the batteries on Sewall's Point, which this morning fired upon my expedition as it passed by out of range. As a means of offense, therefore, in the enemy's hands, these negroes, when able-bodied, are of the last importance. Without them the batteries could not have been erected, at least for many weeks. As a military question, it would seem to be a measure of necessity to deprive their masters of their services. How can this be done? As a political question and a question of humanity, can I receive the services of a father and a mother and not take the children? Of the humanitarian aspect I have no doubt. Of the political one I have no right to judge. I therefore submit all this to your better judgement; and as these questions have a political aspect, I have ventured—and I trust I am not wrong in so doing—to duplicate the parts of my dispatch relating to this subject, and forward them to the Secretary of War.
>
> *Benj. F. Butler*[15]

Three days earlier, General Butler had informed General Scott that three enslaved men belonging to one Colonel Mallory, commander of Confederate forces in the district, had "delivered themselves up" to his picket guards. Butler had interviewed the three personally and found that they were about to be taken south for Confederate service: "I determined, . . . as these men were very serviceable, and I had great need of labor in my quartermaster's department, to avail myself of their services." Questioned about this decision by another officer, Butler offered to return the men if Mallory would swear an oath of allegiance to the federal government.[16] Aware that this was only one instance of many that would follow, Butler asked Scott for a statement of general

policy: "Shall they [the Confederates] be allowed the use of this property against the United States, and we not be allowed its use in aid of the United States?"[17] In endorsements, Scott found "much to praise . . . and nothing to condemn" in Butler's action, and Secretary of War Simon Cameron concurred.[18] Butler put his idea into practice, treating the enslaved people who entered his camp as "contraband of war" and refusing to return them to slave owners. When the plantation owners discovered this, they approached Fort Monroe, demanding that their human property be returned to them. Considering enslaved people to be contraband had a profound impact on black people and influenced their feelings about the Union army for the remainder of the Civil War. Eventually, Butler's actions contributed substantially toward the defeat of the Confederates, who were unable to use enslaved labor to build their forts. Some of these men escaped and found work as servants, cooks, and laborers with Union military units as they passed through on their way south. John Boston was one such man. In the following letter to his wife, he expresses his freedom with a mixture of joy, relief, and sadness.

[From] Uptown Hill [Virginia]
January the 12 1862

My Dear Wife
It is with grate joy I take this time to let you know Whare I am. I am now in Safety in the 14the Regiment of Brooklyn. Th Day I can Adress you thank god as a free man. I had a little truble in getting away. But as the lord led the Children of Isrel to the land of Canon, So he led me to a land Whare freedom will rain in spite of earth and hell.

Dear, you must make your Self content. I am free from al the Slavers Lash and as you have chose to Wise plan of Serving the lord I hope you Will pray Much and I will try by the help of god To Serv him With all my hart. I am With a very nice man and have All that hart Can Wish But My Dear I cant express my grate desire that I Have to See you.

I trust the time Will come When we Shal meet again. And if We don't meet on earth, We Will Meet in heven Whare Jesas ranes. Dear Elizabethe tell Mrs. Ow[e]n[s] that I trust that She Will Continue her Kindess to you and that god Will Bless her on

earth and Save her in grate eternity. My Acomplemnts to Mr. Owens and her Children, may They Prosper through life. I never Shall forgit her kindess to me. Dear Wife, I must Close, rest yourself. Contented, I am free. I Want you to rite to me Soon as you Can Without Delay. Direct your letter to the 14th Regiment, New York State Militia, Uptowns Hill, Virginia. In Care of Mr. Cranford Comary. Write my Dear, Soon as you C
Your Affectionate Husban. Kiss Daniel For me.

John Boston[19]

Other enslaved men often had to make a difficult decision when they became self-emancipators; they had to leave their families in what could perhaps be years of enslavement and brutal torture. John Boston fled slavery in Maryland and joined a New York regiment of the Union army, as described in the letter to his wife previously mentioned.

In letters, black men also told the government about their desire to fight for the Union army.

[From William A. Jones
To the Secretary of War]
Oberlin, O[hio] Nov. 27th 1861

Sir:— Very many of the colored citizens of Ohio and other states have had a great desire to assist the government in putting down this injurious rebellion.

Since they have heard that the rebels are forming regiments of the free blacks and compelling them to fight against the Union as well as their Slaves. They have urged me to write and beg that you will receive one or more regiments (or companies) of the colored of the free States to counterbalance those employed against the Union by Rebels.

We are partly drilled and would wish to enter active service amediately. We behold your sick list each day and Sympathize with the Soldiers and the government. We are confident of our ability to stand the hard Ships of the field and the climate So unhealthy to the Soldiers of the *North* To prove our attachment and our will to defend the government we only ask a trial I have the honor to remain your humble Servant.

Wm. A. Jones[20]

Portrait of Sergeant Tom Strawn of Company B, Third US Colored Troops Heavy Artillery Regiment. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division; LC-DIG-ppmsca-32668)

Portrait of a soldier and his wife, ca. 1860s. (Courtesy of Greg French and Collection of Greg French)

"Contraband" who served with the Thirteenth Massachusetts Infantry, ca. 1863-65. (Courtesy Massachusetts Commandery Military Order of the Loyal Legion and the US Military History Institute)

There also was a black presence and participation in the Confederate army, although that history is, of course, a much more nuanced and complex story. "Thousands of slaves served their masters and masters' sons in the Confederate Army," writes the Civil War historian Ronald Coddington, "before and after the 'Black Republican' in the White House, as some referred to President Abraham Lincoln, issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Many remained with their owners throughout the war."[21] The perplexing relationships between slave masters and enslaved soldiers reflect the mystery of the human condition in this period. Some black soldiers fought for and along with the sons of their owners, while others stood guard to protect white men from Union soldiers.

Portraits of Southern black servants and soldiers tell us a great deal. Take, for example, a photograph of two men—Silas Chandler and the Confederate soldier Sergeant Andrew Martin Chandler, Company F, Forty-Fourth Mississippi Infantry—probably taken in 1861. A tintype portrait of the two men shows Silas seated on a lower chair and Andrew sitting a head taller. Their positions make it clear that Silas's status is inferior. However, both appear well armed for battle. Seventeen-year-old Andrew proudly holds a small pistol in his left hand, a Colt Single Action Army is tucked into his belt, and a short sword is in his right hand. Silas's gaze is focused on the lens; he holds a musket in his left hand and a Bowie knife in his right, and a percussion single-shot pistol has been slipped between the buttons of his jacket. The tintype represents both the complexity of relationships during this period and the conflicted loyalty between the two men.

Silas, fifteen years old at the time, received his free papers just before the fighting began but chose to stay with his friend and follow him to war. After the Battle of Shiloh, Andrew was thrown into a Union prison in Ohio. Silas ran back and forth from the prison to the Chandler homestead in Palo Alto, Mississippi, seeing to Andrew's essentials. The boy was soon released, and the two were excited to rejoin their outfit. During the fighting at Chickamauga, Andrew was wounded on his leg, which the surgeons were ready to amputate. But Silas pulled out a gold coin that the boys had saved to buy some whiskey. Bribing the doctors to let Andrew go, Silas carried the injured boy on his back to the

Full-length portrait of a young boy standing barefoot, clothes in tatters. Beneath photograph is written, "Taylor. Slave of Col. Hamilton as he arrived at the Fort." (Yale University Library Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Item #D-48 Randolph Linsly Simpson Collection, ca. 1862)

Sergeant Andrew Martin Chandler of the Forty-Fourth Mississippi Infantry Regiment, Company F, and Silas Chandler, servant, with Bowie knives, revolvers, pepper-box, shotgun, and canteen. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Digital ID: ppss 00834 LC-DIG-ppmsca-40073)

African American hospital workers, including nurses, at a hospital in Nashville, Tennessee, July 1863. (Courtesy National Archives)

nearest train. They rode all the way to Atlanta in a boxcar. Once there, the hospital doctors saved the boy's leg and his life. Soon after, Silas and Andrew returned home to Palo Alto, where they continued their friendship until they died. Andrew gave Silas land to build a church for the black community and saw that his friend got a Confederate veteran's pension in 1878.[22]