



African Americans at Fort Pulaski National Historic Site, 1733–1900: A Special History Study



Julie de Chantal, Heidi Moye, Anastatia Sims

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Presented to Interior Region 2 (Legacy Southeast Region)

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Cover Image: Historic view, 1863, entitled “Beacon Tower and Negro Cabin, Cockspur Island, Georgia”
Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ga0120.photos.378002p; Historic view, 1863, entitled “Beacon Tower
and Negro Cabin, Cockspur Island, Georgia.” (Note: Seen in the background of HABS No. GA-2158-79.) Fort Pulaski,
Cockspur Island, Savannah, Chatham County, Georgia.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of Fort Pulaski as a symbol of freedom cannot be overstated. During the Civil War, after the United States military bombarded the fortress from the sand dunes of Tybee Island and Colonel Charles Olmstead surrendered it into Federal hands, it stood as a portent of things to come for the Confederacy. On April 13, 1862, Union Major General David Hunter issued General Order Number 7, which granted freedom to all slaves currently on Cockspur Island. With a stroke of his pen, General Hunter transformed Fort Pulaski from a bulwark of the Confederacy into a place of refuge for all enslaved people who lived close enough to attempt an escape to freedom.

A month later, in May of 1862, Hunter took an even bolder step. With General Order Number 11, he ordered that “the persons in these three states Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, heretofore held as slaves, are therefore declared forever free.” Savannah newspapers refused to even print the news; they considered the rumors circulating about it to be false. At the same time, the *New York Journal of Commerce* stated that “as [they did] not believe General Hunter [was] yet insane, [they] doubt[ed] the genuineness of the document.”¹ President Lincoln soon rescinded Hunter’s orders. Yet, in January 1863, he issued his own Emancipation Proclamation. The following summer, a steady stream of enslaved Savannahians attempted to reach Cockspur Island, and even Confederate Colonel Olmstead’s own household cook attempted to secure her freedom at the very fort he had surrendered a year earlier. Unfortunately, she was detained by Confederate pickets on Skidaway Island and was forced to return to Savannah and slavery.

The pivotal events at Fort Pulaski from 1860 to 1865 lend a greater degree of importance to the history of the community surrounding the fort before and after the Civil War. Enslaved African American laborers manufactured the thousands of bricks used to build the fort and worked on its construction throughout the 1830s and 1840s. In January 1861, even before Georgia seceded from the Union, Georgians took control of Fort Pulaski from the two Federal soldiers who were stationed there. Under Confederate occupation, African Americans of Gullah-Geechee origins who lived on neighboring rice plantations were once again brought to Cockspur Island to work on restoring the neglected fort to working condition.

In order to understand the lives and culture of those who labored at Fort Pulaski, we must examine the African American community in Savannah during the decades before and after the war. The churches where enslaved and free African Americans gathered on Sundays served as places of respite where hopes of freedom could be spoken aloud in

¹ Quoted in *Daily Morning News*, Savannah, GA, May 29, 1862.

veiled terms. With freedom of movement throughout the city, African Americans formed a vibrant community that would have been nearly impossible on a plantation. Like Fort Pulaski, the First African Baptist Church served as a starting point on the Underground Railroad. Deacon March Haynes assisted people along their journeys.

The end of the Civil War triggered a period of rapid change for African Americans in the Lowcountry—the coastal area that stretches from South Carolina to Georgia. In 1865, men of the 103rd Infantry, US Colored Troops, were garrisoned at Fort Pulaski. The presence of Black soldiers at the former Confederate outpost was emblematic of the transformation of African American life after emancipation. Freed men and women celebrated their liberation and rejoiced in their newfound autonomy. Yet they still experienced hardship because the end of slavery did not end racism and exploitation. In the face of de facto discrimination, which by the end of the century would be codified into the laws known as Jim Crow, African Americans living in Savannah worked to strengthen their community by establishing a newspaper, a bank, and several schools for their children.

After 1873, Fort Pulaski ceased operations as an active military post. Staffed only by an ordnance sergeant, it fell into disrepair. White Georgians continued to remember its brief history as a Confederate outpost while its place in the history of emancipation was forgotten.² The fort was left in ruins until 1924, when President Calvin Coolidge, the son of a Vermont Union soldier, declared it a National Monument. In the 1930s, the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps began its rehabilitation. Cockspur Island, on which the fort sits, served as a US Navy base during World War II. Fort Pulaski was opened to the public on August 1, 1947.

Since the mid-eighteenth century, African Americans have been a part of life on Cockspur, their presence often taken for granted by the whites who lived and worked alongside them, with their legacy largely undocumented by historians. The goal of this project is twofold: first to illuminate the experiences of African Americans at the fort and second to foster a deeper understanding of Fort Pulaski's role in the history of African Americans in both the Lowcountry and the nation overall.

² For examples of Fort Pulaski in white Georgians' historical memory, see "Colors Full of Glory," *Savannah Morning News*, December 18, 1885, 8; "Stirring Career of Georgia's First Regiment," *Savannah Morning News*, May 5, 1886, 2, 8; "Georgia Troops at Pulaski," *The Sunny South*, Atlanta, GA, December 4, 1897, 10; "Tribute to the Heroes," *Savannah Morning News*, June 4, 1902, 8; "In Line after 40 Years: Mr. George Tennent's Reunion with the Oglethorpes," *Savannah Morning News*, June 4, 1902, 12; "Old Battle Flag Will Be Preserved," *Savannah Morning News*, January 7, 1903, 10; "Famous Georgia Battles of the War between the States," *Butts County Progress*, Jackson, GA, April 3, 1914; "Savannah Honors Heroic Soldiers," *Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association of Georgia*, November 30, 1938, 11.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report traces the history of African Americans at Fort Pulaski and on Cockspur Island from the colonial era to the twentieth century. It explains the significance of the Fort Pulaski National Monument as an African American heritage site and highlights the fort's history as a place "of struggle, community, and triumph."¹ In addition, the report establishes the park's connection to other Lowcountry historic sites, including the First African Baptist Church in Savannah (<https://firstafricanbc.com>), the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park in Beaufort (www.nps.gov/reer/index.htm), and Historic Mitchelville (<https://exploremitchelville.org>) on Hilton Head Island.

During the colonial era, Cockspur Island was the first stopping place for enslaved people bound for Savannah from Africa or the West Indies. Even before the construction of the Lazaretto, inbound ships frequently remained quarantined at Cockspur in order to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. White people regarded the involuntary immigrants aboard these ships as cogs in the ruthless machine of slavery that powered the economy of Georgia and the rest of the South. The majority of enslaved people lived on rural plantations, working as agricultural laborers or domestic servants under the ever-watchful control of their enslavers. Enslaved people who lived in Savannah experienced a greater degree of autonomy. They developed a vibrant community centered around churches, such as First African Baptist. March Haynes, who figures prominently in the history of Fort Pulaski, was a member of that congregation.

When construction of Fort Pulaski began in 1829, the US Army relied on enslaved labor to get the job done. The army purchased bricks made by enslaved men, women, and children on the Hermitage Plantation up the river and leased enslaved men from local planters to do the arduous work required to build the massive fortress. Throughout the 1830s, hundreds of Blacks lived on Cockspur. Most of their names were never recorded and the contours of their experiences must be gleaned from reports of food and supplies purchased, tasks accomplished, and occasional notices of runaways from Cockspur that appeared in Savannah newspapers.

The laws and brute force required to maintain slavery restricted liberty but never crushed the desire for it. Throughout the antebellum era, enslaved women and men risked their lives to escape bondage, either for short periods or permanently. In Georgia, the route to liberation was by water. This report describes the experiences of several individuals who hatched daring schemes to secure their freedom. Some succeeded; others failed, but

¹ www.nps.gov/subjects/africanamericanheritage/index.htm (accessed September 17, 2021).

together their stories laid the groundwork for the multitudes of enslaved people who would seize opportunities to emancipate themselves during the Civil War. For many, Fort Pulaski was the first stop on the road to new lives as free people.

Early in 1861, as tensions between North and South escalated in the aftermath of the election of Abraham Lincoln, Georgians took control of Fort Pulaski. Soldiers who occupied the fort brought personal servants with them and used enslaved men to do the heavy labor required to prepare for the inevitable Union attack. Confederates also relied on Black pilots and boatmen to act as couriers between the island and Savannah. Many of the men forced to aid the Confederate cause early in the war volunteered their services to the Union as soon as they could. After Union forces reclaimed the fort in April 1862, Major General David Hunter issued two emancipation orders and Cockspur Island became the first free soil in the state of Georgia. Fort Pulaski was a refuge and waystation for “contraband”—men, women, and children who made their way through the marshes and across the waterways in search of freedom. The fort served as a nexus connecting the Black community in Savannah with the towns being created by freed people in coastal South Carolina.

After 1873, the fort was abandoned as an active military base. Staffed only by an ordnance sergeant, it fell into disrepair. White Georgians continued to celebrate its brief history as a Confederate outpost while its place in the history of emancipation was forgotten.

Since the mid-eighteenth century, African Americans have been a part of life on Cockspur, their presence taken for granted by the whites who lived and worked alongside them and their legacy largely undocumented by historians. Drawing on government records, census data, memoirs, correspondence, newspapers, and other sources, this study places the experiences of Blacks front and center and demonstrates the significance of Fort Pulaski in the struggle for liberty and racial equality in the United States. Like Fort Monroe in Virginia, Fort Pulaski was “freedom’s fortress”—a beacon of hope for enslaved Georgians and a gateway to emancipation.

CHAPTER ONE

AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE IN COLONIAL AND ANTEBELLUM SAVANNAH

The Founding of Georgia

Two centuries before the arrival of James Oglethorpe, African Americans lived in what became the English colony of Georgia. In 1526, five hundred Spanish settlers attempted to settle near Sapelo Island. A combination of sickness and extreme cold caused more than half of the Spanish soldiers to fall ill and die. The enslaved Africans who had been forced to accompany the party took advantage of their captors' weakened condition to seize their freedom. We do not know how many of the one hundred Africans who fled into the forest survived since no mention of their fate was recorded. Yet those who survived, if any, were most likely absorbed into Native American communities living nearby.¹

James Oglethorpe and the English Trustees, the architects of the future colony of Georgia, envisioned the settlement as a haven for English workers where no African labor would be allowed. This undoubtedly seemed feasible as they debated their ideas for the colony while in England. Reality on American soil, however, tested their ambitions. At the end of 1732, the settlers set sail from England on the *Anne*. Three months later, they landed at Charleston, where Oglethorpe made arrangements for their move a hundred miles south into Georgia. He found a partner in trader Mary Musgrove, a mixed-race woman who lived among Native Americans in a village called Yamacraw. Musgrove had been born to an indigenous mother and an English trader father. She herself later married an English trader. She spent her life with dual identities and familiarity with both cultures.²

On Oglethorpe's behalf, Musgrove negotiated with Tomochichi, one of the chiefs of the Yamasee and Lower Creek people living at Yamacraw, to allow the English to settle nearby. The settlers began to build the town of Savannah on a bluff above the river. During

¹ Guy Cameron and Stephen Vermette, "The Role of Extreme Cold in the Failure of the San Miguel De Gualdape Colony," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 96, no. 3 (2012): 291–307; "Before 1619, There Was 1526: The Mystery of the First Enslaved Africans in What Became the United States," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2019.

² For more on Mary Musgrove, see Karri Lee Alexander, "Mary Musgrove," National Women's History Museum, 2019, www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/mary-musgrove.

their time in South Carolina, settlers did not realize the full extent of the labor that would be required to make their new home habitable, underestimating the work needed to clear forests, plant crops, and build all of the amenities necessary for their survival and later comfort.³

The Trustees had designed the colony as a place where English people could thrive and build new lives. Each family received some acreage, and its members were expected to work for their livelihood. As soon as they stepped off the ship, they climbed the steep forty-foot hill that led to the site of the settlement. Soon, they set up a crane to lift their provisions from the riverbank to the plateau above. During the winter of 1733, a total of 259 colonists shared 4 large tents and worked to clear land and build houses.

The idyllic landscape, filled with abundant wildlife and all that was necessary to make life comfortable, was anything but comfortable in the beginning, and the settlers requested help to build the basic infrastructure. Some of the indentured servants who had settled in Georgia were put to the task, but the work still seemed insurmountable. The fact that slavery and slave ownership remained illegal in the colony did not stop Oglethorpe and the new settlers from accepting temporary loans of enslaved labor to begin the work.⁴ South Carolina slaveholders saw a lucrative opportunity on the horizon and quickly sent skilled enslaved men to help the new settlers with the laborious undertaking of felling trees, sawing lumber, and constructing dwellings and public buildings.

And little by little, they made progress. They marked off streets and squares and divided the town into four wards. Each of the wards, centered around a square, consisted of rows of lots set aside for housing and larger lots to host public spaces. Within a few months, they built more than fifty homes to shelter the people who now lived in the town of Savannah.⁵ The urgent need for enslaved labor from South Carolina was over, but the settlers had already seen the benefits of having such labor. South Carolinians capitalized on the Georgians' willingness to rent the labor, and their business relationship flourished as both groups exploited the loophole that allowed settlers to still abide by the law, albeit with fingers crossed behind their backs.

³ Alexander, "Mary Musgrove."

⁴ On the prohibition on slavery and the early slavery in Georgia, see in particular James McMillin, "The Transatlantic Slave Trade Comes to Georgia," in *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, ed. Leslie M Harris and Daina Ramey Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 21–41; Watson W. Jennison, *Cultivating Race: The Expansion of Slavery in Georgia, 1750–1860* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 11–40.

⁵ Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Savannah in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 50.

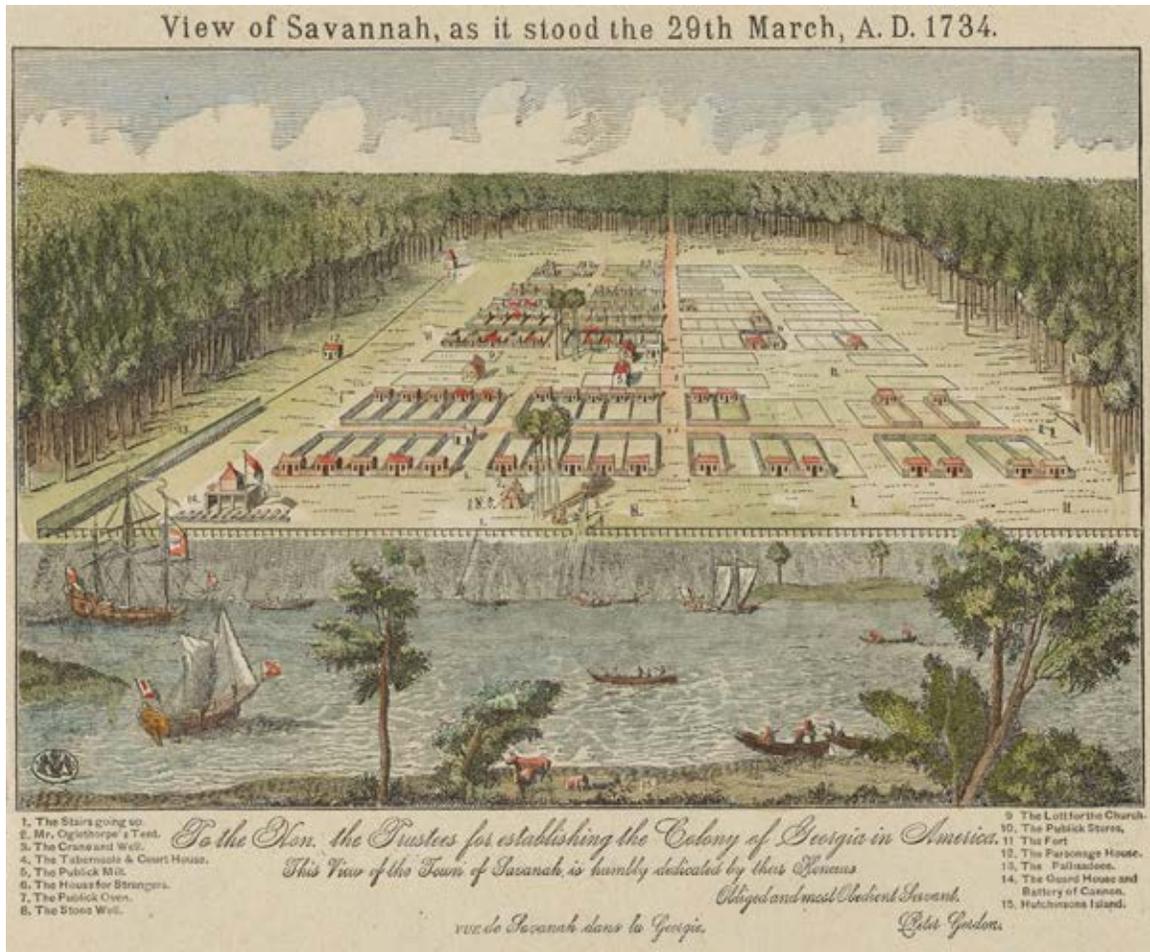


Figure 1.1. Drawing of the settling of Savannah, Georgia, done by Peter Gordon in 1734

Notice the high bluff upon which the town is laid out and the hoist being used to lift cargo to the top of the bluff.

Special Collections Division, University of Georgia Libraries; Digital Collections, New York Public Library,

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/87e22d90-01c2-0135-8c7b-2f2ce9d9b45c>;

also available at the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/97683565.

Salzburgers

In 1734, a new group of white immigrants, the Salzburgers—Lutherans who fled religious persecution in Salzburg—settled in Georgia.⁶ They appealed to Oglethorpe and the Trustees for refuge and promptly received permission to migrate to a site located approximately twenty miles west of the settlement in Savannah.⁷ Reverend Johann Martin Boltzius

⁶ Salzburg was an ecclesiastical (Catholic) state within the Holy Roman Empire (in modern day Austria). The expulsion of the Protestants from the state in the early eighteenth century led to riots and protests in the Protestant states of the Holy Roman Empire.

⁷ On the history of the Salzburgers, see in particular Samuel Urlsperger, *Detailed Reports on the Salzburger Emigrants Who Settled in America*, ed. George Fenwick Jones, a multivolume series published by the University of Georgia Press.

had chosen Georgia because of his own personal opposition to slavery. Yet even his convictions were overridden by the magnitude of the work that awaited the settlers. Acting on behalf of his community, he—like the Englishmen who had arrived before him—accepted the use of enslaved labor from South Carolina to do the hardest of the building work.

The resolve to keep Georgia free of slavery fell quickly, and when James Oglethorpe returned to England in 1736 to report to the Trustees on the colony's progress, settlers took advantage of his absence to smuggle enslaved men and women from South Carolina through the newly established town of Augusta. They began to lobby and petition to allow slavery in the colony and received support from the most unexpected public figures. Evangelist George Whitefield, an Anglican minister who had established an orphanage near Savannah, joined the chorus and insisted that he himself desperately needed enslaved labor to run his charitable institution for children.⁸

At first, Reverend Boltzius attempted to stand against the pressure to legalize slavery in Georgia. Although he had accepted the use of slave labor as a temporary and necessary expedient, he refused to condone slavery as a permanent fixture in the colony. Eventually, though, the swell of public support caused him to back down. On January 1, 1751, slavery was legalized by Act of Parliament. Oglethorpe's vision of a haven for the indigent and the religiously persecuted gave way to a colony that sought to emulate its wealthier, slaveholding neighbors.⁹

Following the change in the law, rich planters from South Carolina eagerly took advantage of fresh opportunities on the Georgia frontier. Between 1750 and 1755, the population boomed with an influx of Europeans and enslaved Africans from South Carolina. In the three years between 1752 and 1755, Georgia's population doubled from three thousand to six thousand people. Nearly two thousand of these newcomers were enslaved people. By 1755, the population reached 18,000 people. The wealthy monopolized the best land, leaving the scraps for those who could not afford to buy more than they had originally been allotted by the Trustees.¹⁰

⁸ Whitefield was an English minister who founded Methodism in the American colonies during the First Great Awakening. He is credited for the development of evangelism. See Frank Lambert, "'Pedlar in Divinity': George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737–1745," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (1990): 812–37.

⁹ At the time, Spanish Florida also technically allowed slavery. See Larry E. Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), and Jane Landers, "Spanish Sanctuary: Fugitives in Florida, 1687–1790," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (January 1984): 296–313.

¹⁰ Noelle McIlvanna, *The Short Life of Free Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 97–98.

Demand for enslaved African labor grew steadily, and from 1755 to 1767 merchants imported slaves primarily through the Atlantic ports in South Carolina. Sixty-three percent of these involuntary migrants came from the Caribbean, while 24 percent came from the rice-growing regions of the African coast.¹¹ Beginning in the fall of 1764, the first of many cargoes of people direct from West Africa arrived at Cockspur Island.

Free and Enslaved Black Culture in Savannah

For many, the word *slavery* evokes an image of vast white cotton fields dotted with Black laborers on a rural plantation. However, few realize that slavery took many forms. Some enslaved men and women worked as artisans, dockhands, servants, or miners. Others lived and worked in cities, as was the case in Savannah. These city people led markedly different lives than their country brethren and often lived in closer proximity to whites.

The variety of living and working arrangements shows the diverse nature of urban slavery. The crudest of these arrangements, the “slave quarters,” often only provided enslaved people with an uncomfortable spot to curl up to rest in a corner of the main house, without the benefit of a mattress or pillow. Pulaski House in Savannah exemplifies this type of rudimentary arrangement that gave little privacy to the enslaved people.¹² In other cases, the loft atop a carriage house served as a more comfortable and private living space. Yet carriage houses were situated close to the main houses, as can be seen at the Owens-Thomas House in Savannah. While allowing more freedom to its inhabitants, the proximity also meant that they could be called back to the house at any time of the night or day, to care for a sick child, empty a chamber pot, or run an errand even after a full day’s work.¹³

Other enslaved men and women were allowed to find their own housing in another part of town away from the slaveholder’s property. Unique to the context of urban slavery, this practice of residing away from the direct supervision of the slaveholder was known as “living abroad.” While still of poor quality, this type of arrangement granted more autonomy and freedom to enslaved people, who could live in family groups, go to church, and enjoy a limited but important social life. City officials disapproved of the freedom that this

¹¹ Karen Bell, “Atlantic Slave Trade in Savannah,” *Georgia Encyclopedia*, August 5, 2015, www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/atlantic-slave-trade-savannah (accessed November 11, 2019).

¹² Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Grandison Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery: Or, A Tour among the Planters* (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1855), 25–27.

¹³ One can see a view of the slave quarters on the website of the Owens-Thomas House at www.telfair.org/visit/owens-thomas/ (accessed April 16, 2021).

practice bestowed upon enslaved individuals and, as a result, passed statutes limiting it.¹⁴ Yet the convenience that this arrangement provided to both enslavers and the enslaved made it impossible to prohibit.

Since only 30 percent of Savannah's population owned slaves, it was not uncommon for urban slaveholders to lease their slaves to nonslaveholders or the city for predetermined periods of time.¹⁵ This practice was known as "working abroad." During the period of the lease, enslaved servants could remain in their usual quarters or, if allowed to keep a portion of their wages, could rent a place of their own. Some took the opportunity to live with family members who were owned by other slaveholders. Others were able to live with free or enslaved spouses and children, or with the people who rented their work. Earning wages while "working abroad" meant that enslaved people could sometimes purchase personal property, such as clothing and personal items, some chickens, or even a horse and a carriage. To increase their earnings, they could take on some other side jobs, tend gardens, fish, hunt, sew, craft objects, or purchase livestock and sell their products at the city market.¹⁶ Again, while technically prohibited by city statute, these practices were seldom policed and rarely restricted.

The twin practices of living and working "abroad" contributed to the unique tapestry from which the antebellum city of Savannah was woven. Because of these living and working arrangements, Savannah was more integrated before the Civil War than it was in the decades that followed the conflict. Black and white citizens of the city worked and lived in the same neighborhoods, mingled on the streets, and sometimes even attended the same churches. Although some congregations were integrated, Black residents preferred to worship in their own churches.

¹⁴ Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, "Slave Life in Savannah: Geographies of Autonomy and Control," in Harris and Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 99–125.

¹⁵ Timothy Lockley, "Slaveholders and Slaves in Savannah's 1860 Census," *Urban History* 41, no. 4 (July 2014): 647–63.

¹⁶ For a discussion of property ownership in slave communities outside of Savannah, see Dylan Penningroth, "Slavery, Freedom, and Social Claims to Property among African Americans in Liberty County, Georgia, 1850–1880," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 405–35.

The Establishment of the First African Baptist Church

Savannah is home to the oldest Black church in the United States. With roots in the upcountry, the First African Baptist Church distinguishes itself as being the first or oldest Black church organized in the nation, a fact that speaks to the uniqueness of the Black community living in the city.¹⁷

George Liele, an enslaved man with a zeal for evangelism, founded the First African Baptist Church in 1788.¹⁸ In 1784, Matthew Moore, a white minister in Burke County, Georgia, had converted Liele and ordained him as a Baptist preacher. For four years, Liele worshiped in a white church and, at the request of slaveholder Henry Sharpe, started to preach to slaves around Savannah. Freed sometime before the American Revolution, Liele traveled on the Savannah River, preaching to and praying with enslaved people on plantations at the request of white masters. Over time, Liele built a congregation of free and enslaved Baptists, including people living on the Silver Bluff Plantation—the plantation was later renamed Redcliffe—where owner George Galphin allowed both Black and white ministers to preach.¹⁹

A man of similar thought lived closer to Savannah. White slaveowner Jonathan Bryan held the deed to Cockspur Island as well as to the Brampton Plantation, four miles west of the city.²⁰ Bryan was an ardent follower of evangelist George Whitefield, who passed away in 1770, but whose influence lingered in Georgia. Understanding the power of the gospel, Bryan encouraged ministers to preach to the enslaved people on his plantation. Liele stopped at Brampton to minister to the enslaved in the late 1770s or early 1780. Upon hearing Liele, Andrew Bryan, one of the enslaved laborers, was moved by the gospel. Born to enslaved parents in South Carolina in 1737, Bryan was in his forties when Liele baptized him and his family. In 1784, Liele left Georgia and settled in Jamaica; Bryan continued to hold services at Brampton in his stead.²¹

¹⁷ On the founding of the First African Baptist Church, see Harris and Berry, “Slave Life in Savannah”; Walter H. Brooks, “The Priority of the Silver Bluff Church and Its Promoters,” *Journal of Negro History* 7, no. 2 (April 1922): 172–96; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Alan Neely, “Liele, George,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 400–401; David T. Shannon, Julia F. White, and Deborah B. Van Broekhoven, *George Liele’s Legacy: An Unsung Hero* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ The Silver Bluff Plantation is now known as Redcliffe Plantation and was the home of James Henry Hammond. It is now operated as a historic site by the state of South Carolina.

²⁰ Bryan County was named in honor of Jonathan Bryan.

²¹ Harris and Berry, “Slave Life in Savannah,” 104.

In 1788, Bryan was ordained, began learning to read and write, and purchased his freedom from the Bryans. The next year, he purchased a lot in Savannah where he and his congregation of sixty-nine members began the construction of the church. The construction took nearly five years to complete. Bryan was fifty-seven years old when he first stood behind the pulpit of the newly finished sanctuary on its opening day in 1794.²²

Although Bryan had the support of his former master, other white men in Savannah disapproved of his power over the Black community. He was arrested and whipped; his attackers believed that his preaching would cause an uprising among the enslaved population. But when their fears did not materialize, they reluctantly allowed him to continue his ministry. By the time of his death in 1812, Bryan had earned the respect and admiration of Black and white citizens alike. One man described him as “this man of God with the white fleecy well-set locks of hair, who dressed like a bishop of London, had jet black skin, and a pair of fine black eyes sparkling with intelligence, benevolence, and joy.”²³

After Bryan’s death, his nephew, Andrew C. Marshall, became pastor of the First African Baptist Church.²⁴ Under his leadership of more than thirty years, the membership of the church continued to grow, as he “baptized nearly 3,800 people, converted 4,000, and married 2,000.”²⁵ In 1832, the congregation purchased the old sanctuary of the white Baptist church located on Franklin Square. When Marshall died in 1856, he was returning from a trip North to raise money for the construction of a new brick sanctuary on the site. His successor, William J. Campbell, picked up where Marshall had left off. He raised \$26,000, and work began on the new building. The entire congregation participated in the construction. Men labored after their other duties were finished for the day to build their new and permanent church home. According to oral tradition among current church members, women made bricks and carried them to the site in their aprons. The sanctuary was completed in 1859 and continues to house the congregation to this day.

As the oldest continuously operating African American church in the United States, the First African Baptist Church is a living demonstration of African American resilience, tenacity, and ingenuity in the face of the daily degradation of slavery. It is a monument to the ability to thrive in spite of adversity. Fort Pulaski shares a tie to the First African Baptist Church in the person of March Haynes, a deacon who ferried enslaved people to freedom at the fort during the Civil War.²⁶

²² Harris and Berry, “Slave Life in Savannah,” 104.

²³ Whittington Johnson, *Black Savannah, 1788–1864* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 10.

²⁴ For more information about Marshall, see Harris and Berry, “Slave Life in Savannah,” 106–8.

²⁵ Harris and Berry, “Slave Life in Savannah,” 107. On construction of the church, see E. K. Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church, from Its Organization, January 20th, 1788, to July 1st, 1888* (Savannah: Morning News Print, 1888), 31–34, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/love/love.html> (accessed October 2, 2021).

²⁶ For more on March Haynes, see Chapter 9.

Black Education

In the middle of the eighteenth century, due to a fear of slave rebellions, Georgia banned the education of the enslaved.²⁷ Slaveholders hoped to exert full control over their human property, and illiteracy became a tool to achieve this goal. But even though whites could limit access to education, they could not suppress the desire to learn. Enslaved people recognized that written documents had the power to shape their lives. Understanding a bill of sale, an advertisement for an auction, a written pass to move about after curfew or to travel from one place to another, a newspaper notice announcing a reward for a captured runaway, a news article reporting on the outside world, and the Bible all enticed people to learn to read and write. Enslaved people looked for ways to circumvent the law and attempted to acquire the skills that they needed through underground means, even though they knew they risked being punished if they were caught. For example, James Sims was publicly whipped when authorities learned of his efforts to teach others to read and write.²⁸

Education often took place in the most inconspicuous venues. In church, call and response—where a leader called out a line of a hymn and the congregation responded—often provided illiterate members with a first taste of literacy. Secret schools flourished, and those who had learned to read and write taught others who were equally eager to learn. For example, one enslaved woman taught children secretly in slave quarters from midnight to 2:00 a.m., well after her day’s work was done and while her master was sleeping.²⁹ Another woman, Susie King Taylor, remembered both white and Black instructors teaching her how to read and write when she was a child.³⁰ She in turn taught many members of the Company E of the 33rd US Colored Troops while working as a laundress in a camp in Beaufort, South Carolina, during the Civil War.

²⁷ According to Eugene Genovese, Georgia and South Carolina pioneered restrictions on education for the enslaved population. Restrictions became widespread following Nat Turner’s Revolt in 1831–1832. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll. The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 562. For more on slavery and education, see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 561–66 and James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

²⁸ More on James Sims in further sections. Charles Lwanga Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat: Biographies of Early Black Savannah* (Savannah: Gullah Press, 2001), 131.

²⁹ The woman described in this passage did not teach in Savannah. However, others like her found creative ways to help others to become literate. Laura S. Haviland, *A Woman’s Life-Work, Labors and Experiences* (Chicago: Publishing Association of Friends, 1889), 300–301.

³⁰ Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the SSD US Colored Troops Late 1st S.C. Volunteers* (Boston: Published by the Author, 1902).

Free People of Color

A third layer of Savannah society existed between enslaved Blacks and free whites.³¹ A small population of 632 free Black people lived in the city in 1840 and enjoyed freedoms that even enslaved servants who lived and worked “abroad” did not.³² These free people could purchase property, open businesses, choose trades, or quit jobs without fear of punishment. They could move about in the city at night or travel away from Savannah without a pass, although they needed to carry documentation proving their free status at all times, just in case. Most importantly, they were free from the nightmare of forced separation from the people they loved, as long as their loved ones were not enslaved.

Although free people of color enjoyed rights that were denied to the enslaved, they were far from treated as the equals of whites. The law required a free person of color to have a white guardian—an upstanding member of white society—who could sign legal agreements on their ward’s behalf. Furthermore, this guardian could, if necessary, affirm that the person was, in fact, free and not a runaway.³³ In addition to any property taxes that they owed, free people of color were also required to pay an additional \$100 within a year of moving to Savannah, per city ordinance.³⁴ All free men of color were expected to contribute to the greater good of the city by dedicating a portion of their labor to public work projects. Due to the fear that they could incite slave riots, free Black people faced harsh corporal punishments if they aided and abetted runaway slaves or committed a crime. In 1811, the state created a separate “special tribunal” to handle crimes committed by Black people, enslaved or free.³⁵

Free men and women of color could eventually purchase the freedom of their enslaved family members. After laws governing manumission—the act of freeing slaves by their masters—became more restrictive, free people of color found ways to circumvent these laws. For example, instead of purchasing a family member’s freedom, free people sometimes purchased the family member as their own “slave.” This status was obviously in name only since the law did not allow for slaveowners to set their slaves free.³⁶

³¹ For a discussion of free African Americans in Savannah, see Janice L. Sumler-Edmond, “Free Blacks in Savannah,” in Harris and Berry, *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, 126–38.

³² The earliest census data available for Savannah is for 1800. US Census Bureau, “Table 11. Georgia—Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990,” www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2005/demo/POP-twps0076.html (accessed November 15, 2021).

³³ Sumler-Edmond, “Free Blacks in Savannah,” 126.

³⁴ Whittington B. Johnson, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah: An Economic Profile,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 418.

³⁵ Johnson, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah,” 127.

³⁶ Manumission is the legal process through which a slaveholder could free an enslaved person.

Prosperous free people of color sometimes held truly enslaved people for their labor as well.³⁷ Part of a small wealthy Black elite, artisans Prince Candy and John Gibbons, for example, owned seven and five slaves respectively.³⁸ Susan Jackson, a pastry cook, purchased slaves to help her in her business.³⁹ At the very top of the free people of color pyramid, Black or mixed-race slaveholders profited on the backs of less fortunate African Americans.

Despite the progress of free people of color, the treatment of one's body at the end of life remained shaped by racial constructs instead of wealth. Before a section of Laurel Grove Cemetery was set aside for the interment of Black people in 1853, another graveyard for both free and enslaved Blacks lay just south of the city, in the area where the Massie Heritage Center is today and close to two squares named for slaveholders: Calhoun Square (named for South Carolina politician John C. Calhoun) and Whitefield Square (named for evangelist George Whitefield). A few of these people were taken from the first burial ground to be interred at Laurel Grove Cemetery South, but the vast majority still lie where they were originally laid to rest. Underneath the concrete pavement, two-story brick homes, the rumble of traffic, and the patter of pedestrian feet, people's remains lie buried, without any markers to let passersby know that the area was once a peaceful graveyard in the midst of a pine thicket.⁴⁰

In January 1853, renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted visited the Black cemetery while he was in Savannah as part of his tour of the seaboard slave states.⁴¹ Having just completed the design of Central Park in New York City, Olmsted was fascinated by the serene location.⁴² More importantly, he took the time to transcribe some of the inscriptions that he read on the headstones. His transcription remains the only record of these inscriptions, which were destroyed over time. Without Olmsted's careful notation of information on markers that caught his eye, none of the names of people buried in the Black graveyard would be known. Since his list did not include every headstone, the names of

³⁷ On Black slaveholders, see Johnson, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah," 418–31.

³⁸ Johnson, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah," 423.

³⁹ Johnson, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah," 423.

⁴⁰ "The History of Laurel Grove South," <https://laurelgrovesouth.org/2020/08/30/example-post-3/> (accessed October 2, 2021); Tina A. Brown, "Nego Burials Grounds Located in Two Historic Squares," *Savannah Tribune*, October 14, 2020, www.savannahtribune.com/articles/nego-burials-grounds-located-in-two-historic-squares/ (accessed October 2, 2021); Will Peebles, "Push to Erase Names of Slaveholders from Savannah Squares Would Be First Change in a Century," *Savannah Morning News*, February 1, 2021, www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2021/02/01/name-change-sought-savannah-george-whitefield-john-calhoun-squares-slavery-graveyard-burial-ground/4265343001/ (accessed October 2, 2021).

⁴¹ Kenneth McFarland, "The Travels of Frederick Law Olmsted in the Antebellum South," *Magnolia* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2006), <https://southerngardenhistory.org/magnolia/> (accessed October 2, 2021); Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 405–10.

⁴² His description of the cemetery and a black funeral in Charleston, South Carolina, is reproduced in Appendix A.

many have been forever lost to history. The significant milestones of individual lives—dates of birth, marriages, and death—were not recorded anywhere else. But they are important. These inscriptions, some of which are only fragments, give us a glimpse into the full lives of people who were enslaved. These headstones were lovingly placed by the people who cared for the departed and are a testament to lives that deserve to be remembered.

CHAPTER TWO

SLAVERY AND PLANTATION CULTURE IN THE LOWCOUNTRY

A way from the city of Savannah, on vast tracts of land owned by white planters, life for those who toiled on the plantations differed greatly from their city counterparts.¹ On a plantation, enslaved people had very little choice as to where they lived or what they did. While slavery on the Georgia Coast was no exception to this rule, the enslaved people who lived and worked on the rice and cotton plantations of the Lowcountry developed a unique and vibrant culture that set them apart from enslaved people who lived in other parts of Georgia. This chapter highlights the distinctive nature of slavery and freedom in the area known today as the Gullah-Geechee Corridor.

Housing

Housing on the Lowcountry plantations differed from the accommodations provided to enslaved people in Savannah. Plantations featured a handful of houses constructed for enslaved people, within sight of the “big house,” the house of the slaveowner, or of the accommodations of the overseer.² On exceptionally large plantations, where fields stretched for several miles, additional slave quarters were constructed in proximity to where enslaved labor was required.

Construction materials used for housing varied by geographic location and according to the availability of natural resources. On a cotton plantation in the upcountry, dwellings were often built of lumber. On a coastal rice plantation, tabby—a type of concrete made from shells mixed with sand, ash, lime, and water—was more frequently used.³ This durable concrete formed thick and substantial weather-resistant walls. While

¹ On the development of plantation slavery in Georgia, see Jennison, *Cultivating Race*, 11–40.

² The slaveholder’s home was often colloquially referred to as the “big house.” Compared to the much smaller and crude slave dwellings, even a modest home would appear larger and more refined than the other buildings on a plantation.

³ Philip D Morgan. *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee. Race in the Atlantic World, 1700–1900* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 7; Susan D. Morris, “Tabby,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/tabby (accessed September 24, 2021).

wooden houses of the upcountry often included lofts for extra sleeping space, tabby houses of the Lowcountry did not. Beyond this distinction, slave cabins were very similar. Most single-occupancy homes consisted of a two hundred square foot multipurpose room with a strategically located hearth used for cooking year-round and heating in the winter. Each cabin had one door and a few windows. Some plantations featured double-occupancy dwellings that were only slightly larger than the single-occupancy homes. The fireplace was located in the common wall and the home usually had two entrances, creating two distinct living spaces.⁴

Labor

Every plantation required both skilled and unskilled labor. On large plantations, one could find a blacksmith, some skilled carpenters, and a farrier. Seamstresses, cooks, a cobbler, a nanny, and other domestic servants worked in the big house. Yet the majority of enslaved people spent their days toiling in the fields under the hot sun or in the pouring rain. The type of crops raised on the plantation shaped their routines.

Cotton plantations usually employed a gang system whereby groups of workers labored from sunup to sundown every day.⁵ In the spring, African American men, women, and children hoed the long rows and planted the seeds. In the summer, they tended to the crops, chopped weeds, and grew food. In the fall, when the harvest came, they carefully but quickly plucked bolls of cotton and dropped them into burlap sacks. In order to ensure that everyone worked to their full potential during the growing season and at harvest time, a white overseer or Black driver closely monitored each worker's daily success or failure. During harvest, the fear of harsh punishment for a low weight was motivation enough to meet the allotted goal for the day. However, exceeding the quota would set a new standard to meet from there on. Thus field hands aimed to pick the exact quantity of cotton required for the day and no more.

On a rice plantation, the work was even more taxing. The environment was wetter and muggier, and the work was more strenuous. Workers in the rice fields suffered from immersion foot syndromes (injuries caused by water absorption in the outer layers of skin), snakebites, and tropical diseases. Rather than working from sunup to sundown every day, field hands labored under the task system, where a specific assignment was given to each

⁴ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 88–89; Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 76, 99.

⁵ See Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

worker daily.⁶ Once the assignment was completed, the workers were off-duty for the rest of the day. They could plant a garden or fish and set traps to supplement the meager food allowances that the slaveholder provided. They could raise small livestock and sell the products. They also had some time to socialize or steal a few moments of pleasure.⁷

Gullah-Geechee Culture

The Gullah-Geechee culture developed on these remote rice plantations along the waterways of Georgia and South Carolina.⁸ Plantation owners only lived on-site for part of the year, if at all, leaving Blacks with more autonomy. As a result, enslaved people formed small villages, away from coastal towns and miles away from the scrutiny of white neighbors. These enclaves served as incubators where African language, religion, and folkways thrived and merged with English and Christian traditions to create a unique culture.

While enslaved captives came from different areas of Africa, those who lived in the coastal communities often shared deep cultural connections. On islands of Sapelo, St. Simons, Hilton Head, and Daufuskie, for example, Black men, women, and children spoke a creole dialect that blended English with the words and cadence of African languages.⁹ Their speech patterns and vocabulary distinguished their language so much that it lost intelligibility outside of the community and could be perceived as a liability. To African Americans living in Savannah, who had for the most part adopted the speech patterns of the white majority, speakers of the Gullah language appeared “country,” backward, or unlearned. To whites, the Gullah language became an important identifying characteristic; postings in newspapers seeking the return of a runaway often mentioned the unique way in which the person spoke.¹⁰

Gullah people painstakingly held onto and cultivated their African food traditions as they began their new lives in Georgia and South Carolina. They imported the skills and knowledge necessary to grow rice from the western coast of Africa to the eastern coast of the United States. They gave sustenance to their bodies by eating from the slow-cooked pot

⁶ Philip D. Morgan, “Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (October 1982): 563–99; Judith Carney, *Black Rice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁷ Penningroth, “Slavery, Freedom, and Social Claims,” 405–35.

⁸ On Gullah-Geechee culture, see Melissa L. Cooper, *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁹ Emory S. Campbell, “A Sense of Self and Place: Unmasking My Gullah Cultural Heritage,” in Morgan, *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry*, 281–92.

¹⁰ Patricia Causey Nichols, *Voices of Our Ancestors: Language Contact in Early South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 58, 78.

of okra, black-eyed peas, or greens set over an open fire.¹¹ A reminder of home for first-generation Africans, food became a source of cultural identity for generations of African Americans who slowly adapted their ancestral foods to the new ways of the South.

Gullah-Geechee communities survived generation after generation and still live today in cultural pockets along the southeastern coast of the United States. On the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands, for example, descendants of the first involuntary immigrants from Africa continue to work to preserve the rich cultural heritage that their ancestors have passed down to them. Sapelo Island is one of the few islands where modern development failed to erase the traces of a culture that once thrived and sustained the people whose labor created wealth for white men and women.¹²

Islam and African Religious Traditions

Prior to their arrival on rice plantations, many captives from West Africa practiced Islam or African religious traditions.¹³ Bilali Mohammed, an African enslaved on Sapelo Island, rose to prominence when he was appointed as the driver for Thomas Spaulding's plantation. Born in present-day Sierra Leone, his qualifications as a master rice cultivator increased his value. Allegedly born into a well-educated family, Mohammed could read and write in Arabic, wore a fez, and prayed facing east toward Mecca as the Islamic tradition dictates. His wife, Phoebe, wore a hijab—a veil hiding one's hair and the side of the face—as a sign of modesty.¹⁴

In her book *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man*, Cornelia Bailey, one of Mohammed's descendants, discusses the Muslim roots of traditions that had been passed down in her family and in her community. In an interview with *Witness to Faith* on PBS, she highlighted the Muslim heritage of her otherwise Baptist community.¹⁵ In church, men and women sit on opposite sides. In the cemetery, tombstones face Mecca in the East. She also spoke of making “white rice cakes with molasses, much like the Islamic rice cakes that her great-great-grandmother gave out to children as charity.”¹⁶

¹¹ Campbell, “A Sense of Self and Place,” 286.

¹² About Gullah-Geechee people on Sapelo Island and memory, see Cooper, *Making Gullah*.

¹³ See Michael A. Gomez, “African, Culture, and Islam in the Lowcountry,” in Morgan, *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry*, 103–30.

¹⁴ Cornelia Bailey, *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man: A Memoir of Life on Sapelo Island* (New York: Anchor, 2003).

¹⁵ Cornelia Bailey, *This Far by Faith: Witness by Faith*, PBS, 2003, www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/cornelia_bailey.html (accessed March 6, 2020).

¹⁶ Bailey, *This Far by Faith*.

Other African religious traditions permeated the daily lives of the Gullah people. Historians estimate that Hoodoo, a syncretic and creole religion, emerged in the Lowcountry between 1740 and 1780.¹⁷ Differing from the voodoo traditions found in Black communities established in Louisiana and along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, Hoodoo integrated several components of the “African Religion Complex.”¹⁸ These elements included “counterclockwise sacred circle dancing,” “spirit possession,” “the principle of sacrifice,” “ritual water immersion,” “divination,” “ancestral reverence,” “belief in spiritual cause of malady,” and “herbal and naturopathic medicine.”¹⁹

It was not uncommon for enslaved people to seek help from the “root doctors” who treated their physical or even emotional maladies with herbal remedies that had been traditionally used in West Africa. They also visited root doctors to obtain charms to protect themselves against evil when discords between neighbors or lovers reached a boiling point.²⁰ At a time when medicine remained rudimentary, healers often gained a high status on plantations, where they provided care to white people as well.²¹ They knew how to cure scurvy, perform surgery, and administer cures that resolved chronic issues.²²

The disruption caused by slavery did not put an end to the ancestral practices of those who had been involuntarily brought to the colonies. When enslaved people in the Lowcountry adopted Christianity, they did so with reservations and often integrated elements of their own religious traditions within their Christian practices. Soon performed in Christian praise houses, the ring shout—in which people formed circles and danced counterclockwise, stomping their feet and making gestures symbolizing the harvest—derived from African religious dances.²³ Boat songs and spirituals, while often Christian in their lyrical themes, built upon work songs and oral traditions originating on the African coast.²⁴ The deeply emotional religious practices of the First Great Awakening (1730s–40s)

¹⁷ Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 34–83.

¹⁸ Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 40.

¹⁹ Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 40.

²⁰ See Roger Pinckney, *Blue Roots: African American Folk Magic of the Gullah People* (Lexington: Sandlapper, 2003).

²¹ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 126.

²² Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 126.

²³ Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 44.

²⁴ Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 606–11.

mirrored the concepts of soul possession that many had carried with them from Africa.²⁵ The messages of spiritual equality and of literacy promoted by evangelical preachers also appealed to them.

Working in the Big House

Eugene Genovese thoroughly documented the lives of enslaved people who worked as domestic servants in planters' homes. His descriptions in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* depict the lives of Black people living in Southeast Georgia and on the Sea Island cotton, rice, and sugar plantations. Those who worked in the big house—those who cooked, cleaned, laundered, or otherwise took care of the basic needs of the planter and his family—often enjoyed a higher status in the plantation hierarchy.²⁶ They soon came to believe in this newfound status and presumed security themselves, and traced social delineations between themselves and the field hands. Some parents prevented their children from playing with the field children, while others expressed rude behavior toward those whom they considered to be inferior.²⁷

The working conditions and access to comfort of house servants seemed to confirm this assertion of superiority and field hands openly coveted positions in the big house.²⁸ Butlers, valets, cooks, maids, nannies, and other domestics still worked hard but indoors rather than outside. They had access to more or better food, better clothing, and more comfortable quarters.²⁹ Mammies were trusted with the raising of children and the intimate secrets of their mistresses.³⁰ They received “more personal consideration from the whites,” which ultimately could lead to small privileges in their favor.³¹ They often had more freedom of movement and a certain degree of authority over other enslaved people.

²⁵ Frank Lambert, “‘I Saw the Book Talk’: Slave Readings of the First Great Awakening,” *Journal of Negro History* 77, no. 4 (Autumn 1992): 12. On enslaved people’s reaction to the First Great Awakening in Georgia, see the experience of Olaudah Equiano. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, Written by Himself* (London: Printed and Sold by the Author, 1794).

²⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 329; Theresa A. Singleton, “Reclaiming the Gullah-Geechee Past: Archeology of Slavery in Coastal Georgia,” in Morgan, *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry*, 172; Erskine Clarke, “‘They Shun the Scrutiny of White Men’: Reports on Religion from the Georgia Lowcountry and West Africa, 1834–1850,” in Morgan, *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry*, 131–50.

²⁷ Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll*, 329–330.

²⁸ Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll*, 330.

²⁹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 331.

³⁰ The role of the Mammy on plantations was mythologized by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in the Progressive Era. See Deborah G. White, “Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery,” in *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), 27–61; Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

³¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 341.

However, the alleged division between house slaves and field slaves did not prevent the development of a level of solidarity between all enslaved people facing a common oppression.³² House servants and field hands often shared family bonds, especially on large plantations. They married each other, formed friendships, and took care of each other.³³ This solidarity, however, remained somewhat hidden from masters who, as a slaveholder highlights, acted as if the servants were “incapable of hearing.”³⁴ House servants often became conduits of information, and passed along what they heard in the big house to those working in the fields. They could warn them of an impending sale or relay messages between people or groups. When they heard of overreaching discipline, beatings, or whippings, they could spring into action and help those in need by providing additional food, care, or even information to help them run away.³⁵

If this close proximity brought prestige and privileges, it also had its downsides. Domestic servants lacked the privacy and downtime afforded to those who worked further away from constant white scrutiny. They were on call day in and day out, and were often subject to the tempers of those who held them as property.³⁶ Masters and mistresses often insulted, injured, and threatened their house servants. They could rarely sit down or enjoy any respite, as they would be deemed lazy or worthless.³⁷ They were often forced to sleep in the same bedrooms as those whom they served.

Enslaved women, in particular, were vulnerable to sexual assault; neither law nor social mores offered them any protection.³⁸ Many of these cases of sexual abuse remain undocumented, but some have been discovered through the years. In 1831, James Henry Hammond received the plantation of Silver Bluff, an estate previously owned by George Galphin, through his marriage to seventeen-year-old Catherine Elizabeth Fitzsimmons.³⁹ The publication of Hammond’s diaries in 1988 revealed that Silver Bluff became a site of violence, exploitation, and horror to those enslaved by Hammond.

A distinguished politician, Hammond served as Congressman for the Fourth District of South Carolina from 1835 to 1836, as governor of South Carolina from 1842 to 1844, and as a United States senator from 1857 to November 11, 1860. He was an outspoken

³² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 341.

³³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 338–39.

³⁴ Cited in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 341.

³⁵ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 340.

³⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 333.

³⁷ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 334.

³⁸ Since enslaved people were regarded as property, the law did not recognize the rape of an enslaved woman by her enslaver as a crime. Moreover, testimony of enslaved people against whites was rarely allowed in court. See Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

³⁹ Carol Bleser, ed., *Secret and Sacred, The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

defender of slavery, who popularized the expression “Cotton is King.”⁴⁰ Yet, despite this distinguished career, Hammond hid a terrible secret. He frequently had nonconsensual relationships with his enslaved servants—particularly young girls. He purchased a seamstress named Sally Johnson and her infant daughter Louisa when Sally was barely eighteen, and immediately forced the young mother into a sexual relationship. When Louisa was about twelve, he inflicted the same treatment on her. He fathered children with both Sally and Louisa. Hammond’s sexual misconduct extended beyond enslaved women to include assaults on his nieces, and eventually his wife left him for a time.⁴¹

For enslaved African Americans in the Lowcountry, as throughout the South, one fundamental fact of life was inescapable: under the law, they were considered property. Whether they lived in the city or on a plantation, whether they worked indoors or in the fields, whether their master was kind or cruel, ultimate control over their lives and their bodies remained in someone else’s hands. They could be bought and sold; sexually abused; forced to work beyond the point of exhaustion; beaten, whipped, branded, or mutilated; have their parents, spouses, children, or siblings snatched from them—all without recourse. Within this inhumane system, they found solace in their families and their communities, in their religious faith and their churches, and in the undying hope that someday, someday, they would be free.

⁴⁰ Hammond popularized the phrase in a speech to the US Senate on March 4, 1858, in which he said, “You dare not make war on cotton—no power on earth dares make war upon it. Cotton is king.” Earlier in the same speech, he declared, “In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life.... It constitutes the very mudsill of society.” See the Library of Congress American Memory page, “James Henry Hammond, *Plantation Manual, 1857–1858*,” US Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awmss5/d08.html> (accessed April 16, 2021).

⁴¹ Bleser, *Secret and Sacred*, passim; Wilma King, “‘Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things’: The Sexual Abuse of African American Girls and Young Women in Slavery and Freedom,” *Journal of African American History* 99 (Summer 2014): 176–77.

CHAPTER THREE

COCKSPUR ISLAND IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

From the mid-1700s through the early 1800s, Cockspur Island history was intertwined with navigation, military development, public health, and the slave trade. Located in the mouth of the Savannah River, the island was the place where ships met the pilots who guided them up the river to the city. The site of a British fort during the colonial era, Cockspur served as the capital of colonial Georgia for a brief period during the Revolutionary War. Far enough from the city, it created a perfect quarantine station to protect Savannah from contagious diseases brought by sick passengers and crew. Furthermore, this small island, with its marshes, sandy soil, and sparse vegetation, was a first stop for African captives nearing the end of a long and perilous voyage.¹

Cockspur: 1763–1770

Ships bound for Savannah usually stopped at Cockspur before navigating the waters of the Savannah River. The earliest surviving issues of the *Georgia Gazette*, dating from the 1760s, frequently mention vessels arriving at the island on their way to the city. On more than one occasion, the *Gazette* recounted stories of a maritime mishap. In April 1763, for example, the newspaper reported that “His Majesty’s ship *The Epreuve*, which had the misfortune to run ashore on Cockspur point, is in a fair way of being got off.”² The ship either remained at or returned to the island to complete extensive repairs, according to a report published in June.³ In July, the newspaper announced that the ship had received “a salute of the great guns from the fort at Cockspur” as it was turned over, and that she could be “expected up to the harbour in a few days.”⁴ The ship came back periodically to complete repairs in 1764

¹ Peeper Island seems to have been the first English name for Cockspur Island, as that is the title John Wesley gave it when he landed there in 1736. By the 1760s, the island was commonly referred to as Cockspur.

² The name *The Epreuve*, which translates from the French as the test or the trial, was somewhat well suited in this case. *Georgia Gazette*, April 7, 1763.

³ Cockspur Island served as a repair station during this period. According to the *Georgia Gazette*, many ships stopped on the island to clean or repair their vessels. *Georgia Gazette*, June 23, 1763; *Georgia Gazette*, July 7, 1763.

⁴ *Georgia Gazette*, July 7, 1763

as well. Traffic around Cockspur, especially during the high season, posed a risk to small embarkations that navigated around larger vessels. In March 1764, for example, a sailor drowned when his canoe flipped as he was trying to go around ship lying at Cockspur.⁵

While little could be done to prevent small boats from capsizing, Georgia legislators took steps to make the passage from Cockspur to Savannah safer.⁶ Sandbars and treacherous waters made the short trip dangerous, and ships needed guidance from experienced pilots who knew the waterways well. In June 1766, Governor James Wright commissioned Captain William Lyford Jr. to pilot incoming ships up the winding waterways into the city's harbor.⁷ Born in the Bahamas and based in South Carolina at the time of his appointment, Lyford was a skilled mariner with a history of abusing men under his command. In 1762, he had been found guilty of assaulting a crewman and ordered to pay restitution. During his time on Cockspur, Lyford relied on enslaved pilots to fulfill his contract and increase his profits. In the late 1760s, he owned at least twelve enslaved men; because of their knowledge and work, he was able to run two boats simultaneously.⁸

Records reveal nothing about the daily lives of Lyford's captive laborers, but there is evidence that he was an abusive master and that the people he enslaved found ways to resist and to seize control of their own destinies while, at the same time, exacting revenge on their enslaver. In 1768, Lyford reported that his schooner, the *Favorite*, had been stolen from Cockspur with an unnamed enslaved man asleep on board. The announcement in the *Georgia Gazette* described him as "a DARK INDIAN FELLOW, who speak [sic] good English." Two years later, it happened again. In 1770, Lyford advertised for the return of two enslaved men who had commandeered one of his vessels and escaped. Tony, "a Brown Indian man" who was fluent in English, and Jack, a Black man who spoke English and Spanish and was able to write, had taken one of Lyford's pilot boats in a daring flight for freedom. It is not known if Tony was the same enslaved Indian who had been supposedly sleeping when the *Favorite* was taken two years earlier or if he and Jack evaded capture. In 1774, an enslaved man named Jack was blamed for setting fire to Lyford's home. The house burned to the ground, and Lyford's family narrowly escaped the blaze. Although Jack denied responsibility, Savannah authorities found him guilty of arson and condemned him to be burned at the stake.⁹

⁵ *Georgia Gazette*, March 15, 1764.

⁶ Lyford followed his father's footsteps in his naval work. His story is told in J. G. Braddock, "The Plight of a Georgia Loyalist: William Lyford, Jr.," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 252.

⁷ Braddock, "The Plight of a Georgia Loyalist," 252.

⁸ Braddock, "The Plight of a Georgia Loyalist," 251; *Georgia Gazette*, April 18, 1770.

⁹ *Georgia Gazette*, February 10, 1768; "Tony An Escaped Slave July 4" <https://adverts250project.org/tag/tony-an-escaped-slave/>; Braddock, "The Plight of a Georgia Loyalist," 252-54.

Taken together, these incidents provide tantalizing glimpses into the lives of people enslaved on Cockspur in the 1700s and into the relationship between enslaved and enslaver. Lyford exploited the skills and knowledge of enslaved pilots to make his business run. Their labor made him a wealthy man. Despite setbacks, he continued to acquire more property and to add to his labor force. By 1776, he had twenty-two enslaved pilots working in Savannah and Sunbury in Georgia and Port Royal in South Carolina. He enslaved still more people at his plantation on St Catherine's Island. Based on his earlier conviction for assaulting a free man on his crew, it appears that he was willing to use physical force as coercion and punishment. Life was harsh for the men and women whom Lyford counted among his possessions; Lyford himself tacitly acknowledged that when he assumed (and other whites agreed) that the fire at his home was set by a vengeful enslaved man. Yet, as the stories of Jack and Tony illustrate, enslaved people knew their own worth and no amount of cruel treatment or exploitation could extinguish the desire for freedom. While Lyford and public authorities viewed the taking of a boat by enslaved men as theft, Jack and Tony likely saw it as fair compensation for their labor as well as a vehicle to take them away from slavery.¹⁰

Jack and Tony's escape as well as the fire that destroyed Lyford's home took place against the backdrop of an escalating crisis between Great Britain and its American colonies. When hostilities began, Lyford cast his lot with the status quo. Because he opposed independence and remained loyal to Great Britain, he was forced to flee Georgia, "taking with him his family and as many of his slaves and possessions [as] his boats could hold." He took refuge in British East Florida and he and his enslaved crew continued to pilot ships for the Royal Navy. Their skill on the water and knowledge of the Georgia coastline proved to be valuable assets to the British. In Lyford's claim for reimbursement for lost property, filed with the British government after the war ended, he declared that when the British took Savannah in 1778, one of his pilots was singlehandedly responsible for the victory. The man—whose name Lyford did not mention in his petition—had guided the fleet up the river, leading to the capture of the city.¹¹ The British promised freedom to Blacks who escaped from Patriot masters, but enslaved people who belonged to Loyalists remained in bondage, and Lyford sought compensation for himself, not a reward for the pilot. The fate of the anonymous mariner is unknown but his story would be replicated decades later, when civil war once again raged on American soil and the outcome of crucial military operations along the coast once again rested in the skilled hands of enslaved pilots—some of whom, like Jack and Tony before them, navigated the turbulent waters around Cockspur in a quest for freedom.¹²

¹⁰ Braddock, "The Plight of a Georgia Loyalist," 256.

¹¹ Braddock, "The Plight of a Georgia Loyalist," 257.

¹² Braddock, "The Plight of a Georgia Loyalist," 261–62.

The Lazaretto

Prior to 1764, enslaved people purchased in Georgia came almost exclusively from the West Indies or from South Carolina.¹³ It is unclear when the first Blacks imported directly from Africa arrived in Savannah. Most historians believe that the first shipment from West Africa landed in the colony in 1766. John and Matthew Strong, two merchants from Liverpool, sponsored this consignment that Captain David Morton delivered from Senegal to the mercantile firm of Broughton and Smith in Savannah. Documents suggest, however, that the first Africans to be transported directly from their homeland to Georgia may have arrived at Cockspur Island two years earlier, in the summer of 1764.¹⁴ An advertisement for a group of “six likely new Negroe men” from the Gold Coast was published by slave brokers Lewis Johnson and Alexander Wyly in the *Georgia Gazette* on July 26, 1764.¹⁵ A second ad for a group of “nine new Negroe men,” also allegedly from the Gold Coast, appeared the following week. A final advertisement, for “ten likely Gold Cost Negroes just imported from the West Indies,” was published on October 25.¹⁶ While some planters preferred to purchase “seasoned” enslaved people—slaves who had spent a number of years in the West Indies and who knew European languages prior to being brought to the colonies—the allusion to the Gold Coast provenance of the enslaved cargo implies a changing trend, even if the advertising indicates that the merchandise had been imported from the West Indies.¹⁷

The last advertisement contained another interesting reference. Unlike other advertisements, this one highlighted that “to prevent their receiving the infection of the smallpox,” the enslaved people for sale had “been kept constantly on board of the vessel since they arrived, where they will be sold.”¹⁸ This was reassuring to interested parties, especially as smallpox threatened to spread in Savannah in 1764. Slave ships were particularly susceptible to diseases. The journey between Africa and Georgia could take between four and six months, depending on the currents and the winds. The conditions on slave ships were execrable. Poorly ventilated vessels transported up to seven hundred people

¹³ Darold D. Wax, “‘New Negroes Are Always in Demand’: The Slave Trade in Eighteenth-Century Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 197–98.

¹⁴ *Georgia Gazette*, October 11, 1764; Karen Bell, “Atlantic Slave Trade to Savannah,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/atlantic-slave-trade-savannah (accessed October 4, 2021).

¹⁵ *Georgia Gazette*, July 26, 1764.

¹⁶ *Georgia Gazette*, August 2, 1764; *Georgia Gazette* October 25, 1764. Historian Darold D. Wax believes that all three of the shipments that arrived in 1764 likely came from Africa via the West Indies; see Wax, “New Negroes Are Always in Demand,” 198.

¹⁷ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 49.

¹⁸ *Georgia Gazette*, October 25, 1764.

crowded below decks, shoulder to shoulder.¹⁹ To avoid revolts and mutiny on the ships, crews kept enslaved people shackled, often in their own feces and vomit, without giving them access to fresh water to clean themselves or the ship's decks. Combined with a lack of proper nutrition during the voyage, this created the perfect environment for the propagation of diseases.²⁰ Scurvy, dysentery, and smallpox were among the greatest killers on ships.²¹ Attempts to improve food and water sanitation, to provide fruits or vegetables rich in vitamin C, and to inoculate cargoes against smallpox reduced the transmission of diseases, but only by so much.²² Ultimately, human cargoes posed a genuine threat to the colonies upon their arrival.

In 1749, in order to protect the colony, the legislature of Georgia ordered the construction of a quarantine station. The practice of quarantine was not new. Dating back to the early medieval era, it had been used to stop the spread of several diseases, including smallpox and the bubonic plague. Cities across the British Empire, including Boston, New York, and London, had constructed quarantine stations nearly a hundred years earlier.²³ Between the 1660s and 1760s, a few localized epidemics threatened the colonies, but few had been understood as having spread through the ports.

In 1763, as smallpox spread quickly to Charlestown and threatened Georgia, Governor James Wright issued a proclamation “to oblige ships and other vessels from places infected with epidemical distempers to perform quarantine,” before reaching the colony.²⁴ News of travelers arriving at Cockspur Island and “performing quarantine”

¹⁹ The largest ship built, *The Hannibal*, was a 450-ton vessel that required 36 guns to defend itself from attacks. Most ships were smaller (transporting between 100 and 450 people). Thomas Phillips, *A Journal of a Voyage Made in the Hannibal of London, Ann. 1693, 1694, From England, to Cape's Monseradoe, in Africa, and Thence along the Coast of Guiney to Whidaw, the Island of St. Thomas, and so Forward to Barbadoes: With a Cursory Account of the County, the People, Their Manners, Forts, Trade, &c* (London: Walthoe, 1732).

²⁰ On the conditions in the ships, see Sean M. Kelley, “Passages,” in *The Voyage of the Slave Ship Hare: A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016): 108–20; Wax, ““New Negroes Are Always in Demand,”” 210; Raymond Cohn, “Deaths of Slaves in the Middle Passage,” *Journal of Economic History* 45, no. 3 (September 1985): 685–92. Abolitionists documented the experiences and conditions of enslaved people on ships. See, for example, W. Elford, “Remarks on the Slave Trade” (printed and sold by Samuel Wood for the Plymouth Committee, 1807).

²¹ Although not communicable, scurvy, a disease acquired due to a lack of vitamin C, weakened people's bodies and made them more susceptible to other diseases.

²² It is important to note that vitamins were only “discovered” in the 1920s and that the knowledge that certain fruits and vegetables cured or prevented scurvy came from trial and error. Cohn, “Deaths of Slaves in the Middle Passage,” 692.

²³ Colby J. Fisher, “Unequal Implementation: The Impact of Government Anti-Plague Policies on the London Poor in 1665” (undergraduate thesis, University of Vermont, 2017).

²⁴ *Georgia Gazette*, July 7, 1763.

appeared in the *Georgia Gazette* quickly in accordance with the proclamation.²⁵ In 1764, Wright issued another proclamation to reduce the spread of smallpox after an outbreak took place in Savannah.²⁶

In 1766, the weekly arrival of “considerable cargoes of Negroes from Africa” with hundreds of infected people on board led Savannah’s officials to recognize not only the need for, but also the urgency of, the construction of a station on Tybee Island.²⁷ In March 1767, leaders in Savannah petitioned the colonial Georgia legislature for an appropriation to purchase land to build a lazaretto—a proper quarantine station—and for funding to run it. Josiah Tattnall, a planter, had land that he was willing to sell.²⁸ In June 1767, the colonial assembly authorized the construction of the Lazaretto on 104 acres on the western point of Tybee. Ads were immediately posted in the Savannah newspaper for proposals for the work to be completed no later than November 1767, which also speak to the urgent nature of the request. The advertisement gave the specification required for the building: “The house to be 40 feet long, and 20 feet wide, from out to out; 12 foot wall in height from the foundation, and 9 feet story; 1 partition, 2 doors, 6 windows below, 2 floors, a pediment door with a staircase to it, and 4 windows above, a chimney and fireplace at each end, likewise a keeper’s house, 15 by 24 feet long, with a brick chimney, 2 doors and 4 windows: The materials of both to be tabby and lime brick.”²⁹

Previous depictions of the original Lazaretto—describing the hospital as being nine stories tall—were in error, as the dimensions listed above were far more modest. The “9 feet story” indicated the height of the ceiling on the main floor of the building—and not the number of floors, which was limited to two.

Whether the Lazaretto was completed by the deadline of November 1767 or not is unknown; however, it is clear that the building was in use by July 1768 when the brigantine *Gambia* arrived from the coast of Africa carrying human cargo infected with smallpox.³⁰ On July 25, Governor Wright issued a proclamation ordering that the *Gambia* be “carried into and moored in Tybee Creek, and that the same, together with the slaves and persons therein, do remain there at least forty days after the last person infected shall have recovered.” Furthermore, he ordered that “all such slaves or persons who may die on board, or on shore during the quarantain [*sic*] be buried in some convenient place on the Publick

²⁵ *Georgia Gazette*, June 23, 1763; *Georgia Gazette*, August 25, 1763.

²⁶ *Georgia Gazette*, May 31, 1764; *Georgia Gazette*, December 20, 1764.

²⁷ *Georgia Gazette*, November 12, 1766; Kenneth K. Krakow, *Georgia Place-Names: Their History and Origins* (Macon: Winship Press, 1975), 130.

²⁸ The legislature also asked for funding to rebuild a lighthouse on Tybee Island in the same request. *Georgia Gazette*, April 1, 1767.

²⁹ *Georgia Gazette*, May 13, 1767.

³⁰ *Georgia Gazette*, July 27, 1768.

[sic] Land, at least five feet beneath the surface.”³¹ The fact that all people who died during their quarantine, notwithstanding their race or status, would be buried in the same location speaks to the extraordinary nature of the events unfolding at the time. Segregated burial practices had been the norm since the early colonial period, and, to some extent, that custom suited the preferences of enslaved and free Blacks to mourn privately, away from the prying eyes of white people.³²

In March 1769, Governor Wright issued another proclamation, this time ordering the *Britannia* to stay at Tybee until the threat of smallpox had passed.³³ The same provisions applied to the ship, including the directives on the burial of those who passed away from the disease. In 1770, the colonial legislature passed a new law to require captains of ships to show passports “from the Governor or Commanding Chief” upon arrival at and leave from Tybee to prevent the “harbouring of sick sailors and others” and “for the regulating and well ordering of the Lazaretto.”³⁴

By 1785, after years of neglect due to the Revolutionary War, a grand jury in Savannah ruled that the Lazaretto was in “ruinous condition” and could no longer be of use.³⁵ In the 1790s and early 1800s, the quarantine existed less as a place and more as a person, the Health Officer of Savannah. The Officer ordered the detainment of incoming ships at various locations. He would row out to the vessel to complete a thorough inspection of the health of the passengers, crew, and cargo in person. Sometimes, he asked the pilots to detain the ship at Cockspur Island, at Five Fathom Hole, or at Fort Wayne just outside the city. With the threat of yellow fever lurking in 1795, Health Officer M. Burke ordered the pilots “to bring no vessel” coming from Philadelphia—the source of the outbreak—“higher than Cockspur without permission.”³⁶

Turnover for this position was frequent. The lack of support, as well as communication problems between the Health Officer and city government, contributed to the city’s inability to retain its employees. Moses Sheftall, who filled the post in 1800, was blamed for the outbreak of smallpox in Savannah. In June, he responded to the “malicious and scandalous falsehood” in a letter penned for the *Georgia Gazette*.³⁷ In March, upon learning of

³¹ *Georgia Gazette*, July 27, 1768.

³² Ross W. Jamieson, “Material Culture and Social Death: African-American Burial Practices,” *Historical Archeology* 29, no. 4 (1995): 39–58; David R. Roediger, “And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community 1700–1865,” *The Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 163–83; Christina Brooks, “Exploring the Material Culture of Death in Enslaved African Cemeteries in Colonial Virginia and South Carolina,” *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* 14, no. 3 (September 2011): 1–10.

³³ *Georgia Gazette*, March 8, 1769.

³⁴ *Georgia Gazette*, April 11, 1770; *Georgia Gazette*, April 18, 1770; *Georgia Gazette*, May 16, 1770.

³⁵ *Fort Pulaski National Monument Quarantine Attendants’ Quarters Historic Structure Report* (Historical Architecture, Cultural Resources Division, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, March 2004), 9.

³⁶ *Columbian Museum & Savannah Advertiser*, August 16, 1799.

³⁷ *Georgia Gazette*, June 26, 1800.

the disease spreading in Charleston, he had written to city officials and “requested their instructions [on] how to act.” He recommended a simple course of action; he wanted to stop all ships arriving from Philadelphia to “visit and examine them.”³⁸ However, “the council did not think proper to agree,” and Sheftall was left without official support. When smallpox spread to Yamacraw, he solicited the opinion of a fellow physician since he was not “accustomed to seeing the disease in the natural way.” His colleague concurred and city officials recommended inoculation as a way to stop the spread.³⁹

Human Trafficking: The Slave Trade

During the two years of 1769 and 1770, hundreds of enslaved West Africans arrived at Cockspur after being forcibly removed from their homeland. One hundred and thirty came on a ship from the “Grain Coast” of Africa.⁴⁰ Another vessel brought ninety-seven people from Sierra Leone, and soon thereafter, another ship followed with two hundred more. Shiploads of human cargo continued to land in Georgia for many years to come. The sheer number of involuntary migrants overwhelms the imagination, and the lack of documentation obscures the individual stories that lie beneath the statistics. Each of these men and women faced a difficult future as they adapted to new surroundings and forged personal connections while enduring the system of slavery.⁴¹

One of the women brought from the “Grain Coast,” Betsey Baptiste, disembarked from a slave ship onto Georgia soil in January 1795; she was about twenty-five years old. Betsey was purchased by Amaritta Baptiste, a free woman of color, who had only received her freedom five years earlier, in 1790. Amaritta had been manumitted by Alexander Watt, a prominent merchant in Savannah. Whether Amaritta purchased Betsey for her labor or as an investment is unknown; however, by 1813, their relationship had grown so close that Amaritta sought Levi Sheftall D’Lyon’s help to ensure that Betsey would be free upon her

³⁸ *Georgia Gazette*, June 26, 1800.

³⁹ *Georgia Gazette*, June 26, 1800.

⁴⁰ European traders gave the name of “Grain Coast” to the region between Cape Mesurado and Cape Palmas, a region located in Liberia today.

⁴¹ *Georgia Gazette*, April 19, 1769; July 19, 1769; May 2, 1770.

death.⁴² After Betsey became a free woman, she supported herself and prospered. She owned her own home and lived a long life. When she died in 1857, she had shared her home with two young women and their children.⁴³

In 1798, three years after young Betsey Baptiste arrived in Savannah, the Georgia legislature banned the importation of captives from Africa. This legislation came ten years prior to the federal ban in 1808. But demand for labor remained high, and some men were willing to break the law in order to make a profit. Traders continued to smuggle enslaved Africans into the country. In 1858, in spite of the federal ban, Charles Gazaway Lamar sent the *Wanderer* to Africa and brought more than four hundred captives to Jekyll Island.⁴⁴ Survivors of the voyage were sold across Georgia and were enslaved until the end of the Civil War.

⁴² On Levi Sheftall D’Lyon, see Lorraine Netrick Abraham, “Levi Sheftall D’Lyon: A Preliminary Biography,” *Armstrong College* (1992), <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1055&context=sav-bios-lane> (accessed April 17, 2021).

⁴³ “Betsey Baptiste,” in *Savannah Biographies: A Collection of Unedited Biographies Written by History Students of Armstrong State College*, Volume 25, Lane Library Special Collections (Savannah: Georgia Southern University, 2011).

⁴⁴ Thomas Robson Hay, “Gazaway Bugg Lamar, Confederate Banker and Business Man,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (June 1953): 89–129; James Jordan, “Charles Augustus Lafayette Lamar and the Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 247–90; “The Yacht *Wanderer* Again.” *New York Times*, October 25, 1859; Tom Henderson Wells, *The Slave Ship Wanderer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967); Tom Henderson Wells, “Charles Augustus Lafayette Lamar: Gentleman Slave Trader,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (June 1963): 158–68.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FORT PULASKI

Cockspur during the American Revolution

As tensions escalated between the crown and American colonists in early 1776, trouble brewed in Savannah.¹ “On the chilly evening of January 18, 1776,” historian Greg Brooking wrote, “Georgia’s royal governor, Sir James Wright summoned Colonial leaders Joseph Clay and Noble Wymberly Jones”—both Sons of Liberty—“to his home.”² At the time of his summons, the British fleet had just arrived off the coast of Tybee Island. Eager to avoid a potential conflict, he impressed upon them that he would do everything in his power to protect them and the city of Savannah from an attack by the British navy. To ensure their safety, Wright wanted the Sons of Liberty to allow the ships to provision themselves in Savannah and offered himself as a mediator should the need arise.

At Tondee’s Tavern, on the corner of Broughton and Whitaker streets, the two men shared the news of the fleet’s arrival and of their meeting with the governor. Perhaps compelled by the warm glow of whiskey or several pints of ale, they decided to arrest Sir James Wright. That very night, following their meeting at the tavern, Major Joseph Habersham and a few supporters made their way to the governor’s house. Wright had been entertaining fellow government officials for dinner. As they ate, the guests discussed the difficult position in which they found themselves; they were loyal to both the town in which they lived and to the government which they served.

Brooking described what happened next. Without warning, young Habersham and his compatriots “entered the dining room amidst a cacophony of loud voices, boots on wood, and confusion and, with apparent grace and dignity, bowed to the assembled guests, and marched to the head of the table.”³ Joseph Habersham announced to the

¹ On the siege of Savannah, see Greg Brooking, “Of Material Importance: Governor James Wright and the Siege of Savannah,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 98, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 251–99.

² Greg Brooking, “The Arrest of Georgia’s Royal Governor Sir James Wright,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, May 9, 2014, https://allthingsliberty.com/2014/05/the-arrest-of-georgias-royal-governor-sir-james-wright/#_edn1 (accessed April 17, 2021).

³ Brooking, “The Arrest of Georgia’s Royal Governor Sir James Wright.”

room, “Sir James, you are my prisoner.”⁴ Wright immediately found himself friendless as those who just moments before had shared the meal with him ran away from the table to avoid the same fate.

Nearly a month after he was put on house arrest, Wright snuck out of his home with only a few belongings, including the royal government seal. Under cover of darkness, he fled to Bonaventure Plantation, home of his friend and fellow Loyalist, Josiah Tattnall. Tattnall lent Wright a boat to help him escape to Cockspur, where the British fleet lay waiting. Just before dawn, after a night of sailing away from Savannah and from the threat of recapture, Wright landed at Cockspur. Captain Andrew Barkley fired a fifteen-gun salute from the deck of the *HMS Scarborough* to celebrate his arrival.⁵ With Wright and his royal seal at Cockspur, the island served as the capital of Georgia from 1776 until its recapture by the Patriots in 1778.⁶

Wright’s sudden escape from Savannah meant that he left almost everything he owned behind, including the people he enslaved.⁷ Several loyalists faced the same losses in land and personal property. In 1783, the British government created a royal commission through which loyalists could submit claims for their loss of property—confiscated or otherwise.⁸ More than 150 loyalists who had resided in Georgia at the beginning of the conflict submitted claims for their land, crops, enslaved laborers, and indentured servants. Wright, in addition to preparing notarized statements for other claimants, submitted several claims of his own. He demanded compensation for 23,544 acres of land and for 231 enslaved people, approximately half of the 526 souls he had enslaved before the Revolution. A few of his claims, including those for “uncultivated land,” were denied in accordance with the law. However, those for lost crops as well as time and services of his human property were accepted. He submitted requests for a total of £100,260.11 of lost property, of which he received only £32,977.⁹

⁴ Brooking, “The Arrest of Georgia’s Royal Governor Sir James Wright.”

⁵ Brooking, “The Arrest of Georgia’s Royal Governor Sir James Wright.”

⁶ The presence of the governor along with the royal seal made Cockspur briefly the seat of power. On the history of loyalists in Georgia, see Robert G. Mitchell, “Loyalist Georgia” (PhD dissertation, Tulane University, 1964); Charles Risher, “Propaganda, Dissension, and Defeat: Loyalist Sentiment in Georgia, 1763–1783” (PhD dissertation, Mississippi State University, 1976); W. W. Abbot, *The Royal Governors of Georgia, 1754–1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959).

⁷ Robert G. Mitchell, “The Losses and Compensation of Georgia Loyalists,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 233–43.

⁸ Mitchell, “The Losses and Compensation of Georgia Loyalists,” 233.

⁹ Mitchell, “The Losses and Compensation of Georgia Loyalists,” 240. Wright received approximately 14 percent of the total compensations received by all loyalists forced to leave the colony, a fact which speaks to his wealth at the time of the Revolution.

Although the story of Wright's escape does not mention the fate of the people he enslaved, he most likely took some with him as he fled to Cockspur Island. Historian Robert S. Lambert notes that "the presence of so many Negro slaves indicates that the more affluent refugees hoped to recoup some of their losses either by renewing planting operations elsewhere or by the sale of chattels to persons in other British possessions."¹⁰ The fact that Wright ordered loyalists and approximately two thousand enslaved people who had sought refuge in the Tybee and Cockspur Islands to be relocated to Jamaica in July 1782 also points to this idea.¹¹ Between five thousand and seven thousand people, including soldiers, civilians, and enslaved people, were evacuated from the islands that summer.¹²

African Americans Take the Same Path

Wright, like other loyalists, had escaped to find freedom in the Cockspur and later Tybee Islands. Soon the tiny islands became a portal to freedom through which African Americans made the same journey. While the majority of enslaved people remained in bondage through the hostilities, the British attempted to destabilize the Patriots by promising freedom to African Americans who remained loyal to the crown.¹³ Between 1776 and 1778, instability in the colony—with plantations and city passing from loyalist hands to Patriot hands and vice versa—created opportunities for many African American men and women to escape. So many took a chance at freedom through Cockspur Island that slave owner and member of the Committee of Safety Edward Telfair complained that the Black pilots should be locked up at night to prevent the loss of more enslaved people.¹⁴ Some were more drastic in their approach. South Carolina General Stephen Bull argued that "it is far better for the public and the owners of the *deserted Negroes* on *Tybee* Island. . . be shot if they cannot be taken."¹⁵ Killing runaways, instead of moving them or selling them, would prevent the enemy from "fight[ing the loyalists] with [their] own money or property."¹⁶

¹⁰ Robert Lambert, "The Flight of the Georgia Loyalists," *Georgia Review* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1963): 437.

¹¹ Lambert, "The Flight of the Georgia Loyalists," 438.

¹² Lambert, "The Flight of the Georgia Loyalists," 438.

¹³ On African Americans and the Revolution, see Philip Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976); Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Liam Riordan, *The Loyal Atlantic: Remaking the British Atlantic in the Revolutionary Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 172.

¹⁵ Italics in the original. Cited in Sylviane A. Diouf, "The Development of Marronage in the South," in *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 34.

¹⁶ Diouf, "The Development of Marronage in the South," 34.

Despite Patriot efforts to keep Blacks enslaved, some won their freedom during the Revolutionary era. One such person was David George. George was born in Essex County, Virginia, around 1724, on a plantation where he witnessed and was the victim of violence from his master.¹⁷ At age nineteen, following the death of his mother, he escaped and sought refuge among the Creek Nation, close to the Savannah River. Chased by his master's son who wanted to retrieve him, George escaped again, this time hiding among the Nautchee [Natchez] Indians. After only a few weeks, Nautchee King Jack traded him to George Galphin, the owner of the Silver Bluff plantation in South Carolina. On the plantation, David George heard George Liele speak the gospel and soon became an ordained minister himself.¹⁸

When Galphin abandoned his plantation and his property to flee the British, George and nearly fifty other enslaved people escaped to the British in Ebenezer, where they hoped to be freed. Upon their arrival, the British General commanding the area feared that George and his followers would foment a rebellion and, as a precautionary measure, jailed them. They were released a month later, with their freedom papers, and allowed to settle in Savannah. George later moved to Yamacraw, where he started to preach with Liele.¹⁹ To retain his freedom after the British evacuation, George migrated to British Nova Scotia, where he lived for nearly a decade and continued to minister in the Baptist Church. In 1782, he left the cold maritime province to establish a Black colony in Sierra Leone, where he founded the First Baptist Church.²⁰

David George and others risked their lives as they fled to Cockspur. The waters around Cockspur were treacherous and any ordinary day could become fatal. In May 1797, "Mr. John Quigley, keeper of the Fort at Cockspur," drowned. His embarkation tipped over as he attempted to board one of the ships.²¹ On December 21 of that same year, Captain Jeremiah Dickinson, Monsieur Therrien, and Thomas McCall, along with "three Negro men belonging to Capt. Dickinson," sailed out of the city on a yawl (a small, two-masted ship) to reach the *Neptune*, which was "anchored in Cockspur Road."²² At around ten o'clock in the morning, just as they passed bird island, a gust of wind from the northwest

¹⁷ David George and John Rippon, "An Account of the Life of Mr. David George from Sierra Leone in Africa Given by Himself in a Conversation with Brother Rippon of London, and Brother Pearce of Birmingham," *Baptist Annual Register* 1 (1794): 473.

¹⁸ David George followed in the footsteps of his contemporary George Liele, who preached on the plantation in the same years. Liele and Andrew Bryan followed their master and sided with the Patriots, David George did not and sided with the British. George was the only one to gain his freedom during the Revolutionary Era. Carter Godwin Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1921), 40–42.

¹⁹ George and Rippon, "An Account of the Life of Mr. David George," 477.

²⁰ George and Rippon, "An Account of the Life of Mr. David George," 477.

²¹ *Columbian Museum*, May 12, 1797.

²² Therrien was most likely of French origins. "Marriages and Death Notices," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 24 (1923): 80.

overturned their boat. Dickinson and Therrien, along with two of the African American men, swam for shore in the freezing waters. McCall and the remaining man clung to the bottom of the capsized boat. Therrien and one of the men sank only “a few fathoms from the shore”; their bodies were never recovered.²³ Dickinson and his companion made it to shore. Dickinson swam out to pull McCall and the other Black man to safety. Dickinson managed to drag McCall into the marsh and swam back out to save the last man, but it was too late. The cold overtook him, and both Captain Dickinson and the last man drowned.²⁴ Around four o’clock that afternoon, Captain James Guard retrieved McCall, one Black man, and Dickinson’s body from the marsh. He provided comfort to both men and ensured the proper burial to the dead Captain.²⁵

We do not know how many enslaved people found refuge with the British at Cockspur during the Revolutionary war; nor do we know how many perished in the attempt. But for a brief time, the island that had been the entry point to a life of slavery for thousands of African captives became a gateway to liberty for some who were daring enough, and lucky enough, to land there.

Fort Greene

In 1795, the construction on Fort Greene on Cockspur began.²⁶ The construction was most likely completed by January of 1800 when word reached Georgia that President George Washington had died.²⁷ At the time, the *Louisville Gazette* reported that the “melancholy intelligence of the death of our late illustrious chief was confirmed, when 16 minutes guns were fired from Fort Greene, under the command of Lieut. Deveaux.”²⁸ By 1804, only a few years after it was built, the fort was already in a “crumbling state,” as the military personnel stationed at the fort took little care of the structure.²⁹

²³ *Columbian Museum*, December 26, 1797.

²⁴ *Columbian Museum*, December 26, 1797.

²⁵ *Columbian Museum*, December 26, 1797.

²⁶ Arthur Pearson Wade, *Artillerists and Engineers: The Beginnings of American Seacoast Fortifications, 1794–1815* (McLean, VA: Coast Defense Study Group Press, 2011), 88; *Augusta Chronicle*, December 22, 1798.

²⁷ Washington died on December 14, 1799.

²⁸ *The Louisville Gazette*, January 21, 1800.

²⁹ *Columbian Museum and Advertiser*, May 16, 1804.

Crumbling or in pristine condition, Fort Greene could not withstand the 1804 Antigua-Charleston hurricane that roared onto the coast that September.³⁰ Every building on Cockspur Island was swept away by the wind and the tidal surge, and thirteen men died. Eighteen vessels capsized and smaller ones simply “cracked like eggshells.” African Americans laboring and living on the Sea Islands caught the brunt of the storm. Hundreds lost their lives due to a lack of weather-resistant shelter and an inability to evacuate.³¹

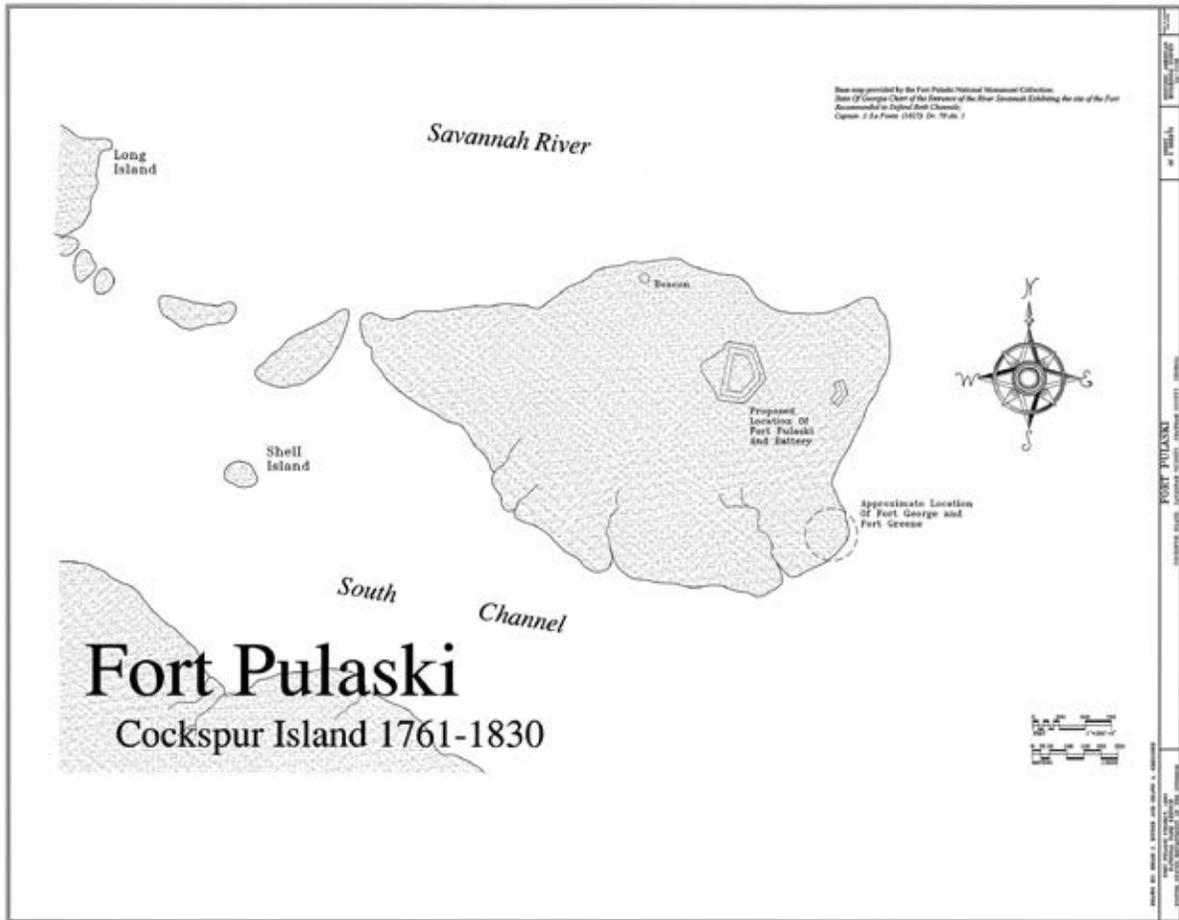


Figure 4.1. Rendering of proposed location of Fort Pulaski 1761–1830.

Rendering of proposed location of Fort Pulaski 1761–1830, HABS GA,26-SAV.V,2- (sheet 1 of 5) - Fort Pulaski, Cockspur Island, Savannah, Chatham County, GA. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ga0120.sheet.00001a> (accessed March 1, 2022).

³⁰ US Congress, *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States. Selected and Edited under the Authority of Congress*, Vol. 1—Military Affairs (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1832), 195, 224.

³¹ Walter J. Fraser, *Lowcountry Hurricanes: Three Centuries of Storms at Sea and Ashore* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

Enslaved People and the Construction of Fort Pulaski

In the spring of 1821, the US Congress approved the choice of Cockspur Island as the future site of a fort to protect Savannah.³² In 1828, the legislature appropriated \$25,000 to begin the construction and requested that an officer be chosen to supervise the endeavor.³³ The following year, the US Army Corps of Engineers appointed Massachusetts-born Major Samuel Babcock in this role. The construction started in 1829 with a total appropriation of \$100,000.³⁴ Fort Pulaski was not Babcock's first venture. Between 1814 and 1829, he had overseen the construction of Fort McHenry, Fort Covington, Fort Look-Out, Fort Delaware, and Fort Babcock, named in his honor.³⁵ Aged forty-four at the beginning of the construction, he saw his health starting to deteriorate. In December 1830, upon recommendation of his doctors—who suggested that the heat, weather, and mosquitos at Cockspur Island were responsible for his ill health—Major Babcock resigned his commission and left the fort.³⁶

A year before Babcock's resignation, in the summer of 1829, Second Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, a twenty-three-year-old Virginian who had just graduated from West Point, received his very first assignment. He was to travel to Cockspur Island to supervise the draining of marshes and the building of dikes on the island for the construction of Fort Pulaski. In 1831, the plan for the fort was rethought since the “plan first projected was not adapted to the nature of the site.” Lee was transferred to Fort Monroe, Virginia, and a new man was assigned to the project.³⁷ Lieutenant Joseph King Fenno Mansfield arrived on the coast of Georgia, full of vim and vigor, to truly begin the construction of the fort this time.

Between 1815 and 1867, the US Army Corps of Engineers oversaw the construction of fortifications along the east coast of the United States. Deemed the “Third System of American Coastal Defense,” this endeavor required a large amount of labor that the Corps itself could not provide. Instead, Corps officials turned to planters to rent labor. Though somewhat controversial at the time, the practice of renting enslaved people for public

³² US Congress, *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States. Selected and Edited under the Authority of Congress, 5, Military Affairs* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1860), 3:293–94.

³³ US Congress, *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States. Selected and Edited under the Authority of Congress, 5, Military Affairs* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1860), 4:13, 18.

³⁴ On the construction of Fort Pulaski, see Rogers Young, “The Construction of Fort Pulaski,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (March 1936): 41–51; *American State Papers, 5, Military Affairs* 4:170, 183, 305.

³⁵ Babcock was at Fort McHenry during the bombardment in the War of 1812.

³⁶ Babcock died six months later in Connecticut.

³⁷ *American State Papers, 5, Military Affairs* 4:729.

works was widespread in the South; several cities called upon slaveowners to complete major municipal projects.³⁸ Not only did it help to reduce the cost of labor; it also accelerated the construction of the critical infrastructure needed in the nascent nation. Beginning in 1791, architect Pierre L'Enfant hired enslaved workers to clear sites for the construction of the White House and the Capitol.³⁹ In 1858, the Engineering Corps reduced the cost of construction of more than “2,000 miles of artificial embankment, with an average height of more than eight feet,” to approximately \$40 million, with its use of enslaved labor.⁴⁰

The US Army Corps of Engineers unit in charge of Fort Pulaski offered terms of rental similar to those offered at other contemporary construction sites. The Corps paid seventy-five cents a day, or twelve dollars a month, to rent each of the enslaved men and boys who formed the labor pool at Fort Pulaski.⁴¹ The enslaved labor force was to perform most of the unskilled labor, such as excavating, hauling the bricks from the docks to the construction site, or mixing the mortar. White workers were to be paid twenty-five cents more a day to complete skilled work such as masonry or carpentry.⁴² In January 1830, Babcock had only hired white workers. Despite his numerous ads placed with local newspapers, he had received “no offers at reasonable price.”⁴³ In April, he was more confident in his ability to rent enslaved labor, estimating that he would “employ about 100 negro

³⁸ Hall, “French New Orleans,” 120–55; Lacy Elizabeth Brooks, “Municipal Slavery: The City of Savannah’s Ownership of Enslaved People” (MA thesis, Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2014); John J. Zaborney, *Slaves for Hire: Renting Enslaved Laborers in Antebellum Virginia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

³⁹ United States National Archives. “National Archives to Display Pay Stubs of Slaves Used to Build U.S. Capitol and White House.” *National Archives* (Press Release), December 29, 2000, www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2001/nr01-30.html (accessed April 17, 2021).

⁴⁰ John R. Ferrell, *From Single- to Multi-Purpose Planning: The Role of the Army Engineers in River Development Policy, 1824–1930* (Washington, DC: US Army Corps of Engineers, 1976), 27.

⁴¹ Major S. Babcock, Savannah, GA, to Col. C. Gratiot, Chief US Engineer, February 8, 1829; Lt. J. K. F. Mansfield, Cockspur Island, GA, to Col. C. Gratiot, Chief US Engineer, February 28, 1832; all in Assembled Collection of Documents Relating to Fort Pulaski, Fort Pulaski National Monument, Savannah, GA (hereinafter cited as Fort Pulaski Collection); Ernest Dibble, “Slave Rentals to the Military: Pensacola and the Gulf Coast,” *Civil War History* 23, no. 2 (June 1977): 101–13; Mark A. Smith, “Engineering Slavery: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Slavery at Key West,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 498–526; Thomas Hulse, “Military Slave Rentals, the Construction of Army Fortifications, and the Navy Yard in Pensacola, Florida, 1824–1863,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 497–539.

⁴² Major S. Babcock, Savannah, GA, to Col. C. Gratiot, Chief US Engineer, March 21, 1829, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁴³ Major S. Babcock, Savannah, GA to Col. C. Gratiot, Chief US Engineer, February 10, 1830, Fort Pulaski Collection.

(laborers)” with an additional “30 white mechanics for [the] remainder of the year, unless [the] place becomes unhealthy.”⁴⁴ By June 1830, he had hired seventy Black workers, fifteen white women, and six boatmen, whose race was not specified.⁴⁵

As part of the “gentlemen’s agreement,” the renters—the Corps of Engineers—paid “a cash rent and assumed the cost of feeding, clothing, and housing the slaves, as well as medical expenses and slave taxes.”⁴⁶ Letters from Babcock and Mansfield to Colonel Charles Gratiot, Chief of the Army Corps of Engineers, indicate that the quartermaster had purchased large quantities of rice to feed the workers. Yet no other foodstuff appears to have been purchased at the time.⁴⁷ Given the large number of calories that the workers burned as they spent hours a day lifting and carrying heavy loads of dirt and bricks, rice could not have been the only food offered to the workers. A few entries list “materials for bake house,” followed by “baking rations,” which implies that bread was baked on-site.⁴⁸ Further entries mentioned “subsistence rations,” most likely for the enslaved workforce, but without any specific information.⁴⁹

An inventory of the resources available at Cockspur completed by Mansfield in March 1831 gives more details about the diet of those who worked on the site.⁵⁰ In addition to rice, he listed linseed oil (also known as flaxseed oil), whiskey, beans, molasses, and salt—all items found in military rations.⁵¹ Since no other references to food appear in the inventories or budgets compiled by Mansfield, it is very likely that the Corps provided standard rations to all fort workers, military or otherwise. Daily rations at the time included, at the minimum, one pound beef or pork, one pound bread or flour, a gill of rum, salt, vinegar, soap, and candles.⁵² In 1832, the military stopped providing hard liquor (rum or whiskey), except for medicinal purposes. Instead of rum, it provided coffee to the troops.⁵³ Debates in Congress bemoaned the lack of vegetables as part of the military

⁴⁴ Major S. Babcock, Savannah, GA, to Col. C. Gratiot, Chief US Engineer, April 8, 1830, Fort Pulaski Collection. The question of the place becoming unhealthy probably refers to the fear of malaria which was common in summer when mosquitos abounded.

⁴⁵ Babcock to Gratiot, April 8, 1830.

⁴⁶ Sarah S. Hughes, “Slaves for Hire: The Allocation of Black Labor in Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1782 to 1810,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April 1978): 260–86.

⁴⁷ Major S. Babcock, Savannah, GA, to Col. C. Gratiot, Chief US Engineer, June 2, 1830, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁴⁸ Maj. S. Babcock, Engr. Transmits report and sketch on state of operations for May, June 1830, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁴⁹ Estimate of Funds for March 1831 encl. in letter of Mansfield, J. K. F. Lt, asking Chief Engr. Gratiot to forward funds. February 14, 1831, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁵⁰ Mansfield material inventory and condition on Cockspur Island. March 8, 1831, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁵¹ Mansfield material inventory and condition on Cockspur Island. March 8, 1831.

⁵² *American State Papers*, 5, *Military Affairs* 2:6.

⁵³ *American State Papers*, 5, *Military Affairs*.4:276.

rations. In 1818, the War Department had ordered that “the commanding officer of every permanent post and garrison where the public lands will justify such measure” cultivate a garden of “kitchen vegetables” to supplement their troop’s diet “throughout the year.”⁵⁴ Therefore, it is possible that enslaved laborers supplemented their daily rations by fishing or tending small garden patches as they would have done on a plantation. The absence of ads or mentions of food indicates that the Corps of Engineers did not procure foodstuff locally, as was done during the construction of the navy yard in Pensacola, for example.⁵⁵

The enslaved people who were sent to work for the army on Cockspur were not the only ones who participated in the construction of the massive fortress. Up the Savannah River, a few miles west of the city of Savannah, Henry McAlpin, a Scotsman, owned the Hermitage Plantation. Thanks to his low cost of labor, he was able to underbid his competition to win the contract to supply all of the Savannah grey bricks needed for the project.⁵⁶ He built a kiln—a high-temperature furnace used to bake pottery—on the riverbank, to cure the bricks. More than two hundred enslaved people dug the clay, shaped bricks, and fired them in the kiln. The size of fingerprints in the bricks and oral histories indicate that children and women participated in this work.⁵⁷ Once the bricks were finished, they were loaded onto barges and shipped downriver to Cockspur, where the laborers used them to construct Fort Pulaski.

⁵⁴ *American State Papers*, 5, *Military Affairs* 2:264.

⁵⁵ Hulse, “Military Slave Rentals,” 512.

⁵⁶ Savannah Unit, Georgia Writers’ Project, Work Projects Administrations in Georgia. “The Hermitage Plantation,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (March 1943): 56–87.

⁵⁷ It is also possible that some of the original fingerprints were those of men. The baking of the bricks removes moisture from the clay, reducing the size of the bricks and of any marks on their surface.



Figure 4.2. Fingerprints on the bricks at Fort Pulaski

From www.facebook.com/FortPulaskiNPS/photos/
have-you-seen-the-fingerprints-pressed-into-the-bricks-at-fort-pulaski-this-set-/1290611730973544.

For the most part, the enslaved and free African American people who worked at the fort remained anonymous, their names never recorded in official reports, letters, or diaries. However, runaway slave advertisements published in the Savannah newspapers revealed the identities of two of these workers, named Sandy and Sawney. An ad placed on the front page of the *Daily Savannah Republican* in 1834 offered a steep reward of ten dollars for

Sandy, a “short stout man” of “yellow complexion [*sic*].”⁵⁸ The ad also mentioned that he was “bow legged,” which might indicate that he suffered from rickets, a vitamin D deficiency, at some point in his life.⁵⁹ While little is known of the man, the ad specified that he was running away from Cockspur. Sandy had been hired to work at the fort, but he had other plans for his life. The ad also mentioned that he might have received help to escape from Harry—an enslaved boatman described as “a fine-looking fellow” who sported “large whiskers well known in the city”—as both men were “frequently seen in the city, and particularly about the market” together.⁶⁰

A driver on the Lombremonde Plantation in Bryan County, Sawney had a history of running away. He was about thirty-two years old and stood at five feet, four or five inches tall, which was just below average height for the 1830s.⁶¹ He was described as being “stout and well made” and of “dark complexion.” When he talked, the listener might hear a “slight hesitation in his speech.” He had suffered an injury earlier in life that left a “scar upon his breast near the bone.” He was “intelligent and country born.”⁶² He served as the driver for William Woodbridge.

In August 1832, Woodbridge died. The death of a white slaveowner could cause great disruption in the lives of the enslaved. Like land, livestock, or crops, Sawney was a valuable part of the deceased’s estate. As property, he could be disposed of in any way that the heirs of the estate chose. He could be sold, taken to a different plantation, or auctioned to settle a debt. Since 1818, the law had prohibited manumission through wills. For that reason, Sawney remained enslaved. In an attempt to achieve freedom, he ran away with his friend Peter before he could be sold or transferred to a different slaveholder. Peter was “over 6 feet in height, quite slim built and bold spoken.” The broker who advertised for their delivery to the Chatham County jail offered a reward of fifteen dollars for Peter and twenty-five dollars for Sawney, a reasonable but not exceptional reward for the time.⁶³

⁵⁸ *Daily Savannah Republican*, July 14, 1834.

⁵⁹ It was only between 1918 and 1920 that scientists discovered the source of rickets. On the health of enslaved people on plantations, see William D. Postell, *The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia Himmelsteib King, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁶⁰ *Daily Savannah Republican*, July 14, 1834.

⁶¹ The name of the plantation was given as Lombremonde in 1832 and Sombremond in 1833. *Daily Savannah Republican*, May 6, 1833.

⁶² *The Georgian*, August 23, 1832.

⁶³ *The Georgian*, August 23, 1832.

Sawney's freedom must have been short-lived as Holmes Tupper, a wealthy Savannahian originally from the North, sent him to work on Cockspur when he recovered him. In the spring of 1833, Sawney ran away again. Again, Tupper advertised for his return; this time, he offered a fifty-dollar reward. While it can be hoped that Sawney's second escape was successful, most attempts failed in the 1830s, and his fate is unknown.⁶⁴

Life at Fort Pulaski

Life on Cockspur was not easy. The commute alone was dangerous. When sailing on a watercraft from Savannah or a nearby island, the waves could overturn a small boat or rock a bigger one hard enough for men to fall overboard. And they often did. In November 1829, the body of David Handerhand washed up after the boat he was sharing with four others overturned. His companions were assumed to have drowned, as they were still missing when Handerhand's body was found.⁶⁵ In March 1830, William Clemmons, a native of Philadelphia, drowned near Cockspur.⁶⁶ A few months later, in August, an "aged black man" working to unload the cargo from a boat fell overboard into the rushing river. William Talbot, a white man on a neighboring craft jumped in, grabbed him, and treaded water until a boat could reach them and pull them to safety.⁶⁷ In 1849, an African American man named Joe wanted to visit his family on the island. He secured a four-oared boat and began the dangerous journey to see his loved ones. A sudden squall kicked up, and the boat broke up. The pieces of it and his body washed up on the shores of Cockspur, and an inquest was held over his body at Fort Pulaski.⁶⁸

Drowning was not the only way that a man's life might be brought to an abrupt end on Cockspur. On November 20, 1834, Mansfield sent a report to Gratiot stating he was "entirely out of funds." Within a few lines, he paints a dire situation. The "several cases and deaths from cholera among blacks on island" compromised the construction efforts.⁶⁹ According to the report, he had ordered "most blacks" "home to [their] masters" and was considering sending white workers as well. If he did so, however, they would be without wages since he could not pay people who were not working. Cholera had affected mainly

⁶⁴ *Daily Savannah Republican*, April 25, 1833, and June 5, 1833.

⁶⁵ *The Georgian*, November 6, 1829.

⁶⁶ *The Georgian*, March 10, 1830.

⁶⁷ *The Georgian*, August 26, 1830.

⁶⁸ *The Georgian*, May 22, 1849.

⁶⁹ Lt. J. K. F. Mansfield, Fort Pulaski, to General Charles Gratiot, November 20, 1834, Fort Pulaski Collection.

Black residents in Augusta and Savannah in the months preceding the Cockspur outbreak.⁷⁰ Infections spread rapidly on plantations and in the city, pointing to the unsanitary conditions in which both enslaved and free Black people lived.⁷¹ The disease appeared to have dissipated quickly as a letter dated November 25th only contains financial predictions, with no indication that the disease still affected the laborers or that their work had stopped.⁷² In September 1835, Mansfield mentioned the disease again, as he explained that the year was not “without many trying difficulties.” He stated that the island had “been visited by the cholera” once again.⁷³

In the afternoon of January 7, 1842, a fire destroyed a building where nearly seventy-five workers dwelled.⁷⁴ According to the report, Mansfield did not deem it necessary to rebuild the building “as laborers can be housed in [the] remaining quarters.”⁷⁵ The *Daily Savannah Republican* reported that the accident “destroyed considerable clothing belonging to the laborers,” the newspapers reported. The newspaper indirectly revealed that the workers in question were white, by stating that “some also lost money—one of them as much as \$700,” an amount that would not have been found in an enslaved worker’s possession.⁷⁶

Weather also threatened the works at Fort Pulaski. Mansfield noted in 1835 that the island had not only been visited by cholera but also by “an overflowing of the sea, by heavy gales which damaged materially most of the boats, and by extreme cold weather for this climate which damaged the newly laid masonry and retarded the operations.”⁷⁷ On August 19, 1842, a sudden thunderstorm broke out over Cockspur.⁷⁸ Daniel Lyons, a twenty-eight-year-old Irishman, dashed to shelter in a storm along with other laborers. Lightning struck the shed, and he was killed instantly. Others who had sought shelter survived without injuries.⁷⁹

⁷⁰ *The Georgian*, September 18, 1834; *The Georgian*, September 19, 1834; *The Georgian*, September 27, 1834; *Daily Savannah Republican*, October 2, 1834.

⁷¹ *Daily Savannah Republican*, September 10, 1834.

⁷² Lt. Mansfield transmits estimates for December 1834. November 25, 1834, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁷³ Engr Mansfield, J. K. F. Progress Report, September 30, 1835, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁷⁴ There is a discrepancy between Mansfield’s report and the newspaper report. The *Daily Savannah Republican* published the news on January 6th, stating that the fire took place on the 3rd. Mansfield’s report notes that the event occurred on the 7th. This could be an error in the transcription. *Daily Savannah Republican*, January 6, 1842.

⁷⁵ Capt. J. K. F. Mansfield, Fort Pulaski, to Col. J. G. Totten, December 1841. The piece about the fire seems to have been added by Young to the letter written in December during the transcription of the records in 1934.

⁷⁶ *Daily Savannah Republican*, January 6, 1842.

⁷⁷ Engr J. K. F. Mansfield, Progress Report, September 30, 1835, Fort Pulaski Collection.

⁷⁸ *Daily Savannah Republican*, August 22, 1842.

⁷⁹ *Daily Savannah Republican*, August 22, 1842.

Conclusion

In 1842, the fort was finally nearing completion after years of toil by both white and Black men. Two companies of the Third Regiment Artillery were stationed on the premises. The same year, many took part in the first pleasure excursions to Fort Pulaski. A steamer picked up paying customers in Savannah and delivered them to Cockspur for an afternoon spent touring the grounds and enjoying an outdoor picnic. Children and “colored people” received a 50 percent discount off the one-dollar fare. These excursions continued from the 1840s up to the start of the Civil War and started again after the end of the hostilities.⁸⁰

Like so many public buildings in the United States, Fort Pulaski owes its existence to the forced labor of hundreds of people whose names will never be known—enslaved men, women, and children who worked on Cockspur or upriver at the Hermitage. The walls of the fort stand firm today because of their contributions to its construction. Their fingerprints in the bricks are visible reminders of their presence and of their lives as they toiled in slavery to build a fort that would stand in defense of a country where they could only hope to be free.

Two of the names we do know—Sandy and Sawney—ran away while they worked on Cockspur. Given the perils of the waters swirling around the island as well as the severe punishment that awaited runaways when they were caught (as most were), flight was an act of desperation that only offered a temporary respite, not full freedom. In the weeks between the time when they absconded and the time when they were returned, they did not escape slavery; they only enjoyed a rest from the grinding drudgery of their work at the fort. They could not hope to escape permanently unless they managed a far more significant journey to a state where slavery was illegal.

For Sandy and Sawney, Cockspur was a prison where they were compelled to work against their will. But three decades later, in the midst of the bloodiest war in our nation’s history, the fort that they and hundreds of others like them helped to build would become the destination for enslaved souls who yearned for liberty. The stories of African Americans—those who were forced to live on Cockspur and those who came by choice—are as deeply embedded into the history of Fort Pulaski as those haunting handprints etched into the walls.

⁸⁰ *Savannah Daily Republican*, June 1, 1842.

The American Revolution and the Construction of Fort Pulaski

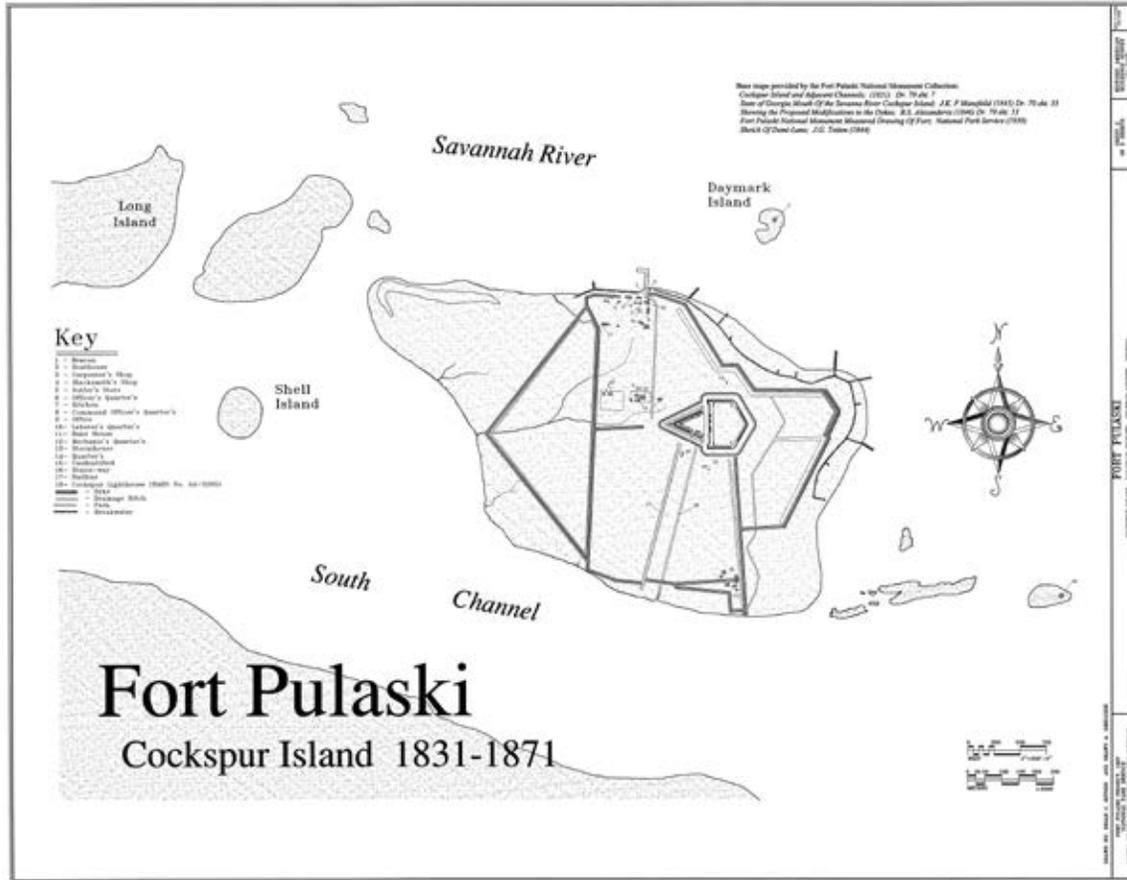


Figure 4.3. Rendering of Fort Pulaski on Cockspur Island 1831–1871

Rendering of Fort Pulaski on Cockspur Island 1831–1871, HABS GA,26-SAV.V,2- (sheet 2 of 5) - Fort Pulaski, Cockspur Island, Savannah, Chatham County, GA. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ga0120.sheet.00002a> (accessed March 1, 2022).

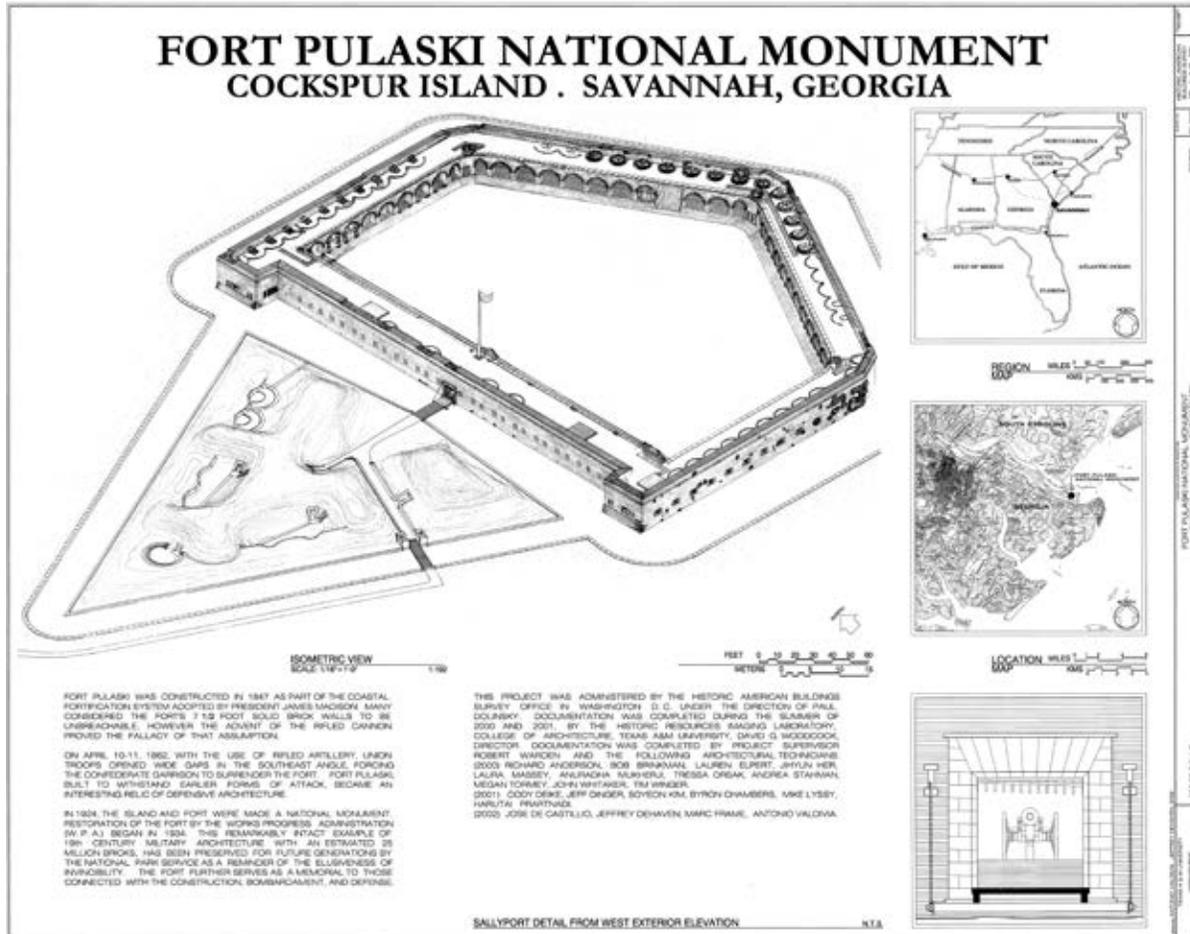


Figure 4.4. Rendering of Fort Pulaski National Monument

Rendering of Fort Pulaski National Monument, HABS GA,26-SAV,V,2- (sheet 1 of 16) - Fort Pulaski, Cockspur Island, Savannah, Chatham County, GA. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ga0120.sheet.00006a/> (accessed March 1, 2022).

CHAPTER FIVE

FORT PULASKI AND THE CONFEDERACY

Two days after ballots had been cast in the presidential election of 1860, eight enslaved men were repairing a bridge on Skidaway Island about ten miles south of Savannah. Their supervisor, carpenter Joseph Ribero, the son of a Portuguese immigrant, sat on a log reading a newspaper when one of the crew approached him with a question.

“Massa Joe, what’s de news?”

“Oh, nothing but politics,” he replied.

“What’s politics?” asked the negro.

“Voting and so on,” said Ribero; “the North is fighting for freedom, and the South for slavery.”

“Well, will the nigger be free if Lincoln is elected?” asked the negro.

“I don’t know; that is more than I am able to tell you,” said Ribero.¹

That question—of what would happen to African Americans if Lincoln was elected—was likely on the minds of many enslaved men and women in Savannah on that November day. In the weeks leading up to the election, many white Savannahians worried about politics and the significance of Lincoln’s victory for the South and for slavery. African Americans who overheard political discussions wondered what the results of this election might mean for them. As Ribero and his crew worked and talked on the Skidaway Bridge, word spread through Savannah that Lincoln had won the popular vote, and that plans were underway for a meeting to take place in the Masonic Hall that evening.²

By the time the meeting convened, “the old town seemed to have gone crazy.”³ Earlier in the year, a “Vigilance Committee” had been formed in Savannah “to detect and expose such persons as may be suspected of entertaining or uttering sentiments hostile to slavery and to use the most expedient means to secure their instant removal,”⁴ and now the candidate of a political party built on hostility to slavery had won the presidency.

¹ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages upon Northern Citizens* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), 37.

² Mary Sharpe Jones and Charles Colcock Jones, *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 626.

³ James David Griffin, “Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War” (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1963), 53.

⁴ Cited in Griffin, “Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War,” 59.

Prominent men packed the Masonic Hall where Captain John W. Anderson of the Republican Blues, a militia group, presided.⁵ Afraid of the sweeping changes that loomed on the horizon, Captain Francis Bartow introduced resolutions to contest Lincoln's election; the resolutions were quickly adopted. The men also called for a state convention and asked that state legislature organize and arm the militias. Even Judge William Law, a well-respected man who was both "ripe in years [and the] embodiment of conservatism and moderation," approved these extreme and reactive measures. "When he sat down every man in the hall jumped to his feet," one historian wrote, "hats were thrown into the air, and the noise inside the building was exceeded only by that on the outside."⁶

Outside of the Masonic Hall, the streets were crowded with what may have been the largest public demonstration in the city since the founding of Savannah. As dusk fell, men carried torches through the streets and people cheered as bands played "Dixie" and "La Marseillaise." In Johnson Square, the crowd squeezed in tight to hear speeches by Mayor Charles C. Jones Jr. and Captain Bartow.⁷ The iconic lithograph of this event shows the "Don't Tread on Me" banner hung from the monument honoring General Nathaniel Green, a hero of the American Revolution. The moment was reminiscent of the reading of the Declaration of Independence at the very same location in 1776. As the crowd flowed out of the square into the streets, people leaned from balconies to hear the fiery oratory. "Men, women, and children are of one mind," a woman declared, "and that mind is resistance to our oppressors!"⁸

Emotions were running high and when white Savannahians—ever vigilant against any attacks on slavery or signs of rebellion among the enslaved—got wind of the conversation that took place on the Skidaway bridge, trouble followed. Ribero's answer—subsequently reported in the abolitionist publication *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages* alongside a compilation of atrocities committed against African Americans—was noncommittal, but in the highly charged political atmosphere of that fall, any conversation with an enslaved person that even hinted at the possibility of emancipation carried risks. On the weekend following the election, an overseer reported to a plantation owner that Ribero had said, "The negroes would be free if Lincoln was elected." Quick to react to the hearsay, the planter gathered a group of men to confront Ribero.

Whether these men were part of the Vigilance Committee or simply an ad hoc group outraged by Ribero's alleged statement and inflamed by the results of the election is unknown. Like the crowd that had gathered outside the Masonic Hall, they adopted

⁵ The Republican Blues were a Georgia militia group founded in 1808 in Savannah.

⁶ Cited in Griffin, "Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War," 53–54.

⁷ R. H. Howell, Lithographer, and Henry Cleenewerck, *The first flag of independence raised in the South, by the citizens of Savannah, Ga. November 8th, drawn by Henry Cleenewerck, Savannah, Ga.; lithographed by R.H. Howell, Savannah, Ga. Savannah, GA, 1860, photograph*, www.loc.gov/item/2004665374.

⁸ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 37.

rhetoric from the era of the American Revolution; the report in *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages* mentioned that the planter brought the case in front of the “Regulators,” another term referencing the war for American independence.⁹ “Armed with revolvers and bowie knives,” they met to decide Ribero’s fate. “They empanelled [*sic*] a jury of thirteen men for the purpose,” and proposed different forms of punishment; some voted to shoot him, others to hang him. Within an hour and without due process, they reached a compromise. Ribero would receive “thirty-nine lashes, have one side of his hair and whiskers cut close, and be sent to Boston,” the Mecca of abolitionism.¹⁰

In the familiar ritual that oiled the system of slavery, Ribero was prepared for his whipping. Dr. Waring himself shaved the left side of Ribero’s head and beard, a gesture meant to humiliate the man.¹¹ He was “tied to the top of a sapling bent over for the purpose, stretched up until his toes barely touched the ground, stripped to the skin, and whipped by two negroes,” a punishment seen as even more humiliating.¹² His wife later recalled that “his side [was] cut like meat scored for the oven.”¹³ Ribero was whisked away and kept on “the Isle of Hope for the night,” then carried to Savannah, where he was unceremoniously placed on a steamer to Boston. Throughout the whole ordeal, he was unable “to communicate with any of his friends.”¹⁴ When the captain refused to give passage to the victim against his will, the committee forced Ribero “to sign a paper which

⁹ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 37. The Regulator movement originated in North Carolina in the late 1760s among backcountry farmers who were angry about government corruption and high taxes and fees. The rebellion was crushed at the Battle of Alamance in 1771. Although the Regulators were not protesting against the British government, the movement is frequently viewed as a precursor to the American Revolution. See “The Regulators,” www.ncpedia.org/anchor/regulators (accessed October 6, 2021).

¹⁰ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 38.

¹¹ Dr. Waring’s first name was not included in the sources reviewed. Records at the Georgia Historical Society may offer more information. There were two Savannah physicians named Waring during this period. Dr. William R. Waring, a thirty-three-year-old doctor and slaveowner, lived in the White Bluff district of Chatham County. 1860 United States Census, Chatham County, Georgia, Population Schedule, White Bluff District, 373, www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7667/images/4211374_00373?usePUB=true&_phsrc=PBd1014&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=10855721 (accessed October 5, 2021). Dr. James J. Waring was born in Savannah, educated in the North, and was living in Washington, DC, when the census was taken in June 1860. In September 1861, he became a surgeon in the Confederate Army. After the war, he returned to Savannah. See www.findagrave.com/memorial/166166457/james-johnston-waring, and US Census, District of Columbia, Population Schedule, 4th ward, 44, www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/10523412:7667?tid=&pid=&queryId=d316e25630548c84040b5018b7428cd5&_phsrc=PBd1150&_phstart=successSource (accessed October 6, 2021).

¹² *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 38.

¹³ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 38.

¹⁴ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 38.

declared that he left the place of his own free will.”¹⁵ His wife hastily gathered a few belongings and met him with their children on the steamer.¹⁶ They arrived in Massachusetts on November 19, eleven days after the conversation between Ribero and the enslaved men.

Ribero’s story immediately attracted the attention of local newspapers and was widely disseminated in New England. While “Southern outrages” were frequently reported, Ribero’s tale was unique. Previously, stories of Southern violence had centered on the mistreatment of enslaved people. More recently, perhaps with the formation of Vigilance Committees in Southern cities, newspapers reported episodes of violence toward Northern men who lived in or visited the South. The assault on Ribero had crossed a new line. Now Southerners were willing to inflict violence on a fellow citizen of their own city. Ribero was a Georgia native. His father, an immigrant, had been a slaveholder. Joseph’s personal views on slavery at the time of Lincoln’s election are unknown, but on August 13, 1862, two years after he was forced to leave Savannah, Ribero enlisted in the Company G (Milford) of the 40th Infantry Regiment of the US Army and fought for the preservation of the Union. He mustered out on January 15, 1864, and remained in Massachusetts until his death in 1883.¹⁷

The harsh treatment Ribero endured is a grim reminder of the violence that the institution of slavery required to function. Slaveholders, who made up a minority of the South’s white population, enlisted the support of the nonslaveholding white majority to defend and maintain the inhumane system. As antislavery sentiment gained traction in the North, proslavery southerners closed ranks, and they responded to any perceived threat or criticism in an increasingly violent manner. Banning or destroying antislavery literature in the Southern states gave way to brutal assaults like the one on Ribero. By 1860, the mere suggestion that slavery was wrong or that alternatives might exist could not be tolerated, and slavery’s most ardent defenders were willing to resort to extreme measures to suppress even a hint of dissent, insubordination, or rebellion.

They also became more willing to argue that violent repression was justified. Richard Arnold, who served as Savannah’s mayor in 1859 and 1860, jumped to the defense of his city when a Northern friend expressed dismay over the attack on Ribero and similar acts in other Southern cities. “I should really blush for the South if I thought there was any possibility of a quiet gentleman who attended to his own business ever being molested because he came from the North,” Arnold replied. “The man Ribero was actually concocting an insurrection and got off well when he took his life with him.” Convinced that

¹⁵ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 38.

¹⁶ *A Fresh Catalogue of Southern Outrages*, 38.

¹⁷ Historical Data Systems Inc., Duxbury, MA; *American Civil War Research Database; Ancestry.com, Massachusetts, US, Death Records, 1841–1915 (database online; Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2013)*, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?dbid=2101&h=3770194&indiv=try&o_vc=Record:OtherRecord&rh-Source=7667.

Lincoln posed a threat to slavery despite his pledge to leave the institution alone in states where it was legal, the mayor insisted, “We here are strictly on the defensive. We are fighting for our very hearthstones.”¹⁸

Tensions continued to mount, and on January 16, 1861, a parade of “Rattlesnakes” took place on the streets of Savannah. Seventy-six men—described as a “very respectable looking set of fellows”—used the imagery of venomous snakes to depict the South’s deepening crisis with the North.¹⁹ “The “mysterious order” walked through the streets following “quite a cavalcade,” including a wagon that carried a band playing live music. In a light carriage, leaders flew a banner featuring a Palmetto tree with a coiled rattlesnake on one side and “a dark streak labeled Mason and Dixon’s line” on the other.²⁰ Another banner displayed a drawing of “one ‘Abe Lincoln’ who, while in the act of putting one foot over it, is throttled by a serpent and falls back in terror.”²¹ The message was clear; the “Rattlesnakes” intended to strike their enemies swiftly and with deadly force.

When the group stopped at the intersection of Broughton and West Broad, Major Edwin Henry Bacon, a successful lawyer originally from Liberty County, delivered an impromptu address. Claiming that he, like many others in the city, had just heard of the group’s existence, he told the crowd that he understood them to be an “effective patrol of a detective character,” whose purpose was “to ferret out evil-doers and suspicious persons in these troublesome times.”²² Describing the members as law-abiding, he still advised “that they could not be too careful to avoid setting themselves up in the place of the law.” Furthermore, he reminded them that they “should not suspect others until they were well assured that grounds of suspicion existed.” “All northern men are not enemies,” he cautioned. “Many of them are true to us and our cause and some are now under arms at Fort Pulaski, to defend your city and State against all invaders.”²³ By the time Bacon spoke, Georgia’s political elite had decided the time for calm deliberation had passed. On the same day that the Rattlesnakes staged their demonstration, a convention to consider secession was called to order in Milledgeville, the state capital. Georgians were preparing for war.²⁴

¹⁸ Richard Dennis Arnold, *Letters of Richard D. Arnold, M.D., 1808–1876, Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, First Secretary of the American Medical Association* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 98–99.

¹⁹ *Savannah Daily Republican*, January 17, 1861.

²⁰ *Savannah Daily Republican*, January 17, 1861.

²¹ *Savannah Daily Republican*, January 17, 1861.

²² *Savannah Daily Republican*, January 17, 1861.

²³ *Savannah Daily Republican*, January 17, 1861.

²⁴ Ralston B. Lattimore, *Fort Pulaski National Monument Georgia* (Washington, DC: National Park Service Historical Handbook Series, 1954), 10.

The Occupation of Fort Pulaski

On January 19, 1861, Georgia seceded from the Union. Even before secession, Georgians had begun severing their ties with the United States. Following the lead of South Carolina whose military forces had seized Fort Moultrie, the Georgia legislature made plans to capture Fort Pulaski. Savannah's leaders and Governor Joseph Brown feared that the US government would garrison and arm the fort if they did not take it first. On the wet and stormy morning of January 3, 1861, a total of 134 men from several of Savannah's long-standing militia units gathered on the wharf located at what is now the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and River Street. Detachments from the Chatham Artillery, the Savannah Light Volunteer Guards, and the Oglethorpe Light Infantry boarded the *Ida* and sailed to the fort. Additional units followed the next day. Since the fort had been sparsely staffed, the capture was peaceful and bloodless.²⁵

On January 5, two days after the men arrived at the fort, the soldiers started cleaning the fort. In a letter to the *Savannah Daily Republican*, an eyewitness, identified only as "S.," reported that the soldiers were in "fine spirits," and that despite receiving "only the rations dealt out by the States," they "exhibit[ed] a degree of patience under their privations which does credit to their soldier-like fortitude."²⁶ Still, the officers lost no time imposing military discipline. Colonel A. R. Lawton issued an order "that any sentinel caught sleeping on post would be shot."²⁷ Some men drew "a long face" at hearing of the order, but most were eager to perform their duties.²⁸ Drills, cleaning, and preparations filled the men's days. The "cuisine [was] perfect and [the men would] not have to fight on empty stomachs," the letter reported. All worked with the same goal: "obeying [the] governor's order and . . . maintaining the honor and dignity of the Empire State of the South."²⁹

Despite the newspapers' upbeat portraits of dutiful soldiers willingly and happily doing their jobs, monotony set in. Yet most men were praised for their good behavior under the circumstances.³⁰ Throughout 1861, the steamer *Ida* shuttled back and forth from Savannah to Cockspur as soldiers from the city's militias rotated in and out of the fort once every ten days. It is likely that the ship also transported enslaved and free Black people as frequently to provide support to the military personnel at the fort.

²⁵ Griffin, *Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War*, 65, 66; Ralston, *Fort Pulaski*, 13.

²⁶ *Savannah Republican*, January 7, 1861.

²⁷ *Savannah Republican*, January 7, 1861.

²⁸ *Savannah Republican*, January 7, 1861.

²⁹ *Savannah Republican*, January 7, 1861.

³⁰ *Savannah Republican*, January 7 and 15, 1861.

Life and Labor for African Americans during the Confederate Occupation

Almost immediately after the companies steamed out to Cockspur on the *Ida*, African Americans joined them. Unlike the white militiamen, enslaved men did not volunteer and were not praised for their sacrifice. Instead, when the state acknowledged their contributions, recognition went to slaveholders rather than the laborers. On January 22, 1861, the secession convention passed a resolution commending the loyalty of “certain patriotic citizens of Georgia and South Carolina” who had “placed in the service of the State large numbers of slaves, without remuneration.”³¹ By the time the resolution was adopted, enslaved people had already been working at Fort Pulaski for about two weeks.³² Sent by their owners—the Daniels, Habershams, Hugers, and Screvens—nearly three hundred enslaved men cleared and deepened the moats, and helped with heavy labor to prepare the neglected fort for war.³³ After two weeks of scooping, scraping, loading wheelbarrows, and dumping dirt and clutter elsewhere, the workers had cleared the moat and were released back to the rice plantations. Enslaved people from surrounding areas helped build the earthwork extending outward from Savannah through the waterways, as a defense system to protect the city from a Union invasion.³⁴ An officer, simply referred to as Captain Screven, a planter, supervised the work of the enslaved people at the fort.³⁵

In March 1861, slaveowners sent another group of seventeen men for 245 days of work. According to historian Jacqueline Jones, planters were paid a total of \$122.50 (50¢ a day) for each enslaved man’s labor.³⁶ In July, the Savannah city government passed a law stating that the city would pay free Black workers employed at the fort a maximum of \$11 a month, should Confederate officials refuse to pay them. In October, three such workers submitted a claim, asking the city to pay the taxes that they owed to the state and county, “in compensation for their service at Tybee Island and Fort Pulaski.”³⁷ At Fort Pulaski and other Confederate military installations, enslaved and free Black laborers served in many different capacities. Officers brought personal servants with them to cook, clean, do laundry, mend

³¹ Georgia, Convention of the People, *Journal of the Public and Secret Proceedings of the Convention of the People of Georgia, Held in Milledgeville and Savannah in 1861, Together with the Ordinances Adopted* (Milledgeville: Boughton, Nibset & Barnes, State Printers, 1861), 117–18.

³² Georgia, Convention of the People, *Journal*, 117–18.

³³ *Daily Morning News*, January 9, 1861; *Daily Morning News*, January 14, 1861.

³⁴ Griffin, *Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War*, 68.

³⁵ *Daily Morning News*, January 14, 1861.

³⁶ Jacqueline Jones, “Wartime Workers, Moneymakers: Black Labor in Civil War-Era Savannah,” in *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, eds. Leslie M Harris and Daina Ramey Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 144.

³⁷ Jones, “Wartime Workers,” 144.

clothes, and perform other housekeeping chores.³⁸ Free and enslaved Blacks employed by the army or militias worked as nurses in hospitals, chopped wood, drove wagons, and excavated areas. Those who were tasked with excavation jobs were expected to complete a certain number of cubic feet a day and received additional pay for any work over what was required of them.³⁹ Using the task system, the military command allowed enslaved men and women to earn wages for themselves once they completed their daily assignments.⁴⁰

At Fort Pulaski, as on plantations throughout the South, enslaved people who did not perform their work to the satisfaction of the overseer were punished harshly. Many slaveholders believed that African Americans were lazy by nature and that physical force was the only method of discipline they understood. They found support in the medical literature of the time, which was suffused with racism.⁴¹ Colonel Charles Olmstead, the commander of the fort during Confederate occupation, summed up these attitudes in his memoirs. As he wrote about his experiences on Cockspur, he mentioned that “at that time our cooks were all Negroes and it goes without saying that strong measures had to be used to keep them up to the mark.”⁴²

Olmstead and other officers from elite families were accustomed to wealth and good food, and they saw no reason to lower their expectations while living in a military encampment. “If a kitchen did not meet the requirements,” Olmstead recalled, “the Cook was promptly laid over a brass drum and a good paddling administered with a shingle.” Olmstead, perhaps anticipating a horrified reaction from his readers, added, “this broke no bones but ensured clean kitchens.”⁴³ Although he wrote his memoirs decades after his time at Fort Pulaski, he still recommended “the method to housekeepers with inefficient or careless servants.”⁴⁴ Olmstead apparently applied the same techniques in his own household. Unsurprisingly, his cook attempted to escape from Savannah to Fort Pulaski after the Union had redeemed the Fort.⁴⁵

³⁸ On slavery in military installations, see Jaime Amanda Martinez, *Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Colin Edward Woodward, *Marching Masters: Slavery, Race, and the Confederate Army during the Civil War, A Nation Divided: Studies in the Civil War Era*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

³⁹ Jones, “Wartime Workers,” 144–45.

⁴⁰ Jones, “Wartime Workers,” 144–45.

⁴¹ Samuel A. Cartwright, “Report on the Diseases of and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* 7 (May 1851): 691–715.

⁴² Lilla Mills Hawes, ed. *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society, Vol. 14: The Memoirs of Charles H. Olmstead* (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1964), 83.

⁴³ Hawes, *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society, Vol. 14*, 83.

⁴⁴ Hawes, *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society, Vol. 14*, 83.

⁴⁵ Hawes, *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society, Vol. 14*, 83.

Contrabands and Freedmen

Most of the names of the African Americans who lived and labored at Fort Pulaski during the occupation from January 1861 to April 1862 have disappeared from the historical record. However, at least two have survived this erasure: an eleven-year-old boy named Lewis Richards and a forty-five-year-old man known only as Robert. We know the names of Lewis and Robert because they were included on an “Inventory of Contraband Negroes at the Post Tybee and Cockspur Island” dated April 30, 1862. They were the most recent additions to the list, and their names were scratched through with the notation, “freed by General Order No 7.” Both appeared to have been seized as contraband because they worked as personal servants to soldiers stationed at the fort at the time of its capture in April 1862.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Inventory of Nineteen Contraband Negroes at the Post Tybee and Cockspur Islands, April 30, 1862, “United States Union Provost Marshal Files of Two or More Civilians, 1861–1866,” Family Search, www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939V-MV97-JG?i=764&wc=M6KL-T38%3A165419801%2C165440901&cc=1845948 (accessed October 11, 2021). Records by Number and Date > 00821–01078, March–April 1862 > image 765 of 1211; citing NARA microfilm publication M416 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). Hereinafter cited as Inventory of Nineteen Contraband Negroes, April 30, 1862. More information on General Order Number 7 can be found in Chapter 6.

Inventory of Nineteen Contraband Negroes, at the Post Tybee and Cockspur Islands, April 30, 1862

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Master		Ailing at this Post	Remarks
					Name	Address		
1	Joseph Brown	25	5	10	Laborer	Mrs. Banton	Thompson St. Sibley at	Dec 16. 1861. Show Warrant
2	John Smith	19	5	5				
3	William Brown	25	5	6				
4	John Smith	20	5	8				
5	Amos Gray	30	5	10	Carpenter	Savannah		
6	Henry Smith	23	5	5 1/2	Laborer	Charleston		
7	John Hill	25	5	11		Savannah	U. S. Army	Officer's servant
8	Henry Scott	20	5	6		Savannah		
9	James Hill	25	5	8		Bluffton	Sibley at	
10	James Graham	22	5	8		Savannah	U. S. Army	
11	Amos Hill	22	5	7	Hand	Savannah		Officer's servant
12	John Hill	25	5	8		Bluffton	Sibley at	
13	Anthony Smith	22	5	5		U. S. Army		
14	James Hill	22	5	9		Bluffton	Sibley at	
15	John Smith	25	5	4		Savannah		
16	John Smith	12	5	0		U. S. Army		
17	John Smith	12	5	0		Savannah		
18	John Smith	16	5	8		Savannah		
19	John Smith	15	5	4		Bluffton	U. S. Army	
20	John Smith	20	5	4		Bluffton	U. S. Army	
21	John Smith	20	5	4		Bluffton	U. S. Army	
22	John Smith	20	5	4		Bluffton	U. S. Army	

Chas. Smith & Co. George
John Smith & Co. George
April 30, 1862
L. J. Hill
John Smith
John Smith

Figure 5.1. “Inventory of Nineteen Contraband Negroes at the Post Tybee and Cockspur Islands, April 30, 1862”
 “United States Union Provost Marshal Files of Two or More Civilians, 1861–1866,” *Family Search*, March–April 1862,
www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939V-MV97-JG?i=764&wc=M6KL-T38%3A165419801%2C165440901&cc=1845948
 (accessed October 11, 2021), Records by Number and Date > 00821–01078, March–April 1862 > image 765 of 1211;
 citing NARA microfilm publication M416 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

Lewis Richards belonged to Antonio Ponce Jr., a private who enlisted on September 3, 1861.⁴⁷ The fact that a private had a servant demonstrates that exceptions were made to the “officers only” rules on slave ownership at the fort. Ponce suffered from tuberculosis, a disease that was incurable prior to the advent of antibiotics in the mid-twentieth century. Lewis, a child who stood only four feet tall, was tasked with caring for a grown man who was gravely ill. Because of his illness, Ponce was sent to a hospital at Port Royal, South Carolina, instead of being sent to Governor’s Island in New York with the other prisoners of war captured at Fort Pulaski. Richards remained behind on Cockspur.⁴⁸

Robert, the other enslaved person whose name appeared on the Cockspur contraband list, belonged to Benjamin Lewis Cole. Cole was a prominent Savannah citizen and the sheriff of Chatham County.⁴⁹ In the spring of 1862, he was a private in the Chatham Siege Artillery while his son, Benjamin Theodore Cole, was a second lieutenant in Company H, 1st Regiment, Georgia Infantry (Olmstead’s Regiment).⁵⁰ It is likely that the younger Cole brought Robert to Fort Pulaski; the contraband inventory dated April 30 lists “Lieut. Cole” as a prisoner of war. According to the contraband list, Robert was forty-five years old and five feet eight inches tall. He was likely married to a woman named Becky.⁵¹ The probate records of Ann Norton, Cole’s mother-in-law, show a man named Robert and his wife Becky; Cole was her executor. The ages of that couple match the age of Robert who

⁴⁷ Inventory of Nineteen Contraband Negroes, April 30, 1862; Alfred H. Terry to Major Charles G. Halpine, Fort Pulaski, July 5, 1862, Fort Pulaski Collection; Lillian Henderson, *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers of Georgia, 1861–1865*, vol. 1 (Hapeville, GA: Longino & Porter, n.d.), 197.

⁴⁸ Alfred H. Terry, “Hdqrs U.S. Forces, Hilton Head, Cockspur &c,” in *Congressional Serial Set* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1899), 116; Edward William Drummond, *A Confederate Yankee: The Journal of Edward William Drummond, a Confederate Soldier from Maine*, edited by Roger S Durham (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 63; “Important from Port Royal,” *Lancaster (SC) News*, July 9, 1862, www.newspapers.com/image/339116968/?terms=Antonio%20Ponce&match=1 (accessed October 11, 2021); “Arrival of Released Fort Pulaski Prisoners,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, Charleston, SC, July 4, 1862, www.newspapers.com/image/604405727/?terms=Antonio%20Ponce&match=1 (accessed October 11, 2021).

⁴⁹ 1860 United States Census, Chatham County, Georgia, Population Schedule, City of Savannah, 1st District, 84, www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7667/images/4211374_00084?usePUB=true&_phsrc=PBd1108&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=10832838 (accessed October 10, 2021). Cole was elected with a large majority over his opponent H. H. Eden in January 1862. He received 313 of his 904 votes from voters stationed at Fort Pulaski. *Daily Morning News*, January 3, 1862.

⁵⁰ Ancestry.com, *Georgia, U.S., Civil War Muster Rolls, 1860–1864* (database online; Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2011), www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2371/images/32304_1020705384_0002-00509?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=abfedc64a3c8b6a949cf503e3ff78d11&usePUB=true&_phsrc=PBd1094&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=30729 (accessed October 10, 2021); “Georgia Artillery Units,” <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~pudig/military/GAGuns.htm> (accessed October 10, 2021); Henderson, *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers of Georgia, 1861–1865*, vol. 1, 183, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89059402255&view=1up&seq=201&skin=2021> (accessed October 11, 2021).

⁵¹ Inventory of Nineteen Contraband Negroes, April 30, 1862.

is listed on the contraband inventory. Benjamin Lewis Cole was an ancestor of the famous actor Ben Affleck. Affleck discovered that he was descended from slaveholders when he participated in the PBS series *Finding Your Roots*, hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., in 2015.⁵²

Although most of the African Americans present at Fort Pulaski during the Confederate occupation were enslaved, there were also some free men of color on the island. In July 1861, a free Black man named Alexander Harris accompanied the Republican Blues to the fort. Harris was born to two free parents in 1818 or 1819.⁵³ During his youth, he spent time in Augusta where he learned the blacksmith trade. He returned to Savannah, where he was listed as a musician on rolls of free persons of color for several months at the beginning of the war.⁵⁴ A free man who did well for himself, he owned a house on William Street. Free persons of color had always occupied a precarious position in the slaveholding South, and white southerners' decision to secede and fight a war to defend slavery made their situation even more perilous. On May 31, 1861, Harris volunteered his services to the Confederacy, most likely to preserve his freedom. The *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers* lists him as a "Colored man, not mustered by in service."⁵⁵ He became a musician in Company C of the 1st Regiment of Georgia Infantry, with Charles Olmstead as his commander. His initial enlistment was for a period of sixty days, but he served for a little over a year, until June 30, 1862.⁵⁶

⁵² "Records Offer Murky View into Ben Affleck's Ancestor and Slavery," *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 2015, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ben-affleck-ancestor-20150517-story.html; Sam Sanders, "After Ben Affleck Scandal, PBS Postpones 'Finding Your Roots,'" NPR/PBS, June 25, 2015, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/25/417455657/after-ben-affleck-scandal-pbs-postpones-finding-your-roots; "Ben Affleck's Slave-Ownning Family; Records Sketch a Conflicted Past," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2015, www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/17/ben-affleck-slave-owning-family-tree-records (accessed October 11, 2021); 1860 US Census Slave Schedules, Chatham County, GA, 461, www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7668/images/gam653_143-0405?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=4cf7591f776bfddafd128259000360d2&usePUB=true&_phsrc=PBd1109&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=92547279 (accessed October 10, 2021).

⁵³ For a biography of Harris, see Maureen O'Brien, "A Biography of Alexander Harris (1818–1909)," Armstrong College, 1982 (accessed April 18, 2021).

⁵⁴ *Daily Morning News*, April 27, 1861; *Daily Morning News*, July 19, 1861; *Daily Morning News*, September 13, 1862.

⁵⁵ Henderson, *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers of Georgia, 1861–1865*, vol. 1, 133.

⁵⁶ Henderson, *Roster of the Confederate Soldiers of Georgia, 1861–1865*, vol. 1, 133.

Conclusion

By November of 1861, the Confederacy had all but abandoned its station on Tybee, only leaving rotating pickets on and off the island in shifts. The steamer *Ida* delivered six months of rations to Fort Pulaski in January 1862. Soon after the delivery, the federal blockade prevented any large-scale movement of soldiers, enslaved people, and supplies, as well as physical communications. In addition to the blockade, the Union cut the telegraph wire that connected the fort to Savannah. Through the winter of 1862, people isolated on Cockspur—whites and African Americans alike—relied on March Haynes, an enslaved man who knew the waterways and who had gained Olmstead’s trust, to relay information to and from Savannah.

CHAPTER SIX

FORT PULASKI AND THE UNION

Waiting and Preparation: Union Forces and Contraband on Tybee Island

A year after South Carolina led the charge of rebellion against the United States, the Union Navy came steaming down the Atlantic Coast. President Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet had responded decisively after Charlestonians fired on Fort Sumter. Until then, the US government and military had acted cautiously in the hopes of preventing a civil war. But when the South made this unprovoked move, Lincoln had no choice. In April of 1861, Lincoln ordered a blockade of Southern ports to choke the “insurrection against the Government of the United States that has broken out.”¹

Six months later, on November 3, 1861, after having passed through heavy storms, the US Navy arrived off the coast of South Carolina. At Port Royal Sound, when the weather cleared off, Union Flag Officer Samuel F. Du Pont used his ships to bombard Fort Walker and Fort Beauregard into submission. Fort Walker took the worst of the attack. When soldiers inside the fort ran out of powder, they retreated. Soon their compatriots at Fort Beauregard followed suit. This was a significant victory for the Union. Union troops moved in and set up a base at Beaufort. From their foothold in the Lowcountry, they then looked southward toward Georgia.²

When General Robert E. Lee learned of the defeat at Port Royal Sound, he ordered Confederate forces to leave Tybee. By November 10, the Confederate troops and guns had been quietly removed. Pickets continued to rotate in shifts from Fort Pulaski. Confederates hoped that the enemy would not realize that Tybee had been all but conceded, yet Union forces quickly recognized that the island had been abandoned. Union General Thomas W. Sherman informed flag-officer Du Pont that Tybee was free for the taking. Du Pont

¹ Abraham Lincoln, *Proclamation by the President of the United States of American on Blockade of Confederate Ports* (Washington, D. C., April 19, 1861), <https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm000582> (accessed March 25, 2021).

² On the Battle of Port Royal, see Daniel Ammen, *The Atlantic Coast. The Navy in the Civil War—II* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1883); Robert M. Browning Jr., *Success Is All That Was Expected: The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War* (Dulles: Brassey’s, 2002).

responded confidently that he would “cork up Savannah like a bottle.”³ Late on the afternoon of November 24, Federal troops arrived at Tybee and set out to intimidate the garrison at Fort Pulaski. They built more campfires than they needed to fool the Confederates into thinking that a larger force had landed, and they raised the American flag high on the lighthouse for all to see.⁴

News of the United States military’s arrival on Tybee spread quickly through the coastal islands and Savannah. On November 26, the *Daily Morning News* reported that the town remained “very quiet and unconcerned, notwithstanding the very close proximity of the invaders.” Nevertheless, Savannahians recognized the threat. Just one day later, the newspaper warned that the enemy had set their sights on Fort Pulaski and that their ultimate goal was to gain control of the city’s port. “No time should be lost and no means neglected in putting our defenses in the best possible condition,” the paper proclaimed. “Now is the time for prompt and decided action.”⁵ Whites feared for their safety, their property, and the future of their peculiar institution of slavery. They believed that Lincoln’s ultimate goal was emancipation, and now Union forces were just a few miles away.⁶

The arrival of the US Navy took on a different meaning for the enslaved population of Coastal Georgia. If the whites’ worst nightmares came true—if the men on those ships offshore and camped out on Tybee aimed to destroy slavery—African Americans’ dreams of freedom would also be realized. Susie King Taylor remembered that she “wanted to see these wonderful ‘Yankees’ so much,” since she had “heard [her] parents say the Yankee was going to set all the slaves free.”⁷

The story of Samuel Mitchell provides a window through which historians can understand how momentous the occasion was for African Americans at the time.⁸ Mitchell lived near Port Royal when Du Pont launched his attack on the Confederates. On the morning of November 7, when navy boats began shelling the forts, seventeen-year-old Sam heard loud noises akin to the sound of thunder. When he looked at his mother in bewilderment, she explained, “Son, dat ain’t no t’under, dat Yankees come to gib you freedom.”⁹ He was so happy that he jumped up and down with excitement. Sam’s father was away working

³ Cited in Griffin, *Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War*, 117.

⁴ *Savannah Daily Republican*, November 27, 1861.

⁵ *Daily Morning News*, November 26, 1861, and November 27, 1861, 1.

⁶ Griffin, *Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War*, 118; *Savannah Daily Republican*, November 27, 1861. On the origins of the phrase “peculiar institution” as a euphemism for slavery in the antebellum South, see www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/peculiar-institution.

⁷ Susie King Taylor mentioned the arrival of the Yankees and how the name “Yankee” became associated with emancipation in her recollections. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 8.

⁸ Mitchell’s story was collected as part of the Federal Writer’s Project between 1936 and 1938.

⁹ Quoted in Barbara Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 44.

Other runaways made their way to relative freedom on Tybee. Like the five who escaped from Wilmington Island, the new arrivals were mostly young men.¹⁵ Josiah Simmons was only fourteen years old when he reached Tybee on December 20. Sixteen-year-old Jerry Abersham arrived on December 22 and Esau Fawkes, aged twenty-five years, came from Savannah on December 27.¹⁶

Through the winter, the number of escapees on Tybee continued to grow. Information about them is sparse. Many came from Savannah, including Samuel Mackey, a thirty-year-old carpenter who belonged to “Miss Mackey.” Tom Webb, aged twenty-eight, and five other men were listed only as laborers. Two men, Daniel Polite and Cesar Graham, came from Bluffton. Morris Pinckney, a twenty-three-year-old man, journeyed from Charleston. Finally, Wally Scott, a twenty-year-old, whose owner is listed as residing in Gainesville, arrived on March 2, 1862. Likely the man who enslaved him had either sent him to join the crews of men working on fortifications or accompanied his owner to serve in the military. All of these men were put to work as boatmen.¹⁷

House servants were just as likely to risk their lives for freedom as laborers. Ishmeal [sic] Hines, twenty-two years old; Ned Polite, forty-five; Anthony Bailey, twenty-two; Benjamin Peterson, thirty-two; Esau Fawkes, twenty-five; Josiah Simmons, fourteen; Thos [Thomas] Frazer, fourteen; Jerry Abersham, sixteen; and Joe Casey, fifteen, came from Savannah, St. Helena Island, Bluffton, and Hilton Head. Their training in domestic service led them to work as servants to officers on Tybee.¹⁸

The arrival of enslaved people at Tybee in the first years of the Union presence is well documented. Censuses of contraband were recorded once every two weeks from March 1 through April 30.¹⁹ The names and vital information of the runaways were committed to paper in the event that an owner who had remained loyal to the United States petitioned for the return of his human property. However, this documentation is only partial at best. As the number of arrivals increased, the task of keeping track of them

¹⁵ Readers familiar with Savannah may wonder if the name “Abersham” is a typographical error, since Habersham is a very familiar name in the Lowcountry. Jerry’s last name may have, in fact, been Habersham but the Union clerk who recorded contraband names always listed him as Abersham, so we have used that name here. “United States Union Provost Marshal Files of Two or More Civilians, 1861–1866,” images, *FamilySearch*, May 22, 2014, [https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/census-of-contraband-camp-tybee-and-cockspur-islands-ga-1862/](https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939V-MV97-NR?cc=1845948&wc=M6KL-T38%3A165419801%2C165440901, Records by Number and Date > 00821–01078, March–April 1862 > image 754 of 1211; citing NARA microfilm publication M416 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); Census of Contraband Camp, Tybee and Cockspur Islands, GA, 1862, Slaveholders Listed, <a href=) (accessed April 18, 2021).

¹⁶ “United States Union Provost Marshal Files of Two or More Civilians, 1861–1866”; Census of Contraband Camp, Tybee and Cockspur Islands, GA, 1862, Slaveholders Listed.

¹⁷ “Miss. Mackey” may refer to Elizabeth Mackay, who was made famous by novelist Eugenia Price in *Stranger in Savannah*; “United States Union Provost Marshal Files,” image 754.

¹⁸ “United States Union Provost Marshal Files,” image 754.

¹⁹ Census of Contraband Camp, Tybee and Cockspur Islands, GA, 1862, Slaveholders Listed, <https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/census-of-contraband-camp-tybee-and-cockspur-islands-ga-1862/> (accessed April 18, 2021).

overwhelmed the Union troops. Furthermore, the preservation of documentary evidence in a time of war was difficult. Several caches of papers were burned, destroyed, or lost as the war progressed. For these reasons, the censuses are incomplete.

There were undoubtedly other enslaved people who escaped to Union lines on Tybee or to Federal gunboats but whose names have been lost to the historical record. Letters from Union officers include references to runaways whose names do not appear on the official contraband censuses. Moreover, the lists from Tybee do not include women. Other camps, like Otter Island, South Carolina, used separate forms to record the names of women, along with their ages and the number of children accompanying them.²⁰

²⁰ “United States Union Provost Marshal Files,” image 476. For example, see the contraband census list for Otter Island, South Carolina: <https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/census-of-contraband-camp-otter-island-sc-april-1862-slaveholders-listed>. For additional information about female contrabands, see Anya Jabour, “Is Anybody Looking? Runaway Slaves and the Refugee Crisis in Civil War America,” January 30, 2017, www.pbs.org/mercy-street/blogs/mercy-street-revealed/is-anybody-looking-runaway-slaves-and-the-refugee-crisis-in-civil-war-america.

Providing Intelligence to the Union



Figure 6.1. Major General Quincy A. Gillmore

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2018666425; Brady's National Photographic Portrait Galleries, photographer. *Portrait of Capt. Quincy A. Gillmore, Officer of the Federal Army (Maj. Gen. from July 10, 1863).*

Enslaved men and women who made their way to the Union lines provided valuable intelligence on the Confederacy and its military operations. On December 30, Captain and Chief Engineer Quincy Adams Gillmore sat down to write to his superior, Brigadier

General Thomas West Sherman, the commanding officer on Hilton Head Island. In his letter, Gillmore discussed his encounter with “the most intelligent slave I have met here”— Brutus Bullos, whom Gillmore referred to simply by his first name.²¹ Bullos had arrived at the Island with Joseph Brown (also known as Newberry), Billy Jenks, Commodore Perry, and Bob Roberts in mid-December.²² His name was included on the list of contrabands on March 1st, along with a notation that on February 16, 1862, he had found employment as a deckhand. Since his name does not appear on subsequent contraband censuses, it is safe to assume that he did not return to Tybee after that date.

Bullos gave Gillmore the lay of the land or, more accurately, the lay of the waterways from Tybee inland. In addition to describing the creeks and inlets that flowed outward to the sea, he also provided valuable intelligence on Confederate battery positions. He told Gillmore where each was located, how many guns each had, the routes used to communicate between them, and where pickets were placed as lookouts.²³ Ultimately, Gillmore declared that he “place[d] great reliance on Bullos’ statement,” “for everything he said of Big Tybee inlet was verified with remarkable accuracy by my examination.”²⁴ Gillmore also wrote to Sherman that “what he says is moreover confirmed by other slaves,” a sign that the information was valid. Based on the information provided to him by Bullos, Gillmore reasoned that if the Union could “get into Savannah River, by a line of communication that [it could] retain and control,” it would be easier “to reduce Pulaski by cutting off its supplies, than by the very doubtful and very expensive operation of bombardment from Tybee Island.”²⁵ Although Gillmore hastened to assure his commanding officer that he had no desire “to shrink from this labor,” he went on to detail the time, cost, labor, and logistical challenges that would be involved in preparing and executing a bombardment. Gillmore rightly estimated that the only way to breach the sturdy walls of Fort Pulaski would be to use “heavy rifled guns.” He ended this detailed letter to General Sherman by again emphasizing his trust in the intelligence that Bullos had given him.²⁶

Isaac Tatnall was another escapee from slavery whose skills and information made him a valuable asset to Union forces. Tatnall was twenty-five years old and, standing six feet, two inches, was unusually tall. He worked as a pilot on the route from Brunswick to

²¹ Letter from Quincy Gillmore to Thomas Sherman, in Gustavus Vasa Fox, *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861–1865* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), vol. 1, 90–93; also cited in William A. Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862–1867* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 2011), 29.

²² Census of Contraband Camp, Tybee and Cockspur Islands, GA, 1862, Slaveholders Listed, <https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/census-of-contraband-camp-tybee-and-cockspur-islands-ga-1862/> (accessed April 18, 2021).

²³ Letter from Gillmore to Sherman, in Fox, *Confidential Correspondence*, 90–91.

²⁴ Letter from Gillmore to Sherman, in Fox, *Confidential Correspondence*, 90–91.

²⁵ Letter from Gillmore to Sherman, in Fox, *Confidential Correspondence*, 92.

²⁶ Letter from Gillmore to Sherman, in Fox, *Confidential Correspondence*, 92.

Savannah. Early in November of 1861, he found himself at Port Royal Sound and witnessed the United States Naval attack on Confederate defenses. A month later, he decided it was time to risk an attempt at a new life. At midnight on Saturday, December 15, Tatnall slipped away from the *St. Mary's* steamer. Moving quietly in the night so as not to attract unwanted attention, he found a small boat. When he gave a signal, four of his friends met him at the boat with food and water. They rowed out to sea, keeping the land in sight.²⁷

It was winter. Even if the winter of 1861 was unseasonably warm, the men rowed along the ocean in an open boat.²⁸ They were exposed to the cold air drifting along the top of the water and whipping around them. From Brunswick, they rowed for three days and nights until they landed on Tybee Island. They knew that the US Army was there, and they sought the nominal freedom that proximity to Union forces would bring.

In a conversation with a correspondent for the *New York Times*, Tatnall offered a glimpse into his life as an enslaved man and clues about why he decided to escape when he did. Holcombe, the man who enslaved him, rented Tatnall's services to pilot the steamer *St. Mary's* for thirty-five dollars a month. Holcombe usually gave Tatnall five dollars, but in November, Holcombe kept the entire thirty-five for himself. It turned out to be false economy. Tatnall observed, "Last month, Master took him all; but he lost by dat, cause dis month I runned away, and he's lost \$1,880." The enslaved pilot knew his worth, and his former master paid dearly for his refusal to give Tatnall even a small fraction of his wages.²⁹

Tatnall quickly earned the trust of Gillmore and his navy counterpart, John Rodgers.³⁰ Because of his job as a pilot, Tatnall was able to share intelligence about Confederate positions along the coast as well as about morale among civilians. He gave information about the batteries on St. Simons and Jekyll Islands. He told the Union officers about white families leaving Fernandina and Brunswick. He described grumbling among poor whites who were unhappy with the war and the draft and reported that he had overheard some elite white men saying they wished Georgia had never left the Union. He was familiar with the Drayton brothers—Thomas, who had defended Port Royal Sound, and Percival, who was on one of the attacking navy ships. He speculated that Thomas may have not fought hard for fear of harming his brother.³¹

²⁷ "The Policy of the Rebels. A Semi-Official Exposition. The Stories told by Contrabands. The Late Col. Croghan. A Breeze in the Georgia Legislature, The Siege of Matamoras," *New York Times*, January 14, 1862. A subsequent article in the *New York Times* refers to the *St. Mary's* as a "rebel steamer"; see "From the Georgia Coast: Interesting Statements by Contrabands," *New York Times*, January 26, 1862.

²⁸ "The Policy of the Rebels."

²⁹ "The Policy of the Rebels."

³⁰ "The Policy of the Rebels."

³¹ "The Policy of the Rebels."

Most importantly, Tatnall knew every approach to Savannah from the sea. He detailed the depth and width of each passage and identified which led to good roads that could be used to invade Savannah. He knew which waterways could be used to blockade Fort Pulaski, and he thought that the US Navy could easily cut off the fort.³² Tatnall told Union officers that, to his knowledge, Fort Pulaski was poorly provisioned and that “it must fall from starvation.” John Rodgers placed great faith in Tatnall, saying, “All the information I have gleaned from Isaac is interesting to me, and you will, I presume find it valuable.”³³ Rodgers himself found it so valuable that he demanded that Isaac be paid for his services to the navy. If Tatnall was willing to risk his life for the United States, Rodgers argued, he deserved to be compensated. Isaac Tatnall continued to be in high demand; in January 1862, Flag Officer Du Pont ordered him to a new post on board the US gunboat *Pembina*.³⁴

Like Gillmore, Du Pont understood the significance of the contributions the men streaming into Union lines made to the war effort. In his letters, he shared a remark from Percival Drayton, who had deep roots in the South. Drayton called these men the “friends of the Union Navy,” then added, “They [have] the knowledge of locality, of the forests, of the waters; for no white man in the South can handle a skiff, are stupid and awkward on the water, while the Negroes are skillful and daring.”³⁵

Using the compiled knowledge acquired from Bullos, Tatnall, and other runaways on Tybee, John Rodgers and Quincy Gillmore recommended to General Sherman that Fort Pulaski be neutralized via blockade: “Fort Pulaski will be completely blockaded. . . its supplies cut off, its usefulness destroyed, and its troops demoralized.”³⁶ In January and February, Gillmore directed the hard labor of constructing batteries in the cold, slippery mud on Jones Island at Venus Point. When these were completed, Union guns fired upon the *Ida* as she made her regular trip to Fort Pulaski to resupply the garrison on February 13. The following week, the Union military cut the telegraph line between Savannah and Cockspur Island. Fort Pulaski was thoroughly isolated.³⁷

³² “The Policy of the Rebels.”

³³ Robert Means Thompson and Richard Wainwright, ed., *Publications of the Naval Historical Society, Volume 9: Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861–1865*, vol. 1, 94–96.

³⁴ Thompson and Wainwright, *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox*, vol. 1, 94.

³⁵ Samuel Francis Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters* (Utica: Cornell University Press, 1969), vol. 2, 69; *Gallipolis Journal*, January 23, 1861; US War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, ed. Robert Scott, series 1, vol. 14 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1882): 324–25. *The War of the Rebellion* will be hereinafter cited as *OR*.

³⁶ “Memorandum of Construction of Battery at Venus Point, Savannah River,” *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 14: 325; Robert Lattimore, *Fort Pulaski National Monument*, National Park Service, 22–23.

³⁷ “Memorandum of Construction of Battery at Venus Point, Savannah River,” *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 14: 325; Robert Lattimore, *Fort Pulaski National Monument*. National Park Service, 22–23.

Contrabands continued to arrive on Tybee and share information with Union officers. Thomas Franklin, an enslaved bricklayer who had been working at Fort Pulaski, left the fort before it was blockaded and made his way to Union lines. In opposition to the reports that Fort Pulaski was poorly provisioned, Franklin had a more recent update and thought that the fort held about five months' worth of supplies. John Rodgers spoke with him and was impressed by his intelligence; Rodgers also noted that Franklin had "white blood in his veins."³⁸

Conventional wisdom held that Fort Pulaski could not be severely damaged by a bombardment from Tybee. Yet Brigadier General Thomas Sherman felt confident that Gillmore could breach the walls of Fort Pulaski with a cannon attack. He directed the chief engineer to begin placing guns on Tybee in preparation for a bombardment of the fort. From February 21 to April 10, 1862, Gillmore supervised the arduous and expensive work of building eleven batteries and putting into place all the support necessary, which he had outlined when presenting the two plans to General Sherman in December of 1861.³⁹

As late as April 6, Union military officers were still relying on contraband information about Fort Pulaski. Lemuel Wilson Landersshine, a Confederate at the fort, reported in his journal that "Dave a negro, belonging to Wells of our company, went off yesterday." "His clothes," Landersshine wrote, "were found at the creek dividing the Cockspur and Long Island so [I] think he has gone to the Yankees. Don't know of any cause."⁴⁰ Apparently, Landersshine was so inured to the system of slavery that he could not imagine why an enslaved man would prefer the possibility of freedom among strangers to continued bondage with the people he knew. Dave arrived on the Union side of the shore without clothing but with valuable intelligence for Gillmore and Rodgers. He reported that reinforcements were expected at Fort Pulaski, along with an attack on the blockading batteries. He added that men in the fort were restless after having been confined to the Fort for so long. They would not be restless for long.⁴¹

³⁸ Thompson and Wainwright, *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox*, vol. 1, 97.

³⁹ Thompson and Wainwright, *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox*, vol. 1, 97.

⁴⁰ Lemuel Wilson Landersshine, April 6, 1862, Fort Pulaski National Monument Archives; Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 1, 405.

⁴¹ Lemuel Wilson Landersshine, April 6, 1862; Du Pont, vol. 1, 405.

Fort Pulaski: Bombardment and Surrender



Figure 6.2. Copy of the official plan for the siege of Fort Pulaski

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/gvhs01.vhs00084; Sneden, Robert Knox. "Copy of official plan of the siege of Fort Pulaski, Cockspur Island, Savannah, Georgia April 1862: by Union forces under Gen'l Gillmore and Hunter." Virginia Historical Society.

On the morning of April 10, 1862, the long-awaited bombardment began. After Colonel Charles Olmstead refused to surrender, the Union soldiers on Tybee began firing at the fort. When it became clear that the walls of Fort Pulaski were no match for the rifled artillery blasting them from Tybee, Olmstead was forced to surrender.⁴²

⁴² Quincy Adams Gillmore, *Official Report to the United States Engineer Department of the Siege and Reduction of Fort Pulaski Georgia, February, March, and April 1862* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1862).



Figure 6.3. Fort Pulaski, Georgia: The breach

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2018670599;
Timothy H. O'Sullivan, "Fort Pulaski, Georgia: The Breach." April 1862.

When Gillmore surveyed the damage done to the fort, he quickly realized that he could have saved much time and effort. He had predicted that the rifled cannon would be more effective, but he had not realized how effective they would be.⁴³ Had they planned only to use those rather than the smoothbore cannon, he could have saved weeks of preparation. While Gillmore received full credit for his months of planning and hard work, General Thomas Sherman did not. He had been recalled only weeks earlier and was replaced by General David Hunter, who was made the commander of the Department of the South.⁴⁴

⁴³ Gillmore, *Official Report*, 51.

⁴⁴ Gillmore, *Official Report*, 51.

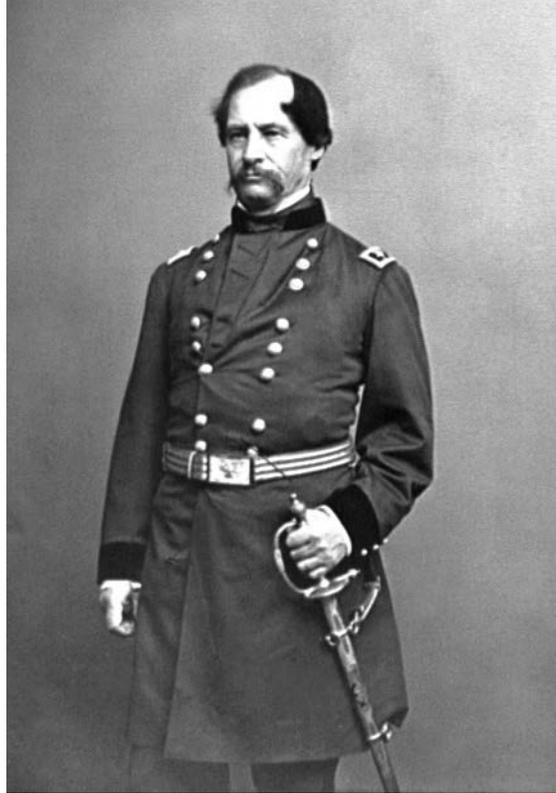


Figure 6.4. Portrait of Major General David Hunter
Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2018666442;
Brady's National Photographic Portrait Galleries, photographer.
Portrait of Major General David Hunter, Officer of the Federal Army.

Du Pont lamented this decision. General Sherman “had prepared the ground, ploughed and harrowed, and others will reap the crops.” “It is a very hard case,” he wrote. “The Navy people quite regret him.”⁴⁵ Contrary to what has been written about the relationship between the army and navy and the effect it had on the decision to bombard Fort Pulaski rather than continuing the blockade, there seems to have been no discord between the navy’s Flag Officer Du Pont and the army’s General Sherman. Du Pont recalled that General Sherman “ever deferred to me. We never had a single difficulty; a passing suspicion or misgiving, when something seemed to elicit it was sure to give way at our next meeting—a more thorough devoted public servant, self-denying and unostentatious never lived.” The blockade was in effect and working, but bombardment promised a quicker means to the desired end.⁴⁶

While Du Pont regretted Sherman’s departure, his replacement’s arrival was a stroke of Providence for the contrabands and other enslaved people on Cockspur Island and living up and down the coast of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida. Major General

⁴⁵ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 1, 396–97.

⁴⁶ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 1, 396–97.

David Hunter took up his new post as Commander of the Department of the South, determined to hasten the destruction of slavery, and he would waste no time before putting his plans into action.

General Orders Numbers 7 and 11

Two days following the surrender of Fort Pulaski, General David Hunter issued General Order Number 7, which granted freedom to all enslaved people on Cockspur Island.⁴⁷ Only days before, the brick fort had stood as a symbol of Southern strength and defiance against the US government. Now, with its crumbled walls, it shone as a beacon of liberty for all the enslaved who lived near enough to imagine escaping to freedom.

More than symbolic, General Order Number 7 immediately changed the lives of two enslaved people at Fort Pulaski. Lewis Richards and Robert, referred to in the previous section, were considered free and no longer contraband. Robert had been brought to Fort Pulaski by Benjamin Cole; Cole had left the fort shortly before the bombardment and had not returned. Lewis Richards accompanied Antonio Ponce Jr. to Cockspur. After the Confederate surrender, Ponce, who was suffering from tuberculosis, was taken with other sick and wounded Confederate prisoners to Port Royal. He was released in the summer and died in Savannah in September.⁴⁸ Because the sick and absent slaveholders had left their body servants at the fort, Lewis and Robert became the only two recorded people who received their freedom by General Order Number 7. However, not all enslaved people at Fort Pulaski were freed by the order. When the Confederate prisoners of war were taken to Governor's Island in New York, their personal servants went with them. The enslaved men and boys were later freed in New York.

General Order Number 7 attracted little attention, but more was to come. On May 9, 1862, a few miles up the coast from Savannah on Hilton Head Island, General David Hunter prepared to make history. While serving in Kansas during the turmoil following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854,⁴⁹ he had become a steadfast abolitionist. In

⁴⁷ The text of General Order Number 7 reads as follows: "All persons of color lately held to involuntary service by enemies of the United States in Fort Pulaski and on Cockspur Island, Georgia are hereby confiscated and declared free, in conformity with law, and shall hereafter receive the fruits of their own labor. Such of said persons of color as are able-bodied and may be required shall be employed in the quartermaster's department at the rates heretofore established by Brig. T. W. Sherman." Headquarters, Department of the South, Fort Pulaski, Cockspur Island, GA, April 13, 1862, *OR* ser. 2, vol. 1: 815.

⁴⁸ *Lancaster News*, Lancaster, SC, July 9, 1862; *Charleston Daily Courier*, Charleston, SC, July 4, 1862, www.findagrave.com/memorial/191638096/antonio-ponce, Ancestry.com, Savannah, GA, Cemetery and Burial Records, 1852–1939 (database online; Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2012).

⁴⁹ The Kansas-Nebraska Act provided for popular sovereignty in Kansas and Nebraska, leaving it up to the citizens of both territories to vote on whether to allow slavery or prohibit it. Both abolitionists and proslavery advocates moved into Kansas. Violence erupted between the two groups and the territory became known as "bleeding Kansas."

December 1861, well before the capture of Fort Pulaski, he had told Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois that, given the opportunity, he “would advance south, proclaiming the negro free and arming him” as he went.⁵⁰ Now he had his chance. As head of the Department of the South, Hunter commanded military efforts in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. He was ready to take action against slavery and eager to enlist African American men in the fight for freedom. In his view, “slavery and martial law in a free country [were] altogether incompatible.”⁵¹ Following up on his decision to free all enslaved people present on Cockspur Island after Olmstead had surrendered Fort Pulaski, he extended that action further. He issued General Order No. 11, which stated that “the persons in these three states Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, heretofore held as slaves, are therefore declared forever free.”⁵²

News of the order quickly spread among military personnel in the area. A week earlier, Du Pont had wondered why Hunter had sent for arms with the intention of enlisting contrabands to fight for the Union. Now that Hunter had revealed the full extent of his plans, Du Pont recorded his reaction. “No one knew of it, no word whispered to me. I laughed outright when I first saw it—then I felt as if it was no laughing matter, it was calculated to make one hold his breath.”⁵³ Du Pont observed that some of the soldiers found the order troubling and noted some of the reactions. “McKinley, an honest Republican opposed to slavery, but no abolitionist, shakes his head.”⁵⁴ Rodgers, who had trusted and repeated the advice of enslaved men ever since he arrived on the coast, thought “that general emancipation must come if the war is prolonged [but] thinks it premature and unfortunate.”⁵⁵ Despite their misgivings, General Hunter remained firm and steadfast in his mission. On May 23rd, he assembled the troops under his command and read the order aloud to them.

The three States of Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, comprising the Military Department of the South, having deliberately declared themselves no longer under the protection of the United States of America, and having taken up arms against the said United States, it becomes a military necessity to declare them under martial law. This was accordingly done on the 25th day of April,

⁵⁰ David Hunter to Lyman Trumbull, December 9, 1861, quoted in Edward A. Miller Jr., *Lincoln's Abolitionist General: The Biography of David Hunter* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997). 79.

⁵¹ Major General David Hunter, “General Order 11,” Headquarters, Department of the South, Hilton Head, SC, May 9, 1862, *OR*, ser. 2, vol 1: 818.

⁵² Major General David Hunter, “General Order 11,” Headquarters, Department of the South, Hilton Head, SC, May 9, 1862, *OR*, ser. 2, vol 1: 818.

⁵³ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 2, 25, 44; Miller, *Lincoln's Abolitionist General*, 99–102.

⁵⁴ Miller, *Lincoln's Abolitionist General*, 46.

⁵⁵ Miller, *Lincoln's Abolitionist General*, 69.

1862. Slavery and martial law in a free country are altogether incompatible. The persons in these three States—Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida—heretofore held as slaves, are therefore declared forever free.⁵⁶

It took some time for General Hunter's radical declaration of emancipation to circulate in Savannah. When news of the order reached town, the *Daily Morning News* initially refused to print it because the editor considered it to be a false rumor. Editors of a number of New York newspapers harbored no such reservations. While some may have doubted its authenticity, they all reported on it. The *New York Journal of Commerce* argued that "as we do not believe General Hunter is yet insane, we doubt the genuineness of the document."⁵⁷ The *World*, also of New York, readily accepted the order as genuine. They heard earlier that General Hunter had been for some time "issuing papers to negroes . . . guaranteeing freedom and their right to go North, East, South, and West"; thus a sweeping emancipation decree seemed consistent with his previous actions.⁵⁸

Both papers agreed that if General Order Number 11 was authentic, Lincoln would not allow it to stand, and they were right. Ten days after the abolitionist general issued his order, and before the president received confirmation of its authenticity, Lincoln firmly disavowed it. Lincoln declared that "General Hunter nor any other commander or person, has been authorized by the Government of the United States to make proclamations declaring the slaves of any State free."⁵⁹ Ever mindful of the political tightrope that he was walking and worried that drastic steps toward immediate abolition might drive the border states out of the Union, Lincoln sought to assuage the public confusion regarding his intentions concerning slavery. He reminded the slaveholding states of his offer to compensate states and slaveholders who adopted gradual emancipation, promising them that "the change it contemplates would come gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything."⁶⁰

With mockery, and perhaps a bit of self-justification, the *Savannah Daily Morning News* reprinted Lincoln's statement, with commentary. "As a part of the record of the times, and for the amusement of our readers," the editor wrote, "we give this morning the very remarkable proclamation of Old Abe, reciting Hunter's order, and repudiating the act of his 'Nigger General' [*sic*] at Port Royal." The story claimed that the newspaper had not reported on the order earlier because the editors did not think that it was newsworthy, then

⁵⁶ Major General David Hunter, "General Order 11," Headquarters, Department of the South, Hilton Head, SC, May 9, 1862, *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 1: 818.

⁵⁷ A brief article citing the *New York Journal of Commerce* was reproduced in several newspapers nationwide. See "Gen. Hunter and His Proclamation," *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, June 6, 1862; "Gen. Hunter and His Proclamation," *Monmouth Democrat*, May 29, 1862.

⁵⁸ "Gen. Hunter and His Proclamation," *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, June 6, 1862.

⁵⁹ Abraham Lincoln, *General order no. 11. Declaring order of General Hunter Emancipating Slaves void, etc.* Washington, DC, 1862, www.loc.gov/item/scsm000579; *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 1: 818–19.

⁶⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *General order no. 11. Declaring order of General Hunter Emancipating Slaves void, etc.* Washington, DC, 1862, www.loc.gov/item/scsm000579; *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 1: 818–19.

went on to describe the episode—a harsh order issued by one federal official that was quickly rescinded by another—as a form of Northern trickery. The article concluded by comparing the incident to the story of two “Yankee peddlers”: the first traveled through a neighborhood selling “the itch”; the second followed, hawking the cure.⁶¹

Lincoln’s repudiation of General Order 11 neither fazed nor deterred David Hunter. He and others like DuPont knew that war would hasten the end of slavery in the United States. The general believed that Lincoln “rejoiced in [his] actions,” as the president “never sent [him] his proclamation or the first word of disapprobation,” and he continued his efforts to recruit Black men for the Union army, even though the United States government had not yet authorized the enlistment of African Americans.⁶² Later in June when responding to inquiries from the War Department about the existence of a regiment made up of “fugitive slaves” in South Carolina, Hunter responded. “No regiment of ‘fugitive slaves’ has been or is being organized in this department.” The general went on to say, “There is, however, a fine regiment of loyal persons whose late masters are ‘fugitive rebels’—men who everywhere fly before the appearance of the national flag, leaving their loyal and unhappy servants behind them.”⁶³

When Hunter’s response was read aloud in the House of Representatives on July 2, Republicans applauded and cheered. Many Congressmen held more radical views on the abolition of slavery than Lincoln, and they were not constrained by the desire to appease the border states. Later that month, Congress adopted the Second Confiscation Act.⁶⁴ This law allowed for the confiscation of slaves held by citizens in rebellion against the United States in areas that came under Union control and stipulated that those slaves, along with any who escaped to Union lines, “shall be deemed captives of war, and shall be forever free of their servitude, and not again held as slaves.”⁶⁵

By the summer of 1862, Lincoln increasingly faced pressure from his own political party—including some members of his Cabinet—to take action against slavery. In the aftermath of the Union victory at Antietam in September 1862, he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The Proclamation promised that on January 1, 1863, “all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State” in rebellion against

⁶¹ “Old Abe’s Repudiation of Gen. Hunter’s Order,” *Daily Morning News*, June 2, 1862, 2.

⁶² David Hunter, *Report of the Military Services of Gen. David Hunter, U.S.A.: During the War of the Rebellion, Made to the U.S. War Department, 1873* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1873), 18.

⁶³ David Hunter, *Report of the Military Services of Gen. David Hunter, U.S.A.*, 21–22. For more on Hunter’s attempts to recruit—and, at times, coerce—African Americans into military service, see Miller, *Lincoln’s Abolitionist General*, 100–101.

⁶⁴ Miller, *Lincoln’s Abolitionist General*, 106; *New York Times*, July 15, 1862.

⁶⁵ *The Second Confiscation Act*, Section 9, July 17, 1862, www.freedmen.umd.edu/conact2.htm; Miller, *Lincoln’s Abolitionist General*, 106.

the United States “shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” Furthermore, it pledged that the federal government, “including the military and naval authority thereof,” would “recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons.”⁶⁶

Not a single person was immediately freed as a result of this declaration or its formal successor, the Emancipation Proclamation issued, as promised, on January 1, 1863. The proclamation only applied to enslaved people under Confederate control—places where Lincoln’s authority was not recognized. It exempted nearly half a million enslaved people living in border states loyal to the Union and in areas that were already occupied by the Union army.⁶⁷ Furthermore, it was a wartime measure; emancipation would not be enshrined in constitutional law until the Thirteenth Amendment was adopted in 1865. Its limitations notwithstanding, its significance and impact are indisputable. The Proclamation made abolition a war aim and assured enslaved women and men that what they had hoped and prayed for was true: a Union victory meant the end of slavery.

Only a few months passed between Lincoln’s revocation of Hunter’s General Order Number 11 and his announcement of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The political landscape changes quickly in wartime, though for the South’s enslaved population it was a change that was long overdue. It was also tacit recognition of the roles that African Americans were playing on both sides of the battle lines. At Fort Pulaski, Confederates depended on the labor of enslaved men to convert the neglected property into an active military installation and keep it running. During the siege, the Confederates relied on March Haynes and on a few other African American men to maintain communications with the mainland. Meanwhile, on Tybee, men seeking to escape from bondage provided vital intelligence to Union officers and worked as laborers and boatmen. For both sides, African Americans were largely unacknowledged contributors to the war effort—taken for granted by the Confederates fighting to preserve slavery, undervalued by many of the Union soldiers fighting to end it.

For African Americans themselves, freedom was the prize, and with General Orders Numbers 7 and 11, it was a prize that seemed within reach. In April 1862, an enslaved man and boy standing within the walls of Fort Pulaski were told that they were free. It was a foreshadowing of things to come. Months before Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, two enslaved Georgians, deep in the heart of the Confederacy, were liberated by the stroke of a federal officer’s pen. The fortress that Confederates had hoped would be a bulwark against invasion had been transformed into a staging ground for liberty.

⁶⁶ *Emancipation Proclamation*, January 1, 1863, Online Exhibit, National Archives, www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation (accessed April 18, 2021).

⁶⁷ Areas excluded from the Proclamation included the border states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri; the western counties of Virginia; and areas of the South under Union control, such as thirteen parishes in Louisiana.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GLIMMERING HOPE OF LIBERTY: ESCAPING ENSLAVEMENT BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

The human urge for freedom is strong. Enslaved men, women, and children craved freedom no less than any other person, but they lived in a society where the principles of liberty and equality applied only to white men. Any attempt to escape slavery was risky and the further South one lived, the harder, longer, and more dangerous the journey to freedom became. If an escapee was caught, slaveholders administered swift and brutal punishment. Nevertheless, for some enslaved people, the lure of freedom proved stronger than the fear of capture, and if they were lucky, they found sympathetic people willing to help them on their journey. In the decades before the Civil War, the network known as the Underground Railroad helped hundreds of souls slip their bonds and build new lives outside of the South.¹ Enslaved people passed information to one another as they learned of directions, safe places to stop and hide, and people who were willing to help hide them as they traveled northward to states where slavery was illegal. Because of Georgia's location in the Deep South, routes to freedom were few and sympathetic helpers scarce. Yet, despite the obstacles, some of Georgia's enslaved left on the perilous trek to free states in the North. Some succeeded; others failed. Regardless of the outcome, their stories demonstrate the strength and power of the desire to be free.

¹ On the Underground Railroad, see in particular David W. Blight, *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004); Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Norton, 2015); and Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and The Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

Stowing Away: William Grimes



Figure 7.1. “Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave”

Engraving from Grimes’s autobiography, discussed here:

www.nhregister.com/news/article/Pioneering-former-slave-author-being-honored-by-13213219.php.

This engraving appeared on the cover of Grimes’s autobiography, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*, published in 1825. Courtesy of the Litchfield Historical Society. See www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/william-grimes-1784-1865.

Photograph from Dwight C. Kilbourne, *The Bench and Bar of Litchfield County, Connecticut, 1709–1909: Biographical Sketches of Members, History and Catalogue of the Litchfield Law School Historical Notes*.

Because of Savannah’s proximity to waterways, enslaved people attempted to stow away on ships and boats bound for northern cities. Here, the Underground Railroad consisted of crewmen who helped someone stow away, or a captain who would turn a blind eye. William Grimes recounted the story of his escape in one of the first slave narratives published in the United States.²

In 1809, the man who enslaved him was out of town, and Grimes was working on the docks in Savannah to earn money in his absence. The crew on one of the boats befriended him, and shortly before the ship set sail, Grimes got on board and hid in a space

² Several American slave narratives were published prior to Grimes’s autobiography. However, the majority were published in London.

between the bundles of cotton left by the crew.³ As the moon rose over the water, he emerged from his hiding spot and lay on the deck with the other sailors. In the dusk, his skin looked no different than the white sailors; Grimes was nearly white and would later pass as white. He had passed for white many times in Savannah, especially if a friend followed him closely as would a servant.

Grimes settled in Connecticut and set up a barbershop. He met a woman and “loved her into an engagement.” Soon after, they were married and had children.⁴ Several years later, the man who last enslaved him sent an agent to claim him and bring him back to Georgia. Grimes sold his home to buy his freedom back and to avoid returning to slavery. The loss of his home, and of every penny he had earned since freeing himself, was worth it to him. “To be put in irons and dragged back to slavery, and either leave my wife and children in the street, or take them into servitude,” he explained, “was a situation, in which my soul now shudders at the thought of having been placed.”⁵ He would have done anything to escape the fate of once again being a slave after having lived as a free man. He fervently believed that human nature itself dictated that all men should be free.⁶

Left penniless by the necessity of purchasing the freedom that the Declaration of Independence assured him was his birthright, he wrote his memoir to make money. He ended his autobiography with this statement: “If there is any man in God’s whole creation, who will say, with respect to himself, (only bring the case home) that there are any possible circumstances in which it is just that he should be at the capricious disposal of a fellow being, if he will say that nature within him, that feeling, that reason tells him so, or can convince him so, that man lies! The soul of man cannot be made to feel it, to think it, to own it, or to believe it.”⁷

Foiled Attempts in 1835

In 1835, as white citizens held meetings in preparation for the festivities celebrating Independence Day, two enslaved people attempted to steal themselves away to a better life. Though the two might have known each other, they were not running away together. A young man and woman each planned an escape, said good-bye to family and loved ones, and boarded a ship with a heart full of hope. The same day, slaveowner Joseph Ribero Sr.—the father of Joseph Ribero mentioned earlier—noticed that the boy in question was

³ William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* (New York: n.p., 1825), 51.

⁴ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 63.

⁵ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 66.

⁶ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 66.

⁷ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 66.

missing.⁸ He sounded the alarm and soon he and others began searching the vessels as they bobbed on the water. Before the day had passed, the boy was found on board a ship. But, in the process, an unrelated escape attempt was discovered.

A girl lay huddled in the tightest spot that she could find on the brig, *New Hanover*. She had faithfully served her master, never giving him a moment to doubt her loyalty or to suspect that she might run away. But, all the while, she had been carefully planning her escape. She had traded in her dress for trousers and a shirt. Dressed as a boy, she avoided the second glances that her dress would have earned her as she boarded. Once on board, she found a place to hide in a space so tight that she could barely breathe. Her heart pounded as she heard the men come aboard and begin their search. She tried to hold her breath and make herself as small and as still as possible. But they found her, and the freedom that she had tried to secure for herself slipped away. Had it not been for Ribero raising the alarm, this brave girl may have been successful. She would have stepped off the boat in Philadelphia and begun a new life as a free person instead of being hustled off to Savannah and taken to jail.⁹

The stories of these two enslaved people—unnamed in contemporary accounts—represent innumerable others who were forgotten long ago. Many such escape attempts—both successful and unsuccessful—have been lost to the historical record.

⁸ *Daily Savannah Republican*, June 19, 1835.

⁹ *Daily Savannah Republican*, June 19, 1835.

A Daring Plan: Ellen and William Craft



Figure 7.2. William and Ellen Craft

NPS Gallery, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/72a234fc-4e0a-4e3a-95f9-71aa2401000b>;
Still, William. "Portrait of Ellen and William Craft." 1886.

A decade later, in December of 1848, another couple planned their escape together. Ellen's and William Craft's successful flight from Macon, Georgia, deep in the heart of the slaveholding South, was one of the most audacious schemes ever hatched and is well documented in William Craft's memoir.¹⁰ Their experience provides insight into the feelings and careful planning behind every attempted escape and is worth recounting in detail here.

The offspring of a sexual relationship between her master and a biracial enslaved woman, Ellen Craft could have passed as white.¹¹ Growing up, visitors to the house often assumed that she was the legitimate child of her master and his wife. Yet she was a constant, painful reminder of her husband's infidelity and of the miscegenation that was rampant under slavery. For that reason, her mistress despised the sight of her. Craft was ultimately

¹⁰ William Craft and S. S. Schoff, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; Or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: William Tweedie, 1860), 1. On their escape, see also Sarah Brusky, "The Travels of William and Ellen Craft: Race and Travel Literature in the 19th Century," *Prospects* 25 (October 2000): 177–92; Sirpa Salenius, "Transatlantic Interracial Sisterhoods: Sarah Remonds, Ellen Craft, and Harriet Jacobs in England," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 38, no. 1 (2017): 166–96.

¹¹ Barbara McCaskill, "Ellen Craft: The Fugitive Who Fled as a Planter," in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Their Times*, ed. Anne Short Chirhart and Betty Wood (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 83.

given to her mistress's older legitimate daughter as a wedding gift; she was only eleven years old at the time. While this meant a reprieve from being bullied by her father's jealous and resentful wife, it also meant leaving her mother at a young age.¹²

As Ellen grew older, her sister made sure that she had her own place to sleep. As a result, Ellen enjoyed some privacy, seldom afforded to slaves, where she sewed and made money for herself.¹³ She fell in love with a young, biracial, enslaved cabinetmaker named William Craft. Ellen's sister and her husband allowed the two of them to form a union by the traditional slave method of jumping a broomstick. While Ellen and William were comparably well-treated, bondage still inflicted psychological torture that no privilege accorded by a master could erase. As William recalled years later:

My wife and myself were born in different towns in the State of Georgia, which is one of the principal slave States. It is true, our condition as slaves was not by any means the worst; but the mere idea that we were held as chattels, and deprived of all legal rights—the thought that we had to give up our hard earnings to a tyrant, to enable him to live in idleness and luxury—the thought that we could not call the bones and sinews that God gave us our own: but above all, the fact that another man had the power to tear from our cradle the new-born babe and sell it in the shambles like a brute, and then scourge us if we dared to lift a finger to save it from such a fate, haunted us for years.¹⁴

Despite not suffering the lash and being allowed the time and space to earn a little money for themselves, Ellen and William yearned for their own freedom and for the freedom of their future children. Both knew firsthand the trauma of families torn asunder by slavery. Ellen had been separated from her mother at a young age and William had been separated from his family on the auction block as the result of an enslaver's unpaid debts. He was determined to ensure the safety of his own family, at all costs.¹⁵ The couple spent many nights sitting in their living quarters discussing the options for attaining the freedom and security they desired, but liberty seemed a distant dream. Enslaved men and women in border states might escape by traveling at night, sleeping during the day, and finding people to help along the way. But the Crafts lived deep within the interior of Georgia, a slave state surrounded by other slave states. A journey over land to the nearest free state would have taken weeks on foot through a territory where the sight of two unaccompanied African Americans would have provoked suspicion and likely violence. As much as they yearned for freedom, Ellen and William understood that any attempt to escape was fraught with peril.¹⁶

¹² McCaskill, "Ellen Craft," 85.

¹³ McCaskill, "Ellen Craft," 86.

¹⁴ Craft and Schoff, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 1.

¹⁵ McCaskill, "Ellen Craft," 87.

¹⁶ McCaskill, "Ellen Craft," 87.

Yet they “resolved. . . to keep [their] dim eyes steadily fixed upon the glimmering hope of liberty,” and on a cold December night, sitting in front of their hearth, a lightning bolt of an idea struck them.¹⁷ In the cabinetmaker’s shop, William was exposed to information about how to travel by coach, by rail, and by sea. What if they cut Ellen’s hair, purchased men’s clothing, and she pretended to be a Southern gentleman?¹⁸ William could pose as her servant. Ellen’s skin was so light that people thought that she was white. White gentlemen traveled with their African American valets frequently, so while a Black couple would attract unwelcome attention from authorities, a white man accompanied by a servant would pass unnoticed.¹⁹

Cautiously, they began to gather the items that they needed and to plan the timing of their escape. They each requested a pass for Christmas day.²⁰ Ellen’s sister readily agreed. William’s master, the cabinetmaker, also agreed but ordered him to return promptly; he needed William’s help in the shop as soon as his pass had expired.²¹ The night before they were set to leave, Ellen and William dealt with a few last-minute concerns. Ellen’s face was so smooth, and her eyes so compelling, that they feared that she would attract unwanted attention. She made a poultice to wear on her face, and William dashed out on a last-minute errand to buy a pair of green spectacles to hide her eyes.²² Just before it came time to leave, William stood behind Ellen with scissors and cut her hair in across the back of her neck. When she dressed in the clothes that they had purchased, she looked the part of a white gentleman.²³

¹⁷ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 29.

¹⁸ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 29.

¹⁹ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 29.

²⁰ McCaskill, “Ellen Craft,” 87; Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 31.

²¹ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 31.

²² Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 34–35.

²³ An image of Craft dressed as a man can be found in Wilbur Henry Siebert and Albert Bushnell, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: MacMillan, 1898), 162; Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 35.



Figure 7.3. Ellen Craft

NPS Gallery, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/09979497-c1f5-47e9-9970-5d8393dfad50>;
Ellen Craft in disguise as an ill Southern planter.

With a prayer that they would be safely delivered to freedom, William and Ellen stepped out of the cabin that had been their home and began their journey on December 21, 1848. They staggered their departures so as not to be seen together as they walked to the train station. William boarded the “negro car” and watched as Ellen purchased tickets for the two of them and boarded the train.²⁴ Just before the train began to chug down the tracks from Macon to Savannah, William spotted the cabinetmaker on the platform.²⁵ He expected to be caught, but just before the suspicious master reached the car that William was on, the train left the station.²⁶

²⁴ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 42.

²⁵ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 42–43.

²⁶ McCaskill, “Ellen Craft,” 88.

Ellen, seated in the white train car, felt extremely anxious. When she turned from looking out the window, she noticed a new passenger seated next to her. She had known the man since childhood. He had even eaten dinner at her sister's home the night before. On this train ride, her disguise was being tried by fire. The conversation around her soon turned to "Niggers, Cotton, and the Abolitionists" and, to avoid engaging in it, she pretended to be deaf.²⁷ When her seatmate left the train, Ellen was able to breathe a little.²⁸

By nightfall, the Crafts arrived in Savannah. That same evening, they boarded a steamer from Savannah to Charleston, where they planned to transfer to a steamer bound to Philadelphia. However, the direct route had been stopped for the winter.²⁹ Instead, William and Ellen bought tickets on a boat bound for Wilmington, North Carolina, where they would be able to set sail for the North. As they steamed along the Coast, they carefully concealed their identities from other passengers. They reached Baltimore, Maryland, on Christmas Eve, filled with anxiety. Liberty seemed within their grasp, yet still so far away. William recalled that "Baltimore was the last slave port of any note at which we stopped. On arriving there we felt more anxious than ever, because we knew not what the last dark night would bring forth. It is true we were near the goal, but our poor hearts were still as if tossed at sea."³⁰

There was good reason for the couple to be apprehensive. As William was waiting to board the train to Philadelphia, he was confronted by a "full-blooded Yankee of the lower order."³¹ The man asked William to point out his master and insisted on proof of ownership before letting William pass. Other white passengers expressed their disapproval at seeing an ailing white gentleman—Ellen—harassed while "he" traveled with his slave, William. Under the pressure of the crowd, the clerks at the train station decided to let them board the train to Philadelphia.³²

While aboard the train from Baltimore to Philadelphia, William met a "coloured gentleman" who spoke of a boarding house run by an abolitionist in Philadelphia.³³ Though grateful for the advice, William remained in "character"; he was, after all, still a slave. Through the windows of the train, William saw the glittering lights of the city and "felt that the straps that bound the heavy burden to my back began to pop, and the load to

²⁷ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 44–45.

²⁸ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 45.

²⁹ Craft noted that on the last voyage out, someone had attempted to escape but had been caught.

³⁰ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 68.

³¹ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 68.

³² McCaskill, "Ellen Craft," 90; Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 68–69.

³³ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 78.

roll off.”³⁴ Ellen and William felt great relief and joy on their first Christmas in Philadelphia as a free couple.³⁵ They finally settled in Boston, where they attempted to live a quiet yet public life, as they lent their voices to the abolitionist movement.³⁶

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act.³⁷ A proslavery legislative measure, the act forced both law enforcement and local citizens to help in recapturing runaway slaves, nationwide. Dr. Robert Collins, Ellen’s brother-in-law, was intent on finding her. He went so far as to appeal to President Millard Fillmore for help in retrieving his human property.³⁸ Fillmore responded by authorizing the use of military force. While Ellen missed her family, the couple had no intentions of submitting to those who were sent to take them back South. Bounty hunters and federal marshals came to Philadelphia to capture and return them to Georgia.³⁹

The Crafts realized that they needed to leave the country to protect their hard-won liberty. Aided by white abolitionists, they journeyed through Nova Scotia, Canada, to board a steamship to Liverpool, England. For the next nineteen years, William and Ellen lived in Great Britain, where they had five children. In his autobiography, William wryly observed that “somehow [he had] not been able to make it convenient to return yet; and, as the free air of good old England agrees so well with my wife and our dear little ones, as well as with myself, it is not at all likely [that] we shall return to the ‘peculiar institution’ of chains and stripes.”⁴⁰ Yet, during Reconstruction, they returned to Georgia with the goal of helping newly freed people near Savannah.⁴¹

³⁴ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 79.

³⁵ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 80.

³⁶ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 11

³⁷ On the Fugitive Slave Act, see Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970); Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government’s Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁸ American law, patterned after the English common law, prohibited married women from owning any property (including enslaved people) in their own names. Any property Ellen’s half-sister owned before her marriage became her husband’s when she married, which is why he had to take action to pursue Ellen. Although a few states begin granting married women property rights in the mid-1800s, Georgia law did not grant property rights to married women until after the Civil War; Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 92.

³⁹ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 89.

⁴⁰ Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 31.

⁴¹ For further reading on the Craft family, see Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

The Ordeal of Thomas Sims



Figure 7.4. Thomas Sims

NPS Gallery, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/ce4b9a79-2483-4487-a72c-e9c9c3b24380>;
Thomas Sims, Boston, Athenaeum.

The Crafts were fortunate. Most escape attempts did not end successfully, as the story of Thomas Sims illustrates.⁴² Sims was the son of enslaved people named Minda Campbell and James Sims.⁴³ As with many people born into bondage, much of Sims's early life is shrouded in mystery. Minda was born into slavery in Georgia in 1793. She belonged to James Potter's mother, Sarah Grimes Potter, and by 1827, she was James Potter's property.⁴⁴ The owner of the Colerain plantation on the Savannah River just west of the city, Potter also held nearly four hundred other African Americans. While some sources indicate that Minda shared her life with an enslaved man named James Sims, other sources suggest that at least two of her sons—Thomas and his brother James—were conceived with a white man. The *Boston Daily*

⁴² Sims's name was spelled differently, depending on his location. In Savannah, he was known as Simms with the double M. In Boston, he was known as Sims, with a single M. Sims' story is described at length in *Trial of Thomas Sims on an Issue of Personal Liberty on the Claim of James Potter of Georgia against Him, as an Alleged Fugitive from Service. Arguments of Robert Rantoul, Jr. and Charles G. Loring, with the Decision of George T. Curtis, Boston April 7–11, 1851* (Boston: W. M. S. Damrell & Co., 1851); Leonard W. Levy, "Sims's Case: The Fugitive Slave Law in Boston in 1851," *Journal of Negro History* 35, no. 1 (January 1950): 39–74.

⁴³ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 8.

⁴⁴ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 8.

Transcript described Thomas as a “slim, small, ‘very bright looking mulatto’ who appeared ‘considerably younger’ for his real age of 23.”⁴⁵ One lithograph, created after the fact, depicts Sims and Anthony Burns in a parade in their honor in Boston.⁴⁶

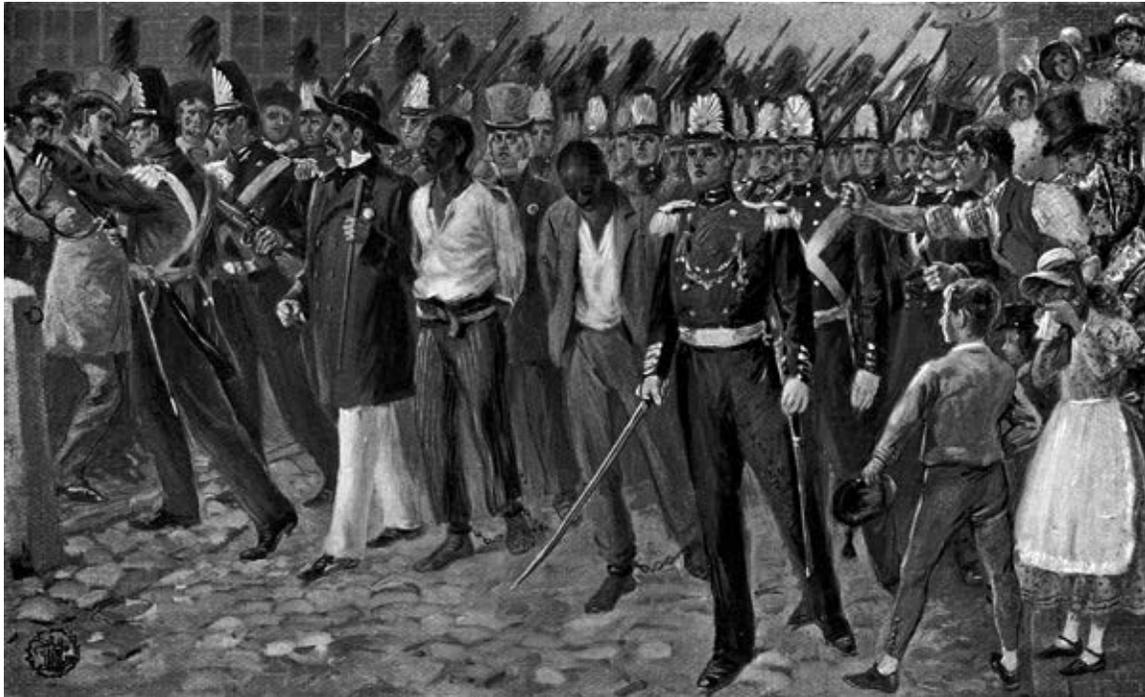


Figure 7.5. Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns

Digital Library of Philadelphia, <https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/Islandora%3A2841>;
Garrett, Edmund Henry. *The Runaway Slaves, Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims*. Hartford, s.n., 1897.

Yet Thomas and James Sims enjoyed privileges that were seldom granted to enslaved children. At Colerain, James was allowed to learn to read and write and to study foreign languages along with the white children.⁴⁷ As Thomas and his brother James grew older, Minda negotiated with Potter to allow her sons to learn trades so that they would not toil their lives away in the fields on Potter’s rice plantation.⁴⁸ James became a carpenter and Thomas a bricklayer, and by the early 1850s, both were working in Savannah, earning money for themselves as well as for Potter.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Cited in Levy, “Sims’s Case,” 43.

⁴⁶ Edmund Henry Garrett, *The Runaway Slaves, Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims* [graphic] (Hartford, s.n., 1897).

⁴⁷ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 11.

⁴⁸ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 8.

⁴⁹ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 8.

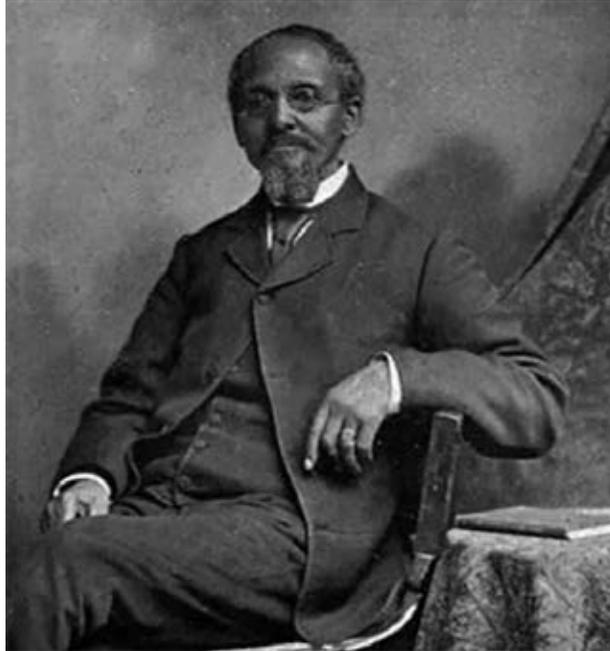


Figure 7.6. Reverend James Sims

New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-76ee-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>;
Reverend James Sims, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

In Savannah, both brothers planned their way to freedom. A skilled carpenter, James Sims earned a decent living in the city. Because he was allowed to keep a portion of his earnings, Sims purchased his freedom from Potter and started his life as a free man in Savannah.⁵⁰ In his spare time, he taught enslaved children at an underground school on Jefferson Street. In 1860, he was discovered and publicly whipped for breaking the law that prohibited enslaved persons from learning to read and write. Sims's status as a free man of color did not protect him from being whipped.⁵¹ Soon after purchasing his freedom, he joined the First African Baptist Church.⁵²

Thomas Sims took a different route to freedom. He spent his days laying bricks and building homes for the citizens of Savannah. Through his work, he connected with other enslaved people who labored in the port.⁵³ He carefully planned his escape, discreetly making inquiries about ships bound to Boston. When the *M. & J.C. Gilmore* sailed on February 21, 1851, Sims was safely on board.⁵⁴ Like the Crafts, he had the advantage of time to help him make his escape. As an urban craftsman, Sims lived a quasi-free life, only

⁵⁰ Stories on James are featured in other sections of this report.

⁵¹ Harris and Berry, "Slave Life in Savannah," 135; Walter J. Fraser, *Savannah in the New South: From the Civil War to the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 20.

⁵² Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 131.

⁵³ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 8.

⁵⁴ Levy, "Sims's Case," 43.

reporting periodically to the overseer. Outside of his working hours, he was on his own. When his overseer realized that he was gone, the ship had weighed anchor and was steaming northward.⁵⁵

Sims's time as a free man was brief. Upon arrival in Boston, he wired home to get money, inadvertently giving his owner information to locate him. Using the tools provided by the Fugitive Slave Act, Potter sent his agents to retrieve him.⁵⁶ As Sims left a dance hall one April night, a group of white men, including two Boston police officers, rushed him. Sims quickly realized what was happening. He pulled a knife, stabbed one of the officers, and yelled for help: "I am in the hands of kidnappers!" Despite his struggle, he was outnumbered and quickly subdued. The men shoved him into a carriage and took him to jail.⁵⁷

Thomas Sims, like the Crafts and other enslaved men and women who successfully made their way North, learned that being on free soil did not guarantee long-lasting freedom. Slaveholders went to great lengths to reclaim their human property and the law, especially after 1850, was on their side. A rich man, Potter had no need to recover his financial investment in Sims. Yet he intended to test the validity of the Fugitive Slave Act.⁵⁸

Confined in the Boston Federal Courthouse, Sims awaited his fate, but he was not alone.⁵⁹ Bystanders who witnessed his abduction had reached out to a vigilance committee composed of activists who were determined to thwart enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. Prominent abolitionists including William Lloyd Garrison, Amos Bronson Alcott, and future Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew came to his aid. They provided him with an attorney and publicly advocated for his release.⁶⁰ Sims desperately tried to avoid being returned to Savannah and slavery by claiming that he was a victim of mistaken identity.⁶¹ He pretended that he had never even heard of James Potter and invented a completely different life story for himself. Through his attorney, he told the courts that he had been born in Florida, and that he had been free "for as long as he could remember."⁶²

⁵⁵ Levy, "Sims's Case," 43.

⁵⁶ Levy, "Sims's Case," 44.

⁵⁷ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 6.

⁵⁸ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 15.

⁵⁹ Levy, "Sims's Case," 44–45.

⁶⁰ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 505–8.

⁶¹ Levy, "Sims's Case," 49.

⁶² Levy, "Sims's Case," 50.

In an attempt to merge facts with fabrication and perhaps to make his story more credible, Sims admitted that he had lived in Savannah for the previous year—but not because he had been enslaved there, but rather, he said, because he had been courting a young woman. He claimed that he had fled to Boston in order to avoid both a confrontation with his beloved's other suitor and the fine for entering Georgia as a free person of color.⁶³

When Potter's agents refuted this testimony, local abolitionists made plans to rescue Thomas from federal custody and take him away to a safer location, as they had done when they rescued Shadrack Minkins, another runaway, a few months earlier.⁶⁴ However, guards and strong iron chains wrapped around Sims foiled their attempt. Lewis Hayden, another man who had seized his freedom and now lived freely in Boston, made plans to help Thomas escape through a window. Newly installed iron bars on the windows of the prison thwarted this scheme.⁶⁵

Unfortunately for Sims, the court ruled in Potter's favor and ordered that he be returned to Georgia.⁶⁶ In the dark hours between midnight and daybreak, 150 men assembled to escort Sims from the courthouse to a boat where he would trace his journey to freedom in reverse. Abolitionists were furious and decried the injustice that they had just witnessed in the free city of Boston. Frederick Douglas exclaimed, "Let the Heavens weep and let Hell be merry!"⁶⁷ James W. C. Pennington, who had escaped slavery in 1827 and had become an ordained minister, spoke eloquently of both Thomas Sims's case and the institution of slavery in America:

My constant trouble of mind is the evils now pressing on my nation and people. What the end is to no eye human can foresee & we are naturally inclined when suffering bad to fear worse. . . . Thomas Sims has been given over to his Claimant and has been taken back into Slavery. "These cases are enough to break one's heart. It is difficult to see how the enormous evil and crime of Slavery can be carried to a greater extent."

The whole land is full of blood. The cry of the poor is going up from every part of the country into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth Will he not soon hear and answer; "Lord give us help from trouble."⁶⁸

⁶³ Levy, "Sims's Case," 43; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 508.

⁶⁴ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 506–7.

⁶⁵ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 508; Levy, *Sims's Case*, 63.

⁶⁶ *The Trial of Thomas Sims*, 39–47. A lithograph of Sims' departure appeared in "Departure of the Brig Acorn from Boston Harbor with Sims on Board," *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, vol. 1 (Boston: F. Gleason, 1851), 44.

⁶⁷ Cited in Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 13.

⁶⁸ James W. C. Pennington, "The Whole Land is Full of Blood," April 29, 1851 (accessed on March 22, 2021), www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/whole-land-full-blood-1851.

Only a few months after Ellen and William Craft had been able to evade the slavecatchers who had been sent North to return them to slavery, Sims failed to maintain his newfound freedom. The owner of the *Gilmore*, the ship on which Sims had escaped, paid his return expenses in order to maintain good faith with slaveowners in Savannah. Sims had risked everything to take control of his future, and his gamble had failed. Despite the best efforts of legal experts who defended him, advocates who wrote on his behalf, abolitionists who plotted his escape, and wealthy opponents of slavery who offered to purchase him to free him legally, he was headed South.

Sims disembarked from the *Acorn* in Savannah and was taken to the city jail where he was lashed thirty-nine times, the maximum allowed by law.⁶⁹ The new jail, built only five years earlier, offered no better atmosphere than its predecessor. The city police force and the jail functioned as the legal arm of slaveholders, intimidating African Americans with the threat of physical violence.⁷⁰ Enslaved people in the city lived under a dusk-to-dawn curfew that restricted their movements. If they were caught outside of their homes without a written pass, they would suffer the consequences. Police officers' main responsibility was to be watchful at night for illicit movement on the streets.⁷¹ Oftentimes enslaved persons might be bound and forced into jail, where they would be held for several days or even weeks. As one visitor to Savannah recalled:

Not far from the Asylum stand the city jail, the occupants of which are mostly slaves, not only those who have been caught while endeavoring to obtain their freedom, but those also who have been sent there by their masters to undergo a course of punishment for some misconduct. The laws of the city forbid the master to whip his own slave; therefore when he considers his slave deserving of punishment, he sends him to the hail with orders to have him whipped so many times a day for a certain number of days; these seasons always occurred at stated intervals, so the poor victims knew when the hour was to arrive for them to endure their cruel discipline. . . . I knew of one female slave while I was in Savannah, who was sent here and beat daily during one whole week, not for any particular crime, but because she did not happen to please her mistress.⁷²

⁶⁹ Levy, "Sims's Case," 72.

⁷⁰ Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 172, 189.

⁷¹ On jail and police surveillance in Savannah, see Haley Osborne, "Shackles and Servitude: Jails and the Enslaved in Antebellum Savannah" (honors thesis, Georgia Southern University, 2020; accessed April 19, 2021), <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1555&context=honors-theses>.

⁷² Emily P. Burke, *Pleasure and Pain, Reminiscences of Georgia in the 1840s* (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1978), 43–46.

This chamber of horrors is where Sims was immediately remanded when he reached Savannah.⁷³

Despite being incarcerated in miserable conditions, Sims suffered no serious repercussions during his stay at the jail. His trial and return had ignited a firestorm of abolitionist activism, and even after his return to Savannah, officials were wary of further inflaming antislavery sentiment. In the decade between the Compromise of 1850 and the election of Lincoln, abolitionists in the North vociferously advocated for the freedom of enslaved people. Tensions between planters in the South and activists in the North grew steadily. Within days, Sims returned to bricklaying but claimed that he should have been “more severely punished but for the sympathy manifested for him at the North.”⁷⁴

Sims’s mother Minda Campbell had a single overarching goal in life: the freedom and well-being of her family. She also worked to achieve a quasi-free status for her two daughters, Cornelia and Isabel. In the early 1850s, Potter sold both daughters to auctioneer Thomas J. Walsh. In 1853, the deeds for the daughters were transferred to Joseph Story Fay, a northerner who lived in Savannah.⁷⁵ The daughters followed Fay, who split his time between his home state and his adopted one. Sometime between 1854 and 1858, Fay made notes on the deeds and referred to the two of them as “belonging to themselves,” a sign that he had given them their freedom. Another note reads, “The enclosed Bills of Sale belong to Minda Campbell, and are of her children who she has bought from time to time, and now holds as free.” In 1860, Fay wrote to Minda concerning Cornelia, Isabel, and their children. While his letter is missing, hers has been preserved:

Dear Sir

I received your Kind letter Enquiring how Many and the ages of the children Some time ago and Must appoligise for not writing you Ere this But My Son James that Do My writing for Me have been Sick and I was Necessarily Hindered from Doing So But I Will now Say Sir that the Number of the children that you Hold Bills of Sale for are as follows—Cornelian and her three Boys the ages are William now 16, Stephen, 14, Duncan 7, years of Age Respectively. She have four Boys living, But there is But three Mentioned in the Sale I think the youngest Named Adrian Was Borne after the Sale these are the four children of Cornelia at Any Rate though there May not Be But two Mentioned in the Bill of Sale—Isabella is in the other Bill of Sale Separate from the others thus the Number of My children and grandchildren you have in your care Sir is Six (6) Isabella

⁷³ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes*, 34–36 and 47–50. On two separate occasions, Grimes was sent to the city jail for several weeks. His description of the condition of the jail and dreading a beating were used to inform this paragraph.

⁷⁴ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 20.

⁷⁵ Fay-Mixter Family Papers, 1775–1962, IV, Legal Papers, 1775–1945, B., Deeds, 1775–1894, Box 4, Folder 21, Deeds for Enslaved People, 1851–1858, www.masshist.org/collection-guides/digitized/fa0400/b4-f21#3.

having no children Alive With the hope Sire that you May Do for them What you May
this is Best under the circumstances I am sure you Will, this Sir I shall be contented and
Feel Deeply obligated to you,

You Will Please Sir Remember Me to the Mistress and children and With the
hope that these May find you All Well and Happy I Am Sir as Ever your Humble
Grateful Servt

Minda Campbell⁷⁶

Minda Campbell was nearly seventy years old when she dictated this letter to her son James Sims in 1860. She spent her entire life advocating with white men for herself and her children. By 1857, her son James lived as a free man in Savannah. He had worked as a carpenter until he could afford the sum of \$740 to purchase his freedom.⁷⁷ When Minda attained her freedom is unknown, but by 1863, she lived as a free person of color in Savannah. Her extraordinary tenacity was important to this story. The legal system in the United States was built by and intended to benefit white men who owned property. Even white women had little recourse with the law. As an enslaved woman, she achieved the rarely attained goal of not only freeing herself but also helping all of her children become free.

In 1861, not long after Sims penned this letter for his mother, drastic changes were underway in Savannah—changes that placed free people of color in an even more precarious position. Black men, both enslaved and free, were pressed into service building fortifications and batteries for Confederate regiments to protect against an expected invasion from the United States military. The thought of working with and for white men who were fighting to keep African Americans enslaved must have been odious to Sims. Perhaps, too, he feared for his own freedom in a new nation that held the preservation and protection of slavery as a founding principle. Facing an uncertain future in Savannah, Sims boarded a steamer to Boston just as his brother Thomas had done many years earlier.⁷⁸

In 1863, two years into the war, Thomas Sims saw an opportunity to reach freedom. Shortly after his return to Savannah, he was sent to Vicksburg, Mississippi, to work as a bricklayer.⁷⁹ In Vicksburg, he acquired a horse to ride several miles out to the plantation where his wife and child lived. Late at night, Thomas, his wife, their child, and four of their friends climbed in a dugout boat and pushed off the bank into the darkness.⁸⁰ They slipped quietly past Confederate pickets, but Thomas was armed and ready to fight for their free-

⁷⁶ Minda Campbell, “They Belong to Themselves,” Massachusetts Historical Society, www.masshist.org/object-of-the-month/2018-february (accessed March 22, 2021). Formatting and spelling have been preserved from the original transcription.

⁷⁷ Campbell, “They Belong to Themselves.”

⁷⁸ Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 131.

⁷⁹ *Boston Herald Traveler*, April 24, 1863.

⁸⁰ *Burlington Times*, May 2, 1863; *Vermont Chronicles*, April 28, 1863.

dom if he needed to do so. The moon was bright, but the clouds worked in their favor to obscure their passing near the Confederate pickets. When they reached Union lines, Sims earned passage to Boston by detailing the Confederates' positions to General Grant.⁸¹

The details of Sims' journey from Vicksburg to Boston are murky but depicted as an epic journey in Northern newspapers. He was most likely offered passage on a steamer on the Mississippi River, which connected to another on the Ohio River. He might have received help from disaffected Confederate soldiers.⁸² Sims clearly had Boston in mind as a destination, but he was forced to stop in Cincinnati when his wife and child became ill. Nevertheless, they arrived in Boston on April 23, 1863. He was immediately interviewed by a reporter from the *Boston Traveler* about his miraculous escape.⁸³ Whether Thomas knew that his brother James was also in the city when he planned his escape is doubtful. However, he knew that his sister was living there, since his family stayed with her for a time.

In his triumphant return to freedom in Boston after a decade in slavery, Sims became an instant celebrity in the city and joined the abolitionist circles. On the evening of May 6, he was invited to speak at the Tremont Temple with William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips.⁸⁴ That night, he explained to the crowd that "his escape recently was not caused by ill treatment, but because he felt he had a right to be free," a language that Bostonians fully understood.⁸⁵ Following in his mother's footsteps, Sims had finally freed his own family.

For enslaved African Americans in the antebellum South, obtaining freedom was an arduous and dangerous task. The stories of the Craft and the Sims families illustrate the nearly insurmountable obstacles that they faced. "Running a thousand miles for freedom," as the Crafts titled their book, was an apt description. All told, the Crafts and the Simses ran a thousand miles many times over for their freedom. The Crafts had to travel first to Philadelphia, then to Boston, and finally to England. Thomas Sims made the perilous trip to Boston once, and then more than a decade later made the trip again before he finally claimed lasting freedom.

William Grimes, Ellen and William Craft, Minda Campbell, Thomas Sims—these are the stories we know. There are undoubtedly others that remain untold. The theme that resonates through all of these stories is that the desire to escape from bondage was powerful and that Georgia's enslaved population was poised to seize opportunity when it came. The Civil War brought that opportunity, and Fort Pulaski became a beacon of hope, a vital waystation on the road from slavery to freedom.

⁸¹ *Boston Herald Traveler*, April 24, 1863.

⁸² *Detroit Free Press*, April 29, 1863.

⁸³ *Boston Herald Traveler*, April 24, 1863; *Boston Herald Traveler*, April 25, 1863.

⁸⁴ *Boston Herald Traveler*, May 6, 1863.

⁸⁵ *Boston Herald Traveler*, May 7, 1863.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“YES, WE ALL SHALL BE FREE”: ESCAPING ENSLAVEMENT DURING THE CIVIL WAR

The redemption of Fort Pulaski and the General Orders issued by General David Hunter in April 1862 are indelibly linked to the flight of enslaved people away from the Confederacy and mark a significant but little-known chapter in the history of emancipation. Hunter’s proclamations affirmed the truth of rumors that had circulated among African Americans since the beginning of the war: the arrival of the US Army and Navy meant freedom. As news of the Union victory on Cockspur Island spread through the Lowcountry, African Americans almost immediately began to row out to surrender to navy gunboats. At first, their legal status was in limbo. In military communications, they were most often referred to as contrabands, as in contraband of war (captured enemy property). For the escaped men and women who reached safety behind Union lines, legal terms mattered little.¹ They rejoiced in the knowledge that they were free: free from those who held them and their families as captive laborers, free from being bought and sold on the auction block, free from suffering brutal physical, sexual, and emotional punishment. Emerging at last from a centuries-old system of bondage and oppression, they understood all too well the difference between slavery and freedom.

In 1862, Fort Pulaski became a focal point for the larger struggle between North and South. The Confederacy had hoped to hold the recently completed military fortress as a symbol of Southern power. But Quincy A. Gillmore and his men, aided by intelligence supplied by men like Brutus Bullos and Isaac Tatnall, and perhaps even March Haynes, laid waste to the fort from their position on Tybee.² The fort’s walls could not withstand advances in rifled weapons technology. With the arrival of General David Hunter, Fort Pulaski took on a new purpose. A staunch abolitionist, Hunter was determined to use his position to strike a decisive blow aimed at the destruction of slavery. While historians have largely viewed Hunter’s orders as symbolic because they affected only a small number of

¹ John Syrett, *The Civil War Confiscation Acts: Failing to Reconstruct the South* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

² While there is no known extant record of March Haynes by Union writers prior to 1862, there is still a possibility that Haynes may have been in communication with Gillmore or others prior to the Siege of Fort Pulaski.

people before Lincoln rescinded them, their impact on enslaved people in the Lowcountry was real; a US Army general had declared them emancipated. Once the promise of liberty was made, no presidential action could erase it. With the stars and stripes flying overhead, Fort Pulaski was transformed from an outpost of rebellion into a gateway to liberty. In the months following Confederate surrender, Pulaski’s pock-marked walls became a sanctuary for men, women, and children eager to cast off the bonds of slavery.³

³ Abraham Lincoln, Letter to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, Washington, DC, www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/greeley.htm (accessed on March 22, 2021).

Susie King Taylor



Figure 8.1. Susie King Taylor, known as the first African American army nurse

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.57593; “Susie King Taylor, Known as the First African American Army Nurse.” Boston: Published by the author, 1902 (from a photograph taken between 1862 and 1866).

Late one evening, sometime between the election of 1860 and the redemption of Fort Pulaski in 1862, Dolly Reed attended church on the outskirts of Savannah.⁴ Further from the city center, the congregants felt a little more comfortable worshipping freely. African American churches were places for both worship and shelter from the oppression of a white world, a place where attendees came for both spiritual sustenance and a deeper, private connection with their own community. Reed was a free woman of color and, despite her free status, she still needed a pass to walk the streets after curfew.⁵ Her literate granddaughter, Susie, had forged one for her and signed it with the name of the man who was her guardian.⁶ That evening in the church, not everyone was free, but they all deeply desired to be. All voices lifted, blending together as one, as they sang to the heavens. . .

Yes, we all shall be free,
Yes, we all shall be free,
Yes, we all shall be free,
When the Lord shall appear.⁷

In the midst of this hopeful, prayerful hymn, police burst into the sanctuary and arrested everyone. They accused them of using Lord as a metaphor for Yankee. This veiled yearning for freedom earned them all a trip to jail. Reed sent a message to her white guardian, who came to have her released. Determined to be more cautious, she stopped attending meetings outside of the city center.⁸

Reed’s arrest occurred during a period of growing unease among white Georgians. Her granddaughter, Susie King Taylor, had grown curious about the changes that she saw taking place in Savannah. She read the newspapers and was fascinated with the “Yankees” mentioned in them.⁹ White enslavers had told African Americans in the city “not to go to the Yankees, for they would harness them to carts and make them pull the carts around, in place of horses.”¹⁰ Taylor asked Reed if these strange stories were true. “Certainly not!”¹¹ Reed replied. She explained that white people were afraid of losing their human property and were stoking fear to keep African Americans under their control. Taylor had overheard her enslaved parents talking about how “the Yankee was going to set all the slaves free” and she “was very anxious to see the Yankees.”¹²

⁴ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 8.

⁵ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 7.

⁶ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 7.

⁷ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 8.

⁸ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 8.

⁹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 7.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 7.

¹¹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 8.

¹² Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 7–8.

Valentine Grest, who held more than thirty people in servitude in 1860, allowed Taylor to live with her grandmother in Savannah.¹³ His wife Mary Fredericka Kottman Grest felt much affection for Taylor.¹⁴ Perhaps it was her influence that gave Taylor such latitude. In Savannah, Taylor was taught by many teachers, both white and Black. She learned to read and write and had outgrown the knowledge of her teachers by the time that the Civil War began.¹⁵

Taylor was with her grandmother during the bombardment of Fort Pulaski and heard the sounds of battle as they reached Savannah. “I remember what a roar and din the guns made,” she wrote in her autobiography. “They jarred the earth for miles.”¹⁶ Eventually, she continued, “the fort was at last taken by them.”¹⁷ Two days later, her uncle took Taylor along with his family to St. Catherine’s Island in Liberty County. They were on the island for two weeks, when fourteen-year-old Taylor, “at last, to [her] unbounded joy,” “saw the Yankee.”¹⁸ A gunboat picked up about thirty African Americans to take them to St. Simon’s Island. When the captain of the boat learned that Taylor could read and write, he was taken aback. He commented that she seemed much different than the others on the boat. Taylor quickly and emphatically explained that “the only difference is, they were reared in the country, and I in the city.”¹⁹

Taylor took a circuitous route to freedom. From Savannah, to St. Catherine’s Island, then to St. Simon’s, she made her way to Beaufort, South Carolina. In Beaufort, she lived and worked with the US Colored Troops.²⁰ Many other African Americans were on their own journeys to freedom. Some of them were aided by March Haynes as he rowed his boat between Tybee, Cockspur, and Savannah, bringing both information and people from the city to the islands. Others tried to make it on their own. Many succeeded but some did not. Few were able to write a memoir of their experiences as Taylor did, but all shared her curiosity about the Yankees who brought the promise of liberation to the Lowcountry.

¹³ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 5.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 2.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 6.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 9.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 9.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 9.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 9.

²⁰ On the history of the US Colored Troops, see Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword*; Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 13.

Running to Freedom: Contrabands in 1862



Figure 8.2. Historic view, 1863, entitled “Beacon Tower and Negro Cabin, Cockspur Island, Georgia”

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ga0120.photos.378002p;

Historic view, 1863, entitled “Beacon Tower and Negro Cabin, Cockspur Island, Georgia.”

(Note: Seen in the background of HABS No. GA-2158-79.) Fort Pulaski, Cockspur Island, Savannah, Chatham County, Georgia.

John G. Abbott of the 48th New York Infantry Regiment kept a journal of his experience during the Civil War. Tragically, he suffered mortal wounds in the Battle of Fort Wagner as he fought alongside the men of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, the second Black regiment formed in the Northern states. But in the years before that battle, Abbott kept details of his service in his journal, and more importantly, details of the arrival of African Americans as they reached freedom. In November of 1861, as he observed the Battle at Port Royal, Abbott made his first notation of a contraband who rowed out to a federal gunboat.²¹ A week later, he wrote of exploring the mainland and helping a formerly enslaved woman “crack hominy and to grind Indian meal.”²²

²¹ John G. Abbot, *Diary, 1861–1863*, November 5, 1861, Township of Hamilton Historical Society, https://museum.dmna.ny.gov/application/files/2715/5067/6981/John_G_Abbott_Diary_48th_NYVI.pdf.

²² Abbott, November 11, 1861.



Figure 8.3. Contraband aboard the USS *Vermont*, Port Royal, South Carolina
Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/286558;
Henry P. Moore, “Contraband aboard U.S. Ship *Vermont*, Port Royal, South Carolina.” 1861.

During the winter months, as he helped build and man Union batteries, he reported several freedom seekers arriving from Savannah. Reports of African Americans increased once the 48th New York was sent to garrison at Fort Pulaski after the fort returned to Union hands in April of 1862. He made sure to note General Hunter’s order “declaring Slavery [*sic*] forever free in the States of SC, Ga, Fla.”²³

In July, he made note of twenty-four contrabands arriving from South Carolina; three more contrabands made it to Fort Pulaski from Savannah in August.²⁴ In both instances, those who sought freedom behind Union lines brought recent issues of the newspapers with them to provide much-needed information about Confederate thought and movements to military leaders in the US Army.²⁵ Motivated by the promise of freedom that Fort Pulaski held and eager to aid in the fight against slavery, Black men and women continued to risk their lives and health to make the trip to Cockspur Island.

On “a splendid moonlight night” in September of 1862, between twenty and thirty African Americans boarded hand-crafted dugout canoes, and quietly rowed toward Fort Pulaski. Their escape was well-planned. Most of them were fleeing the Daniels Plantation,

²³ Abbott, February 15 and 17, 1862; March 5, 1862; May 12, 1862.

²⁴ Abbott, July 17 and August 2, 1862.

²⁵ Abbott, July 17 and August 2, 1862.

two miles south of Savannah. They had communicated with four friends or family members who lived in Savannah. The group had almost reached Fort Pulaski when they were sighted by a military officer also out on the water. Fortunately for them, it was a Union officer, not a Confederate one.²⁶

On September 10, another group met with rougher luck. Six freedom seekers attempted to slip past the Confederate pickets on the mainland.²⁷ They were spotted, and the soldiers opened fire. The six broke into a run, trying to get past the pickets and avoid capture. Five were taken prisoner. The lone man who managed to make it to the fort took a bullet to the heel as he was running. Wounded and dripping blood, he rowed out to the fort by himself. The same night, another man reached the fort. His enslaver was leaving on a train, and he took advantage of the confusion to run away.²⁸ Towards the end of the month, a group of three people from Savannah planned their escape. They found a small canoe and rowed from Savannah to Fort Pulaski.²⁹ Like others before them, they brought current newspapers to give to the men at the fort.

Not all freedom seekers hailed from Savannah. From one hundred miles inland, a man chose to make a much longer journey to Fort Pulaski for the freedom that he had heard could be attained there. The details of his story with the exception of the mention in Abbott’s journal have been lost from the historical record, but his perilous journey was successful, and he reached the safety of Fort Pulaski.³⁰ These brave, hopeful people had been inspired to risk their personal safety for the freedom that Hunter had promised with his General Orders. They did not care that the orders had been rescinded. Along the information network that enslaved people had carved out for their ears only, they had heard stories of the change for the better in the lives of those who had escaped to Union lines. Many people were determined to make the trip from where they were enslaved to freedom on the islands.

²⁶ Abbot, September 8, 1862; *The New South*, September 13, 1862. See also Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Abbott, September 10, 1862.

²⁸ Abbott, September 10, 1862.

²⁹ Abbott, September 22, 1862.

³⁰ Abbott, September 23, 1862.

The Emancipation Proclamation and its Impact in the Lowcountry

In January 1862, Boston abolitionist Lydia Maria Child wrote to her friend John G. Whittier, a Quaker living in Haverhill. In her letter, she spoke to him of Harriett Tubman:

Many have heard of Harriet Tubman, whom they call Moses, on account of the multitude of people whom she has brought out of bondage by her courage and ingenuity. She talks politics sometimes, and her uncouth utterance is wiser than the plans of politicians. She said the other day: “Dey may send de flower ob dair young men down South, to die ob de fever in the summer, and de agoo in de winter. (Fur ‘t is cold down dar, though ‘t is down South.) Dey may send dem one year, two year, three year, till dey tired ob sendin’, or till dey use up all de young men. All no use! God’s ahead ob Massa Linkum. God won’t let Massa Linkum beat de South till he do the right ting. Massa Linkum, he’s a great man, and I’s e a poor nigger, but dis nigger can tell Massa Linkum how to save de money and de young men. He can do it by setting de niggers free. S’pose dar was awfu’ big snake down dar on the floor. He bite you. Folks all skeered, cause you die. You send for doctor to cut de bite; the snake he rolled up dar, and while doctor dwine it, he bite you agin. De doctor cut out dat bite; but while he dwine it, de snake he spring up and but you agin, and so he keep dwine till you kill him. Dat’s what Massa Linkum orter know.”³¹

Tubman had escaped slavery in 1849 and had made her way to the North, where she became acquainted with white abolitionists. In 1851, Tubman returned to the South to help others escape. She continued to ferry people to freedom from the border states until the abolition of slavery. During the Civil War, she sailed to Port Royal, where she worked for the Union to help thousands of newly freed people in the Lowcountry of South Carolina.³² Whether or not Lincoln heard the advice that Tubman had for him is unknown. However, while his advisors encouraged a more gradual abolition of slavery, abolitionists echoed her words in their pleas to him.

The contrabands who had been fleeing to Union lines since the outbreak of war, along with General Hunter’s orders in the spring of 1862, may have been on Lincoln’s mind as he shaped his ideas of postwar Reconstruction. In the summer of 1862, Lincoln drafted his famous letter to Horace Greely. The letter illustrated his ambivalence toward slavery. “My paramount object in this struggle,” he wrote, “is to save the Union, and is not either to

³¹ Harriet Winslow Sewall, John Greenleaf Whittier, Wendell Phillips, and Lydia Maria Child, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), 161. Spelling from the original has been preserved.

³² Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait for an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 204.

save or destroy slavery.”³³ He further explained that “if I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.”³⁴

Yet Lincoln might have concealed his true feelings on slavery as he had already drafted a preliminary version of what would become the Emancipation Proclamation. He had also discussed when and how to release his proclamation with his cabinet. His cabinet encouraged him to wait for a decisive Union victory; otherwise, the proclamation would feel like a desperate attempt.³⁵ On September 22, 1862, following the Union victory at Antietam, he issued a preliminary announcement of his proclamation as a war measure extending to the states in rebellion.

Union Captain Percival Drayton was in Washington, DC, in December of 1862 a few days before the Emancipation Proclamation was scheduled to take effect. As he prepared to return to Port Royal, he took a moment to write to his flag officer, Samuel F. Du Pont, who was still in South Carolina. He mused about the expected events: “It is generally supposed that New Year will see the President’s proclamation for freeing the slaves, as I for one do not believe that there will ever be a peace worth having on this continent so long as slavery is permitted on it.”³⁶

³³ Abraham Lincoln, Letter to Horace Greely. August 22, 1862.

³⁴ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Vol. 5: 1861–1862 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 388–89.

³⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 5–6.

³⁶ Emancipation Proclamation, September 22, 1862; Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 2, 306–7.



Figure 8.4. Drayton’s negro quarters, Hilton Head, South Carolina

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.11400; Moore, Henry P. “Drayton’s Negro Quarters, Hilton Head, SC.” 1862.

Drayton descended from a long line of wealthy slaveholders from South Carolina, and many of his relatives still profited from enslaved labor. His family had moved to Philadelphia following the Nullification Crisis of 1832–33. He minced no words in his letter to Du Pont, writing that “[he] hope[d that] it will sweep the institution clean away, as standing directly in front of the settlement of our difficulties and as being a disgrace to the civilization of the nineteenth century.” Furthermore, he insisted that he did not think that “such a measure will bring about a reconstruction of the Union, but [he was] quite satisfied that nothing else will.”³⁷

Five days into the new year, Du Pont wrote a letter of his own. “In reference to slavery—the question has got beyond me,” he claimed.³⁸ “I know it is the most complicated questions possible; and it may be that we are to be scourged still longer for some great national wrong in reference to it.”³⁹ Du Pont frequently recorded conversations that he had

³⁷ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 2, 306–7.

³⁸ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 2, 345.

³⁹ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 2, 345.

with others about the subject of slavery in his journal. His entries around the Proclamation hint to the fact that he had yet to fully reconcile his own position with the positions of other officers on the military mission that they had been given. Nonetheless, he approved of Lincoln’s plan to help turn the tide of war. “As a war measure,” he argued, “it strikes me. . . we have a right to emancipate. . . . We are looking to see if the President affirmed his proclamation on New Year’s Day. General Saxton seems to take for granted he has, for he had a grand celebration on that day.”⁴⁰

Abbott’s journal shows that the Proclamation drastically changed the officer’s relationship with enslaved people. He no longer referred to the refugees who reached the liberty of Fort Pulaski’s walls as contrabands, using the term Negroes instead. In April, Abbott started to note the arrival of African American runaways at Cockspur.⁴¹ First, he recorded the arrival of a family, the next day that of man. In June, only a month before his death, Abbot made his last mention of a man who arrived at the fort, bringing news of Confederate movements from Savannah.⁴²

Although Abbott’s journal ended with his death, the flow of freedom seekers reaching Fort Pulaski continued. In the summer of 1863, a little more than a year after the retaking of Fort Pulaski by the Union, enslaved people still made their way across the marshes to the first stop on the Underground Railroad to freedom. Those who labored at the behest of the Confederate Army on the isles near Cockspur found themselves especially tempted to flee to liberty, even at the risk of losing their lives.⁴³ John Ash, a Confederate cavalryman in the 5th Georgia Cavalry Hussars, noted that the Confederate military began taking special precautions to avoid the loss of slaves due to defection. Pickets accompanied those who were sent to cut marsh grass or to run other errands.⁴⁴ Despite their increased vigilance, seven people made a safe and successful journey to Cockspur Island in July alone.⁴⁵

As the losses increased, the Confederates became merciless toward enslaved people who attempted to escape. A man enslaved by the family of Eben Williams became the victim of their zeal. Whether he was attempting to run away or was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time is not entirely clear. However, Ash mentioned that the man was on

⁴⁰ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 2, 345.

⁴¹ Abbot, April 18 and 19, 1863.

⁴² Abbot, June 12, 1863.

⁴³ Du Pont, *A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, vol. 2, 267. “Four thousand contrabands are at work round Savannah, all would leave and come to the coast if they dared [reports of two contrabands]” in October 1862.

⁴⁴ John Hergen Ash, *Civil War Journals*, June 13, 1863, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

⁴⁵ Ash, July 9, 1863.

a boat with another man near the little Skidaway Bridge. As they approached a picket post, the pickets fired on the boat without warning. A bullet entered the top of his head and exited his neck. He was believed to have been killed instantly.⁴⁶

Later in the summer, a new gang of slaves was sent to the Isle of Hope to build batteries at Montmollin’s Point and Grimball’s place.⁴⁷ As they toiled in the hot sun, digging dirt and heaping it in enormous piles, the proximity of Union lines tempted them.⁴⁸ Watching and waiting, learning the routines of those who oversaw them, and gathering news of the location of picket posts, they planned their escape. In the dark of night, they waded into the river to swim to the other side. Four of them made it, but one unfortunate man was startled by a porpoise swimming near him; he drowned. The others who had yet to attempt to cross the river felt wary and stayed put after seeing their friend die. They returned to Grimball’s, where they were arrested for attempting to run away and imprisoned in Savannah.⁴⁹

With his orders, Major General David Hunter had created a climate that inspired these hopeful runaways. Still on Hilton Head Island and organizing escapees into military units, Hunter wrote to Confederate President Jefferson Davis in 1863:

The poor negro is fighting for liberty in its truest sense; and M^r [Thomas] Jefferson has beautifully said,—“in such a war, there is no attribute of the Almighty, which will induce him to fight on the side of the oppressor.”

You say you are fighting for liberty. Yes you are fighting for liberty: liberty to keep four millions of your fellow-beings in ignorance and degradation;—liberty to separate parents and children, husband and wife, brother and sister;—liberty to steal the products of their labor, exacted with many a cruel lash and bitter tear.⁵⁰

A fervent abolitionist, Hunter had no intention of abandoning his efforts to help achieve complete emancipation for the millions in bondage in the South. In a slow but steady trickle, men and women arrived to safety in areas under Hunter’s command.

⁴⁶ Ash, July 18, 1863.

⁴⁷ Ash, August 19 and September 19, 1863.

⁴⁸ Proximity varied. Once beyond Confederate pickets, one could be considered on Union soil or water again. Reaching a Union picket, naval craft, or Fort Pulaski would be the intended goal.

⁴⁹ Ash, August 19 and September 19, 1863.

⁵⁰ Major Gen. D. Hunter to Jefferson Davis, April 23, 1863, enclosed in Maj. Gen. D. Hunter to Hon. E. M. Stanton, 25 April 1863, S-1563 1863, Letters Received, series 12, Adjutant General’s Office, Record Group 94, National Archives, www.freedmen.umd.edu/Hunter2.html (accessed April 19, 2021).

African Americans were not the only ones risking their lives to get to the safety of Union lines. “Ten soldiers assigned to one of the batteries guarding the river,” all immigrants, “fled to the enemy in Fort Pulaski” as well.⁵¹ When interviewed by the officers at the fort, the immigrants said that they had left because the Confederacy was “an evil only to be endured because of the inability of the people to oppose or escape from it.”⁵²

The last escape story in this section deserves special notice because of the individuals involved. It is also a stark illustration of the high risk that any escape attempt posed to the runaways. Charles Olmstead, the commander of Fort Pulaski during the brief period of Confederate occupation, vividly described his treatment of the enslaved cooks who labored at the fort. When morale was low or the cooks took their time, he prescribed a good beating to promote efficiency.⁵³ He applied the same treatment to his own servants. By the summer of 1863, the cook and Olmstead’s servants had had enough. They had heard that the fort was now a place of refuge and liberty. They knew that if they made it to Fort Pulaski, they would be safe and free.⁵⁴

Early one July morning in 1863, Olmstead awoke to find that his cook had run away with a small group of servants.⁵⁵ He leapt on his horse to find them and bring them back. When he dismounted to search for them on foot, his horse kicked his kneecap so hard that Olmstead fainted and had to be carried back home. Olmstead’s injury may have provided the runaways a brief reprieve, but it did not save them from harm. Pickets from a Confederate company found one of the escapees hiding on Skidaway Island. Confederate soldiers brought her back to camp with the intent to return her to her enslaver. When they spotted another runaway, Sergeant John Ash was sent to fetch the slavecatcher and his dogs to go after him. While one more of Olmstead’s servants was captured, the others made it to freedom.⁵⁶

The historical record is unclear as to whether Olmstead’s cook made it to Fort Pulaski or if she was captured by pickets.⁵⁷ Little is known as to what happened to the servants who were apprehended and returned. Given Olmstead’s belief in the efficacy of physical abuse to promote efficiency, they likely suffered a harsh punishment. The story speaks to the profound dilemma that enslaved men and women faced as they contemplated running for the Union lines just a few miles away. On the one hand was the promise of emancipation; on the other was the risk of dire, and perhaps fatal, consequences. The

⁵¹ Cited in Griffin, “Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War,” 246.

⁵² Cited in Griffin, “Savannah, Georgia, during the Civil War,” 246.

⁵³ Hawes, *The Memoirs of Charles H. Olmstead*, 118.

⁵⁴ Hawes, *The Memoirs of Charles H. Olmstead*, 118.

⁵⁵ Hawes, *The Memoirs of Charles H. Olmstead*, 118.

⁵⁶ Hawes, *The Memoirs of Charles H. Olmstead*, 118.

⁵⁷ Ash, July 12, 1863.

sharply contrasting fates of the servants who ran away from Olmstead’s household must have been the topic of many whispered conversations as other servants went about their work in Savannah. It probably gave food for thought to individuals as they weighed their chances and made their choice to stay or go. Accounts of people who safely made the journey to Cockspur Island inspired hope, while the retribution dished out to those who failed served as a grim reminder of the overarching power of slaveholders and the system that they created to hold others in bondage.

Harriet Tubman and the Combahee Raid



Figure 8.5. Portrait of Harriet Tubman

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.54230;
Powelson, *Portrait of Harriet Tubman*, 77 Genesee St., Auburn, New York. 1867–69.

Harriet Tubman had spoken sage words when she advised Lincoln that he must free every single enslaved woman, child, and man of the South before he could win the war. The president had put words to paper, but Harriet Tubman gave his words legs, eyes, and ears. Many African Americans had already made their way to Union lines to take their own freedom, but there were many thousands more still in bondage. This was the reality both inland and upriver from the free settlements under the protection of Union forces at Beaufort and Hilton Head.

Tubman had earned the Biblical nickname of “Moses” due to her determined return trips back into slavery to free friends, family, and strangers.⁵⁸ She recalled her feelings as she first set foot in a free state. “When I found I had crossed dat line,” she said, “I looked at my hands to see if I was de same pusson.” She continued, “There was such a glory ober ebery ting; de sun came like gold through the trees, and ober the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaben.”⁵⁹

Yet she was alone in her freedom. Without her loved ones to share in this newfound condition, free from the shackles and inhumanity of slavery, it was hard for her to enjoy the feeling for long. She still felt a feeling alienated in her own country. “I was free,” she wrote, “but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom.” She “was a stranger in a strange land.”⁶⁰ Tubman decided to make a home for her family and then go back to free them so that they could live with her and share her joy in the joy of emancipation. Penny by penny, working in hotels and clubs, she earned enough money to make trips back to the slave states and rescue her family.⁶¹ Through the 1850s, even after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, Tubman made an estimated thirteen trips and rescued about seventy people from slavery.⁶² She claimed that she never “lost a passenger.”⁶³

When the Civil War began, Tubman left her aging parents at their home in Philadelphia. She traveled to South Carolina to work as a nurse among the freed people and to assist military leaders as a scout and spy. She lived primarily in Port Royal and on Hilton Head.⁶⁴ In 1863, General Hunter asked Tubman to accompany an expedition of “gunboats up the Combahee River.” “The object of the expedition,” he explained, was “to take up the torpedoes placed by the rebels in the river, to destroy railroads and bridges, and

⁵⁸ Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W. J. Moses, printer, 1869), 19. The original spelling and grammar have been retained.

⁵⁹ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 19–20.

⁶⁰ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 20.

⁶¹ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 20–21.

⁶² Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, xvii.

⁶³ Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 192.

⁶⁴ Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 204

to cut off supplies from the rebel troops.”⁶⁵ Hunter trusted Tubman due to her skill in gathering information by slipping beyond enemy lines and earning the trust of the enslaved people she encountered. Tubman negotiated with Hunter. She argued that she would only go “if Col. James Montgomery was to be appointed commander of the expedition.” She knew Montgomery well, as they had both been close to John Brown, and she trusted him.⁶⁶ She would also take with her a small group of Beaufort freedmen whom she had trained—including Walter Plowden, Peter Barns, Mott Blake, Sandy Selters, Solomon Gregory, Isaac Hayward, Gabriel Cohen, George Chrisholm, Charles Simmons, and Samuel Hayward. They would help her with scouting and spying. Working with her team, Tubman gathered information that was vital to the success of the Combahee River Raid.⁶⁷

On the night of June 2, 1863, Tubman, Colonel Montgomery, and 150 US Colored Troops boarded three gunboats: the *Adams*, the *Harriet Weed*, and the *Sentinel*. Confederate pickets spotted them and sent a warning to their commanders. But as dawn broke the next morning, heavy fog wafted over the water and across the land. Obscured by fog, African American soldiers disembarked and set fire to plantation homes, barns, rice mills, and steam engines. They passed word to the enslaved people still living on the grounds that gunboats would be ready to take them to freedom.⁶⁸

Tubman described a tumultuous scene as people rushed into the river, determined to make it onto the gunboats and away from slavery:

I never saw such a sight. . . . Here you’d see a woman with a pail on her head, rice a smokin’ in it just as she’d taken it from the fire, young one hanging on behind, one hand round her forehead to hold on, the other hand digging into the rice pot, eating with all its might; hold of her dress two or three more; down her back a bag with a pig in it. One woman brought two pigs, a white one, and a black one. . . . Sometimes the women would come with twins hanging around their necks; appears like I never saw so many twins in my life; bags on their shoulders, baskets on their heads, and young ones tagging behind, all loaded; pigs squealing, chickens screaming, young ones squalling.⁶⁹

Tubman tried to help these desperate, fleeing people bring their most valued possessions with them. A sick woman who was already carrying her own child wanted to bring two of her pigs. Tubman carried the pigs for her, but there was no time to linger. Confederates

⁶⁵ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 39.

⁶⁶ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 39.

⁶⁷ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 70–71.

⁶⁸ Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 212–13.

⁶⁹ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 40–41.

were chasing the people as they headed for the boats and shooting at them. As Tubman ran, she “stepped on [her] dress, it being rather long, and fell and tore it almost off, so that when [she] got on board the boat, there was hardly anything left of it but shreds.”⁷⁰

As panic grew among those trying to board the boats, Colonel Montgomery asked Tubman to sing. “Moses, you’ll have to give ’em a song.” Then Harriet lifted up her voice and sang:

Of all the whole creation in the east or in the west,
The glorious Yankee nation is the greatest and the best.
Come along! Come along! Don’t be alarmed,
Uncle Sam is rich enough to give you all a farm.⁷¹

Despite the success of the Combahee River Raid—the raid freed nearly eight hundred people—others experienced a great tragedy that day. A Confederate soldier shot a girl merely thirty-five yards away from a boat and freedom. He captured her and brought her and several others caught on the riverbanks back into slavery. She had been shot for running away, and like others who unsuccessfully ran for freedom, she endured a harsh punishment once the gunboats sailed away.⁷²

When the fully loaded gunboats returned to Beaufort, those on board were free to start new lives. While President Lincoln had written the words to legally free them, Tubman, her team, Montgomery, and his soldiers had brought freedom to them on the gunboats. *The Commonwealth* praised her work, writing, “Since the rebellion [Tubman] has devoted herself to her great work of delivering the bondman, with an energy and sagacity that cannot be exceeded.” “Many and many times,” the paper continued, “she has penetrated the enemy’s lines and discovered their situation and condition, and escaped without injury, but not without extreme hazard.”⁷³

While it may seem that Fort Pulaski is removed from this raid and the freedom that it brought to those people on the banks of the Combahee that foggy morning in June of 1863, it is not. Without the Union victory at Fort Pulaski a year earlier, General Hunter would have been less likely to issue General Order Numbers 7 and 11. The redemption of what was thought to be an impenetrable fortress guarding the route into the interior of Georgia from Confederate control was a steppingstone to emancipation. Deeply dedicated to the cause of abolition, Hunter proceeded cautiously at first by issuing General Order Number 7, then acted more boldly with General Order 11.

⁷⁰ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 86. This part speaks to the feminine constructs that Tubman followed in spite of the rather masculine nature of her spying and involvement in military and rescue operations.

⁷¹ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 41.

⁷² *OR*, ser. 1, vol 14: 303.

⁷³ *The Commonwealth*, July 10, 1863.

Likewise, President Lincoln moved cautiously. As more and more African Americans took refuge behind Union lines and forced the United States military to give them their freedom, the issues of slavery and freedom were brought to the forefront. Congress had taken the lead by passing the Confiscation Acts in 1862. But Lincoln had given his military forces the tools to enact freedom with the Emancipation Proclamation. The military victories at Port Royal Harbor, the redemption of Fort Pulaski, General Hunter’s orders, and the successful raid on the Combahee River are all tightly intertwined and deeply connected. Something profound was taking shape on the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, and these events changed the course of history in the Lowcountry. Where once enslaved people were forced to make dangerous journeys over a thousand miles, freedom was now close enough to reach.

CHAPTER NINE

MARCH HAYNES

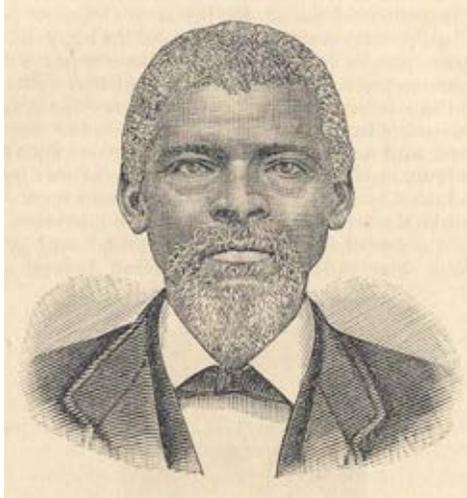


Figure 9.1. March Haynes (from Love’s *History of the First African Baptist Church*)

Emanuel King Love. *History of the First African Baptist Church, from Its Organization, January 10th, 1788, to July 1st, 1888: Including the Centennial Celebration, Addresses, Sermons, Etc.* (Savannah: Morning News Print, 1888).

March Haynes was a “true man, and would have been a leader in any age and of any people,” said Reverend E. K. Love in the *History of the First African Baptist Church*.¹ Haynes had lived in and around Savannah for most of his life, and his story intertwined with the history of Fort Pulaski during and after the Civil War. Born into slavery, many details of his biography are obscure, but unlike most of the African Americans who remained anonymous as they passed through Cockspur, he emerges in the historical record as an extraordinary figure who won admiration and respect from whites and blacks alike. His story merits close examination, as it provides glimpses into the experiences of other African Americans in and around Savannah.

¹ Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, 178.

Haynes's early life is a blur. He was born in Pocotaligo, South Carolina, in 1825. Although an obituary reported that he was enslaved by the Waldburg family, the historical records do not confirm the name of his owners at the time of his birth or later in his life.² There are no mentions of his parents or siblings, where he grew up, how old he was when he married his first wife, or if he had children lost to disease or forcibly separated from him because of slavery. It is impossible to know if he remained in Pocotaligo throughout his childhood or if he was sold. Similarly, little is known as to where he acquired the skills and knowledge that he put to good use during and after the Civil War. Finally, no record exists of his arrival in Savannah.

However, some details have survived the erasure of slavery. At the age of thirteen, Haynes began a lifelong association with the Baptist church. According to the *History of the First African Baptist Church*, he was baptized in April 1838 by Reverend Jack Watry and joined the Wilmington Baptist Church.³ As he matured, Haynes joined the leadership of the church. In 1849, at age twenty-four, he became a deacon.⁴ His involvement in the Baptist denomination continued, and church records show that by 1858, Haynes had moved to Savannah and had become a member of the First African Baptist Church.⁵

When Haynes joined First African, he was in his early thirties. He knew how to read and write, and he was a carpenter—a skill that made him especially welcome in the congregation since the church was constructing a new sanctuary on Franklin Square. More important to the history of Fort Pulaski, he knew the waterways surrounding Savannah like the back of his hand and could safely pilot a boat in the dead of night.⁶ His extensive knowledge of the area and its treacherous waters, as well as his relationships with white residents, suggest that, by 1858, he had lived in Savannah for a long time. The official notice of his affiliation with First African Baptist was simply the first record of his presence in the city.

² An article in the *Savannah Morning News* in 1863 reported that “a negro man named March” had been arrested for helping enslaved people escape to Union lines. While we know that March Haynes helped numerous people escape to freedom at Fort Pulaski, we cannot confirm that he is the person the newspaper was referring to here. Searches of records for African American men named March prior to 1860 produce many results, almost none of which can be firmly linked to March Haynes, because either the age or other factors do not coincide with what we know about him. Likely, the Rowland theory has stuck because John C. Rowland served as a Confederate soldier at Fort Pulaski and became a prisoner of war when Union forces reclaimed the fort. While we know that Haynes was at the fort off and on during the Confederate occupation, surviving records are unclear about his exact status, as is discussed in detail later in the chapter. There is currently no known source to either confirm or disprove whether Haynes was held by the Waldburgs or by John C. Rowland. *Savannah Morning News*, April 28, 1863.

³ Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, 177. Unfortunately, as yet we have been unable to find an African American Baptist church of this name or to locate Jack Watry in other sources.

⁴ Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, 177.

⁵ Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, 177.

⁶ *Savannah Morning News*, April 28, 1863; Drummond and Durham, *A Confederate Yankee*, 22; Frederic Denison, *Shot and Shell: The Third Rhode Island Heavy Artillery Regiment in the Rebellion, 1861–1865* (Providence, RI: J. A. & R. A. Reid, 1879), 261.

As early as October 1861, Haynes worked as a carpenter at Fort Pulaski. Under the law, he was classified as a slave, but his exact status at the fort during the Confederate occupation is unclear. It has been assumed that he was the property of a Confederate slaveholder (possibly John C. Rowland) stationed at the fort, but there is no extant documentary evidence to confirm his true status. However, the evidence does suggest that he served in a somewhat independent capacity. The record group Confederate Soldiers Miscellaneous Records' "Unfiled Papers and Slips" contains a scrap of paper with his full name.⁷ This collection holds fragmentary records of Confederate soldiers whose identities cannot be matched with other files, such as enlistment or pension records. Some civilian information made its way into this collection as well.

It is certain that March Haynes was not enlisted in a Confederate company at the Fort. Instead, the inclusion of his name in the collection indicates that he was on Cockspur as a civilian. The fact that the record includes his full name—first and last—is also telling. It was customary to refer to enslaved men and women by first name only. Surnames were usually reserved for free persons. By referring to "March Haynes, carpenter," this little scrap of paper suggests that he was accorded a status similar to that of a free person of color, and furthermore that Colonel Charles H. Olmstead, the Confederate commanding officer at the fort, did not regard him as a personal servant or as one of his military subordinates.⁸

Haynes earned the trust of the men garrisoned at Fort Pulaski. Colonel Olmstead soon started to rely on Haynes to perform important or dangerous work, work that would have been previously assigned to the most trusted enslaved people. As the US Navy closed in on the coast of Georgia and settled in on Tybee, Confederates at Cockspur found themselves in a tenuous situation. The blockade between Savannah and Cockspur cut off supplies and communication, leaving the island to fend for itself. Olmstead turned to Haynes and tasked him with slipping through the waterways undetected by Union soldiers to carry mail, supplies, and critical information from Fort Pulaski to the city and back again.⁹

As he paddled back and forth between Cockspur and Savannah, Haynes faced a choice; he could carry out the orders of the men he was familiar with, or he could abscond to freedom.¹⁰ Other enslaved men and women in and around Savannah had already chosen the latter option. But pursuing the promise of freedom involved considerable risk.¹¹ Anyone found guilty of helping an enslaved person run away faced severe punishment, up

⁷ NARA M347, Unfiled Papers and Slips Belonging in Confederate Compiled Service Records, Papers of and Relating to Military and Civilian Personnel, compiled 1874–99, documenting the period 1861–65.

⁸ NARA M347, Unfiled Papers and Slips Belonging in Confederate Compiled Service Records, Papers of and Relating to Military and Civilian Personnel, compiled 1874–99, documenting the period 1861–65.

⁹ "Death of an Old-Time Negro, Capt. March Haynes Ex-Scout and Pilot 90 Years Old," *Savannah Morning News*, July 16, 1899.

¹⁰ "Death of an Old-Time Negro."

¹¹ *Savannah Morning News*, April 28, 1863.

to and including the death penalty. As Haynes assessed the risk, he chose the safe play. Haynes enjoyed freedom of movement because he had earned the respect of white men in Savannah with his intelligence and usefulness to them. He knew the white men in Savannah and at Fort Pulaski; he understood what they expected of him and what he could expect from them. He did not yet know the men who served in the United States military. Perhaps more importantly, he also did not know if Union forces possessed the capability to take Fort Pulaski back into their possession or whether the Confederates would hold it.¹²

During slavery, African American men and women adapted and survived by keeping a close eye on the behavior and mood of the white people who held power over their lives, and by adjusting their own behavior and mood accordingly. Many examples in the records show these coping mechanisms as enslaved men and women acted one way in the white sphere and a drastically different way within their own homes, churches, and communities. Haynes demonstrated the same shrewdness as he bided his time, waiting to see which side would prevail in the struggle for control of Fort Pulaski. In March of 1862, only a few weeks before the Union forces on Tybee began bombarding Fort Pulaski, Haynes made several risky round trips from Savannah to Cockspur. Privates Lemuel Wilson Landershire and Edward William Drummond and Colonel Charles Olmstead all refer to him in their letters/journals.¹³ On Tuesday morning, March 18, Haynes arrived at Cockspur with letters from Savannah for the men. He spent the day at the Fort waiting for nightfall before leaving for Savannah. Upon Haynes's departure, Drummond wrote that he was certain that the envoy would make it back safely, "as he is perfectly familiar with the many passes through to Wilmington Island."¹⁴ A week or so later, Haynes set out for Cockspur again. When he arrived at the Fort at about 9:00 p.m., "he was hailed with many a hearty cheer."¹⁵ Drummond and others "had given up all idea of hearing anything more until the Blockade was raised, but [Haynes] managed to get through although he had to pass right by about Sixty Yankees."¹⁶ Haynes entertained the bored men with his tale of sneaking past the unsuspecting Union soldiers.

Soldiers repeated Haynes's story. Drummond wrote that Haynes's "knowledge of the marsh and it being high tide" were of tremendous help as "he managed to paddle his canoe past them without being seen although but a short distance."¹⁷ In a March 28 letter describing life at Cockspur to his wife, Charles Olmstead recounted that "in the midst of

¹² *Savannah Morning News*, April 28, 1863.

¹³ Lemuel Wilson Landershire Diary, March 18, 19, and 27, 1862.

¹⁴ Drummond and Durham. *A Confederate Yankee*, 22.

¹⁵ Drummond and Durham. *A Confederate Yankee*, 22.

¹⁶ Drummond and Durham. *A Confederate Yankee*, 22.

¹⁷ Drummond and Durham. *A Confederate Yankee*, 22.

all this gloom a black ray of sunshine came to [them] yesterday in the shape of March.”¹⁸ That night, Haynes returned to Savannah, carrying Olmstead’s letter as well as many others. A week later, on April 7, Drummond wondered in his journal when Haynes would make it back with more mail. Certain of the outcome, he mentioned again Haynes’s skill on the water.¹⁹

Only a few days after Drummond’s musings, on April 10, 1862, the Union bombarded the Fort. The Union’s capture of the Fort and resulting events unfolded quickly. On April 11, Colonel Olmstead surrendered the fort. On April 13, US General David Hunter issued General Order Number 7, freeing those enslaved at the Fort and on Cockspur Island.²⁰ March Haynes’s name, however, was not on the list of those officially freed by the order. He was not sent away with the other prisoners of war and their servants either. This points toward Haynes having been absent from the fort during the battle, perhaps choosing to stay in the safety of Savannah.

Once Haynes learned of the surrender of the fort, he made the journey back to Cockspur, and offered his services to the Union as a scout, using his knowledge of the area to bring information about the Confederacy from Savannah. In order to help with his work, Brigadier General Quincy Adams Gillmore provided him with a “staunch, swift boat painted a drab color, like the hue of the Savannah River.”²¹ From 1862 to 1864, Haynes applied the skills that he had used while on mail runs to liberate people enslaved in Savannah. Once again, he waited for nightfall to spirit people through the waterways. His oars slipped through the water soundlessly as he glided past attentive Confederate pickets keeping watch in the night. His passengers must have held their breaths through the night, hearts pounding for fear of being caught, only to be relieved as they set foot on Cockspur Island. Some stayed at the Fort to work; others moved to Hilton Head or Beaufort. In 1863, the *Savannah Morning News* published an article about “a negro man named March,” who had been arrested for helping enslaved people escape.²² While it is impossible to know if the man referred to was Haynes, it could have been a taste of things to come. Soon, Haynes

¹⁸ Colonel Charles H. Olmstead to Florence Olmstead, March 28, 1862, in the Charles H. Olmstead Papers, #1856, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁹ Drummond, *A Confederate Yankee*, 31.

²⁰ Hunter acted without authorization from the president or Congress. Prior to January 1863, when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which permanently freed enslaved people who crossed Union lines, enslaved people who fled to Union occupied areas found themselves in limbo. While the Second Confiscation Act, passed in July, 1862, a few months after Hunter’s orders, promised that enslaved people who fled to Union lines would not be returned to slavery, it did not offer a mechanism to permanently free enslaved people.

²¹ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 261.

²² *Savannah Morning News*, April 28, 1863.

and his wife, Elvira, left and established themselves behind Union lines. Haynes continued his work, scouting rebel positions, helping people to freedom, and delivering critical information to Union officers.²³



Figure 9.2. March Haynes painting
Martin Pate NPS site.

²³ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 261.

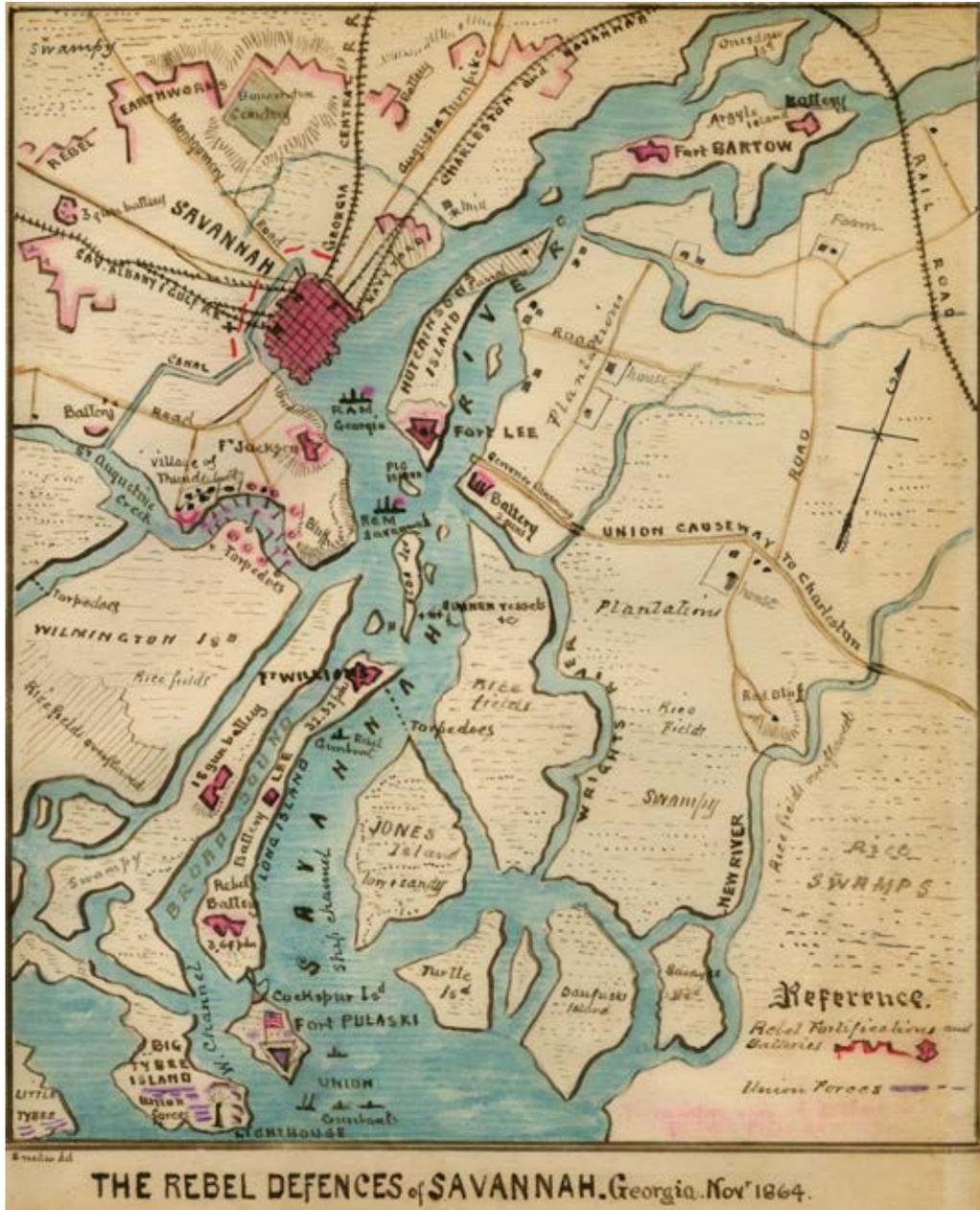


Figure 9.3. The Rebel defenses of Savannah, Georgia

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/gvhs01.vhs00030;
Robert Knox Sneden, "The Rebel Defences of Savannah, Georgia," November 1864.

In the summer of 1864, Haynes's luck dried up. As the night sky began to fade and the sun illuminated the landscape, a group of six Confederate pickets spotted Haynes's boat and ordered him to halt. Haynes refused and, against all odds, traded gunfire with the pickets; he shot and killed three soldiers and took a bullet to his leg. Injured, he made it back to

safety and reached the hospital on Hilton Head. The injury left him scarred for life, but not afraid. In August, while still recovering, Haynes enlisted in recently formed Company K of the 21st US Colored Infantry Regiment.²⁴

As the war drew to a close, Haynes remained on Hilton Head. Early in 1865, records indicate that he served as Provost Marshall in Mitchelville, an experimental community established for free men and women by the Union Army on Hilton Head.²⁵ Due to poor communication in Company K, Haynes was listed as AWOL (absent without leave). The army later rectified the mistake, and Haynes was medically discharged.²⁶

Haynes remained in Mitchelville following the end of the war and returned to Savannah in the 1870s. In 1873, he owned the *Dolly*, a sloop, and had returned to work on the Savannah River. He was mentioned again in the *Savannah Morning News* when he pulled up an old anchor off the bed of the Savannah River.²⁷ In the mid-1870s, he began working for John Houston McIntosh Clinch who, along with his wife Elizabeth Waldburg Clinch, owned multiple properties in and near Savannah. Haynes worked as a “caretaker” on some of their property, while still sailing between Savannah and the Refuge Plantation along the Satilla River near St. Mary’s.²⁸

In April 1875, Haynes, Peter Morel, Doctor Speed, Sawney Williams, and Augustus Coleman applied for a charter to incorporate the Society of John the Baptist, a benevolent society aiming to help African Americans in the city.²⁹ Following the war, a large number of African Americans living in the South faced abject poverty. After Democrats regained control of the Georgia state legislature in 1870, they worked to reestablish white supremacy through laws meant to reverse the economic and political progress made by the freed people. Violence against Black voters increased, and as a result, the community turned inward to protect itself. Through funds raised by its members, the Society of John the Baptist’s mission was multifold. It strived “to aid the distressed, and to relieve the sick,” “to provide for the burial of such of their dead as circumstances may require,” and “to perform

²⁴ The 21st US Colored Infantry Regiment was organized in March 1864, only a few months before Haynes’s encounter with the Confederate troops. The regiment was mustered out in October 1866. Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 261.

²⁵ *Savannah Daily Herald*, March 25, 1865.

²⁶ NARA M1823. Compiled military service records of volunteer Union soldiers belonging to the 20th through 25th Infantry Units organized for service with the US Colored Troops; *Savannah Daily Herald*, March 25, 1865.

²⁷ *Savannah Morning News*, March 28, 1873.

²⁸ *Savannah Morning News*, November 18, 1878.

²⁹ *Savannah Morning News*, April 24, 1875.

all such other acts of charity and benevolence as may come within the object of their association.”³⁰ They had created a mutual aid society similar to those being formed by Blacks throughout the South during the Jim Crow era.³¹

Haynes continued to live a full and active life through the 1870s, and his activities made him a familiar figure to both white and Black Savannahians. When his ship, the *Reliance*, ran into trouble out on the Savannah River, the newspaper printed a notice mentioning that he had not been involved in the accident, as if to reassure the readership.³² At the time, he had been busy piloting other boats up and down the river. Haynes sailed to other states so frequently that people all along the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida knew and respected him, and commonly addressed him as Captain Haynes.³³ His name was frequently on the voters’ list. He lived with his wife and his son March Jr.—born in 1871—and continued to work as caretaker for several properties belonging to the Clinch family. He remained deeply involved with the Society of John the Baptist, taking the lead when the society ran into trouble. In 1876, society president Abner Brown ran for a second term. When the members failed to reelect him, he absconded with the society’s bank book and money. Haynes, who had been the founding president, promptly sought a warrant for his arrest.³⁴

In the 1880s, Haynes proved to be a keen businessman. In 1882, he bid for a contract to widen Cuyler Canal. The city had started to drain the swamps within its jurisdiction in an attempt to prevent a yellow fever epidemic similar to the one that it had experienced in 1876.³⁵ The work on the canal had begun in 1881, and the following year, Haynes won the contract to widen the waterway. The project, however, cost more than he had expected, and he soon ran out of money. Haynes settled his debts but could not pay his men. He turned to his white connections when his men threatened him with violence. His white patrons helped him to meet the payroll, and by March 1885, the project was finally completed.³⁶ Haynes had pulled out of his contract, which reverted to the city. Ultimately, the city completed the work with the use of convict labor.³⁷

³⁰ *Savannah Morning News*, April 24, 1875.

³¹ On fraternal societies, see Joe W. Trotter, “African American Fraternal Associations in American History: An Introduction,” *Social Science History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 355–66.

³² *Savannah Morning News*, July 15, 1875.

³³ *Savannah Tribune*, July 22, 1899.

³⁴ *Savannah Morning News*, April 21, 1876.

³⁵ *Savannah Morning News*, September 2, 1876; *Savannah Morning News*, November 17, 1876; Georgia Department of Transportation, *Draft Environmental Statement: Harry S. Truman Parkway*. Application No. 074 OYN 003846 (Savannah: US Army Engineer District Savannah, 1979), 64.

³⁶ *Savannah Morning News*, August 10, 1882.

³⁷ Georgia Department of Transportation, *Draft Environmental Statement*, 64.

Along with his multiple business ventures and civic activities, Haynes remained a pillar of the First African Baptist Church, where he was elected deacon in 1877.³⁸ To celebrate the centennial anniversary of the Church in 1888, the church commissioned James Sims and the Reverend E. K. Love to write its history. They included a section on March Haynes (as reproduced in Appendix B). Few people receive such glowing tributes during their lifetimes, and this passage attests to the deep appreciation Haynes's friends and acquaintances felt for his achievements, his character, and his service to Savannah's African-American community.

The characteristics that James Sims and the Reverend Love praised so lavishly showed themselves a few years later in 1893 and 1894. The First African Baptist Church was thrown into turmoil when a faction in the church accused Love of "immorality."³⁹ The conflict between the two parties forced the church and the Baptist community leaders to either support or censure the pastor in the face of this accusation. Haynes along with a few other deacons could not tolerate this division. He firmly took a side when he left the church that he had long attended to found a new congregation on Bryan and East Broad Streets. They named the new congregation the First A. B. Church, a name it retained for several years until it was renamed the Bolton Street Baptist Church.

In 1895, at age seventy, Haynes still worked as a captain, was still involved in the church, and remained active in politics.⁴⁰ But times were changing and the freedom that he and others had fought so hard to obtain was being eroded by the insidious imposition of Jim Crow. In 1897, he faced opposition when he went out to vote. The *Savannah Morning News* reported, "one old colored man who carried a musket in the Confederate cause, March Haynes, who has been in the employ of Col. J.H.M. Clinch for nearly twenty years," had been denied the right to cast his ballot in the election.⁴¹ The poll worker cited a change of address as the reason, even though Haynes carried a letter from Clinch that verified where he lived.⁴²

When Haynes picked up the issue of the newspaper that morning, he read the account of what happened. He or a friend immediately went down to the *Savannah Morning News* office to correct the story. It was important to Haynes that the public know that he had served the United States, not the Confederacy. The next day, the newspaper printed a retraction.⁴³ The newspaper's willingness to correct the story, the original article's sympathetic tone, the emphasis given to his work ethic, and the fact that he faced no

³⁸ Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, 177.

³⁹ "The Pastor's Game of Freeze-Out," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 17, 1893.

⁴⁰ *Savannah Morning News*, March 14, 1895.

⁴¹ *Savannah Morning News*, January 27, 1897.

⁴² *Savannah Morning News*, January 27, 1897.

⁴³ *Savannah Morning News*, January 28, 1897.

retaliation all demonstrate the respect that the community had for him. As racial tensions deepened and racial segregation hardened, March Haynes's exemplary character shone through, a beacon that crossed the color line.

Despite having been seriously wounded during the war and being in the last years of his life, Haynes lived with vigor and determination. When his wife, Elvira, died in 1890, he grieved. He later remarried Maria Fowler. In July of 1899, March Haynes passed away. Both the *Savannah Morning News* and the *Savannah Tribune*, the local Black newspaper, commemorated his death.⁴⁴

For nearly three decades, writers at the white *Savannah Morning News* had featured stories discussing Haynes. To appeal to the readership in an era of nostalgia for the Old South, Haynes's obituary became an ode to the Confederacy. Born a slave to the Waldburg Family, the newspaper relates, Haynes had "gained great notoriety as a Confederate scout and messenger during the first part of the war between the states."⁴⁵ His role in the war reinforced the image of the enslaved who was willing to heroically sacrifice for his master. According to the story, Haynes single-handedly "kept up communication between the beleaguered Confederate garrison in Fort Pulaski and the city," even at a time when "every foot of the marsh and river was covered by the patrols, sentinels and gunboats of the enemy."⁴⁶ Chalking up his change of allegiance to the Union as a simple matter of having taken offense "at something," the newspaper paints Haynes as loyal to his "old-time white friends."⁴⁷ This feature was common in the Progressive era memoirs where white Southern women lamented the loss of the Mammy who had diligently taken care of their families.⁴⁸

The two death notices also differ drastically on Haynes's age at the time of his death. The white writers at the *Savannah Morning News*, as they so often did when an elderly African American died, exaggerated Haynes's age. They estimated him to be ninety, which was fifteen years older than other sources. Taken on its face, the embellishment of Haynes's age might not add up to much. But when considered in light of the other factors that they chose to emphasize, it seems clear that the exaggeration indicates a nostalgia for antebellum times when men like Haynes were enslaved. By making him older, they wish to highlight the portion of his life that was spent in slavery.

In stark contrast to the white newspaper, the writers of the *Savannah Tribune* offered a nuanced portrait of the beloved Haynes. Conscious of the lack of choices available to those in slavery, they saw no need to mention that he had been a slave, who owned

⁴⁴ *Savannah Morning News*, July 16, 1899; *Savannah Tribune*, July 22, 1899.

⁴⁵ *Savannah Morning News*, July 16, 1899.

⁴⁶ *Savannah Morning News*, July 16, 1899.

⁴⁷ *Savannah Morning News*, July 16, 1899.

⁴⁸ Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 27–61 (New York: Norton, 1985).

him, or which side he fought on. Instead, they highlighted his agency. “During the late war he was quite a figure, being the mail carrier to and from Savannah to Fort Pulaski,” the newspaper writes, “which position he resigned of his own free will.”⁴⁹ The paper used words like “gained reputation,” “lived,” “returned,” “had charge,” “active”—all words that indicate a deliberate choice that shaped his life.⁵⁰ The writers lead with Haynes’s chosen occupation of piloting ships and smaller boats up and down the rivers, an occupation that he had excelled at and performed until his health prevented him from doing so. They followed with his dedication and service to his church and other civic organizations, connecting him to his community. The *Savannah Tribune* published the details of his funeral, information that the *Savannah Morning News* failed to mention. Despite their differences in worldview, both papers spoke of March Haynes respectfully, if not glowingly.

March Haynes’s participation in covert missions at Fort Pulaski and the Sea Islands, both during the Confederate occupation and after the redemption of the fort by Union forces, make his life worthy of its own chapter. He experienced slavery during antebellum times, made bold, decisive choices during the Civil War, and lived a full life during Reconstruction and the beginnings of Jim Crow. Haynes’s life serves as a lens through which a large portion of the time included in this study could be viewed. His life had great impact while lived, and it should have equal significance in the interpretation at Fort Pulaski.

⁴⁹ *Savannah Tribune*, July 22, 1899.

⁵⁰ *Savannah Tribune*, July 22, 1899.

CHAPTER TEN

FORT PULASKI NEXUS

The redemption of Fort Pulaski in April 1862 meant severing ties with Savannah and forging links with South Carolina’s Sea Islands. Hilton Head, Port Royal, and Beaufort were hubs for the US military and for the civilian abolitionists who had traveled south to educate and assist newly freed men and women. Where the *Ida* had once steamed back and forth carrying Confederates and enslaved people from Cockspur to Savannah, now Union soldiers and civilians—both white and African American—traveled and communicated regularly with the Union outposts perched on the South Carolina coast. Travel over water began immediately after federal troops reclaimed the fort. In June 1863, a cable across Lazaretto Creek established telegraph communications between Cockspur and South Carolina.

For those seeking to escape from slavery, the return of Fort Pulaski to Union control meant that Cockspur was no longer a place to avoid. Instead, the fort served as a depot on the Underground Railroad and a departure point for the South Carolina Sea Islands. On the islands of Hilton Head, Port Royal, and St. Helena, and at Beaufort, African Americans met Union military officers on a mission to crush the slaveholders’ rebellion, as well as civilian abolitionists eager to hasten emancipation and help freed men and women adjust to their new lives. In 1862, the story of Fort Pulaski became intertwined with what historian Willie Lee Rose called the “rehearsal for Reconstruction” taking place just to the north.¹

Military Service and the 1st South Carolina Regiment

When he issued General Order Number 11 in May 1862, Major General David Hunter had military as well as humanitarian concerns on his mind. No one doubted his hatred of slavery and his commitment to emancipation. Faced with the War Department’s repeated denials of his requests for additional troops, Hunter was eager to enlist African American men in the Union cause. He expected that volunteers would rush forward. On Hilton Head

¹ Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).

Island and at Beaufort, men willingly enlisted. Those living further from the military hub, however, felt more reticent. In response, Hunter made a clumsy, heavy-handed attempt to impress them into service.²

African Americans had good reason to be suspicious of white men trying to force them into compliance. So when Hunter's emissaries arrived on St. Helena to take men who labored on the plantations to Hilton Head, the reaction was instant panic.³ First, these men did not want to leave their homes where, for the first time, they were able to live in peace with their families, free from the fear of their enslavers. Second, the men were afraid that once they reached Hilton Head, they would be shipped to Cuba.⁴ As the United States military approached the South Carolina coast in 1861, slaveholders had told Blacks that Union forces would send them to Cuba and sell them into slavery there.⁵

Susan Walker, a white teacher from the North, was among those who were tasked with choosing which men would be taken to Hilton Head to be trained as soldiers. She had come South to help educate newly freed people, and she took no joy in being asked to select which men would leave their homes. When one military officer ordered the men under his command to shoot anyone who tried to flee rather than go, Walker interceded. She "assured them. . . that [General Hunter was] their friend and that no harm would be done them; conjured them to go willingly and be obedient to every command."⁶ In the end, about five hundred frightened men were transported to Hilton Head from St. Helena, Ladies, and Coosaw Islands.

² On the bar on Black soldiers, see James McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 20–21. On Hunter's attempts to recruit—and in some cases coerce—Black men for military service, see McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War*, 166, and Miller, *Lincoln's Abolitionist General*, 100–101.

³ Susan Walker, *Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio: Journal of Miss Susan Walker, March 3rd to June 6th, 1862* (Cincinnati: Press of Jennings and Graham, 1912), 38.

⁴ Walker, *Journal of Miss Susan Walker*, 22.

⁵ Walker, *Journal of Miss Susan Walker*, 22.

⁶ Walker, *Journal of Miss Susan Walker*, 39.



Figure 10.1. Dress parade of 1st South Carolina US Colored Troops

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2013649032; “Dress Parade of First South Carolina (U.S.C.T.), Beaufort, S.C.” 1862–64.

Thus was born the 1st South Carolina Volunteer Infantry, precursor to the US Colored Troops (USCT).⁷ The men were issued uniforms and began their basic training, but because Hunter had acted without authorization from Washington, the soldiers received no pay. The general wrangled with his superiors in Washington over the enlistment of Black troops for the rest of the summer before Lincoln finally authorized the formation of African American units in August. Not all of the white soldiers encamped on Hilton Head and the surrounding areas shared Hunter’s antislavery views. In fact, many of the enlisted men and

⁷ McPherson, *The Negro’s Civil War*, 64, 167.

officers were outspoken racists and abused the Black soldiers whom they came in contact with both physically and verbally. The arrival of these new recruits on Hilton Head exacerbated tensions that already existed.⁸

Through the summer of 1862, some of the enslaved men who passed through Fort Pulaski joined the 1st South Carolina. Whether they felt the same panic when asked to enlist is unknown. It is less likely that they did. They were not being forcibly removed from their homes. They were in transit at Cockspur and knew they would be moving on to somewhere where they could make their way as free men. They may have had family, friends, or at least acquaintances in South Carolina; the border between the two states had always been porous, and many people enslaved in Georgia had been born in South Carolina. Having met with Union troops when they reached safety at Fort Pulaski, they may have been less frightened by the rumors of Northern plans to ship them to Cuba.

In October of 1862, the men who served in the 1st South Carolina Volunteers were mustered into the USCT and designated into new regiments. The 1st South Carolina became known as the 33rd USCT. From 1862 to 1865, 346 Georgia men were added to the rolls. The trend continued: there were 208 Georgia men enlisted in the 34th USCT, 123 Georgia men in the 21st USCT, and 287 Georgia men in the 44th USCT.⁹ African Americans from Georgia reached freedom and became eligible to enlist either by approaching a federal gunboat, making their way to Fort Pulaski, or traveling directly to a military camp in South Carolina.

Thanksgiving and Christmas at Fort Pulaski, 1862

In November 1862, the officers garrisoned at Fort Pulaski planned a “Grand Thanksgiving Fete and Festival” and invited people from Beaufort and Hilton Head to attend.¹⁰ On November 27, when the guests arrived on three steamers at about noon, the festivities began. Rev. Dr. William P. Strickland, the Chaplain of the 48th New York Regiment, conducted religious services. With that solemnity out of the way, residents and guests of Fort Pulaski embarked on all sorts of fun. There was target practice, a rowing match, a foot race, a hurdle sack race, a wheelbarrow race, a greased pole contest, and a greased pig to catch.¹¹

⁸ Miller, *Lincoln's Abolitionist General*, 99–114.

⁹ Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom*, 87–90.

¹⁰ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 125–27. In 1795, Washington had made February 19, a day of Thanksgiving. Madison had made Thanksgiving a fall holiday in 1815. In 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed that the last Thursday in November should be a day set aside for prayer and thanksgiving, a date that we maintain to this day. Abraham Lincoln, *Proclamation of Thanksgiving*, Washington, DC, October 3, 1863 www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/thanks.htm (accessed April 19, 2021).

¹¹ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 125–27.

One event was reserved exclusively for the contrabands. The “meal feat” featured a tub filled with meal with a \$5 gold coin buried inside. The competitors had their hands tied behind their backs and attempted to retrieve the coin with their teeth. A reporter for the *New South* described the scene:

The meal feat was perhaps the most ludicrous feature of the whole. . . The ludicrous appearance of the contraband’s head when it emerged from the meal-tub can be more easily imagined than described. They were very earnest in their search, and it was amusing to see the anxious looks of those standing by lest the one with his head buried in the meal should be successful. The third one succeeded in obtaining the prize and was so elated with his success that he was led into a salutatory manifestation of the exuberance of his joy and capered round the tub of meal in real George Christy style.¹²

The lucky third contestant was Samuel Pope, a thirty-nine-year-old contraband native of St. Helena Island, South Carolina.¹³ The following year, he enlisted in the 21st USCT and served on Hilton Head. His presence at Fort Pulaski on Thanksgiving in 1862 and his military service on Hilton Head Island in 1863 illustrate that movement between the fort and South Carolina was fluid and frequent.

The reporter’s disdainful tone and the physically humiliating nature of the “meal feat” expose a problem. The men and women who had escaped to Fort Pulaski were free from slavery, but not from the racism that was pervasive throughout the United States. It was manifested in varying degrees, ranging from virulent hatred by people who held that African Americans were primitive savages, just one small step removed from wild animals, to the less venomous but still demeaning attitudes of white abolitionists who viewed enslaved and freed people as ignorant and childlike. But the white belief in African American inferiority was the bedrock of race relations. Whites expressed this attitude publicly in newspapers, magazines, and books, as well as in private letters and journals. The undercurrent of racial prejudice, that existed even among reformers who abhorred slavery and genuinely wanted to help those who had been enslaved, bred distrust among African Americans. White people frequently were bewildered by the common dissimulation that they observed among Blacks; it was a habit born from experience.

¹² George Christy was a popular blackface minstrel performer in the 1840s. Cited in Abraham John Palmer, *The History of the Forty-Eighth Regiment New York State Volunteers, in the War for the Union, 1861–1865* (New York: Veteran Association of the Regiment, 1885), 62.

¹³ Palmer, *The History of the Forty-Eighth Regiment*, 64.

At the end of the day, Brigadier General Rufus Saxton, who was in charge of recruiting African Americans for military service, arrived at Fort Pulaski after attending a similar celebration on St. Helena Island in South Carolina.¹⁴ He read aloud his own Thanksgiving Proclamation to the hundreds of celebrants, concluding with a special message for the contrabands:

You freemen and women have never before had such cause for thankfulness. Your simple faith has been vindicated. "The Lord has come," and has answered your prayers. Your chains are broken. Your days of bondage and mourning are ended, and you are forever free. If you cannot yet see your way clearly in the future, fear not: put your trust in the Lord, and He will vouchsafe, as he did to the Israelites of old, the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, to guide our footsteps "through the wilderness" to the promised land.

I therefore advise you all to meet and offer up fitting songs of thanksgiving for all these great mercies which you have received, and with them, forget not to breath and earnest prayer for your brethren who are still in bondage.¹⁵

Saxton's speech was followed by dinner and a ball. They dined on oysters, pies, and lemonade. The food was so plentiful that there was enough left for a second meal at midnight. The party continued long into the night and into daybreak the next day for both the white and Black participants at Fort Pulaski. Harder drinks than lemonade flowed freely, and the next day the fort was deathly quiet as the celebrants recuperated.¹⁶

On December 8, the officers of the 48th New York decided to allow the men to recreate the games of Thanksgiving for just themselves. This time, the men only competed in foot races and the greased pole feat. Events were segregated: whites competed against whites and African Americans against African Americans.¹⁷

On Christmas Eve of 1862, one of the African American men living at Fort Pulaski experienced the worst of the racism prevalent among the Northern soldiers.¹⁸ The man had either escaped to Fort Pulaski from slavery or had been sent from South Carolina to work at the fort, where he served as an officer's personal waiter. A group of soldiers belonging to Company E of the 48th New York accused him of stealing money and of cursing the

¹⁴ Brenda Stevenson and Charlotte L. Forten Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 404.

¹⁵ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 127.

¹⁶ Abbott, November 27–28, 1862.

¹⁷ Abbott, December 8, 1862.

¹⁸ Abbott, December 24, 1862.

officers. They put the man in a boat and rowed to nearby Turtle Island, where they brutally whipped him “until the blood ran down his back.” Afterward, they put him back in the boat and took him back to Fort Pulaski.¹⁹

The bleeding man, who less than a month before had listened as General Saxton proclaimed his eternal freedom, now sat in a boat, injured, having endured a beating as severe as any he may have suffered when enslaved. With a sore, battered body, he spent his first Christmas in freedom at the fort, guarded by Union soldiers. While no evidence survives to establish his guilt or innocence, his punishment was undoubtedly harsher than what would have been inflicted on a white man accused of the same crimes.²⁰

The man was not the first freed person to be a victim of white vigilante justice, nor would he be the last. Some whites people wondered if African Americans ever regretted emancipation. When Laura Towne, the founder of the Penn School on St. Helena Island, asked an elderly African American woman named Susy if she wanted her old master to return, the woman replied, “No indeed, missus, no indeed they treat us too bad. They took every one of my children away from me. When we were sick and couldn’t work, they took away all our food from us; give us nothing to eat. They’s awful hard, Missis.”²¹ Towne explained that she had been told that other people would not mind a return to the old system. When Susy heard that, “a look of supreme contempt” covered her face. “That’s because they have no sense, then missus,” she declared.²²

¹⁹ Abbott, December 24, 1862.

²⁰ Abbott, December 24, 1862.

²¹ Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 399–400.

²² Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 399–400.



Figure 10.2. Miss Laura Towne's school, St. Helena Island, South Carolina
Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/stereo.1s03953/?locrl=blogpic;
"Miss Laura Town's [i.e., Towne's] School, St. Helena Island, South Carolina."

New Year's Day 1863: Emancipation Celebration at Port Royal

On New Year's Day, General Saxton invited everyone in the area to gather at the headquarters of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, nicknamed "Camp Saxton" on Port Royal Island, to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation:²³

When in the course of human events there comes a day which is destined to be an everlasting beacon-light, marking a joyful era in the progress of a nation and the hopes of a people, it seems to be fitting the occasion that it should not pass unnoticed by those whose hopes it comes to brighten and to bless. Such a day to you is January 1, 1863. I therefore call upon all the colored people in this Department to assemble on that day at the Headquarters of the First Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers, there to hear the President's Proclamation read, and to indulge in such other manifestations of joy as may be called forth by the occasion. It is your duty to carry this good news to your brethren who are still in slavery. Let all your voices, like merry bells, join loud and clear in the grand chorus of liberty "We are free," "We are free,"—until listening, you shall hear its echoes coming back from every cabin in the land, "We are free," "we are free."²⁴

Saxton planned the event to serve a dual purpose: celebration and recruitment. In addition to the men of the regiment, guests would include Susie King Taylor; Charlotte Forten, the first African-American missionary to the South; Laura Towne; Ellen Murray; and other white abolitionists. Harriet Tubman, who was at Port Royal a month later in February 1863, may have attended the reading on New Year's Day. Since "all the colored people in the Department" had been ordered to attend and that Fort Pulaski belonged to the Department that Saxton commanded, African Americans at Fort Pulaski most likely attended as well.²⁵

²³ Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 427.

²⁴ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 132–33.

²⁵ "Interesting from Port Royal; A Jubilee among the Negroes on the First," *New York Times*, January 9, 1863.



Figure 10.3. Charlotte Forten Grimké

NPS, www.nps.gov/places/the-charlotte-forten-grimke-house.htm;
Charlotte Forten Grimké, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



Figure 10.4. Ellen Murray

NPS, www.nps.gov/articles/000/penn-schools-founders-at-rest.htm;

"Ellen Murray with Two Students, Grace and Peg, in February of 1866." Penn Center Collections.



Figure 10.5. Laura M. Towne

New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nysl.org/items/83d465d0-73ab-0e4a-e040-e00a18060754>;
“Portrait of Teacher Laura M. Towne, a Founder of the Penn School, with Students Dick, Maria and Amoretta,”
New York Public Library.

On New Year’s Eve, men in the 1st South Carolina rounded up ten oxen, slaughtered them, and dug huge pits that were then filled with wood and burned down until they were coals. Above the pits, the oxen would be roasted with men staying up all night to stoke the fire. The next morning, many rose from their beds early. They were excited to be on their way to Beaufort and to Camp Saxton to enjoy the day of celebrating freedom. “The most glorious day this nation has yet seen,” thought Charlotte Forten as she prepared to board a

steamboat.²⁶ At about ten o'clock in the morning, the steamboats started to arrive from the river, bringing people from the islands to the mainland. Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the white abolitionist commander of the 1st South Carolina, described the scene: "The road was crowded with riders & walkers—chiefly black women with gay handkerchiefs on their heads & a sprinkling of men."²⁷ Some had been up very late the night before to ring in the new year and so were forced to wait for the second trip on the steamboat and arrived after the ceremony had begun.²⁸

"A beautiful grove, a live-oak grove," had been chosen for the ceremony.²⁹ "White ladies and dignitaries usurped the platform" that had been built to help the crowd see the speakers more clearly.³⁰ Higginson marched his companies to the grove for the ceremony. "I thought I had never seen anything so beautiful. There were the black soldiers, in their blue coats and scarlet pants," Forten wrote.³¹ At 11:30 a.m., the services began with prayers. Brisbane read the proclamation. Born into a slaveholding family, Brisbane was an abolitionist convert who had emancipated his own enslaved people in the 1830s.

²⁶ Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 428.

²⁷ Thomas Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 75.

²⁸ Laura Matilda Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne: Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862–1884* (London: Riverside Press, 1912), January 1, 1863.

²⁹ Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 429.

³⁰ Higginson, *The Complete Civil War Journal*, 76.

³¹ Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 429.

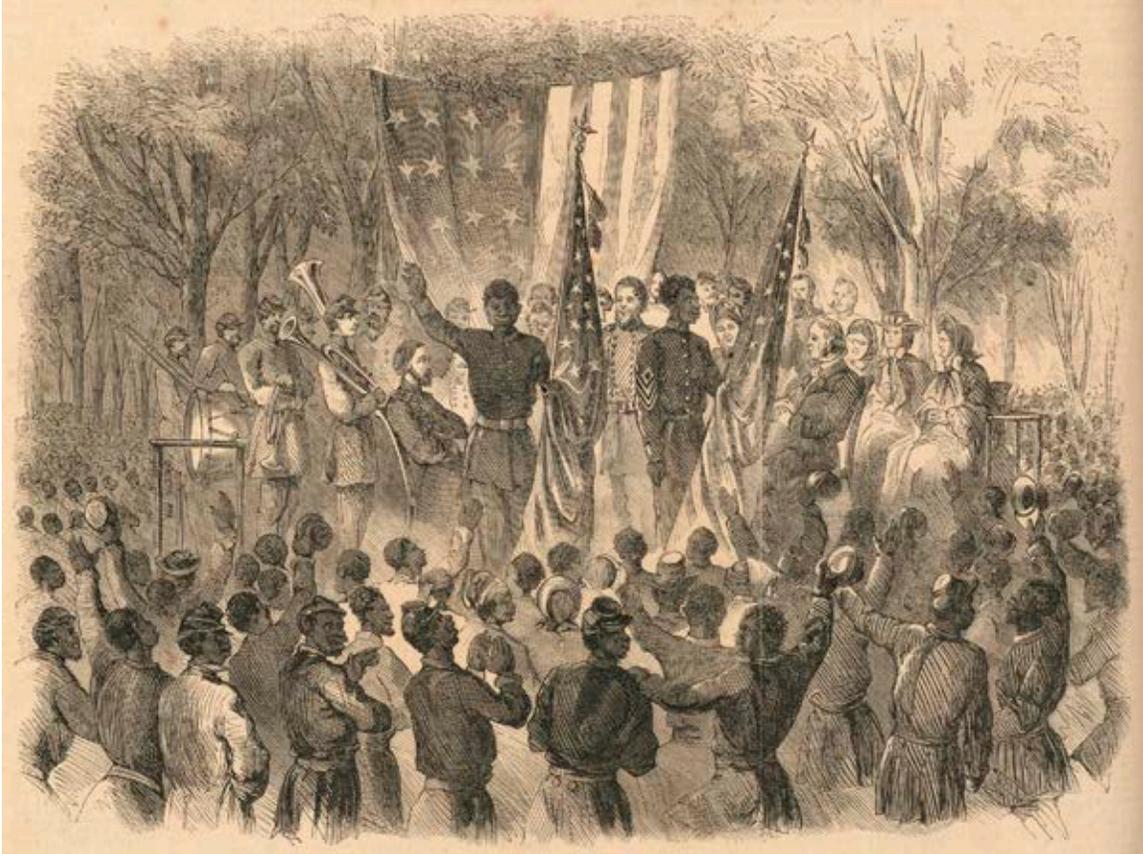


Figure 10.6. Emancipation Day in South Carolina

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99614128; "Emancipation Day in South Carolina,"
The Color-Sergeant of the 1st South Carolina (Colored) Volunteers addressing the regiment,
after having been presented with the stars and stripes, at Smith's Plantation, Port Royal Island, January 1.

Next came the presentation of the regimental colors. Suddenly, the official ceremony was interrupted by an unplanned moment. A single voice rose from the crowd. The low but sure and steady voice immediately captured the attention of the hundreds who had gathered to hear the proclamation read. "My Country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of Liberty..."³² The lone voice was soon joined by others. Higginson stood on the platform transfixed by the spontaneity and emotion of the singers.³³ When the white women on the platform attempted to join the refrain, he silenced them; this song was not for them.³⁴

It was a moment Higginson would remember for the rest of his life. "I never saw anything so electric," he wrote; "it made all other words cheap, it seemed the choked voice of a race, at last unloosed; nothing could be more wonderfully unconscious; art could not have dreamed a tribute to the day of jubilee that should be so affecting; history will not

³² Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 430

³³ Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 430.

³⁴ *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War* (Boston: W. B. Clarke Company, 1906), 130.

believe it; & when I came to speak of it, after it was silent, tears were everywhere.”³⁵ Others were equally moved. Dr. Seth Rogers observed, they “sang it so touchingly that everyone was thrilled beyond measure. Nothing could have been more unexpected or more inspiring [than] this spontaneous outburst of love and loyalty to a country that has heretofore so terribly wronged these blacks.”³⁶

Buoyed by the crowd, Colonel Higginson spoke next. But not one person recounting the events of that day recorded his words, only that he spoke grandly following the singing. When the colonel finished speaking, he presented Prince Rivers and Robert Sutton to the crowd. Both men had risked their lives to reach the freedom of Beaufort and had been rewarded with positions as noncommissioned officers in the 1st South Carolina regiment.

Prince Rivers was born in 1803 in Beaufort and lived in slavery for sixty-two years. He served as a carriage driver and learned to read and write. When Henry Middleton Stuart, his enslaver, moved inland, he took Prince with him. Prince was aware that he had been taken inland so that he could continue to be enslaved. In 1862, Prince took a horse and rode through Confederate lines to Beaufort. In his months of freedom, Prince enlisted in the 1st South Carolina. He traveled to Philadelphia and returned “impressed with the magnitude of the country.” As Higginson presented the flag of the United States of America to Prince, he told him “that his life was chained to it and he must die to defend it.” Then Prince spoke to the crowd.³⁷

Another man, Robert Sutton, had been enslaved on the Alberti plantation on the Georgia/Florida border. When he heard of the arrival of the Union military, he crafted a dugout and made his way up the coast until he reached federal lines. Upon reaching Beaufort, he enlisted in the 1st South Carolina. He spoke plainly but movingly to the crowd that had gathered for Emancipation Day. “He told them there was not one in that crowd but had sister, brother, or some relations among the rebels still; that all was not done because they were so happily off, that they should not be content till all their people were as well off, if they died in helping them.”³⁸

Following the ceremony, Susie King Taylor remembered that “it was a glorious day for us all, and we enjoyed every minute of it, and as a fitting close and the crowning event of this occasion we had a grand barbecue. A number of oxen were roasted whole, and we had

³⁵ Seth Rogers, MD, *War Time Letters*, January 1, 1863, www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Projects/Rogers/letters.html.

³⁶ Rogers, January 1, 1863.

³⁷ *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War*, 104, 131.

³⁸ *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War*, 131–32.

a fine feast.”³⁹ The band continued to play all day as the people celebrated. “The soldiers had a good time. They sang or shouted ‘Hurrah!’ all through the camp and seemed overflowing with fun and frolic.”⁴⁰

For many, as both Dr. Rogers and Charlotte Forten recorded, this was the best day of their lives. The intensity of meaning and feeling on the day when Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was celebrated resonated even more powerfully among those who had formerly been enslaved.

Continuing Connections

In the three years between the holiday celebrations at Fort Pulaski and Beaufort and when the men who served in the USCT were mustered out in 1866, the community of free people on the South Carolina coast continued to grow. Because of the dearth of records—contraband lists and lack thereof discussed in previous sections—it is impossible to know exactly how many men, women, and children passed through Fort Pulaski on their way to freedom. It is equally impossible to know how many of them remained at the fort in the years before peace arrived.

While most of the men fleeing slavery in Georgia were mustered into military service in South Carolina, some men and teenagers from South Carolina were sent to work at Fort Pulaski. As Union soldiers based at Fort Pulaski went on expeditions, they brought refugees back with them. On September 30, 1862, the 48th New York steamed to Bluffton. When they returned, they brought with them “all the negroes [they] could reach.”⁴¹

On St. Helena Island, Laura Towne recorded her fears that “dismay” would follow the seizure of twenty refugees who had arrived there from Edisto Island.⁴² Soldiers captured these men and “carried [them] off to Fort Pulaski” as laborers. Towne was correct. A month later she recorded that “the seizure and transportation to Pulaski of those men from the village has had a very bad effect. No man likes to be seized and taken from home to unknown parts.”⁴³

³⁹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 47.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 47.

⁴¹ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 113.

⁴² Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, 92–94.

⁴³ Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, 92–94.

That same month, one of the civilian abolitionists grew annoyed with a man named Cato and threatened to send him away to Fort Pulaski.⁴⁴ The men taken to Fort Pulaski were not soldiers; instead, they were laborers, sent to provide support to the troops stationed at the fort. Movement went both ways for African Americans between the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Cockspur.

If people were sent from South Carolina to Fort Pulaski, it is equally likely that people were leaving Fort Pulaski for South Carolina. Cockspur, already occupied by regiments of the US Army, would not have been able to sustain a constant large population of civilians. Fort Pulaski's proximity to the plantations in South Carolina that still required labor to produce cotton and food—as well as the need for men to fill the ranks of the USCT—meant that people who arrived at the fort's gates were unlikely to be long-term residents.

In order to gain insight into the texture of what life was like for African Americans who had been freed during the Civil War, one must look toward South Carolina. Many Georgians lived their lives in South Carolina after escaping slavery at Fort Pulaski. The stories and experiences of the people who lived on St. Helena Island, Port Royal Island, and Hilton Head Island at Mitchelville, as well in military camps at Beaufort, provide a view that cannot be found by focusing on Fort Pulaski alone.

⁴⁴ *Letters from Port Royal Written at the Time of the Civil War*, 87.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MITCHELVILLE

When white inhabitants heard the news that the US Navy was steaming toward the coast of South Carolina, they panicked and ran for safety inland. The few stragglers who remained behind cleared out after they heard the thunderous bombardment begin. As a result, Hilton Head was virtually uninhabited except for about 150 enslaved people when soldiers disembarked on the island after the Union victory. Brigadier General Thomas West Sherman set up headquarters there.¹

As news spread that whites had fled when faced with the might of the US Army and Navy, other African Americans arrived on Hilton Head in droves, quickly swelling the population already established on the island. One soldier wrote, “Negro slaves came flocking into our camp by the hundreds, escaping from their masters when they knew of the landing of ‘Linkum sojers’ as they called us. . . many of them with no other clothing than gunny sacks.”² In South Carolina, as throughout the Confederacy, African Americans hoped to secure freedom for themselves by seeking refuge with the US military. By 1862, more than 1,500 African Americans had migrated to the island.

General Thomas W. Sherman, whose mission was military rather than humanitarian, realized that the army needed civilian help with the burgeoning population of newly freed African Americans. On February 6, 1862, he issued General Order No. 9. Citing “the helpless condition of the blacks inhabiting the vast area” that his forces occupied, he called on volunteers from the “highly-favored and philanthropic people” of the North to come South and help instruct the formerly enslaved people.³ Sherman saw them as “in such a state of abject ignorance and mental stolidity as to preclude all possibility of self-government. . . in their present condition.” He also proposed dividing the area into districts, appointing agents to govern them, and compelling African Americans to continue working the plantations.⁴ As under slavery, they would be provided with food, clothing, and shelter, but unlike the previous system, they would also earn wages.⁵

¹ On the history of Hilton Head, see Martin Abbott, *The Freedmen’s Bureau in South Carolina, 1865–1872* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967).

² Cited in Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands*, 45.

³ General Thomas Sherman, *General Order No. 9*, February 6, 1862. Headquarters Expeditionary Corps, Hilton Head, South Carolina in US War Department. *OR* ser. 1, vol. 6, 222–23.

⁴ Sherman, *General Order no. 9*, February 6, 1862, 222–23.

⁵ Sherman, *General Order no. 9*, February 6, 1862, 222–24.

In response to Sherman's call, white men and women came from the North to the coast of South Carolina to help. Women came to teach, and men like Thomas Wentworth Higginson volunteered their services to the Army. Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, also sent a representative, Edward Pierce, to oversee the operation. Both Higginson and Pierce held antislavery views.



Figure 11.1. Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, commander of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers
Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2010645144; William Notman, "Col. T. W. Higginson, Commander of the 1st SC Volunteers
(the first African American regiment)." Boston, circa 1905–11.

The Reverend Abraham Murchison

While many refugees came to Hilton Head from other coastal areas of South Carolina, some also came from Savannah and other locales in Georgia. Abraham Murchison, an enslaved preacher, escaped early from Savannah; he was on Hilton Head before the redemption of Fort Pulaski by Federal forces.⁶ A military correspondent for the *New York Times* recorded his impression of Murchison after he attended a service where the reverend presided. Murchison, he wrote, was “a remarkable negro” whose sermon “was marked by considerable originality.”⁷ The reporter also observed that Murchison’s influence over the Black community was “immense.” At the time, Murchison worked as a cook for the army and was moonlighting as a pastor, but that would change within a few months when the army began paying him twenty dollars a month for his services as a chaplain.⁸ Murchison then used his salary to fund an investment of his own: peddling goods during the day and preaching on Sunday.⁹

The increase in Murchison’s salary may have been a direct result of his meeting with Major General David Hunter. Aware of Murchison’s clout in the community, the general summoned the pastor to his headquarters a few days before the bombardment of Fort Pulaski.¹⁰ Hunter asked Murchison to help him recruit soldiers for the regiment of African Americans that he intended to form. Murchison agreed and came out of the meeting with a favorable impression. He told the *New York Times* correspondent, “That General is smart. He has an eye that looks through a man. . . . I know he’s a fightin’ General, by his looks!” Hunter was “a fightin’ General” indeed, willing to do battle with his superiors as well as with the enemy.¹¹ A month passed before Hunter issued his emancipation order and began his public attempts to raise an African American regiment. When recruitment began, Murchison kept his word and helped persuade Black men to volunteer for the army.¹²

⁶ On Murchison, see Clarence L. Mohr, “Before Sherman: Georgia Blacks and the Union War Effort, 1861–1864,” *Journal of Southern History* 45, no. 3 (August 1979): 331–52.

⁷ “A Negro Conventicle—The Rev. Abraham Murchison,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1862. Although the article wasn’t published until after Confederates had surrendered Fort Pulaski, the dateline was April 7, and the article also reported that the bombardment of the fort was to begin soon.

⁸ *Report of Contrabands Employed and Hired at Hilton Head, SC, during the Month of November 1862 for C. Saxton*, November 1862.

⁹ Charles Carleton Coffin, *The Boys of '61, or Four Years of Fighting. Personal Observations with the Army and Navy, from the First Battle of Bull Run to the Fall of Richmond* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1884), 224–27.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, April 19, 1862.

¹¹ *New York Times*, April 19, 1862.

¹² Mohr, “Before Sherman,” 349–50.

Ormsby Mitchel and the Founding of Mitchelville

Major General Ormsby Mitchel arrived in Port Royal harbor on September 15, 1862, to replace General Hunter. A restless, high-energy career soldier, Mitchel itched for a mission to fulfill. But instead, he was faced with discord between the two senior officers who were in command at Hilton Head. Brigadier General John Brannan and Brigadier General Rufus Saxton did not see eye to eye.¹³ Saxton was an abolitionist who had been appointed military governor for the area. He was committed to supporting the reformers who had come to the South to assist freed men and women as they began new lives. Brannan, on the other, “hated [the missionaries] and the negroes alike.”¹⁴ Mitchel knew that he would have to help mend fences between the two men and support the mission that Saxton had been assigned. On his first day, he spent time with both men seeking to “harmonize all differences.”¹⁵

¹³ The Rufus and S. Willard Saxton Papers are located at Yale University. Rufus’s brother, Samuel Willard, joined him in South Carolina to help during the Port Royal Experiment. Both brothers had been invited to join Brook Farm, a transcendentalist commune in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Samuel Willard Saxton went and learned the printing trade. Rufus went to West Point. On Brook Farm, see Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Higginson, *The Complete Civil War*, 41.

¹⁵ Frederick Augustus Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel, Astronomer and General: A Biographical Narrative* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1887), 361.

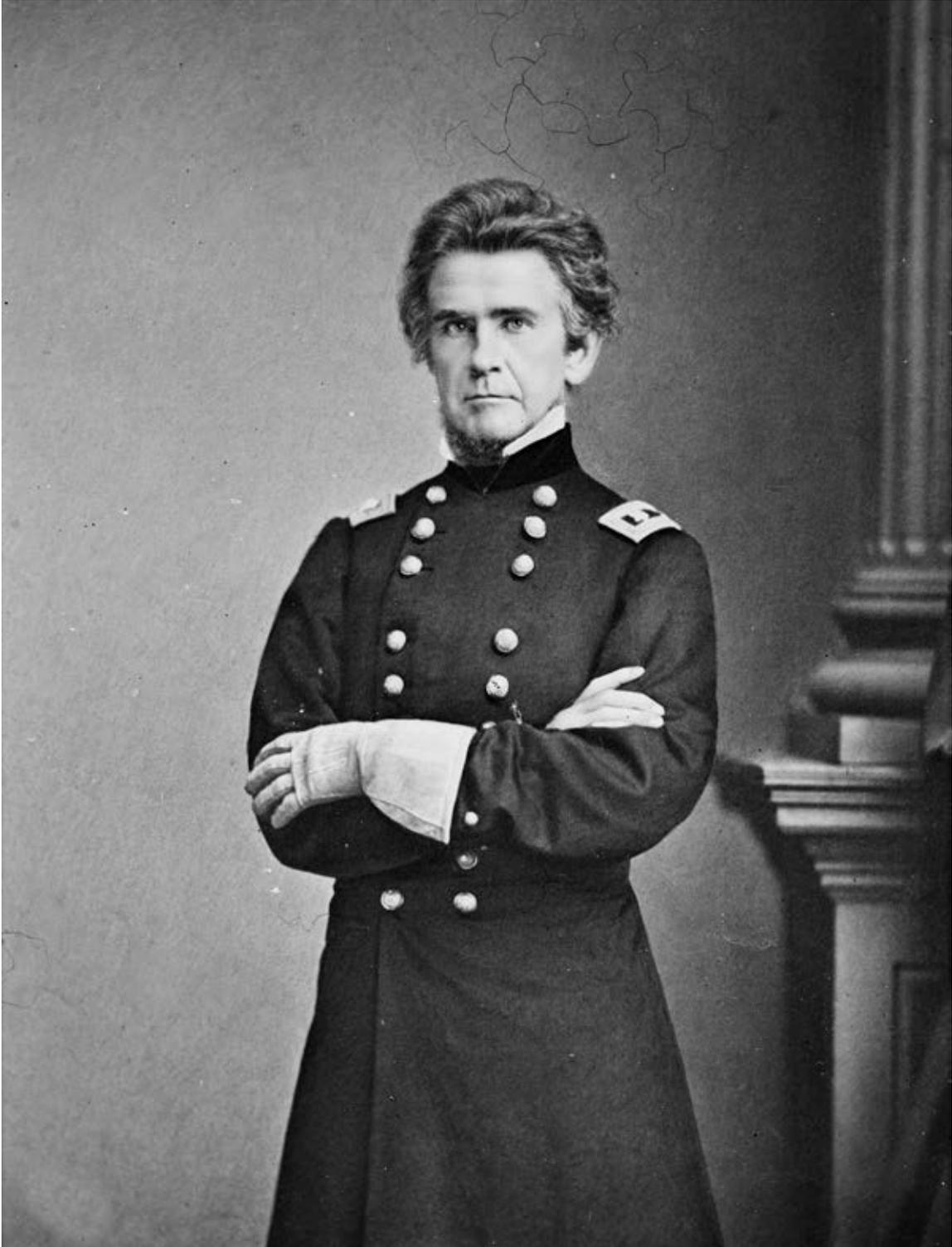


Figure 11.2. Brigadier General Ormsby M. Mitchel

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2018666466; Brady's National Photographic Portrait Galleries; portrait of Brig. Gen. Ormsby M. Mitchel, officer of the Federal Army, circa 1860–62.

The next day, Mitchel went to Fort Pulaski to address the men of the 48th New York regiment who were stationed at the fort. He struggled to reconcile his displeasure at being assigned to the Sea Islands with his need to inspire those who served under his command. In the speech that he delivered that day, he sought to assure both the assembled soldiers, and perhaps himself, of the importance of their assigned task: “I am just from the North, where, having conversed and associated with the thinking men of the country, I am satisfied that the work before us is the most stupendous, the most arduous, that has ever been attempted; and it is a work in which we can never be successful unless we enter upon it with a determination never to succumb.”¹⁶

Two years earlier, Mitchel had spoken publicly of his devotion to the Union despite having been born in a slaveholding state; he was born in Kentucky but spent most of his childhood in Ohio. At Fort Pulaski, the place that Georgians had briefly occupied and upheld as a symbol of Confederate power, Mitchel spoke forcefully. “If we permit the iron heel of the Southern aristocracy to crush us,” he said. “I undertake to say before you all that the last hope of humanity will die out forever.”¹⁷ Aware that some of the men in his audience had little sympathy for the abolitionist cause, Mitchel employed arguments that had become familiar in the years before the Civil War: the “slave power”—wealthy slaveholders who wielded disproportionate influence over the federal government—represented a threat to everyone’s liberty and well-being.¹⁸

In addition to settling disputes at headquarters and boosting morale among the soldiers that he commanded, Mitchel was also responsible for the welfare of the contrabands now residing on Hilton Head. Their living conditions were dismal. Mitchel “found six or seven hundred negroes hived in three wooden buildings within the stockade.”¹⁹ Overcrowding left no room for privacy and made the barracks potential breeding grounds for disease. In addition, he saw that they were “subject to ill treatment and often abuse from the prejudiced whites.”²⁰ Faced with what in the twenty-first century would be termed a humanitarian crisis, Mitchel’s “first work (almost) was to see to their comfort.”²¹

Mitchel wasted no time in making improvements. He had been on Hilton Head about a week when he decided that the African Americans should be given their own space on the island to create a town that would belong to them.²² An area was secured near Fish

¹⁶ Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel*, 362.

¹⁷ Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel*, 362.

¹⁸ Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel*, 362.

¹⁹ Phineas Camp Headley, *The Patriot Boy, Or, The Life and Career of Major-General Ormsby M. Mitchel* (New York: William H. Appleton, 1865), 265.

²⁰ Headley, *The Patriot Boy*, 267.

²¹ Headley, *The Patriot Boy*, 267.

²² Headley, *The Patriot Boy*, 267.

Haul, which had belonged to Confederate Brigadier General Thomas Drayton and had served as his headquarters before the Battle of Port Royal.²³ Mitchel determined that the military would supply the lumber, and gangs of freedmen would build the houses. One of the first buildings completed in Mitchelville, named in Mitchel's honor, was the First African Baptist Church. Abraham Murchison was formally installed as the pastor in August of 1862, with a founding congregation of 120 members.²⁴



Figure 11.3. Enslaved people held by Confederate General Thomas F. Drayton, Hilton Head, South Carolina

Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.04324;
Henry P. Moore, "Slaves of the Rebel Genl. Thomas F. Drayton, Hilton Head, SC." 1862.

²³ *The New South*, October 4, 1862.

²⁴ *The New South*, August 30, 1862.



Figure 11.4. General Thomas F. Drayton's mansion, Hilton Head, South Carolina
Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2004666251;
Henry P. Moore, "Slaves of the Rebel Genl. Thomas F. Drayton, Hilton Head, SC." 1862.



Figure 11.5. Mitchelville map and homes

Creative Commons Wikipedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mville_1864map.jpg.

On October 12, 1862, Mitchel attended the consecration service of the church, which would become the hub of the town of Mitchelville, and addressed the congregants:

Good colored people, you have a great work to do, and you are in a position of responsibility. The whole North, all the people in the Free States, are looking at you and the experiment now being tried in your behalf with the deepest interest. This experiment is to give you freedom, position, home, and your own families,—wives, property, your own soil. You shall till and cultivate your own crops; you shall gather and sell the products of your industry for your own benefit; you shall own your own earnings, and you shall be able to feel that God is prospering you from day to day, and from year to year, and raising you to a higher level of goodness, religion, and a nobler life.²⁵

The first sentence of Mitchel's exhortation is the portion that is most often quoted, but he went on to describe the life that awaited the people gathered in the church that day. He talked in great detail about the whitewashed houses that the freedmen lived in, with flower gardens and vegetable patches just outside their doors. He assured them that they could hold their families close and secure in their own village. He told them about the school that would be built so that they and their children could be educated. But most of all, he sought to instill a sense of responsibility in them. He ended the speech with these words: "I shall

²⁵ Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel*, 366–67.

watch everything closely respecting this experiment. It is something to be permanent—more than a day, more than for a year. Upon you depends whether this mighty result shall be worked out and the day of jubilee come to God’s ransomed people.”²⁶

Publicly, Mitchel treated newly freed people as civilian refugees and not as contraband dependent on and attached to the military. He gave them space and recognized their autonomy to govern themselves in their own town. Privately, he fretted as disagreements with Brannan had led to Saxton’s departure. Mitchel wrote to Washington and begged for Saxton to be sent back and given more authority. He also asked to be moved to a more active role in the war. He argued that “General Saxton should return with new levies and inaugurate a great system of negro emancipation in these islands,” claiming that “to this work he is especially adapted, while I am not, and if I am fit for anything, it is for active work in the field.”²⁷ Despite Mitchel’s misgivings, a reporter said of him that “though not a professed abolitionist, yet General Mitchel is a better, wiser friend of this people than either of his predecessors has been.”²⁸

Mitchel’s time in South Carolina soon came to an abrupt end. He contracted yellow fever after the Pocotaligo mission, in which troops were sent inland to destroy the railroad between Savannah and Charleston. Yellow fever was almost always fatal. In his last few days of life, Mitchel once more attempted to heal the differences between Brannan and Saxton.²⁹ But the rift between the two men was permanent. General Ormsby M. Mitchel died on October 31, 1862. Mitchelville lived on.

The Freed People’s Village

A war correspondent, Charles Carleton Coffin visited Hilton Head in February of 1863. He attended a meeting of the African Baptist church and recorded the events in great detail. His account provides a glimpse of life in Mitchelville through the eyes of a white observer. Inside the “plain wooden building. . . there were two rows of benches, a plain pine pulpit, a ventilated ceiling, from which three or four glass lamps were suspended.”³⁰ Rev. Murchison, “tall and copper-hued,” stood at the pulpit as another man “twenty-five years

²⁶ Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel*, 366–67.

²⁷ Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel*, 369.

²⁸ Headley, *The Patriot Boy*, 266.

²⁹ Mitchel, *Ormsby Macknight Mitchel*, 380.

³⁰ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 225.

of age” led the congregation in singing “the well-known tune ‘Jordan.’”³¹ Men sat on one side and women on the other; “all heads were bowed” as Murchison prayed “a prayer full of supplications and thanksgiving.”³²

But this was not just a worship service; this was a business meeting of the church.³³ Murchison presided and called a vote on whether to censure the sexton who had failed to make sure that the church was lighted for Thursday evening prayer meeting. The sexton did not give an adequate explanation and so was banned from receiving communion until the leadership felt that he had repented. This was followed by a “young man, named Jonas” petitioning to become a member of the church.³⁴ Jonas had made his way to Mitchelville from Charleston when he heard of the relative freedom offered on Hilton Head. He had left in such a hurry that he had not brought his certificate of membership from the church that he had attended. But Jonas responded adequately when questioned about his faith, and he was welcomed into the congregation as a member. Coffin noted, “Minister and people were but a twelvemonth out of bondage. . . before them was a future, unrevealed, but infinitely better than what their past had been.”³⁵

Murchison remained as the pastor of the Baptist Church and performed hundreds, if not thousands, of baptisms, marriages, and funerals. He also served as the town recorder or magistrate. Murchison traveled from Mitchelville to Beaufort to attend the one-year commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation, and he opened the celebration with a prayer.³⁶

Despite their newfound freedom to live their own lives and Mitchel’s inspirational words at the consecration of the church, the residents of Mitchelville still experienced the dangers of living near white people who did not consider them as their equals. On a summer’s day in August 1864, a woman was in the little clapboard house that she shared with her husband and children.³⁷ At dusk, three drunken soldiers from the nearby military camp on Hilton Head burst in and attacked her. They thought they could get away with raping an African American woman. Her husband immediately went to Abraham Murchison for help.³⁸

³¹ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 224–25.

³² Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 225.

³³ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 225.

³⁴ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 226

³⁵ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 227.

³⁶ *The New South*, January 9, 1864.

³⁷ Ira Berlin et al, ed., “South Carolina Black Minister to the Commander of the Department of the South,” in *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991):, 314–15.

³⁸ “South Carolina Black Minister to the Commander of the Department of the South.”

Murchison helped to restore order to the home that evening, and then he went back to his house and immediately wrote to military leadership demanding security for his community. His letter indicated that this was not the first incident of its kind, and that the residents of Mitchelville had had enough. "I Saw the 3 men who had committed to Rape," he wrote.³⁹ They were "officers of the 25 Ohio Reg & was under the influent of Licor."⁴⁰ When confronted, they claimed they were in the village to recruit Black men for the army, yet they had attempted to conceal their identities by pinning the shoulder straps that indicated their rank on the inside of their coats. Murchison continued, "We have been trubled very often by these officers & Sailers & I think a stop aught to Put to it."⁴¹ The pastor ended his letter there and signed his name, but then, still deeply disturbed by the crime, he added another paragraph:

Ferther thay Say that thay are Recruteing colored men for Solders & thay had with them 3 Bottle of Licor of Sum Kind & thay gave Adam Bowin & Several others Sum of it I genl Several of the 2nd US Batery men here & thay Stand Redy to assist me in Keeping order in the Village if you will grant Promission i Don't think that eny officers or Saler aught to have these Night Pass to come over the Villag for thay will not Behave them Selves as men these col Soildier over here gen are faithfull in the Discharge of there Duty Sum of them i have none ever Since I arrive on the island

Your obd Servent
 Revd A Mercherson⁴²

In this letter, Murchison was able to do something that an enslaved man would never have been able to get away with. He protested the violation of an African American woman, and he called on federal authorities to get some protection for Mitchelville. He openly addressed one of the bitterest byproducts of slavery. Rape of Black women was commonplace in the slaveholding South, assault on a woman's body just another manifestation of the master's privilege.⁴³ Enslaved women could not defend themselves, and their husbands could not protect them. In this instance, Murchison was able to take a stand for his community. Since he was literate, he could write to the general and report on the soldiers

³⁹ "South Carolina Black Minister to the Commander of the Department of the South." Spelling reproduced from the original.

⁴⁰ "South Carolina Black Minister to the Commander of the Department of the South."

⁴¹ "South Carolina Black Minister to the Commander of the Department of the South."

⁴² "South Carolina Black Minister to the Commander of the Department of the South."

⁴³ On rape and Black women in the South, see Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Martha Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1993): 402–17.

himself. He spoke not as a supplicant begging a favor from a benefactor but as a citizen calling for justice and security. Life was far from perfect, but at least the freed people of Mitchelville now had recourse to seek redress when they were wronged.

Murchison's complaint about white officers invading the home of a Mitchelville resident sheds light on this newspaper clipping: "Why don't Recorder Murchison have the board walk, between the creek and Mitchelville repaired? Many ladies and gentlemen from here would like to visit the village, especially on the Sabbath, but are prevented from doing so because the walk is so dangerous."⁴⁴ The pastor's letter indicated that the sexual assault that had occurred the previous summer was not an isolated incident; therefore, Murchison may have deliberately delayed making routes into the village more accessible. The dangerous boardwalk that kept people from attending church might also deter marauding soldiers who were up to no good. Murchison was the leader of Mitchelville and the protector of his people.

March Haynes, whom Murchison likely knew from their shared time in Savannah and the Baptist Church, also lived in Mitchelville in the 1860s. In 1865, Haynes was elected as the town's Provost Marshall. He assisted Murchison in both leading the town and keeping the residents safe. In 1865, the two men governed about 1500 people. Until 1867, the US military remained on Hilton Head. The residents of the town earned wages of between four and twelve dollars, providing civilian labor as well as drawing military rations.⁴⁵

Following the end of the Civil War, African Americans continued to live at Mitchelville and to purchase other plots of land on Hilton Head. Archaeological studies of the site where the town once stood show that the people who dwelt there lived more urban than rural lives. They had easy access to shops to purchase goods that country people would not have had access to, and they enjoyed a diet of more domesticated meat. While they still supplemented their diet with hunting and fishing, they did not have to depend solely on these skills for a source of nutrition.⁴⁶

In 1875, the property Mitchelville had been built on reverted back to the Drayton family. March Gardner, an African American, purchased the land from the Draytons. A property dispute at the time of his death caused it to be divided. In the early 1880s, "Mitchelville ceased being a true village and became a small, kinship-based community."⁴⁷ This transition had been years in the making. Without the army supplying wages, residents

⁴⁴ *The New South*, April 22, 1865.

⁴⁵ Michael B. Trinkley and Debi Hacker, *The Archaeological Manifestations of the Port Royal Experiment at Mitchelville, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina* (Savannah Georgia: Chicora Foundation, 2001), 5.

⁴⁶ Trinkley and Hacker, *Archaeological Manifestations of the Port Royal Experiment*, 11.

⁴⁷ Trinkley and Hacker, *Archaeological Manifestations of the Port Royal Experiment*, 5.

Mitchelville

were forced to return to a more agrarian way of life. Gradually, the physical remnants of what had once been the thriving little village faded away. The experiment that Ormsby Mitchel had created was successful for years but did not endure into the new century.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, African Americans continued to live on Hilton Head Island. Some of them managed to purchase their own plots of land, where they farmed or fished for a living. Descendants of the founders of Mitchelville continued to worship at the First African Baptist Church on Hilton Head where Abraham Murchison served as the inaugural pastor. African Americans living on the island today trace their roots back to Mitchelville. Many residents are currently contributing their knowledge of their families, history, and culture to the ongoing historic and archaeological research taking place at Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park on Hilton Head Island.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Trinkley and Hacker, *Archaeological Manifestations of the Port Royal Experiment*, 5.

⁴⁹ Information about the Mitchelville Freedom Park can be found at <https://exploremitchelville.org>.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FORT PULASKI AFTER THE WAR

Tragedy at Ebenezer Creek and Its Aftermath

By the time that the Union launched the Atlanta campaign in the spring of 1864, the Emancipation Proclamation was a year old. Thousands of African Americans along the Georgia and South Carolina coast enjoyed their new status as free men and women, yet tens of thousands of African Americans in the interior of Georgia remained enslaved.¹ After the Battle of Atlanta in September, Major General William T. Sherman pushed his army across the interior of the state and took Savannah. As the troops marched, African American refugees—men, women, and children—followed behind. They chose to leave their homes and travel with the army in order to escape from slavery. Military officers welcomed young able-bodied men because they were able to perform the necessary manual labor required to support an army; they cooked, did laundry, gathered and cut wood for fires, cleared roads, and did other tedious chores. But the band of women, the elderly, and children who trailed behind the army was another matter. Soldiers often viewed them, at best, as a nuisance and, at worst, as a hindrance to the military mission. One man described the “great caravan of negroes hanging on the rear of [their] column” as “a sable cloud in the sky before a thunderstorm.”²

Late in the evening on December 7, the Fourteenth Corps, led by Union Brigadier General Jefferson C. Davis, arrived at Ebenezer Creek in Effingham County. Just miles away from Savannah, Davis was running behind schedule; the other wing of the army was a full day’s march ahead. Men set to work cutting trees around the road and constructing a pontoon bridge so that the thousands of soldiers under Davis’s command could cross the 165-foot-wide creek. While these preparations were being completed, the rear guard skirmished with Confederate cavalry.³

¹ US Bureau of the Census, *Population of the United States in 1860, State of Georgia, Table 1* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 69. According to the 1860 census, Georgia’s enslaved population totaled 462,108 people. Only a few thousand at most had made their way to freedom by 1864.

² Gordon D. Whitney and Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, *Jefferson Davis in Blue: The Life of Sherman’s Relentless Warrior* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 306.

³ Whitney and Hughes, *Jefferson Davis in Blue*, 307.

On December 9, Davis ordered the refugees to wait on the bank while soldiers crossed the bridge, and then, when the last soldier was safely across, he gave the order to dismantle the bridge.⁴ The African American camp followers—numbering in the hundreds—were left stranded and panic ensued. They were miles from home in unfamiliar territory, dependent on the military for protection, and now they had been abandoned with Confederate cavalry hard on their heels. Some remained where they were, crying and praying. Others tried desperately to cross the creek on their own, but the water was deep and swift, and many drowned.⁵ Union soldiers watched in horror from the other side. Some tried to help by throwing logs and branches into the water. In addition to those who drowned, some Union soldiers reported seeing people shot by Confederates.⁶ The exact number of casualties that day is unknown.

Whatever the number, it was enough to cause outrage and grief in the hearts of those who witnessed the desperate attempt to cross the creek and the disastrous results. Private Harrison Pendergast wrote, “Where can one find in all the annals of plantation cruelty anything more inhuman and fiendish than this?”⁷ Dr. James Patten wished that he “would have [Davis] hanged as high as Haman.” “There is great indignation among the troops,” he continued. “I should not wonder if the valiant murderer of women and children should meet with an accident before long.”⁸ One soldier called the episode “a burning shame and disgrace” and added that the contrabands “prefer sinking in the water to returning to slavery.”⁹

When Sherman heard about this horrific incident, he dismissed the criticism of Davis. “Humbug, Jeff. C. Davis . . . took up his pontoon bridge, not because he wanted to leave them behind, but because he wanted his bridge.”¹⁰ Major General Henry Slocum, an abolitionist who ranked between Davis and Sherman, agreed that the removal of the bridge was justified. He argued that “on several occasions on the march from Atlanta [they] had been compelled to drive thousands of colored people back, not from lack of sympathy with

⁴ Whitney and Hughes, *Jefferson Davis in Blue*, 309.

⁵ Whitney and Hughes, *Jefferson Davis in Blue*, 309.

⁶ Anne J. Bailey, *The Chessboard of War: Sherman and Hood in the Autumn Campaigns of 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 114–16.

⁷ Quoted in Bailey, *The Chessboard of War*, 116.

⁸ Quoted in Hughes and Whitney, *Jefferson Davis in Blue*, 309.

⁹ Quoted in Bailey, *The Chessboard of War*, 116.

¹⁰ Quoted in Hughes and Whitney, *Jefferson Davis in Blue*, 312.

them, but simply as a matter of safety to the army.”¹¹ Still, many of those following managed to find a way to cross the creek and catch up to the army. Finally, they made it to Savannah in time for Christmas.¹²

The tragedy at Ebenezer Creek led Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to visit Savannah soon after the New Year to speak with Sherman and to meet with African American leaders. On January 12, 1865, Stanton and Sherman met with a delegation of ministers at the Green-Meldrim House.¹³ Roseanna Green Drayton, an eleven-year-old girl who was a servant at the house, recalled her excitement. Dressed in a black dress with a white apron, she was thrilled to wait on “the Big Man.” General Sherman had taken Savannah back for the Union, and she respected him.¹⁴

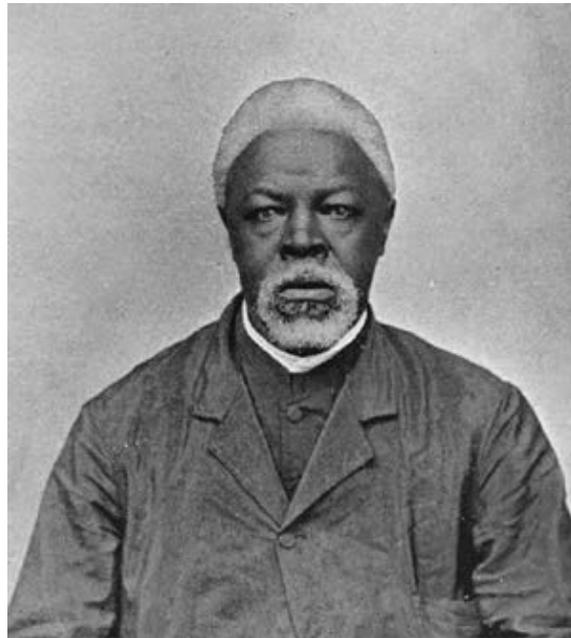


Figure 12.1. Reverend Ulysses L. Houston

Digital Collections, New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-76ed-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>; “Reverend Ulysses L. Houston” in Emanuel King Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church, from Its Organization, January 10th, 1788, to July 1st, 1888: Including the Centennial Celebration, Addresses, Sermons, Etc.* (Morning News Print, 1888), 131.

¹¹ Quoted in Hughes and Whitney, *Jefferson Davis in Blue*, 312.

¹² Hughes and Whitney, *Jefferson Davis in Blue*, 313.

¹³ For an in-depth analysis of this particular event, see Jonathan M. Bryant, “‘We Defy You!’ Politics and Violence in Reconstruction Savannah,” in *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, ed. Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 157–75.

¹⁴ Herman N. Drayton Memoir, Georgia Historical Society, MS2499. “More than once she would light up like a Christmas tree when she told how she served what she called ‘The Big Man’ (Gen. Sherman). Ma would go in to detail when she described how she was dressed. She said she wore a long black dress with lots of gathering from the waist down. She said that she wore a white pinafore type apron over her dress. She said that when she would spin around in it, they would admire her.”

Twenty African American men crowded into the room with the Secretary and the General: William Campbell, John Cox, Ulysses Houston, William Bently, Charles Bradwell, William Gaines, James Hill, Glasgow Taylor, Garrison Frazier, James Mills, Abraham Burke, Arthur Wardell, Alexander Harris, Andrew Neal, James Porter, Adolphus Delmotte, Jacob Godfrey, John Johnson, Robert Taylor, and James Lynch.¹⁵ They ranged in age from twenty-six to seventy-two, with most of them being in their forties and fifties. Most had been born in Georgia, but three were from South Carolina, one from North Carolina, and one from Maryland. Many had lived in the cities of Savannah and Charleston, but a few were from the country. Some had been born free. A few had been emancipated by their enslavers; others had managed to purchase themselves. Still more had become free with the arrival of Sherman in Savannah. Alexander Harris had served with the Confederates at Fort Pulaski. He supervised enslaved men as they mucked out the moats. His African Baptist church was on the outskirts of Savannah, and he had met Sherman's army as they entered. Although he had been with the Confederates as a free man, he much preferred the Union Army.¹⁶

These ministers, leaders in their communities, chose Garrison Frazier as their spokesperson. Born in North Carolina, the sixty-seven-year-old Frazier had purchased his freedom, along with that of his wife, just eight years earlier. He was an ordained Baptist minister but did not preside over a congregation due to his failing health.¹⁷ During the meeting, which proceeded along the lines of a hearing or formal inquiry, Frazier responded to questions posed by the white men. Frazier's answers, as recorded in the minutes, were respectful and unambiguous. In particular, he took the opportunity to emphasize two points of special concern to African Americans. First, when asked about military service for African American men, Frazier made it clear that the compulsory enlistment of African Americans into the USCT regiments should come to a halt.¹⁸ He and his colleagues insisted that many men would still join and fight for the Union, but that it should be their choice to do so. Second, Frazier emphasized that the newly freed people needed to be given their own land to support themselves and to form their own communities apart from whites. With the exception of James Lynch, the man from Maryland, all of the men agreed with Frazier's responses. Lynch dissented on two points. He believed that African Americans and whites should live in close proximity rather than in separate communities. Additionally, he declined to endorse Frazier's favorable assessment of Sherman, saying he

¹⁵ "Sherman Meets the Colored Ministers in Savannah. Minutes of an interview between the colored ministers and church officers at Savannah with the Secretary of War and Major-General Sherman. Headquarters of Major-General Sherman, Savannah, January 12, 1865," Union Correspondence, Orders, and Returns Relating to Operations in North Carolina (from February 1), South Carolina, Southern Georgia, and East Florida, from January 1, 1865, to March 23, 1865, no. 2.

¹⁶ Bryant, "We Defy You," 165; "Sherman Meets the Colored Ministers in Savannah."

¹⁷ Bryant, "We Defy You," 165.

¹⁸ "Sherman Meets the Colored Ministers."

had not yet had sufficient contact with the general to form an opinion. The minutes did not record any discussion of the events at Ebenezer Creek, but noted that there was “some conversation on general matters related to General Sherman’s march.”¹⁹

Field Order Number 15

Out of the tragedy at Ebenezer Creek came the meeting with African American leaders in Savannah, and out of the meeting came Sherman’s Field Order Number 15.²⁰ On January 16, 1865, Sherman issued the order which allocated coastal land from Charleston in South Carolina to the St. Johns River in Florida to be divided into forty-acre plots for African American families to settle. Just as important, the order ended forced conscription, but young men were still encouraged to enlist. Sherman declared, “By the laws of war, and orders of the President of the United States, the negro is free and must be dealt with as such.”²¹

Soon after, on February 2, 1865, Brigadier General Rufus B. Saxton traveled to Savannah to hold a meeting at the Second African Baptist Church to announce the order. “The pews, in the body of the house were filled. The galleries presented a sable cloud of faces. Seats were placed in the aisles, and every seat in the house was occupied, and there was still a crowd at the door anxious to obtain an entrance.”²² Throngs of newly freed people filled the church as the organ played at “the first meeting ever held in Savannah having in view the exclusive interests of the colored people.”²³ Even the balcony was tightly packed with men and women eager to hear what General Saxton and Reverend Mansfield French—a civilian missionary to the South Carolina Sea Islands—had to say.

General Saxton began, “I have come to tell you what the President of the United States has done for you.”²⁴ In the familiar call and response common to African American churches, the thousand voices in the crowd responded, “God bless Massa Linkum!” Saxton continued, “You are all free.” Again, the crowd erupted with exclamations of support for the speaker.²⁵

¹⁹ “Sherman Meets the Colored Ministers.”

²⁰ Bryant, “We Defy You,” 166.

²¹ Special Field Order, no. 15. www.freedmen.umd.edu/sfo15.htm; O. O. Howard, “The Freedmen during the War,” *The New Princeton Review* 2 (November 1886): 239.

²² *Savannah Daily Herald*, February 3, 1865.

²³ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 420.

²⁴ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 420.

²⁵ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 420.

Saxton explained the meaning of Sherman's order. He told his eager audience how the people at Beaufort and on the Sea Islands had prospered in the two years since white slaveholders fled and the US Army took control of the territory. Saxton encouraged the crowd to take full advantage of the opportunity to claim their own plots of land under the order. He concluded by reminding the assembly that "they owe[d their] liberty to the men of the North, to President Lincoln, to the thousands who have died,—to Jesus Christ."²⁶ The crowd responded with a loud and solemn, "Amen."²⁷

As the meeting drew to a close, Reverend Ulysses Houston, who attended the conference with Stanton and Sherman, led the congregation in prayer.²⁸ He earnestly prayed that the men of the Confederacy, the "Rebels," would lay down their weapons and halt their rebellion against the United States.²⁹ Afterwards, Houston visited the man who had recorded these events for posterity. Houston sat with journalist Charles Carleton Coffin and shared the story of his life.³⁰

Houston was born in 1824. As a young boy, his enslaver hired him out. He worked at the Marine Hospital waiting on sailors who, in return, taught him to read. Houston loved to read and would read any newspaper, Bible, or book that he could obtain. As an enslaved man, he had few outlets for his education. So, his natural path for learning and leadership was through the church. As he matured, he reached an agreement with his enslaver to hire out his own time. For the sum of fifty dollars a month, he leased himself from the white man who legally owned him and made a life for himself in the city of Savannah.³¹

Houston leased the lower floor of the Montmollin slave market, where he ran a butcher shop.³² His work as a business owner enabled him to travel to purchase livestock that he butchered and sold in his shop. As a result, he was well acquainted with many people and acquired information on current political events. Houston told Coffin of how he had hoped for Republican John C. Fremont to be elected in 1856 because he knew that Fremont opposed slavery.³³ Four years later, when Lincoln won the election, he must have been overjoyed.

Having spent many years just below the slave market, he opened up to Coffin about his experiences. He paced the room and wiped tears from his eyes as he spoke:

²⁶ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 422.

²⁷ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 422.

²⁸ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 422.

²⁹ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 422.

³⁰ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 423.

³¹ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 423.

³² Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 423. The building where Houston operated his business currently houses Wild Wing Café.

³³ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 424.

Iniquity was at its height when the war began, and it continued till General Sherman came. O, it was terrible! terrible! to be there in that room on the lower floor, and see the hundreds taken out,—to see them nabbed in the streets, or taken from their beds at dead of night by the sheriff, and sold at once; for since the war began white men have been obliged often to raise money suddenly, and slave property being especially insecure, we were liable to be sold at any moment. Runaway slaves were whipped unmercifully. Last summer I saw one receive five hundred lashes out on the Gulf Railroad, because he couldn't give an account of himself. The man who kept the slave market left the city with a large number of slaves just before Sherman came, taking them South; but he is back in the city. He is a bitter old Rebel.³⁴

The two men talked late into the night. Houston had already planned for the implementation of the order. He had saved five hundred cowhides to sell. He intended to use the proceeds to buy lumber to build a community on Skidaway Island.³⁵

In March 1865, two months after Sherman's order, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—known simply as the Freedmen's Bureau—was established.³⁶ While its chief purpose was to give legal titles to forty-acre plots of land, it also effectively solved Sherman's problem of freed people trailing behind his army. By June, forty thousand families had settled on four hundred thousand acres.³⁷

In April 1865, five weeks after the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, DC. With his death and the ascension of Vice President Andrew Johnson to the presidency, the direction of the administration shifted. In the summer of 1865, Johnson restored the land that Special Order 15 had set aside for the newly freed people to their former owners—men who had only recently laid down their weapons against the Union.³⁸

By 1865, thousands of African Americans had lived as essentially free for nearly three full years. They had enrolled in schools to learn how to read and write. They had worked the land of former slaveholders under the supervision of federal officials. They had created their own households, free from the prying eyes of white overseers and masters. Some had donned the uniform of the US Army and Navy and shouldered weapons in defense of their country. African American soldiers and sailors had suffered the hardship of being separated from loved ones; some had been wounded, others killed. They had

³⁴ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 424–25.

³⁵ Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, 425. The events are also discussed in Foner, *Reconstruction*, 71.

³⁶ The Freedmen's Bureau stemmed from the results of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission created in 1863. On the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, see Foner, *Reconstruction*, 68–76.

³⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 71.

³⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 158–60.

sacrificed and served at times with no pay at all and, at others, with delayed and less pay than their white counterparts. Now the land that the government had promised them was being ripped away.

Seeing the situation, Aaron Alpeoria Bradley, a southern-born biracial lawyer who had run away to Massachusetts, urged Blacks to fight back.³⁹ Born into slavery near Augusta, Georgia, around 1815, Bradley had escaped to the North in the 1830s. There, he worked to educate himself and became a lawyer and a politician.⁴⁰ One of the few African American men to achieve this success, he was a man on a mission. Bradley was drawn to the coastal area and had settled in Savannah by 1865.⁴¹

As families were being evicted from land they had occupied for months, Bradley encouraged them to resist when the military came to force them out.⁴² In and around Savannah, he held rallies, taught school, and advocated for the rights of freed people. He circulated a petition demanding suffrage for African American men.⁴³ He promised to present it in Washington, although rumors abounded that he was paying people for their signatures. Bradley's fiery rhetoric calling for African American resistance made him a thorn in the side of white authorities, including the federal officers who had taken charge of Savannah after Sherman's arrival. In December 1865, he was arrested.⁴⁴ He was charged with using "insurrectionary language" and with defrauding those who had signed his petition.⁴⁵ He was tried by a military tribunal, where he presented his own defense.⁴⁶ In the end, he was sentenced to be confined at Fort Pulaski for a year.⁴⁷

Bradley only remained imprisoned at Fort Pulaski for twelve days before he was released.⁴⁸ He left the state temporarily, but he later returned, resumed his work, and continued to run afoul of authority. In the winter of 1868, he was elected as a delegate to, then quickly expelled from, Georgia's constitutional convention. Soon after, he was elected

³⁹ E. Merton Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley, Georgia Negro Politician during Reconstruction Times," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (March 1967): 15.

⁴⁰ According to Coulter, Bradley was never truly admitted to the bar, and might have pretended that he had been. He was officially stricken out of "roll of attorneys" in Massachusetts and in New York, after he was "convicted of seduction in Brooklyn." Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 16.

⁴¹ It is possible that Bradley came back to the South in 1861, upon the victory of the Union in Port Royal.

⁴² Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 18.

⁴³ Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 18.

⁴⁴ Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 18–19.

⁴⁵ Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 19.

⁴⁶ Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 18.

⁴⁷ Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 21.

⁴⁸ Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley," 21.

to, and again expelled from, the state senate.⁴⁹ In 1875, he was disbarred in Georgia.⁵⁰ In all three instances, newspapers reported that the actions were taken because of events from Bradley's past. He had been convicted of seduction (a felony) in New York in 1851. In 1856, he had been cited for contempt of court and disbarred for malpractice in Massachusetts. Despite expulsion and disbarment, Bradley continued to speak out for the rights of African Americans and had a large following in Savannah. Yet he was still controversial, drawing criticism from all sides: whites and African Americans, his fellow Republicans as well as Democrats.⁵¹ For whites throughout the nation, he became an example of an "uppity Negro"—an educated, articulate African American who dared to advocate for racial and economic justice.

Aaron Alpeoria Bradley's brief incarceration on Cockspur marked a new phase in Fort Pulaski's history. As Sherman marched through Georgia in 1864, emancipation became reality for the state's enslaved population and the fort was no longer needed as a waystation on the Underground Railroad. In the spring of 1865, as the war drew to a close and the Confederacy collapsed, the fort's role as a military installation also diminished. Garrisoned by troops from the 103rd Regiment of the USCT in 1865 until they were mustered out of service in the spring of 1866, the fort began to be used as a prison.⁵² The transition began in October 1864, when a group of Confederate officers, who were prisoners of war, were transferred to Fort Pulaski. They were sent elsewhere by the spring of 1865, but their stay there demonstrated the facility's usefulness for imprisonment. The walls were thick and sturdy and the fort's location on a tiny island offered limited opportunities for escape. In 1868, the fort became the center of a controversy surrounding the treatment of prisoners housed there as they awaited trial in a murder case that grew out of the racial tensions stemming from Reconstruction.⁵³

⁴⁹ E. Merton Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley, Georgia Negro Politician during Reconstruction Times," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (June 1967): 154; *Edgefield (SC) Advertiser*, February 19, 1868; *Selma (AL) Times and Messenger*, April 30, 1868; *Fairfield (SC) Herald*, September 23, 1868.

⁵⁰ E. Merton Coulter, "Aaron Alpeoria Bradley, Georgia Negro Politician during Reconstruction Times Part III," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (September 1967): 297; *New York Times*, February 2, 1875.

⁵¹ For examples of Bradley's national notoriety, see *Vicksburg Herald*, September 17, 1868; *Chicago Evening Post*, February 17, 1868; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 6, 1867; *Lincoln County (TN) News*, July 25, 1868.

⁵² Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword*, 490.

⁵³ Elizabeth Otto Daniell, "The Ashburn Murder Case in Georgia Reconstruction, 1868," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 296–312.

The Case of George Ashburn

With the end of the war, the men who had fought for the Confederacy returned home. Although most of them pledged the oath of allegiance to the United States in order to reclaim confiscated property, retain their weapons, and vote, bitterness over their defeat and the ruin that the war had wrought lingered. For many white southerners, the postwar South seemed like a world turned upside down. Those who had been enslaved were now free; those who had been accustomed to wealth, power, and privilege now struggled. In this vastly changed social landscape, the racism that had undergirded slavery thrived. Most whites grudgingly accepted the end of slavery, but many refused to accept African Americans as their equals and were determined to keep the people they had once enslaved in a subordinate status. Their willingness to use any means necessary—including violence—to deny freed men and women the full rights and privileges of citizenship led to the formation of the Ku Klux Klan in 1865.⁵⁴

On March 21, 1868, KKK grand wizard and former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest traveled to Columbus to meet with the Georgia chapter of the Klan.⁵⁵ Only a few nights later, on March 30, 1868, a group of men, described in some accounts as wearing disguises and in others as wearing masks, murdered a white southerner, George Ashburn, in the boarding house where he lived.⁵⁶ Ashburn was a Scalawag; he had opposed secession, had served in the Union Army, and was now active in the Republican Party. Furthermore, he had advocated on behalf of freed people.⁵⁷ Earlier that evening, he had attended a racially integrated political meeting where he both listened and spoke. Columbus Klansmen were determined to make him pay and to put an end to his treasonous political career.

Ashburn's murder shocked Columbus citizens and attracted attention outside the city. An African American woman at the boarding house at the time of the murder saw one of the assailants with his mask off, and gave a statement pointing the finger at one of Columbus's prominent white citizens. She later recanted, most likely in fear for her own

⁵⁴ On the history of the Ku Klux Klan and violence in Reconstruction, see David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865–1965* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965); Foner, *Reconstruction*, 342–44, 425–44; Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

⁵⁵ The Georgia Klan was very active between 1867 and 1869. Members beat or killed missionaries, white sympathizers, and Black activists alike to reinstate white supremacy; see Foner, *Reconstruction*, 426–41.

⁵⁶ Daniell, “The Ashburn Murder Case,” 297, 300.

⁵⁷ Daniell, “The Ashburn Murder Case,” 297–98.

life. General George Meade, commander of the Third Military District of Georgia, sent representatives to oversee the investigation, imposed martial law, and removed the mayor of Columbus.⁵⁸

Nine men suspected of killing George Ashburn were transported to Fort Pulaski for interrogation and incarceration.⁵⁹ As the investigation progressed, reports began circulating in Georgia newspapers that the suspects had been tortured.⁶⁰ These stories alleged that the detectives, with the military's blessing, forced the suspects into steam boxes where they endured hours of high temperatures and tight compression on their bodies. In addition, the prisoners complained of bad food and of being housed in cramped cells with poor ventilation.⁶¹ An African American prisoner named John Wells vouched for this version of the interrogation.⁶²

General Meade insisted that the suspects had not been tortured, although he conceded that detectives had shaved the men's heads and blindfolded them during the interrogation.⁶³ While Meade vehemently denied the allegations of torture on these suspects, he did not deny that torture existed at Fort Pulaski at all.⁶⁴

The murder suspects' stay on Cockspur was brief; the prisoners were soon transferred to McPherson Barracks in Atlanta. But questions surrounding their treatment at the time of their incarceration continued to be intertwined with the investigation of the crime. Their trial, begun by a military tribunal, ended before a verdict was reached. Civilian authorities never filed charges in the case and thus no one was ever convicted for George Ashburn's murder.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ "The Murder of George W. Ashburn of Georgia," *New York Times*, April 6, 1868; Tom Huntington, *Searching for George Gordon Meade: The Forgotten Victor of Gettysburg* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2013), 360.

⁵⁹ Daniell, "The Ashburn Murder Case," 304.

⁶⁰ *New York Times*, July 21, 1868; *Daily Columbus Enquirer*, July 17, 1868.

⁶¹ Daniell, "The Ashburn Murder Case," 304.

⁶² *The Southern Watchman*, June 24, 1868; *Charleston Daily News*, July 16, 1868; *The Daily Phoenix*, July 19, 1868.

⁶³ George Gordon Meade, *Major General Meade's Report on the Ashburn Murder* (Atlanta: Judge Advocate's Office, Headquarters Department of the South, 1868), 34.

⁶⁴ Meade, *Report on the Ashburn Murder*, 37.

⁶⁵ While the trial was underway, the Georgia legislature ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. Under the terms of the Military Reconstruction Act, adoption of the amendment ended military rule and returned the state to civilian authority, so General Meade ordered the trial to halt. Daniell, "The Ashburn Murder Case," 309.

Cockspur and Fort Pulaski in the 1870s and 1880s

In the 1870s, African Americans continued to live on Cockspur Island and at Fort Pulaski. In contrast to the lack of documentation created before the Civil War, a record was kept of the residents' names, ages, familial connections, and occupations during Reconstruction. In the 1870 US Federal Census, a number of African Americans can be found living among the hundreds of white soldiers still garrisoned at the Fort.⁶⁶

Colonel Robert Howard, who commanded the fort, lived with his wife and three children at Fort Pulaski. Their household employed Hannah Brown, a thirty-five-year-old African American woman, as a cook, along with her young son Henry as a domestic laborer. The post's other colonel, Dunbar Ransom, and his wife Helen also employed an African American cook named Kate Pinkney. Sallie Wade cooked for the family of Captain Charles Humphries. Phoebe Miller and Susan Ruffin helped cook for the enlisted men. Miller was sixty, and Ruffin was twenty-four.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ "United States Census, 1870," database with images, *FamilySearch*, June 10, 2019, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-682S-LWR?cc=1438024&wc=KGQL-K68%3A518665401%2C519038601%2C519048801>, Georgia > Chatham > Fort Pulaski and Cockspur Island > image 1 of 5; citing NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

⁶⁷ "United States Census, 1870," database with images, *FamilySearch*, June 10, 2019, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-682S-LWR?cc=1438024&wc=KGQL-K68%3A518665401%2C519038601%2C519048801>, Georgia > Chatham > Fort Pulaski and Cockspur Island > image 1 of 5; citing NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

Fort Pulaski after the War

5th Dist.

Page No. 321

Inquiries numbered 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 20 are to be answered (if at all) merely by an affirmative mark, as follows:—

SCHEDULE 1.—Inhabitants in Fort Pulaski & Cockspur Island, in the County of Chatham, State of Georgia, enumerated by me on the 15th day of August, 1870.

Post Office: Savannah James W. Blawie, Ass't Marshal. 230

1	2	3	4			7	8		10	11		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
			4	5	6		8	9		11	12								
1	Marideth W.	24	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			Indiana										1
2	Mason Joseph	28	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			Norway	1	1								2
3	Peterson Math	27	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			Ohio										3
4	Pierce Samuel	25	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			Missouri										4
5	Leah George	26	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			Ireland	1	1								5
6	Kanich Edward	25	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			Russia	1	1								6
7	Snider John R.	24	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			Ohio										7
8	Spaulding Henry	24	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			New York										8
9	Spaulding Samuel	19	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			St. Helena										9
10	Scappellato Angelo	25	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.		25	Denmark	1	1								10
11	Galbraith 24	P	W			Samuelson U.S.A.			Ireland	1	1								11
12	Jeans Emma	23	P	W		Samuelson U.S.A.		25	Florida					1	1				12
13	Cart Katherine E.	19	P	W		Samuelson U.S.A.			North Island										13
14	Bevila 1	P	W						Georgia						1	1			14
15	Montague Sarah	24	P	W		Samuelson U.S.A.		125	Massachusetts										15
16	Annex 31	P	W			Samuelson U.S.A.			Georgia										16
17	Annex A 27	P	W						Pa						1	1			17
18	Samuelson Margaret	40	P	W		Samuelson U.S.A.			Scotland	1	1								18
19	Mathew Phoby	60	P	B		Coon		35	St. Helena					1	1				19
20	Kiffin Susan	24	P	B		Coon		25	St. Helena					1	1				20
21	Coon Robert C.	23	M	W		Soldier U.S.A.			New York					1	1			1	21
22	29773011	Bayne James	40	M	B		Farmer	50	Georgia					1	1			1	22
23	— Lucy	42	P	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				23
24	— John	11	M	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				24
25	— Wiley	9	P	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				25
26	— Sus	7	M	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				26
27	— Delia	4	P	B					Pa					1	1				27
28	— Meliah	2	P	B					Pa					1	1				28
29	29773012	Green Richard	38	M	B		Farmer	52	Pa					1	1			1	29
30	— Abby	37	P	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				30
31	— Cuff	10	M	B					Pa					1	1				31
32	— Maria	7	M	B					Pa					1	1				32
33	— Jeff	2	P	B					Pa					1	1				33
34	— Margaret	12	M	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				34
35	29773013	Manning Alice	40	M	B		Farmer	50	Pa					1	1			1	35
36	— Adeline	42	P	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				36
37	— Amelia	13	P	B		Farmer			Pa					1	1				37
38	— John	9	M	B					Pa					1	1				38
39	— Jane	9	M	B					Pa					1	1				39
40	— Mallic	5	P	B					Pa					1	1				40

No. of dwellings: 16
 No. of white males: 13
 No. of colored males: 10

Figure 12.2. 1870 US Census

“United States Census, 1870,” database with images, FamilySearch, June 10, 2019, [181](https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33HT-682S-LWR?cc=1438024&wc=KGQL-K68%3A518665401%2C519038601%2C519048801, Georgia > Chatham > Fort Pulaski and Cockspur Island > image 1 of 5; citing NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).</p>
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Three Black families cultivated the land to provide supplemental food to those inside the fort. The Bryan family, led by Sambo and Lucy, farmed. Three of their children, John, Miley, and Gus, aged eleven, nine, and seven respectively, helped them till the ground and harvest the crop. Two younger children, Delia and Milish, were not quite old enough to help with the work. The Grover family of Richard and Abby had two sons and one daughter. Their three children, Cuff, Mars, and Dell, did not work. The Mangum family of Alic and Adaline also farmed. Richard and Amelia, their twelve-year-old son and daughter who were born less than twelve months apart, labored with them. They also had three younger children. John and Lewis were nine-year-old twins. Mollie was five.⁶⁸

There is very little detail about these families in the historical record; other than that, in 1870, they lived and worked on Cockspur. We do not know where they came from beyond their place of birth recorded in the census or where they went later; by 1880, they were no longer on the island.⁶⁹ We don't know exactly where they lived or whether they owned or leased the land they farmed. Yet they, like so many anonymous African Americans who came before them, played a significant role in the history of the fort. As we have seen, throughout its existence the fort relied on the labor of African Americans who performed tasks essential to survival and prosperity. Because the island is small, these families must have interacted with the soldiers from time to time, but we cannot determine the frequency or nature of these contacts.⁷⁰

Sergeant Stout and the Reporter: The *Atlanta Constitution* Writes about Fort Pulaski

After the last military units were withdrawn in the fall of 1873, the fort was staffed by a series of Ordnance Sergeants. John Martus is believed to have been the first of the Ordnance Sergeants. His daughter Florence became recognized by sailors worldwide as the Waving Girl.⁷¹ Once Martus retired, James Coleman became the Ordnance Sergeant. While he was at Fort Pulaski, Coleman reported two African American men for stealing a boat

⁶⁸ "United States Census, 1870," database with images, *FamilySearch*, June 10, 2019, [⁶⁹ The 1880 Census regroups "the Islands" together. None of the entries match those of 1870.](https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-682S-LWR?cc=1438024&wc=KGQL-K68%3A518665401%2C519038601%2C519048801, Georgia > Chatham > Fort Pulaski and Cockspur Island > image 1 of 5; citing NARA microfilm publication M593 (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).</p></div><div data-bbox=)

⁷⁰ During the 1870s and 1880s, Fort Pulaski again became a destination for fun, sightseeing, picnics, and concerts for people sailing from Savannah. Before the Civil War, African Americans boarded these pleasure cruises as servants for the white people who came to enjoy the coastal site. But during the 1870s and 1880s, African Americans were able to charter their own cruises and enjoy Fort Pulaski for themselves.

⁷¹ There is a historical marker celebrating the history of the Waving Girl. See https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_ghm_the-waving-girl.

from the island. Primus Singleton and Lindsey Richardson were tried for the crime. Singleton received a year in prison, as he was believed to be the ringleader of the crime. Richardson testified against his partner and received a lighter sentence.⁷²

By 1887, Coleman had been replaced by Albert Stout, who was likely the first African American appointed as caretaker of Fort Pulaski.⁷³ When he took over as Ordnance Sergeant, the fort had been all but abandoned for fourteen years and had fallen into disrepair. In 1891, the *Atlanta Constitution* took notice and published a tongue-in-cheek perspective of the decay of Fort Pulaski. Rather than blaming the government for its neglect or pointing out that there was little room in the budget for staff or improvements, the reporter poked fun at the Ordnance Sergeant. The article, which reveals as much about its author's attitudes as it does about the state of the fort, has been included in its entirety in Appendix D.⁷⁴

The exchange that concluded the article encapsulated tensions in race relations in the postwar South. The reporter believed that Sergeant Stout was negligent for not clearing brush—a job that whites still relegated to African Americans.⁷⁵ But the sergeant was unfazed. He quietly but firmly asserted that the color of his skin was less important than his rank. He had been assigned as the noncommissioned officer in charge of the fort, and he felt that manual labor was not his job. He had no staff to supervise in maintaining the property since the army had abandoned the fort. A career soldier since 1864, Stout had undoubtedly encountered racism throughout his time in the army and had learned to remind others that he was assigned the same duties and enjoyed the same privileges as anyone else of the same rank. We can infer that the reporter was taken aback by Stout's answer. We also detect racial stereotyping in his reference to the sergeant's "lazy, lonesome life," but we cannot know if he would have posed the question in the same way if the caretaker had been white.⁷⁶

The article also reveals the lens through which white Southerners viewed and interpreted their own history. For the reporter, Fort Pulaski's moment of glory was the brief period of Confederate occupation, "the time when brave men in gray garrisoned this fort, when the dead guns of today were alive in defense of the homes of those who manned them."⁷⁷ In 1891, Confederate monuments were beginning to appear throughout the South

⁷² *Savannah Morning News*, November 30, 1886.

⁷³ "Official Business, The Army: Changes of Station," *The Public Review* 1, no. 3 (May 19, 1887): 140.

⁷⁴ *Atlanta Constitution*, June 14, 1891.

⁷⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*, June 14, 1891.

⁷⁶ *Atlanta Constitution*, June 14, 1891.

⁷⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*, June 14, 1891.

and the myth of an idealized “Lost Cause” was taking hold in the popular imagination.⁷⁸ For decades to come, white Georgians in general and Savannahians in particular would claim the fort as a symbol of Confederate resolve in the face of overwhelming odds. They glossed over the fact that the “gallant colonel” Charles Olmstead, who declared that he was “here to defend the fort, not surrender it,” did in fact surrender it, unable to counter the US Army’s technological superiority. Instead of being a bulwark of Confederate strength, Fort Pulaski demonstrated the South’s military weakness.

The emphasis on Fort Pulaski’s brief period as a Confederate post also overlooked—as did Lost Cause mythology in general—the fact that African Americans were southerners too, and that no history of the South can be complete without the inclusion of their stories. The portrait of Fort Pulaski as a Confederate fortress that prevailed in the *Constitution* reporter’s mind, and in the minds of many others, obscured its significance in the story of enslavement and emancipation. As we have seen, the US Army relied on enslaved men as it constructed the fort, and Confederates relied on slave labor as they prepared to defend it. After the fort was reclaimed by the Union, it became a destination for African Americans seeking to escape slavery, and it was the place where, in April 1862, two enslaved African Americans were freed by order of a Union general, probably the first enslaved people in Georgia to be emancipated by federal authority. Fort Pulaski was not only the scene of a military struggle between North and South; it was also a significant site in the larger struggle between slavery and freedom.

Ordnance Sergeant William Chinn

Sometime between 1891 and 1894, a new Ordnance Sergeant was assigned to Fort Pulaski. Like Stout, William Chinn—who was sometimes called Charles Chinn—was African American. He lived at Fort Pulaski along with his wife Sallie. Sallie’s mother, Mary Washington, was visiting the fort with “another relative” at the time of the events.⁷⁹

Perhaps Olympian and author James Brendan Connolly had Chinn in mind when he described the caretaker of Fort Pulaski in his novel, *Jeb Hutton: The Story of a Georgia Boy*, published in 1902. Connolly had worked at the US Army Corps of Engineers in Savannah and had drawn upon his experience there for his fictional story. He wrote:

⁷⁸ In 1875, the city of Savannah dedicated a memorial in Forsyth Park to the Confederate soldiers who had died in the Civil War. The monument is the oldest Confederate monument in Georgia. On the history of the Lost Cause, see Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865–1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*.

⁷⁹ The event made the news nationally, hitting major and local outlets. For examples, see *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 21, 1894; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 21, 1894; *Iron County Register*, July 26, 1894; *Berkshire Eagle*, July 21, 1894; *Chicago Tribune*, July 21, 1894.

Fort Pulaski, a roomy, eight-sided, stone and brick structure, that had been built in Van Buren's administration, at a cost of one million dollars, was in the official keeping of a sergeant of ordnance, a tall, well-built negro, who carried a distinguishing Indian bullet in his left leg, which was slightly out of plumb on that account, and always ready to remind him by its twining that he was once a man of war. He dwelt within the fort, in the southwesterly corner, where his quarters were abutted on one side by a casemate, used as a general storeroom, and on the other side by the magazine, in which lay dormant five tons or so of powder in kegs.⁸⁰

On the morning of July 20, 1894, Chinn had breakfast with his family, then went to work in one of the storerooms. The mosquitoes along the coast in Georgia were fierce in the summertime and Chinn hoped to keep them at bay while he worked.⁸¹ He took a little powder from one of the kegs, put it in the middle of the room, and lit it. Chinn expected that the mosquitoes would leave to avoid the smoke, so that he could work in peace.⁸²

Unfortunately, Chinn was a little careless and somehow left a small trail of powder back to the keg. When he lit the powder in the center of the room, the trail ignited, and he tried to escape. He told his rescuers that the force from the explosion knocked him down three times before he could get to the door.⁸³ Mary, his mother-in-law, was on her way to the room to ask to borrow one of his tools. Four hundred pounds of loose powder exploded just as she reached the doorway.⁸⁴ Mary was thrown about fifty feet by the blast. Though he was badly burned and had been "knocked down three times in his effort to reach the door," Chinn managed to walk to the foreman's office where he knew that he would find a medicine chest. From there, he was carried on a cot to the wharf. The quarantine officer, Dr. J. B. Graham, who was present at Fort Pulaski that day, provided immediate medical attention to Chinn.

When people in Savannah heard the explosions, they immediately sent a boat out to the fort. Dr. Graham had treated both victims. Chinn and Washington were both taken to Savannah for further treatment. While Washington was expected to make a full recovery, multiple newspapers predicted that Chinn would die due to the severity of his burns.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ James Brendan Connolly, *Jeb Hutton: The Story of a Georgia Boy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 171.

⁸¹ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 21, 1894.

⁸² *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 21, 1894.

⁸³ *Savannah Morning News*, July 21, 1894.

⁸⁴ *Savannah Morning News*, July 21, 1894.

⁸⁵ *Savannah Morning News*, July 21, 1894.

Connolly included the explosion in his novel, *Jeb Hutton*. In his rendering, Jeb and his friend Kelly, employed by the Corps of Engineers, were working at Fort Pulaski at the time of the explosion and acted heroically.⁸⁶ They dug the sergeant out from the rubble and carried him to the wharf, then reassured the wife and mother-in-law that all would be well, as they sat in the ruins of their quarters at the fort.

The editors of the *Savannah Morning News* took the occasion to rehash the history of Fort Pulaski—but only the part of the history that would resonate with their readers.⁸⁷ Once again, they described how the proud men of Savannah snatched the fort from the Union when Georgia seceded. Once again, they praised Colonel Olmstead’s refusal to surrender. And once again, they glossed over the fact that in the end, the Union retook the fort and the Confederate defenders ended up as captured prisoners of war.⁸⁸ It was Savannah’s version of the Battle of the Alamo, only without the grisly martyrdom at the end—a tale of heroism to be recounted again and again, omitting the inconvenient detail that the heroes were on the losing side.

By the following summer in 1895, Sergeant Chinn had recovered and was back at Fort Pulaski.⁸⁹ The government had made a small but significant improvement to the fort. Under Chinn’s direction, a new flagpole had been installed. For the first time in over eighteen years, the flag of the United States flew above the fort again.⁹⁰ In 1897, Chinn decided to retire. The army secured a berth on the train for him to travel from Savannah to Fort McPherson in Atlanta to complete the paperwork. The ticket agent looked Sergeant Chinn in the face and told him that people of color could not ride in a sleeper car, nor in a car with white people.⁹¹

When Chinn woke up the next morning, he was told by the porter that the newspaper had written about the agent’s refusal to give him the ticket that the army had secured for him. He was later interviewed by the newspaper reporter who inquired about his side of the story. He told the newspaper that “the railroad people [told me] that I could not ride in a sleeper with the whites, and that they couldn’t afford to run a sleeper for me. They offered me a berth in a sleeper if I would charter the whole car and also pay for the eighteen berths. But I didn’t feel like paying out so much money for a sleeper.”⁹²

⁸⁶ Connolly, *Jeb Hutton*, 200.

⁸⁷ *Savannah Morning News*, July 21, 1894.

⁸⁸ *Savannah Morning News*, July 21, 1894.

⁸⁹ *Savannah Morning News*, August 6, 1895.

⁹⁰ *Savannah Morning News*, August 6, 1895.

⁹¹ *Savannah Morning News*, March 31, 1897; *Savannah Morning News*, April 1, 1897; *Savannah Morning News*, April 6, 1897.

⁹² *Savannah Morning News*, April 2, 1897.

Chinn's experience with the ticket agent was typical for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Just a year earlier, the United States had set forth the "separate but equal" doctrine in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*.⁹³ Even though he wore the uniform of the US Army, in the eyes of the law, the color of his skin mattered more than his service to his country. Sergeant Chinn completed his paperwork and retired. He moved with Sallie and Mary to Virginia, where he lived the rest of his life.

There is a coda to Chinn's story. Chinn was born in Lexington, Kentucky. In the 1850 census, he and his family were listed as free inhabitants of Kentucky, and there is no indication of their color. This may indicate that Chinn was biracial. There was another Chinn family in Kentucky, a white one. Lieutenant Addison Ball "A. B." Chinn was born near William Chinn and was about the same age. While Sergeant Chinn chose to enlist with the Union, Lieutenant Chinn served on the Confederate side and was captured in battle. In 1864, he was one of the "Immortal 600" Confederate prisoners of war transferred to Fort Pulaski.⁹⁴ He spent a miserable, freezing, starving winter there before he was paroled in the spring of 1865. The irony of the two Chinns—likely connected, both from Kentucky, one white, the other black, both of them at Fort Pulaski at different times—is a unique one. One served time as a prisoner for participating in a rebellion. The other was the officer in charge of the fort after it had outlived its usefulness to the military.⁹⁵

By 1910, Fort Pulaski no longer had an Ordnance Sergeant or a representative from the military residing on site. Instead, the lighthouse keeper and the quarantine officer lived on Cockspur, along with a few support staff, some accompanied by their wives. Six African Americans lived on Cockspur, equally split between three occupations. Two of them cooked, two did odd jobs, and two worked as attendants at the quarantine station. Three years later, this skeleton crew shrank even further when an "inspection reported the lighthouse keeper had vacated the reservation, which left the fort without a caretaker."⁹⁶

⁹³ Harvey Fireside, *Separate and Unequal: Homer Plessy and the Supreme Court Decision That Legalized Racism* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004).

⁹⁴ J. Ogden Murray, *The Immortal Six Hundred: A Story of Cruelty to Confederate Prisoners of War* (Roanoke: Stone Printing and Manufacturing Co., 1911), 346.

⁹⁵ See www.findagrave.com/memorial/46902544/addison-ball-chinn. Note that a family member of Chinn also researched his great-grand-uncle: <https://geneanotes.blogspot.com/2011/09/part-rant-part-brag.html?m=0>.

⁹⁶ J. Faith Meader and Cameron Binkley, eds., *Fort Pulaski National Monument Administrative History* (Atlanta: Cultural Resources Division, Southeast Regional Office, National Park Service, 2003), 15.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY AND RECONSTRUCTION

Education

While some African Americans in Savannah had escaped to the Sea Islands during the Civil War, most remained behind, waiting for the change in status promised by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.¹ When General William T. Sherman's army rode into the city in December 1864, the more prominent and educated members of the African American community began to make plans.

During Reconstruction, education was a priority in Black communities. Georgia lawmakers, like their counterparts across the South, had made little effort to establish public schools for white children, let alone to fund education for African American children.² Black community leaders knew that if they wanted schools to educate their people, they would have to organize them themselves.

On January 1, 1865, crowds of people gathered at the First African Baptist Church. The sanctuary was packed to capacity; the pews were filled with people eager to discuss the establishment of schools. Hundreds more waited outside as the discussions began. At the meeting, the community formed the Savannah Educational Association and elected James Lynch, William Campbell, J. Brown, and Charles Bradwell to serve on the executive committee.³ John Cox was appointed as chair and James Porter as secretary. Most of the men who formed the association's executive board were ministers or active members of Savannah Black churches. During slavery, churches had been a focal point for the African American community and a training ground for leaders; after emancipation, the churches continued to serve those functions.

¹ For statistics about the community, see John W. Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto: The Making of the Black Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865–1880," *Journal of Social History* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1973): 463–88.

² On African Americans' fight for education, see Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*; Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 54–58, 62–77.

³ Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865–1873* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 73.

Soon after its creation, the Savannah Education Association launched a fundraiser. Within two weeks, they had collected \$800 and opened two schools.⁴ The first was the Bryan Free School, in the heart of the city, on the corner of Barnard and St. Julian Streets. In choosing this location, the board reckoned with the sordid history of slavery; the school was located in the Old Bryan Slave Mart.⁵ Now the newly freed children of Savannah could gather to learn in the same place where men, women, and children had previously been bought and sold like livestock. James Porter, the secretary of the association, served as principal at the Bryan Free School. A tailor by trade, Porter was not a newcomer to the field of education. He had clandestinely used his shop to break the law that prohibited anyone to teach Black people to read and write. A trapdoor in the floor secretly let the pupils hide in a closet when white customers entered the shop.⁶

The second school to be established, the Oglethorpe Free School, was located near the corner of Joachim and Farm Streets. Again, the location was significant as it was established in the building that had been used as a Confederate hospital during the Civil War. The *Savannah Republican* praised the work of its principal when it reported that “Louis B. Toomer and his able assistants, who despite all the obstacles, bitter prejudice, and opposition that has beset them, have continued in the good work of education.”⁷

In addition to these formally organized schools, individuals also operated private schools. Harriet Jacobs, who had famously escaped slavery and published her autobiography, traveled to Savannah in the early years of Reconstruction. For a brief time, both Jacobs and her daughter worked as teachers.⁸ Susie King Taylor also returned to the city where she had grown up to teach both children and adults in her little school. However, she could not compete with the more organized and larger schools for very long.⁹

Small or large, all of the schools faced the same problem; they lacked money. Before the end of 1865, African Americans in Savannah had given all that they could to support the Bryan and Oglethorpe schools. The American Missionary Association (AMA), a New York-based abolitionist association, stepped in to help the struggling Savannah Educational Association.¹⁰ Yet the AMA’s intervention was a mixed blessing. The

⁴ Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 73.

⁵ Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 73. The school is mentioned in the *Savannah Daily Herald* on March 20, 1865.

⁶ Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*. 164–65; Charles Lwanga Hoskins, *W. W. Law and His People: A Timeline and Biographies* (Savannah: Gullah Press, 2013), 45.

⁷ Cited in Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 172–73.

⁸ Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 190–94.

⁹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 53–55.

¹⁰ Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love*, 76; David Tyack and Robert Lowe, “The Constitutional Moment: Reconstruction and Black Education in the South,” *American Journal of Education* 94, no. 2 (February 1986): 236–56.

Association brought with it much-needed financial support; however, it also took away community control over the school system. To add insult to injury, the AMA assigned all white teachers, some northerners and some southerners, to the classrooms. When Beach Institute was constructed in 1867, Savannah's African American children had a modern new school to attend, yet only one African American had been hired to teach the students.¹¹

More than two decades after emancipation, Savannah became the home of the first public-funded Black college in Georgia. In 1890, the General Assembly chartered the Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth using funds from the Second Morrill Land Grant Act. Passed in 1862, the first Morrill Land Grant Act allowed states to set aside money from the sale of public federal lands to establish agricultural and mechanical colleges. The second land grant act, enacted in 1890, provided for the establishment of similar institutions in the former Confederate states, provided that the states did not deny admission on the basis of race. The Georgia State Industrial College opened its doors in Athens but was relocated in Savannah in October 1891.¹²

As Reconstruction ended and white southerners began to enact Jim Crow laws, African Americans in Savannah and the Lowcountry continued to prioritize education. The Beach Institute remained open until 1919 and the Georgia State Industrial School became the Savannah State University. For a century after the Civil War, African Americans continued to encounter "obstacles, bitter prejudice, and opposition." It took decades of persistent effort by African Americans as well as actions by the Supreme Court, Congress, and the president of the United States before Black communities began to have the same educational opportunities as white ones.

Zion Baptist Association

Before the Civil War, Savannah's African American Baptist churches belonged to the Sunbury Association along with the white churches. At the time, the Sunbury Association held the upper hand with the appointment, removal, and reappointment of ministers who occupied the pulpits in churches, such as the First African Baptist. In July 1865, all four African American Baptist churches in Savannah joined their sister churches in South Carolina and Florida in removing themselves from the Sunbury Association. Together, they

¹¹ Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 172–73.

¹² On the history of Savannah State College, see Charles J. Elmore, *Richard R. Wright, Sr., at GSIC, 1891–1921: A Protean Force for the Social Uplift and Higher Education of Black Americans* (Savannah: Privately printed, 1996); Clyde W. Hall, *One Hundred Years of Educating at Savannah State College, 1890–1990* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, 1991).

formed the Zion Baptist Association.¹³ This exodus sent a powerful message: white control over Black churches was no longer welcome. Much like those who had formed the little town of Mitchelville and, later, those who had claimed their forty acres, most newly freed people wished to put as much distance as they possibly could between themselves and their former enslavers.¹⁴

Banks and Newspapers

Churches and schools were not the only institutions where Savannah's freed people sought to exert independence. In 1866, the Freedmen's Savings and Trust opened a branch in Savannah.¹⁵ The churches of the Zion Baptist Association deposited funds at the bank, along with several local African American owned businesses. Control of the community's own money was important.

African Americans also wanted their own sources of information. James Meriles Sims, whose brother Thomas had famously escaped but had been returned to slavery in 1851, began publishing the *Southern Radical and Freedmen's Journal* in 1867. A year later, he renamed it the *Freemen's Standard*. Few issues have survived, and it is unclear how long the paper remained in business. In 1875, the *Colored Tribune* was established with John Deveaux as editor.¹⁶ Soon thereafter, its name was changed to the *Savannah Tribune*. The paper ceased publication in 1878 "because the printers in the city, all white, refused to produce it." It reopened in 1886 and has been published almost continuously ever since, except for another hiatus from 1960 to 1973.¹⁷

¹³ The Georgia Baptist Association Records are located at the Jack Tarver Library at Mercer University. Robert G. Gardner, et al., *A History of the Georgia Baptist Association, 1784–1984*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1996); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), <https://libraries.mercer.edu/research-tools-help/archives/association-convention-records-pdf>.

¹⁴ Lewis, *W. W. Law*, 46.

¹⁵ Carl B. Osthaus, *Freedmen, Philanthropy, and Fraud: A History of the Freedman's Savings Bank* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976). See also www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/freedmans-savings-and-trust.html.

¹⁶ Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto," 477.

¹⁷ William Robert Autrey, "The Negro Press—Southern Style Militancy: The *Atlanta Independent* and *Savannah Tribune*, 1904–1928" (master's thesis, Atlanta University, 1963); William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). On the *Tribune*, see also Michelle McLean-Mobley, "The *Savannah Tribune*: Completing the News for Savannah's African Americans, 1929–1941" (MA thesis, Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2008).

Another well-known African American newspaper has roots in Savannah. Robert Abbott, who founded the *Chicago Defender* in 1905, was born in Georgia in 1868.¹⁸ After his father died, his mother Flora married John Sengstacke. Sengstacke was a biracial man who grew up in Germany. His father Herman was a German sea captain who landed in Savannah in 1847. In the city, he saw a slave sale for the first time in his life and his stomach turned with repugnance. He decided to purchase a woman named Tama whom he married in Charleston. When Tama died after the birth of their second child, Sengstacke took their children to Germany, where he raised them as free people.¹⁹ When John Sengstacke returned to Savannah as an adult, he met and married Flora, Robert Abbott's mother. He established a church in Woodville and published the *Woodville Times*. As a grown man, Abbott moved to Chicago where he founded the nation's most popular Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*.

Abbott's nephew, John Herman Henry Sengstacke, was born and raised in Savannah.²⁰ From an early age, his uncle Robert took an interest in his education. Abbott mentored his young nephew and groomed him to follow in his footsteps at the *Chicago Defender*. When Abbott died in 1940, Sengstacke took the helm of the publication and expanded the company. He soon published the *Michigan Courier* in Detroit, the *Tri-City Defender* in Memphis, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. This rich addition to the texture of American culture originated in Savannah. These newspapers and Sengstacke himself were committed to illuminating the many inequalities that African Americans faced in society.²¹

Through the remainder of the 1800s, Savannah's African American community grew more educated, gained more household wealth, took control of its churches, and participated in the political arena. As Reconstruction ground to a halt in the late 1870s, state legislators began to push African Americans out of the political offices that they had gained. They also passed laws that enforced segregation, and beginning in the 1890s, Georgia and other southern states began enacting voting requirements designed to disfranchise African American voters. Despite the persecution, the Savannah community kept pushing for equality.

¹⁸ On Abbott, see Metz T. P. Lochard, "Phylon Profile, XII: Robert S. Abbott—Race Leader," *Phylon* 8, no. 2 (1947): 124–32; Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955).

¹⁹ Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 219.

²⁰ See the biographical note of the Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers at www.chipublib.org/fa-abbott-sengstacke-family-papers-2.

²¹ See the biographical note of the Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers at www.chipublib.org/fa-abbott-sengstacke-family-papers-2.

1888: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Emancipation

In 1888, twenty-five years after the celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation at Camp Saxton near Beaufort, Savannah's African American community organized its own commemoration. However, the tenor of the celebration had shifted perceptibly since that first joyful occasion. The day was marked by a parade that included both civic and militia organizations whose members marched through the streets to the site of the ceremony. Judge James Meriles Sims, who had purchased his own freedom and who had seen his brother risk his life to escape from slavery, read the proclamation.

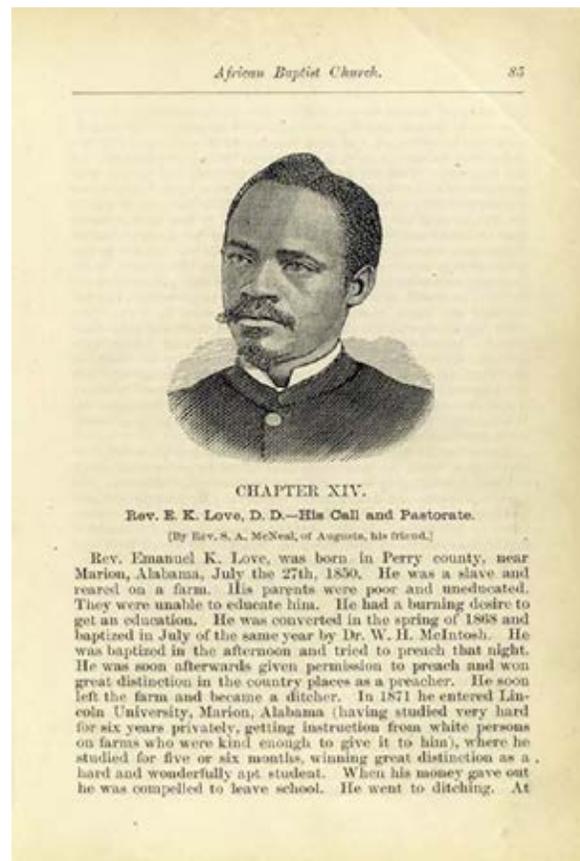


Figure 13.1. Reverend Emanuel King Love

Digital Collections, New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-7730-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>;
Emanuel King Love, *History of the First African Baptist Church, from Its Organization, January 10th, 1788, to July 1st, 1888: Including the Centennial Celebration, Addresses, Sermons, Etc.*, (Savannah: Morning News Print, 1888).

Reverend Emanuel K. Love, pastor of the First African Baptist Church, delivered the keynote address. “We are brought together today to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation. That was the greatest event that has occurred in our history of this country. In celebrating this day, we cannot help thinking of the dark past, survey the present and taking as best we can a peek into the future,” he began. While Love did not want to linger

on the past, he briefly remembered, "Slavery with all of its inhuman hardships, wounds, bruises, cowhides, bull-whips, patrols, and every course which the damnable system of slavery in this country had are forever gone. Fading away as the stars of the morning losing their light in the glorious day. . . . The mighty God said to the raging billow of slavery thus far shalt thou go. . . . and in 1865 there was a great calm of this troubled sea."²² Love emphasized that African Americans should be thankful that such a terrible time had passed. Yet, as he stood in front of the crowd that day, he felt angry, impatient, dissatisfied, and he offered a view of the president known as the Great Emancipator that challenged conventional wisdom:

Our people have learned to think that Abraham Lincoln was the greatest champion of our case. But such is not true. The thing that was uppermost in the mind of Mr. Lincoln was the salvation of the Union. So far as Mr. Lincoln was concerned the Emancipation Proclamation was purely a war measure—for he would 'save the Union with or without freeing the slaves.' From this single statement it must be clear to you that our freedom was not first in Mr. Lincoln's mind, yet I thank God for Mr. Lincoln, for his election which had much to do with kindling the fire between the two sections which resulted in a bloody war whose crimson stream washed away the black stain of slavery. I thank God for a Charles Sumner whose persistent efforts, sweeping influence, true patriotism, and far-seeing sagacity almost compelled Mr. Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation which we celebrate today. . . . I honor Mr. Lincoln but I honor Charles Sumner more.²³

Love then drove his point home even harder:

I thank God for that brave man and soldier Jeff Davis. I thank God for his election. Had the Southern Confederacy placed a coward at its head, we would not have been freed as the result of that four years of bloody war. If Jeff Davis had not been a brave, great man fighting from what he conceived to be a principle of right and justice (although he was wrong) he would have accepted Lincoln's offer of surrender in ninety days. If he had accepted, it is hard for me to see from a human standpoint how or when we would have been freed. . . . from my standpoint, for had Jeff Davis accepted [Lincoln's offer] I do not see how I could have been freed. The truth of it is that God was using both Abraham Lincoln and Jeff Davis to bring to light this child of freedom the birth of which we celebrate today.²⁴

Love's interpretation stands in sharp contrast to the Lost Cause mythology that was emerging among whites and that would dominate American history textbooks for most of the twentieth century. For him and for his audience, the "war between the states," as white

²² *Savannah Tribune*, January 7, 1888.

²³ *Savannah Tribune*, January 7, 1888.

²⁴ *Savannah Tribune*, January 7, 1888.

Southerners preferred to call it, had not been a constitutional crisis about state sovereignty; it was, instead, the painful but necessary crucible of liberty. He understood that without both Lincoln's dedication to preserving the Union and Davis's stubborn determination to tear it apart, African Americans would have remained enslaved much longer. Love also reminded them that full equality had yet to be achieved and he argued that the burden rested on Blacks themselves: "The Emancipation Proclamation . . . did not unlock the great house of honor, fame, wealth, culture, elevation, moral stamina, civil rights, social equality, nor respectability. This we must do for ourselves. . . . They must be dearly bought by diligent application to business, economy, truthfulness, soberness, honesty, and virtue. For the kingdom of prosperity, influence, elevation, culture and wealth 'suffereth violence and the violent take it by force.' Let us go up as a united army and take the city. God has willed it and it shall be ours."²⁵

The following year, Reverend Love received a grim lesson on the limits of emancipation. He and other ministers boarded a train from Savannah to Indianapolis to attend the National Convention of Coloured Baptists. To avoid the prevalent drinking and smoking in the smoker car, the preachers asked to be seated in the first-class coach. This displeased the white passengers, and word of the mixing of white and black men in first-class spread up the track. When the train pulled into Baxley, Georgia, a crowd of seventy-five armed and angry white men was waiting. They jumped on board, pulled the ministers out of the car, and beat them with clubs.²⁶

Bruised and bloody, Love managed to complete the trip to Indianapolis, where he stood at the convention to share what had happened to him. Love was often at odds with the more conservative African American leadership of his time. He abhorred the status quo. Instead, he pushed for the advancement of his people. He continued to crusade for equality until his death in 1900.

The First African Baptist Church, led by other pastors, continued to be at the forefront of the push for full equality. Other Savannah churches followed the same path. The church, from slavery, through Reconstruction and then Jim Crow, and into the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, held steady. It was the one constant—a place of both worship and community.

²⁵ *Savannah Tribune*, January 7, 1888.

²⁶ Thomas Lewis Johnson, *Born Three Times* (Chester: Anza Publishing, 2005), 130.

CONCLUSION

The research included in this study suggests a paradigm shift in the interpretation at Fort Pulaski. Although the occupation, siege, bombardment, and surrender during 1861 and 1862 comprise a significant chapter in military history and will always be of interest to visitors, the experiences of African Americans on Cockspur Island and at the fort illuminate an equally important aspect of our nation's past: the long journey of Blacks from slavery to freedom.

The larger story of the fort from the time of its construction through the mid-twentieth century encapsulates the experiences of African Americans in Georgia. Like many historic structures in the United States, it was built by enslaved people who received no compensation or recognition for their work, whose names have been lost to history. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Confederates seized Cockspur Island and forced enslaved people into the service of military fighting to keep them in bondage. Reclaimed by Union forces in 1862, the fort became an avenue to freedom for some, while Major General David Hunter's orders offered the promise to all African Americans in the Lowcountry that universal emancipation was at hand. After Reconstruction, the abandoned and decaying fort, staffed by a lone caretaker who lacked the authority and resources necessary for restoration, was a metaphor for the experiences of freed men and women who saw their bright hopes for freedom and equality crumble in the face of the oppression of Jim Crow. In the twentieth century, African Americans who worked on Cockspur once again labored in anonymity, and descendants of men and women who in the 1860s had found a refuge from slavery at Fort Pulaski were governed by the rules of segregation when they visited the park.

Placing African Americans front and center enables us to view the history of Fort Pulaski through a different lens. From the arrival of enslaved Africans on ships in the 1700s through the segregation of public facilities in the twentieth century, the larger experience of Blacks in America was replicated on tiny Cockspur Island. The Civil War was pivotal, both for the fort's future as an army post and for the Blacks who built and maintained it. The triumph of rifled artillery had a lasting impact on military strategy, while the Union victory opened new possibilities for African Americans and changed the dynamics of slavery in the Lowcountry. The transformation of Fort Pulaski from a Confederate trophy to a gateway to freedom was a portent of things to come. The fort should be remembered not only for its place in the history of weaponry and fortifications but also as a crucible for sweeping social change.

Recommendations for Further Studies

Specific Research Topics

103rd Regiment USCT

Pilots on Cockspur and Tybee

Domestic servants on Cockspur from the Civil War through the mid-twentieth century

Role of African Americans in the operation of lazaretto

African American excursions to Fort Pulaski in the twentieth century

Further research on the individuals identified in this study

General Research Suggestions

Sources at Georgia Historical Society, which was closed for renovations while we were conducting research

Sources related to contrabands and USCT at National Archives, Washington, DC

APPENDIX A

Frederick Law Olmstead

An Excerpt from *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*

SAVANNAH.

Savannah, which is but half a day's sail from Charleston, has, on the other hand, a curiously rural and modest aspect, for a place of its population and commerce. A very large proportion of the buildings stand detached from each other, and are surrounded by gardens, or courts, shaded by trees, or occupied by shrubbery. There are a great number of small public squares, and some of the streets are double, with rows of trees in the centre.

Charleston and Savannah are so easily accessible from the North, and are, in consequence, so much visited, and so much written about, that there is no occasion for me to particularly describe them, or their vicinity. Both towns are chiefly interesting from that in them which is indescribable, and which strangers cannot be expected to fully appreciate.

SLAVE-FUNERALS AND BURYING-GROUNDS.

I described a negro-funeral that I witnessed in Richmond, Va. In Charleston, I saw one of a very different character. Those in attendance were mainly women, and they all proceeded on foot to the grave, following the corpse, carried in a hearse. The exercises were simple and decorous, after the form used in the Presbyterian church, and were conducted by a well-dressed and dignified elderly negro. The women were generally dressed in white, and wore bonnets, which were temporarily covered with a kind of hood, made of dark cambric. There was no show whatever of feeling, emotion, or excitement. The grave was filled by the negroes, before the crowd, which was quite large, dispersed. Besides myself, only one white man, [406] probably a policeman, was in attendance. The burying-ground was a rough "vacant lot" in the midst of the town. The only monuments were a few wooden posts, and one small marble tablet.

While riding, aimlessly, in the suburbs of Savannah, on returning from a visit to the beautiful rural cemetery of the wealthy whites, which Willis has, with his usual facility and grace, a little over-pictured, I came upon a square field, in the midst of an open pine-wood, partially inclosed [*sic*] with a dilapidated wooden paling. It proved to be a grave-yard for the negroes of the town. Dismounting, and fastening my horse to a gate-post, I walked in, and found much, in the monuments, to interest me. Some of these were mere billets of wood, others were of brick and marble, and some were pieces of plank, cut in the ordinary form of tomb-stones. Many family-lots were inclosed [*sic*] with railings, and a few flowers

or evergreen shrubs had sometimes been planted on the graves; but these were broken down and withered, and the ground was overgrown with weeds and briars. I spent some time in examining the inscriptions, the greater number of which were evidently painted by self-taught negroes, and were curiously illustrative both of their condition and character. I transcribed a few of them as literally as possible, as follow:

Sacred to the memory
of Henry Gleve, He
died January 19, 1849
Age 44
[407]

BALDWING
In mem of Charles
who died NOV
20. THE 1846
aged 62 years. Blessed are the
dead who dieth
in the LORD
Even so said
the SPerit. For
the Rest From
Thair
[The remainder rotted off.]

DEAR
WIFE OF
JAMES DELBUG
BORN 1814 DIED 1852

In Memr
y of Ma
gare
-t. Born
August 29 and
died Oc
tober 29, 1852

[The following on marble.]

To record the worth and fidelity and virtue of Reynolds Watts, (who died on the 2d day of May 1829 at the age of 24 years, in giving birth to her 3d child). Reared from infancy by an affectionate mistress and trained by her in the paths of virtue, She was strictly moral in her deportment, faithful and devoted in her duty and heart and soul a [Sand drifted over the remainder.]

There were a few others, of similar character to the above, erected by whites to the memory of favorite servants. The following was on a large brick tomb: This tablet is erected to record the demise of Rev. HENRY CUNNINGHAM, Founder and subsequent pastor of the 2d African Church for 39 years, who yielded his spirit to its master the 29 of March 1842, aged 83 years.

[Followed by an inscription to the memory of Mrs. Cunningham.]

This vault is erected by the 2d African Church as a token of respect.

The following is upon a large stone table. The reader will observe its date; but I must add that, while in North Carolina, I heard of two recent occasions, in which public religious services and had been interrupted, and the preachers—very estimable colored men—publicly whipped.

Sacred to the memory of Andrew Brian pastor of 1st colored Baptist church in Savannah. God was Pleased to lay his honour near his heart and impress the worth and weight of souls upon his mind that he was constrained to Preach the Gospel to [dying] world, particularly to the sable sons of Africa. Though he labored under many disadvantage yet thought in the school of Christ, he was able to bring out new and old out of the treasury. And he has done more good among the poor slaves that all the learned Doctors in America. He was imprisoned for the Gospel without any ceremony was severely whipped. But while under the lash he told his prosecutor he rejoiced not only to be whipped but he was willing for to suffer death for the cause of CHRIST.

He continued preaching the Gospel until October 6, 1812. He was supposed to be 96. Years of age, his remains were interred with peculiar respect an address was delivered by the Rev. Mr Johnston Dr. Kolluck Thomas Williams & Henry Cunningham. He was an honour to human nature an ornament to religion and a friend to mankind. His memory is still precious in the (hearts) of the living.

Afflicted long he bore the rod
With calm submission to his maker God. [409]
His mind was tranquil and serene
No terrors in his looks as seen
A SAVIOURS smile dispelled the gloom
And smoothed the passage to the tomb.

“I heard a voice from Heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth! Yea saigh the Spirit that they may rest from the labours.”

Appendix A

“This stone is erected by the First Colored Church as a token of love for their most faithful pastor. A.D. 1821.”

Source

Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 405–10.

APPENDIX B

An Excerpt on March Haynes

He is a faithful officer and enjoys the entire confidence of the church and community. He enlisted in the late war on the Union side and did valiant service. He was active in putting many of his race over on the Union side, where they enjoyed freedom. He was a brave soldier. In attempting to get some of his people from Savannah over on the Yankee side he encountered the enemy, who commanded him and his faithful few to halt. This command was given to the wrong man. He was willing to meet death rather than obey that command. He knew it was death to obey and could but be death to disobey, hence the war began between them, in which he was terribly wounded. He made good his escape, however to the Union soldiers. He is still alive, but unable to work from the effects of the wound he received on that occasion. He is pensioned by the United States, but not near so much as he should be. He is a humble man, meek and full of faith, and is beloved by the entire church. He is one of the most polite men in the world. Whatever duty is assigned to his hands will be done with promptness and accuracy. There is not a deacon or a member connected with the church that has suffered more for his race than Deacon Haynes. He is a true man, and would have been a leader in any age and of any people. He is a natural detective, and as a shrewd man he has few equals. As a friend he is true, lasting and tender. He is forbearing and extremely kind, and is an honor to our church and our race. He loves to work for his Master, and, though wounded, always does his part. He is possessed of indomitable courage and great zeal, coupled with a clear judgement and profound discretion.

Source

E. K. Love, *History of the First Baptist Church, from Its Organization, January 20th, 1788 to July 1st, 1888* (Savannah: Morning News Print, 1888), 177–8)

APPENDIX C

Obituaries

Death of an Old-Time Negro—*Savannah Morning News* *Capt. March Haynes, Ex-Scout and Pilot, 90 Years Old*

March Haynes, one of the oldest and best known colored men of Savannah was buried yesterday from the First African Baptist Church. He was a pilot along the river and inland waters of the coast and followed that calling up to a short time before his death. He was a man of strong characteristics, and was trusted without reservation by his white friends. March was born a slave nearly ninety years ago, and belonged to the Waldburg family. He gained great notoriety as a Confederate scout and messenger during the first part of the war between the states. He was one of the men who kept up communication between the beleaguered Confederate garrison in Fort Pulaski and the city, when every foot of the marsh and river was covered by the patrols, sentinels and gunboats of the enemy. Before the close of the war, however, when the people were sending their servants to Southwest Georgia to avoid capture March took offense at something and went over with his family and all his belongings to the Federals at Hilton Head. At the close of the war he returned to Savannah and has since lived here. As evidence of how well he was thought of it is stated that some years ago March undertook a contract for ditching and employed a number of colored men to do the work. The work cost a great deal more than Haynes received for it and he could not pay his hands and they threatened him with violence. He was much distressed, not however, because he feared personal injury, but because he couldn't pay his debts. In this emergency his old-time white friends came forward to pay off his hands. He was a man of powerful frame and a remarkably striking face. The death of Captain March Haynes will be learned with sadness by many of the older generation who live in Savannah and along the coast.

Mr. Haynes' Death: An Old Respected and Reputable Citizen —*Savannah Tribune*

Mr. March Haynes, one of our old and most respected and trustworthy citizens died at his late residence on Friday of last week after several week's illness, being about 75 years of age. Mr. Haynes, or Capt. Haynes, as he was known among the craftsmen, was well known around our port and Florida and South Carolina, merited by the title of "Capt." from his practical knowledge of navigation, not only with the small crafts, but with the larger vessels of our port. During the late war he was quite a figure, being the mail carrier to and from Savannah to Fort Pulaski, which position he resigned of his own free will. While in this service he gained reputation and the confidence of the people regardless of race. After the

war Mr. Haynes lived at Port Royal and Hilton Head for a number of years; after which he returned to the city and followed his old profession as pilot, etc. In recent years he has had charge of the premises of Mr. Jacob Waldburg. Mr. Haynes as an active deacon of the First. A.B. church, Bolton and West Broad streets, Rev. M.J. Maddox, pastor. He was also an active member of Robert G. Shaw Post No. 8, G.A.R and other organizations. The funeral occurred from the church on Sunday afternoon, Rev. Alexander Harris officiation, assisted by Rev. Crolley of Asbury M.E. church. The Grand Army and the Chatham Light Infantry of which he was an honorary member, attended the funeral in a body. The pall bearers were Messrs. Isaac Cohen and Cyrus Robinson of the Grand Army, Dea. Linder of Beth-Eden church, Dea. Ranair of the 1st A.B., Mr. Joe Baker of the Chatham Light Infantry and Color Sergeant Carr. A wife and other relatives survive the deceased.

APPENDIX D

Sergeant Stout, the Solitary Occupant of Fort Pulaski— A Lonesome Life

Savannah, June 13—[Special]—Occasionally an opportunity is afforded to the public of visiting Fort Pulaski, once guardian of the entrance to the Savannah river but now valueless except as a teacher of what is forever past in warfare and as an historical relic.

These occasions are always taken advantage of by many of the survivors of those who held the fort when to be one of its guard meant something vastly different from the life of its present solitary occupant, Sergeant Stout.

Nominally, the colored sergeant is a guard stationed there by the government, in lieu of something more warlike for him to do, to protect its property from would-be robbers and vandals. What thing of value the former could carry away and what thing of value the latter could destroy, is enshrouded in too deep a mystery for the average visitor to solve.

There are cannons, to be sure, but as they weigh thousands of pounds it is not probable that they would be removed for plunder in a row boat. Descendants of Alaric in spirit might scribble their names upon the black globes that are piled in pyramids about the ramparts, or chip a piece of brick as a souvenir, but the old fort might as well go gradually in that way as by the ravages of time and the elements, the effects of which are plainly perceptible in every section of the great structure.

Evidently Sergeant Stout thinks work that is not purely military in its nature derogatory to a soldier's reputation. Still, the unkempt appearance of the fort adds materially to its picturesque interest. The cactuses that have found a lodging place in clefts in the bricks, and boldly shoot their ugly leaves skyward at an acute angle, serve to relieve the straight outlines and leave a more lasting and more favorable impression upon those who look upon it as much ruins, and would be disappointed if they found it in first-class order. As it is, there are many who are sorry and frankly confess it that the walls were ever repaired; that there are not huge breaches in them, and a little more air of romance enveloping the place. True, in places a few layers of brick are gone, and on top of the south-eastern wall there is a ragged opening in which a dozen may sit with ease, memento of the devastation of a bomb. True, the plastering has fallen in the quarters, leaving great red patches of brick, and the boilers and pumps have rusted to ruin. True, the tracks are hidden by vegetation, and the wheels of the half-dozen carriages that remain in position are immovable. True, the great iron cylinders, once harbingers of death, laying on the ground as useless as every anything was useless in the go-ahead world, day by day accumulating a little more rust, are only waiting for the time that may come when a secretary of war, swayed by utilitarian

motives will rob Pulaski of their eloquent presence. True it is that all attest the flight of years and whisper to minds that wander backward, memories of the stories heard and read of the time when brave men in gray garrisoned this fort, when the dead guns of today were alive in defense of the homes of those who manned them, when the gallant colonel, who still walks Savannah's streets, sent back the laconic reply, "I'm here to defend the fort, not surrender it," when shot and shell instead of cumbering the ground, as now, whizzed through the air to kill and destroy; true, all this appeals to the soul that thrills in sympathy with historic lore—and yet one feels a trifle sorry that age has not invested it with that indescribable charm oft-times stamped upon more common structures; that it is not more moss-grown and divested of the suggestiveness of the struggle and horrors of warfare that it yes inspires.

Sergeant Stout makes no effort to stay time's hand. Blackberry bushes twine their prickly branches in and out among the cannon balls, and the gallant guard does not even molest their fruit. Wasps have dotted the arched roofs and walls and corners of the casemates with their nest of mud, like the excrescences on a tree, and the sparrow have built their nests among the studded bushes that unhesitatingly thrust their leaves in the very mouths of the cannons, as if peace were a matter of eternity. If ever the sergeant did make a fight against their presence, he has long since given it up as a hopeless contest.

Sergeant Stout has been in the army for twenty-seven years. Since July 1887, he has been guardian of Pulaski. Sometimes he does not leave Cockspur Island, on which the fort is located for months at a time. He is perfectly satisfied with his lazy, lonesome life. Once a month he makes a report of what is at the fort, but beyond that he seems to have but little work save that of keeping people from landing on the island without a permit. Even the graves in the little cemetery outside the walls, whose only indications is an inverted cannon, are hidden from sight by rank growth of bushes, weeds and grass. When asked once why he did not get a scythe and cut them down, the sergeant drew himself up proudly, and with the air of a commander-in-chief, remarked: "That's manual labor, and I ain't expected to do that.

Source

Atlanta Constitution, June 14, 1891.

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