A nine part series of frequently overlooked sites in and around Corinth, Mississippi.

Part Nine – ***The Corinth Contraband Camp: A walk through history***

There have been any number of articles about the Contraband Camp on North Parkway, but have you actually been there? The camp has become quite the gathering place for the fitness folk and every morning the sidewalk is trod by walkers looking to avoid the crowds at the Regional Park. The path may be a little shorter in length but the company provided by the bronze residents and an understanding of what happened here, makes a twenty minute workout a walk through history.

There are thousands of stories about Corinth in the Civil War, most of them dealing with military operations, deaths, wounds and suffering. The story told by the bronze figures at the Contraband Camp is different; it is a story of freedom, new beginnings and hope. It is a story of life.

From the earliest days of the Civil War, wherever there was a Union army or garrison, there were runaway slaves. Under Federal law (the Fugitive Slave Act) slaves had to be returned to their masters and many hopeful runaways were forced back into bondage. Major General Benjamin Butler deplored this situation. He observed how slave labor was assisting in the Confederate war effort and he began to keep the runaways near his Virginia camps, declaring them to be “contraband of war.” The name stuck and runaway slaves were known as contrabands from that point on.

Expeditions into enemy country were met by hordes of men, women and children seeking the safety of the armed Union soldiers. When the Union troops returned to their camps the runaways created their own temporary communities. Most of the camps were squalid affairs;

huts, shacks and tents scattered about with little thought given to food, water or sanitation. Hunger and disease were common. But not at Corinth.

Through the efforts of the Union army and the American Missionary Association a model camp was created. By mid 1863 the camp resembled a small village with frame and log houses on named streets, complete with a church, school, hospital and commissary. Four hundred acres of farmland was tended by the residents, three hundred planted in cotton and the rest producing fresh vegetables for the army. In a matter of months, the camp was a thriving success and making a monthly profit of $4,000 to $5,000.

Most importantly, far and above the clean swept streets and the black marks on a ledger sheet, the camp was a place of freedom, dignity and respect. People, who had been considered mere property only weeks before, were taking their own first steps in freedom. Adults and children were attending school, a privilege once denied them, and many of camp residents studied by candlelight after a hard day in the fields. When the law changed concerning blacks serving in the army, hundreds of men chose to enlist. At first they were merely guards over their own camp but eventually they were involved in the army's campaigns and men from Corinth fought with distinction at the Battle of brice's Crossroads.

The individual stories of the camp are told in the bronze faces along the walkway. The proud "greeter" at the start of the walk welcomes you to the camp. She is followed by a laundress and a farmer. At the far end of the path are a mother and daughter on their own stroll, holding a Bible from which they are both learning to read. Further along is the kneeling Chaplain James Alexander, supervisor of the camp, who is assisting a young boy with a spilled pile of books. Last of all is the soldier, once a resident of the camp, he proudly wears the uniform of his

country and stands guard over his family and friends. They're here every day, come on out for a walk and say hi.

For more information on the Corinth Contraband Camp and the African American experience in the Civil War, visit the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center, a unit of Shiloh National Military Park, at 501 West Linden Street. The visitor center is open daily 8:00 to 5:00, and can be reached at 662-287-9273.