

NEW MASTERS ON THE MISSISSIPPI:
THE UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS OF THE MIDDLE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

by

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Chapter 1

William Casey of Natchez, Mississippi, refused all offers for his grapevine, even as much as five hundred dollars from "Madame Bingham" a fellow citizen. In 1850 a reporter described it as the monarch of grapevines in the United States. With a base three inches in diameter, and hundreds of feet of fruit bearing vine, it had threatened to take over the neighborhood. It had already climbed a tree, outgrown its trellises, and spread to overhanging branches. Such inconveniences, however, counted only as minor problems when measured against the astounding one ton of fruit estimated to have loaded down its branches. Local legend had it that a Spaniard planted it many decades earlier when the flag of Spain flew over the river town. Finding the local climate suitable, and the loess soil of the Mississippi River bluffs fertile, the vine put down deep roots and flourished, producing what some considered a tolerably good wine.¹

One hundred and thirty years earlier, another European import found the eastern banks of the Mississippi equally fertile, and the settlers found it just as intoxicating. In 1721 Father Pierre Francois de Charlevois declared the region "one of the most beautiful and fertile countries in the world" and that "it wants nothing to make an improvement of the land but negroes, or hired servants." While the priest preferred hired help, the settlers preferred slaves, and with those sentiments African slavery arrived at Natchez, then a fortified settlement on the Mississippi River, one hundred and thirty miles northwest of New Orleans (perhaps double that by boat). There, on the river bank, and the bluffs some two hundred feet above, the enslaved Africans (along with a few unfortunate Native Americans) engaged in tobacco cultivation and other menial tasks such as wood chopping, construction, and

¹ *The Pittsfield Sun*, (Massachusetts), November 28, 1850.

tanning—labors typically associated with a frontier settlement. Moreover, like all able bodied men on the frontier, their masters expected them to assist in the defense of the colony against attacks by Indians, Spaniards, and Englishmen. Toward that end, the French had constructed another fort one hundred miles to the north on the Yazoo River, not far north of present day Vicksburg. While the alluvial plains west of the Mississippi beckoned, it would be some time before settlers tamed the swamps and bayous comprising the western bank of the Mississippi. For the remainder of the eighteenth century, the bounty of the eastern bluffs more or less sufficed.²

In addition to importing the first African slaves to the region, the French contributed to the rise of the institution by establishing a legal framework for its governance. In 1685, Louis XIV issued the *Code Noir*, a series of fifty-nine articles spelling out the legal status of masters, slaves, and Jews in the colonies. Dealing with religious concerns first, the initial articles expelled Jews from, and codified Roman Catholicism as the sole religion in, French holdings. Other articles proscribed punishments for specific crimes committed by slaves, while at the same time outlining certain legal protections, albeit thin ones, owed to them. Under the code, slaves could not engage in commerce without their master's permission, and even with their master's blessing selling sugar in any quantity was off limits. As for the perpetuation of the institution through natural increase, the code listed the mother as the path to slavery for children born of mixed parentage.³

In 1724, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, explorer and governor of Louisiana, issued a new black code that addressed the realities, or excesses, of Louisiana society. Many

² Ronald L. F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez* (Washington D.C.: Eastern National, 1999), 4; B. F. French, ed., *Historical Journal of Father Pierre Francois Xavier de Charlevois, Historical Collections of Louisiana*, 7 vols. (New York, 1846-51, III.), 141, 154.

³ *Édit du Roi, Touchant la Police des Isles de l'Amérique Française* (Paris, 1687), 28–58.

of Bienville's articles duplicated, updated, or illuminated points from the 1685 code.

Reflecting the expansion of French holdings from sugar producing islands of the Caribbean to the mainland of North America, the new code no longer specified sugar as the preferred currency for payment of fines. Other changes reflected a hardening attitude toward race in North America, specifically Bienville's prohibition against marriages between blacks and whites, irrespective of servile status.⁴

Yet as much as Bienville and French royal officials wanted to create a society in keeping with their notions of race and religion, the precariousness of frontier life dictated compromise. In Natchez' case, the ever present threat of attack by local Native Americans, from whom the settlement derived its name, forced the authorities to compromise. In November 1729, the Natchez tribe massacred the inhabitants of Natchez, signaling a colony-wide uprising of natives from the Yazoo River to the interior of Louisiana. The following year, French colonists embarked on a campaign of annihilation to destroy the Natchez and their allied tribes. Toward that end French officers employed a small number of black soldiers who were promised their freedom in return for fighting the Indians. For the remainder of the 1730s a small force of black militia supplemented French forces in the region. In 1736 they participated in a campaign against the Chickasaws near present-day Tupelo, Mississippi. According to Charles Gayarre, a nineteenth-century historian, and sometime politician and writer from New Orleans, in the spring of 1736, with Bienville's troops engaged in a battle with the Chickasaw at the village of Ackia, a free black man named Simon, chagrined at the behavior of his troops, sought to redeem himself by stealing a small herd of horses from under the Chickasaws' guns. Gayarre wrote,

⁴ Charles Gayarre, *History of Louisiana* (New York, W. J. Widdleton, 1867), v. 2, appendix, p. 531-40.

Simon, a free black, the commander of the commander [?] of a company of negroes who had thrown down the mantelets they were carrying to protect the French in their attempt to storm the village of Ackia. Simon, when his men had fled, had stood his ground, and had remained with the French officers at the spot the most exposed, until the retreat was sounded. He was a sort of privileged character, and he was sorely vexed at the cowardice displayed by those of his color. The French officers, who were amused at his chagrin, and at the comical expressions in which it was vented, kept bantering him without mercy on his light-footed companions. Stung to the heart, Simon exclaimed: "A negro is as brave as any body, and I will show it to you." Seizing a rope which was dangling from one of the tents, he rushed headlong toward the horses which were quietly slaking their thirst under the protection of the muskets of the Indian villages. To reach the white mare, to jump on her back with the agility of a tiger, and to twist round her head and mouth the rope with which to control and rein her, was the affair of an instant. But that instant was enough for the apparently sleeping village to show itself wide awake, and that dark mass was seen as if spontaneously girding itself with a zone of fire, so rapid and thick were the flashes from its innumerable loopholes. But away dashed Simon with the rapidity of lightning frantic with affright, madly reared and plunged the conquered mare under the strong hand of Simon, who forced her to take the direction of the French camp, where he arrived safely amid the cheering acclamations of the troops, and without having received a scratch from the balls of the enemy. This noble feat silenced at once the jests of which Simon thought himself the victim.

Despite such efforts at immobilizing hostile natives, many years passed before Natchez began to prosper again. By 1744, only eight white men and fifteen blacks of both sexes inhabited the colony.⁵

In late 1762 and early 1763, after decades of fighting natives on the frontier, and European forces on the seas and continent, France gave up its claim to the region above New Orleans, signing the eastern side of the Mississippi over to the British, and the west to Spain.

⁵ Dunbar Rowland and A. G. Sanders, eds. and trans., *Mississippi Provincial Archives; French Dominion* (Jackson, Press of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1927), v. 1, p. 68-70 (hereinafter cited as *MPA*); *History of Louisiana*, v. 2, p. 480-81, v. 3, p. 28.

The British, realizing the benefit of having territory on the Mississippi River, promptly signed treaties with native tribes, extending British dominion north of the Yazoo River. The contiguous border initially benefited both nations, providing points of contact where they could conduct trade to their mutual, but not altogether legal, benefit. Lesser British officials launched new efforts to populate the region, founding settlements at suitable sites on the eastern banks of the river. The Spanish got a rather late start in governing their side of the river, waiting until 1769 to Don Alejandro O'Reilly to take command at New Orleans. Still, neither power had yet realized the potential wealth the river bottoms could yield. The chief means of profit were deer skins, lumber, and naval stores. Developments in the east, however, soon changed the complexion of the region, significantly increasing the number of settlers on the British side of the river. Loyalists, fleeing the American Revolution along the eastern seaboard, sought peace in the Mississippi River settlements. It did not last long, for in 1779 Spain declared war on Britain and embarked on a campaign to take British outposts in the region. The British, like the French before them, resorted to arming free blacks as a means of defending the colony. As Gayerre wrote, describing the fall of Baton Rouge and Natchez, "In these two forts of Baton Rouge and Natchez was found a considerable number of militiamen and free negroes, with arms in their hands."⁶

The Spanish—at least officially—practiced a slightly less harsh brand of slavery than the French. Under the new regime, slaves could purchase their own freedom and had access to the courts in limited situations. Such liberalization did not sit well with French planters, accustomed to the strict articles of the Code Noir as they were. They preferred slavery as a total institution as opposed to the Spanish ideal of slavery as a controlling institution. Their

⁶ *History of Louisiana*, v. 3, p. 355-56; J. F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi, as a Province Territory and State, with Biographical Notices of Eminent Citizen* (Jackson, Power & Barksdale Publishers and Printers, 1880), 124-25; *History of Louisiana*, v. 3, p. 129.

relationships with the Spanish governors would ebb and flow over issues surrounding slavery. Spanish clerics, too, found fault with the French system, in particular, with the lack of concern French priests showed for black morals. When O'Reilly landed in New Orleans, enough lived together outside of marriage that he forced at least forty to get married. They excused their immorality by claiming that getting married was futile when one, the other, or both, could be sold at any time by their masters. The Spanish priest who reported the abuses wrote, "It seems to me that the most effective way to prevent the commission of such sins, is to impose upon the masters the obligation of watching over the morals of their slaves." Such logic is where the two nationalities butted heads—the French planters were very much laissez-faire when it came to government regulation of slavery on the plantations. Despite their differences, the region saw a significant increase in the slave population during Spanish dominion. The Natchez settlement, which contained a handful of colonists a few decades earlier, by 1787 had multiplied to 1,275 whites and 675 blacks due to pro-American immigration policies.⁷

Developments during the 1790s changed Natchez forever. At the beginning of the decade agriculture in the region was in a state of flux. Tobacco had played out as a profitable crop, and experiments with indigo had proven less than exciting. While a few planters experimented with cotton, a Massachusetts Yankee made agriculture in Natchez pay handsomely. Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793, and by 1796 David Greenleaf, a Natchez mechanic, was building gins throughout the region. The cotton business boomed quickly, so much so that in 1799 Sir William Dunbar of Natchez wrote, "We continue to cultivate cotton with very great success. It is by far the most profitable crop we have ever

⁷ *History of Louisiana*, v. 3, p. 162-65; Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763–1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 65, 223-225; *The Black Experience in Natchez*, p. 9.

undertaken in this country. The climate and soil suit it exactly." All that was needed was cheap labor to cultivate the fields—the planters saw black slaves as the solution.⁸

Simultaneous with the cotton boom, the United States took possession of the region east of the river as a result of the outcome of the Revolution. In 1798 the United States organized Mississippi as a territory and sent U. S. soldiers to take physical charge at Fort Rosalie on the bluffs at Natchez, and Fort Nogales, on a high promontory near where the Yazoo discharges into the Mississippi. The change of government did not adversely affect the cotton boom in the least. a year after the changeover, Dunbar wrote, "We require more slaves. A well managed gang of negroes can cultivate fifty per cent more cotton than they will be able to pick from the fields...We are not prohibited from importing negroes, except from the United States, and their value has enhanced." A year later, he wrote to a businessman in Richmond, Virginia, "Negroes, and particularly tradesmen are in demand here. Ordinary men are worth \$500 cash, women \$400 and upwards." He goes on to brag about how wonderful Mississippi masters are to their slaves, saying, "There is not country where they are better treated....They have as much bread and usually milk and vegetables, as they wish, and each family is allowed a lot of ground and the use of a team, for melons, potatoes, etc." Yet despite such a sunshiny portrait, Dunbar, making reference to Gabriel Prosser's rebellion to his Virginia correspondent, acknowledged the ever present danger of insurrection in Mississippi. His solution? Slavery as a total institution. While confessing that "Slavery can only be defended perhaps on the principle of expediency," he pushed forward with his argument that "yet where it exists, and where they so largely outnumber whites, you must concede almost absolute power to the master." Without his prescription, he told his reader, the alternatives were "insurrection with all its horrors, or emancipation with

⁸ *Mississippi, as a Province*, p. 143,

all its evils." Those two alternatives would inhabit the nightmares of many whites in the region for the next sixty years.⁹

In 1802, Chancellor Robert R. Livingston toiled away in Paris, France, working at negotiations that would eventually give the United States possession of New Orleans, and thus remove any hindrances to American exports from the region. Coincidentally, another American was in Paris at the same time, seeking to conclude a separate deal with the French in support of his inventions relating to steam propulsion. Eventually the two met, and Livingston agreed that Robert Fulton's inventions had merit, resulting in a partnership for the construction of a steamer to ply the Hudson River between Albany and New York City. In 1807 their partnership reached fruition with the first voyage of the *Clermont*. Realizing the vast potential for steam on the Mississippi River, four years later they commissioned the steamer *New Orleans* built at a shipyard on the Monongahela River at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for service on the Mississippi. Piloted by Nicholas Roosevelt, granduncle of future president Theodore Roosevelt, the *New Orleans* weathered fires, Indians, and the New Madrid earthquake before finally arriving at Natchez where throngs had gathered on the bluffs to see the new invention. With the port of New Orleans in American hands, planters had easy access to world markets, and with the steamer, an efficient means of transporting cotton and slaves to and from the region. Thus Fulton's steamboat, along with Livingston's successful negotiations for the Louisiana Purchase put the final pieces of the puzzle in place for the rise of King Cotton and slavery in the region.¹⁰

⁹ *ibid*, 144-45.

¹⁰ Alice Crary Sutcliffe, *Robert Fulton and the "Clermont"* (New York, The Century Company, 1909), 117,18; Charles W. Dahlinger, "The New Orleans, Being a Critical Account of the Beginning of Steamboat Navigation on the Western Rivers of the United States", *Pittsburg Legal Journal*, Vol. 59 No. 42 (Oct. 21, 1911): 570-591; John Hazelhurst Beneval Latrobe, *The First Steamship Voyage On The Western Waters* (Baltimore, John Murphy, 1871), 1, 26, 31.

By 1812, when Louisiana entered the Union, and 1817, when Mississippi became a state, slavery was well on its way to smothering the region like William Casey's grapevine. In 1820, the Mississippi counties adjoining the Mississippi River, accounted for 18,723 slaves, 212 free blacks, and 15,337 whites. Across the river, in still largely unimproved Concordia Parish, stretching from the lower corner of Mississippi to what would eventually become Arkansas, 1,787 slaves outnumbered whites nearly two to one. The demand for slaves was such that the region became a prime location for slave merchants, with Natchez boasting the second largest slave market in North America.¹¹

With no formal name, the intersection of Liberty and Washington Roads on the outskirts of Natchez became known simply as the Forks of the Road. While the trafficking in human cargo had gone on for some time in the region and Natchez, Isaac Franklin and business partner John Armfield's put the intersection on the map, so to speak, with their establishment of a slave market at the junction of the two roads in 1823. With a business model based on purchasing slaves at low prices in Virginia and reselling them along the River where they were in higher demand, they became the top slave traders in the United States within a few years. Other dealers set up shop in the region, and although the importation of slaves from other states was halted from 1837 to 1846 as a result of the Nat Turner rebellion, by the time of the Natchez market's peak, 600 to 800 slaves could be seen for sale at any given time. So many enslaved Africans passed through Natchez that they eventually had their own dedicated hospital.¹²

¹¹ Historical Census Browser. Retrieved [Date you accessed source], from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.

¹² Jim Barnett and H. Clark Burkett, "The Forks of the Road Slave Market at Natchez" *Mississippi Journal of History* (Fall 2001): 171, 176, 181; Wade, Richard C. *Slavery in the Cities : The South, 1820-1860* (Cary, North Carolina: Oxford University Press, 1967), 139.

The journey from the eastern seaboard to the banks of the Mississippi carried significant threats to the lives and health of the slaves. Most walked the distance across the Appalachians, to Nashville, Tennessee, where they either boarded a boat, or walked south on the Natchez Trace, to their ultimate destinations in the slave marts on the river. A white traveler in North Carolina stumbled across just such a *coffle* preparing to walk to Natchez in 1844. He described it as:

a singular spectacle, the most striking one of the kind I have ever witnessed. It was a camp of negro slave-drivers, just packing up to start; they had about three hundred slaves with them, who had bivouacked the preceding night in chains in the woods; these they were conducting to Natchez, upon the Mississippi River, to work upon the sugar plantations in Louisiana. . . . they had a caravan of nine waggons and single horse carriages, for the purpose of conducting the white people, and any of the blacks that should fall lame, . . . The female slaves were, some of them, sitting on logs of wood, whilst others were standing, and a great many little black children were warming themselves at the fires of the bivouac. In front of them all, and prepared for the march, stood, in double files, about two hundred male slaves, *manacled and chained to each other*. . . . To make this spectacle still more disgusting and hideous, some of the principle white slavedrivers, who were tolerably well dressed, and had broadbrimmed white hats on, *with black crape round them*, were standing near, laughing and smoking cigars.¹³

The terrain, particularly the route through the Appalachians, proved difficult for the slaves. As one slave recalled "the snow and rain came down in torrents, but we had to rest out in the open air every night; sometimes we would have to scrape away the snow, make our pallets on the cold ground, or in the rain, with a bunch of leaves and a chunk of wood for our pillow, and so we would have to rest the best we could, with our chains on...We were driven with whip and curses through the cold and rain." Yet the journey by water carried as much

¹³ Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937, p. 773.

peril; in a scene echoing of the Middle Passage one eyewitness remembered "There was on the boat a large room on the lower deck, in which the slaves were kept, men and women, promiscuously -- all chained two and two, and a strict watch kept that they did not get loose; for cases have occurred in which slaves have got off their chains, and made their escape at landing- places, while the boats were taking in wood;-- and with all our care, we lost one woman who had been taken from her husband and children, and having no desire to live without them, in the agony of her soul jumped overboard, and drowned herself. She was not chained." He matter-of-factly added, "It was almost impossible to keep that part of the boat clean."¹⁴

In the early 1830s Joseph Holt Ingraham, a Yankee clergyman from Maine who served as a languages professor less than five miles away from the slave markets at Jefferson College, described scenes at the marts for the rest of the nation from the point of view of a white observer:

A mile from Natchez we came to a cluster of rough wooden buildings, in the angle of two roads, in front of which several saddle horses, either tied or held by servants, indicated a place of popular resort...Entering through a wide gate into a narrow courtyard, partially enclosed by low buildings, a scene of novel character was at once presented. A line of negroes commencing at the entrance with the tallest, who was not more than five feet eight or nine inches in height, down to a little fellow about ten years of age, extended in a semicircle around the right side of the yard. There were in all about forty. Each was dressed in the usual uniform of slaves, when in market, consisting of a fashionable shaped, black fur hat, roundabout and trousers of coarse corduroy velvet, precisely such as are worn by Irish laborers, when they first "come over the water;" good vests, strong shoes, and white cotton shirts, completed their equipment. This dress they lay

¹⁴ William J. Anderson, *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave* (Chicago: Daily Tribune Book and Job Printing Office, 1857), 12; William W. Brown, *William W. Brown, An American Slave* (London, Charles Gilpin, 1850), 39.

aside after they are sold, or wear out as soon as may be; for the negro dislikes to retain the indication of his having recently been in the market. With their hats in their hands, which hung down by their sides, they stood perfectly still, and in close order, while some gentlemen were passing from one to another examining for the purpose of buying.¹⁵

William J. Anderson, former slave, and later abolitionist, painted a very different scene of the Forks of the Road markets when he was sold there after a arduous journey from Virginia. Writing to influence abolitionist sentiment in the north on the eve of the Civil War, Anderson's account differs dramatically from Ingraham's serene description.

In due time we arrived safely in the slave-pen at Natchez, and here we joined another large crowd of slaves which were already stationed at this place. Here scenes were witnessed which are too wicked to mention. The slaves are made to shave and wash in greasy pot liquor, to make them look sleek and nice; their heads must be combed, and their best clothes put on; and when called out to be examined they are to stand in a row—the women and men apart—then they are picked out and taken into a room, and examined. See a large, rough slaveholder, take a poor female slave into a room, make her strip, then feel of and examine her, as though she were a pig, or a hen, or merchandise. O, how can a poor slave husband or father stand and see his wife, daughters and sons thus treated.

I saw there, after men and women had followed each other, then--too shocking to relate--for the sake of money, they are sold separately, sometimes two hundred miles apart, although their hopes would be to be sold together. Sometimes their little children are torn from them and sent far away to a distant country, never to see them again. O, such crying and weeping when parting from each other! For this demonstration of natural human affection the slaveholder would apply the lash or paddle upon the naked skin. The former was used less frequently than the latter, for fear of making scars or marks on their backs, which are closely looked for by the buyer. I saw one poor woman dragged off and sold from her tender child--which was nearly white--which the seller would not let go with its mother. Although the master of the mother importuned him a long time to let him have it with its mother, with oaths and curses he refused. It was too hard for the mother to bear; she

¹⁵ Ingraham, Joseph H. *Southwest by a Yankee* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835), v. II. 192.

fainted, and was whipped up. It is impossible for me to give more than a faint idea of what was enacted in the town of Natchez, for there were many slave pens there in 1827.¹⁶

Henry Watson, another former slave who passed through Natchez, concurred with Anderson in his description of the dehumanizing treatment of men and women at the slave marts:

Arrived in Natchez, Miss., and went to our pen, which Mr. Denton had previously hired for us; and had our irons taken off and our clothes changed; for Mr. Denton was expecting visitors to examine the flock, as he would sometimes term us. There was a sign-board in front of the house, which informed traders that he had on hand, blacksmiths, carpenters, field-hands; also several sickly ones, whom he would sell very cheap. In a short time purchasers became plenty, and our number diminished. I was not sold for several weeks, though I wished to be the first, not wishing to witness his cruelty to his slaves any longer; for if they displeased him in the least, he would order them to be stripped, and tied hand and foot together. He would then have his paddle brought, which was a board about two feet in length and one inch in thickness, having fourteen holes bored through it, about an inch in circumference. This instrument of torture he would apply, until the slave was exhausted, on parts which the purchaser would not be likely to examine. This mode of punishment is considered one of the most cruel ever invented, as the flesh protrudes through these holes at every blow, and forms bunches and blisters the size of each hole, causing much lameness and soreness to the person receiving them. This punishment is generally inflicted in the morning, before visitors come to examine the slaves.

Just before the doors are opened, it is usual for the keeper to grease the mouths of the slaves, so as to make it appear that they are well and hearty, and have just done eating fat meat; though they seldom, if ever, while in the custody of the keeper, taste a morsel of meat of any kind.¹⁷

For the enslaved sold through markets at Vicksburg, the scene differed very little. Henry Bibb recalled how, when his owner put him and his family up for sell in Vicksburg, that his mental capacity concerned prospective buyers as much as his physical capacity:

¹⁶ *William J. Anderson*, 14, 15.

¹⁷ Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), 10-12.

We had there to pass through an examination, or inspection by a city officer, whose business it was to inspect slave property that was brought to that Market for sale. He examined our backs to see if we had been much scarred by the lash. He examined our limbs, to see whether we were inferior.

As it is hard to tell the ages of slaves, they look in their mouths at their teeth, and prick up the skin on the back of their hands, and if the person is very far advanced in life, when the skin is pricked up, the pucker will stand so many seconds on the back of the hand.

But the most rigorous examinations of slaves by those slave inspectors, is on the mental capacity. If they are found to be very intelligent, this is pronounced the most objectionable of all other qualities connected with the life of a slave. In fact, it undermines the whole fabric of his chattelhood; it prepares for what slaveholders are pleased to pronounce the unpardonable sin when committed by a slave. It lays the foundation for running away, and going to Canada. They also see in it a love for freedom, patriotism, insurrection, bloodshed, and exterminating war against American slavery.

Hence they are very careful to inquire whether a slave who is for sale can read or write. This question has been asked me often by slave traders, and cotton planters, while I was there for market. After conversing with me, they have sworn by their Maker, that they would not have me among their negroes; and that they saw the devil in my eye; I would run away, &c.¹⁸

From the slave pens, most bondsmen journeyed to the local plantations, where the growth cycle of cotton dictated their activities. Those who did not end up on a plantation found themselves working as stevedores at steamboat landings, wood choppers at camps in the river bottoms, stoking boilers aboard a steamer, or a myriad of jobs one of the small towns scattered along the riverbank. On the plantation, and elsewhere, most slave-owners adhered to a five-day workweek, giving their servants Saturdays and Sundays off, as well as major holidays like Christmas and the 4th of July. During the harvest season they went to the fields before sunrise, waiting there until the first hints of dawn provided enough light to see the bolls. From there, they toiled all day—going so far as to bring their lunches with them, to

¹⁸ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, the Author, 1849), 101-02.

avoid losing time walking to and from lunch. When darkness came—so dark as to where they could not make out the bolls—they finally quit for the day.¹⁹

Amid the drudgery the slaves found diversions. Dancing, music, and special meals were among their favorites. When interviewed in the 1930s James Lucas recalled Christmas celebrations on the Wilkinson County, Mississippi, plantation where he was raised. He claimed that his master gave the slaves "a heap o' fresh meat an' whiskey for treats" but noted that they were not permitted to get drunk. A dance contest, held on Christmas, judged by whites, seemed memorable for the amount of laughter the revelers elicited from the master. Isaac Stier recalled the dances as "real cotillions, lack de white folks had" with "a fiddler." An added bonus was that his master would let the slaves invite their "sweethearts from other plantations" to join them on Christmas day.²⁰

Marriage celebrations proved just as popular. James Lucas remembered how the young white women dressed up the slave brides "lak dey was white," and sometimes had a cake delivered from New Orleans. On Lucas' plantation a preacher married them in the same ceremony used by whites, followed by "a little drink an' some cake" for all of the celebrants. As was the custom for most slave celebrations, dancing soon followed, as Lucas recalled, "Us all clapped han's an' tromped an' sway'd in time to de music." Not far away, in another part of Adams County, Mississippi, Emily and Edmund Ellis solemnized their vows in a similar fashion. Since Emily was a particularly favored servant, her master, Thomas Baker,

¹⁹ *Southwest by a Yankee, II*, 285-86; Charles S. Syndor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1966), 11-17, 21.

²⁰ Work Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interview with Former Slaves Mississippi Narratives*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12055> (Accessed March 10, 2009), narratives of James Lucas and Isaac Stier, (hereinafter cited as *WPA Narratives*)

lavished her with an equally opulent wedding, complete with musicians, a huge feast, and dancing, and, like the wedding of Lucas's memory, "by the book."²¹

While these two examples paint a joyful picture, many slave marriages masked a deep sorrow, for often they were remarrying or "refamilying" after slave traders separated them from spouses via the slave markets. Isaac Green, a former slave who had escaped to Canada recalled in a particularly tragic episode of seeing a "yellow girl" carrying an infant on a slave boat at Natchez. When a prospective buyer came aboard "looking to buy a yellow girl without children" the master told him she had no children, took her six-week-old baby from her, and gave it to a white woman. In another instance, William Wells Brown discovered a friend of his "hanging between the heavens and the earth" in a warehouse at Natchez Under the Hill. He recalled, "I went in, and found Lewis there. He was tied up to a beam, with his toes just touching the floor. As there was no one in the warehouse but himself, I inquired the reason of his being in that situation. He said Mr. Broadwell had sold his wife to a planter six miles from the city, and that he had been to visit her -- that he went in the night, expecting to return before daylight, and went without his master's permission. The patrol had taken him up before he reached his wife. He was put in jail, and his master had to pay for his catching and keeping, and that was what he was tied up for." Prospective buyers found morose and demoralized slaves off-putting, which drove down their prices. One of Brown's tasks was make sure buyers did not see that side of the slaves, "Some were set to dancing, some to jumping, some to singing, and some to playing cards. This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy. My business was to see that they were placed in those situations before

²¹ Ibid., James Lucas; Deposition of Thomas F. Baker, May 13, 1890, Deposition of Doctor McGee, May 13, 1890, Deposition of Jerry Martin, May 14, 1890, Deposition of Emily Ellis, May 13, 1890, Civil War Pension File of Edmond Elliott (Alias Ellis), Records of the Veterans Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., (Hereinafter cited as *Pension File*).

the arrival of the purchasers, and I have often set them to dancing when their cheeks were wet with tears."²²

For those who found such humiliations intolerable and considered escape, local authorities had mechanisms in place to prevent their departure. After Nat Turner's rebellion, most southern states attempted to reign in free ranging slaves with increased slave patrols, pass systems, and other methods of keeping slaves on the plantations and their masters accountable for keeping them there. Despite such actions, if one can believe the slave narratives, the nighttime fields and forests of the region were a veritable rush hour of slaves going to and fro. Any excuse to get out and about sufficed, from clandestine religious services, courting, dancing, to plain old juvenile mischief. James Singleton, remembered "I seen 'pattyrollers' ridin' 'bout to keep de darkies from runnin' 'roun' widout passes. I never seen 'em whup none but dey tol' us we'd git twen'y-nine licks iffen we got caught by 'em. I seen darkies git whuppin's on other plantations—whup 'em half a day sometimes, gen'ly when dey tried to run away." The slaves even went so far as to sing about their nighttime exploits, "Run nigger run, pattyrollers ketch you, run nigger run, it's breakin' days." Another version went, "Run nigger run, de patterrollers ketch you—Run nigger run, fer hits almos' day, De nigger run; de nigger flew; de nigger los' His big old shoe."²³

For whites, the booming slave population was, at the very least, a source of discomfort, and at the other end of the spectrum, fodder for their nightmares. By the end of the 1850s, 151,000 slaves lived in the counties adjoining the Mississippi River from the Arkansas state line to the southwest corner of Mississippi. Two thirds lived on the

²² Benjamin Drew, *A North Side View of Slavery* (Boston: J. P. Jewett and Company, 1856),. 285; Brown, *An American Slave*, 43-45.

²³ Rev. James Singleton, Mollie Williams *WPA Narratives*.

Mississippi side of the river; the disparity resulting from the swampy nature of the west bank. Only 28,424 whites lived on the Mississippi side, with slightly less than 8500 on the Louisiana side. About 434 free blacks lived in the region. The numbers add up to a barely controllable slave population, especially so when one considers that most whites lived in cities and towns, and in parts of the countryside black to white ratios sometimes surpassed ten to one. In the era leading up to the Civil War, municipalities in the region continuously dealt with vagrant slaves, particularly on weekends when they came to town for many of the same reasons that white people went to the towns, to spend money, socialize, or create mischief. In Natchez, the city fathers took to ringing the courthouse bell on Sunday afternoons to let the slaves know it was time for them to vacate the town. As one observer noted, "Then commences a ludicrous scene of hurrying and scampering, from the four corners of the town; for woe be to the unlucky straggler, who is found after a limited period within the forbidden bounds!" Any slave caught in Natchez after 4 p.m. on the Sabbath received forty lashes, which seemed sufficient for motivating them to follow "their noses with all commendable speed, along the diverging highways...to their respective plantations."²⁴

Whites in Vicksburg faced many of the same problems, though on a different scale. In Natchez, the precipitous bluffs frowning down on the river and Natchez Under the Hill served, at least in the imaginations of the citizens, as somewhat of a physical and moral barrier to the sin and crime that occurred below. The slave marts, with their offensive smells, diseases, and unscrupulous merchants were not permitted to befoul the city limits. Above the

²⁴Historical Census Browser. Retrieved March 10, 2009, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>; Ingraham, *Southwest by a Yankee*, II, p. 54-56; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, p 77-82.

river, gentility ruled; below—depravity. In Vicksburg, no such barrier existed. While no crime statistics exist to compare with one another, the Vicksburg newspapers give the impression of a much more pervasive crime problem with slaves and whites, sometimes in collusion, preying on other whites. In the final decade of slavery in Vicksburg, newspaper editorials documented drunkenness, chicken thievery, gambling, robbery, murder, and a host of other crimes committed by slaves in Warren County. Masters there had less than complete control over their chattel.²⁵

By the 1850s national issues began, in a significant way, to encroach on the planters' capacity to maintain control over their chattel. While elements of the Compromise of 1850 struck different chords among the region's residents, the Fugitive Slave Act elicited the most newspaper ink. In the weeks and months following the act's passage, Mississippi newspaper editors ran article after article condemning or illustrating northern opposition and disobedience to the act. Runaway slaves had become a hot-button topic. Newspapers in the region banded together to serve as clearinghouses of descriptions of runaway slaves housed at various jails in different southern states. In search of an explanation for why slaves would run away, one editorialist claimed, "Our country is beginning to become infested with two great evils; one is Abolitionists amongst us from the Northern States, and the other Free Negroes, Boatsmen, Stewards, Cooks, Barbers on boats, &c." A few months later another editorial attacked whites who presumed to teach black children to read and write in Natchez. The author accused them of wishing to "educate them to become the dominant race in the South; or they wish to raise them to a level with the white race, for the purpose of an amalgamation between the two races." If the outright appeal to racism did not work, the

²⁵ Jonathan Beasley "Blacks—Slave and Free—Vicksburg, 1850-1860" *The Journal of Mississippi History*, v. 38, (February 1976): 16-23.

writer concluded with an economic argument, that educated slaves would write their own passes and end up in the north where "fifteen thousand fugitive slaves are kept from their owners." Without those influences, slaves presumably would have wanted to remain on the plantations.²⁶

Ultimately, the threat of corporal or capital punishment was the slave owners' trump card for dealing with recalcitrant slaves. In Mississippi, the 1857 slave code specified twenty-five crimes for which slaves could lose their lives. Whites, too, were subject to the same penalty for those crimes, but were tried under different rules. Blacks and Indians could not testify in the state's circuit courts, except in civil cases where both parties were black or Indian. In the late 1840s, the state of Mississippi executed around nine slaves per year—the number of informal or local executions is unknown. In May 1852 the *Natchez Courier* carried a short article regarding the fate of "Ike," a slave who had "with a dangerous weapon" wounded "very severely, Mr. Wm. Shillings, the overseer under whose charge he was." The court sentenced him to death in November 1851, but his attorney appealed to the Mississippi High Court, which affirmed the lower court's ruling, and the newspaper noted that Ike would be hanged on May 21, in a private execution, within the walls of the jail courtyard. Impromptu executions, carried out by masters within the confines of the plantation, or lynchings by angry whites, were not unheard of, and often celebrated in the region's newspapers. Sometimes even northern papers could not bring themselves to condemn the lynchings, if the reasons appeared warranted as in the case of a slave in central Mississippi in 1851. The Brattleboro, Vermont, *Weekly Eagle*, just under a short blurb about Jenny Lind's concert in a Natchez church, tells of a Mississippi slave, name unknown, who "committed an

²⁶ *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, June 1, 1850, August 10, 1850, November 16, 1850, December 7, 1850; *Natchez Courier*, December 24, 1850.

outrage upon the person of a white lady and afterwards murdered her and her son," and never made it to trial. A mob of whites "turned out in mass and, arresting the negro, burned him alive." Northern Abolitionists published accounts of brutality at every opportunity. Hiram Mattison, a Methodist Episcopal minister, polymath, and abolitionist, collected a number of those accounts and published them in a narrative he derived from an interview with a former slave from South Carolina. To supplement his work, and further demonstrate the depravity of the planter class, he editorialized the following account from an 1858 edition of the

Natchez Free Trader:

"The victim was chained to a tree, faggots were placed around him, while he showed the greatest indifference. When the chivalry had arranged the pile, in reply to a question, if he had any thing to say, he is reported to have warned all slaves to take example by him, and asked the prayers of those around. He then asked for a drink of water, and after quaffing it said, "Now set fire, I am ready to go in peace." When the flames began to burn him, in his agony he showed gigantic strength, and actually forced the staple from the tree, and bounded from the burning mass. But he instantly fell pierced with rifle balls, and then his body was thrown into the flames and consumed, to show that no such being had ever existed. Nearly four thousand slaves from the neighboring plantations were present as at a moral lesson written in characters of hell fire. Numerous speeches were made by the magistrates and ministers of religion (facetiously so called) to the slaves, warning them that the same fate awaited them if they proved rebellious to their owners."²⁷

Far more frequent, beatings and other forms of corporal punishment took place on a regular basis in the region and depended on the personalities of the individual planters or overseers. Slaves could receive whippings for getting caught in town after curfew, leaving the plantation, or just about any reason a master or overseer saw fit. Sometimes a slave's

²⁷ James T. Currie, "From Slavery to Freedom in Mississippi's Legal System," *Journal of Negro History*, (Spring 1980): 114, 116; Rev. H. Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York, self published, 1861), 54.

tone of voice was enough to earn a beating, and any opinion deemed offensive could merit punishment. On one plantation, the overseer, "a big, hard fisted Dutchman bent on gittin' riches... trained his pasty-faced gal to tattle on us Niggers." Ex-slave Charlie Davenport remembered that "She got a heap o' folks whipped" and was not above gloating about it after the whipping. Some planters sunk to branding and other forms of mutilation to keep slaves in line—a practice abolitionists documented as examples of the depravity of Slave Power.²⁸

In regard to Slave Power and the rise of northern perceptions of it as a monolithic enterprise in the 1850s, planters in the region did not always share the same opinions as their democratic compatriots from other regions of the South, for Whiggish political thought dominated the river counties. The planters understood that internal improvements in transportation, both by rail and by water, could only enhance their economic potential. Figurative and literally, the river is what probably bound them most to the rest of the nation and influenced their dichotomous attitudes toward the rest of the country. They believed that if secession came, turmoil in commerce on the river would likely harm their profits. Yet in the same region fire eaters like John Quitman took root and thrived, advocating the overthrow of foreign governments in the service of expanding slavery. In 1859 Vicksburg hosted the Southern Commercial Convention which called for the resumption of the international slave trade. However, when secession came, some slave owners like Judge James Shirley of Vicksburg remained committed to the Union.²⁹

²⁸ Charlie Davenport, *WPA Narratives*; Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, 92-93; Theodore D. Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 77-82.

²⁹ *The Pittsfield Sun*, September 21, 1864; Peter F. Walker, *Vicksburg: A People at War, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 24.

After Fort Sumter in April 1861, only hardcore unionists continued to speak out against the Confederacy while the remainder of the white citizenry girded for war. On courthouse lawns and town squares throughout the region, young men in gaudy uniforms prepared for martial glory, calling themselves names like the Vicksburg Southrons, Milliken Bend Guards, and Tensas Cavalry. They spent their money in the photography galleries in Natchez and Vicksburg; as fierce looking as their boyish faces could be with their unwieldy bowie knives, Kossuth hats, crossed belts, and militia gray uniforms. Later, when the dirt and blood took hold, and the boys of '61 became the veterans of '62, photographic chemicals would run short in the South, leaving those early photos of the fresh-faced innocents as the dominant image of the Confederate soldier. Supremely confident of their ultimate victory, they marched off to war, further skewing the ratio of blacks to whites in the countryside.

Slaves in the region were not so unsophisticated as to be uncomprehending of what secession and war meant for them. In December 1860, a newspaper reported that a slave in north central Mississippi, when ordered to work, told his master that "if he wanted the work done, to do it himself, that he would soon be as free as anybody." Just above that article, another told of how concerned whites broke up an ominous gathering of slaves under a white overseer in the region. In May 1861 residents whispered of a forestalled insurrection complete with white leaders in Jefferson County, Mississippi, just to the north of Natchez, likewise in Washington, Mississippi. In July another rumor alleged of yet another uprising in Jefferson and Franklin Counties, with possibly the largest conspiracy taking place among slaves on Second Creek, near Natchez, in which the slaves planned to murder the white men and take their wives and daughters. Such reports served to remind whites of the tenuous control slave owners had along the river, and that secession and war could upset the

established balance. By July 1862, Natchez Provost Marshal, Alexander K. Farrar, felt the situation so dangerous that he wrote Mississippi Governor, John J. Pettus, warning him that "within the last 12 months we have had to hang some 40 for plotting an insurrection, and there has been about that number put in irons." He continued, "I assure you that if the overseers are taken off this County...will be by no means safe." The root of the evil: "The negroes have such large liberties, they are enabled to harbor runaways, who have firearms, traverse the whole Country, kill stock, and steal generally." Such was the state of affairs when Union naval forces entered the region in May 1862 after the fall of New Orleans and Baton Rouge.³⁰

By the beginning of the Civil War, slavery in the region had, like William Casey's grapevine, grown to unmanageable proportions, so much so, parasitic, it threatened to strangle its host. As much as slave owners would have liked to have made slavery a total institution, controlling every aspect of their chattels' lives, they lacked the will and manpower to do it. Early on, the French established their *Code Noir* to govern their relations with blacks, followed by the Spanish, who brought their own concepts of humane slavery to the region. Ultimately, the British would govern for a short while, but it was finally Americans who determined the ultimate form of bondage, a form which was decidedly less total than they would have liked.

Thus, slavery in the region became a controlling limited institution. If the Nabobs of Natchez, and their kith and kin at other towns along the river wanted any time, or peace of

³⁰ *Natchez Weekly Courier*, January 2, 1861; Benjamin L. C. Wailes Diary, May 19, 1861, Benjamin Leonard Covington Wailes Collection, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina; Davidson Burns McKibben, "Negro Slave Insurrections in Mississippi, 1800-1865," *Journal of Negro History*, v. 34, (January 1949): 73-90; Winthrop D. Jordan, *Silence and Tumult at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy*, revised, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1995); Provost Marshal A. K. Farrar to governor John J. Pettus, Natchez, July 17, 1862, in Records of the Office of the Governor, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

mind, to enjoy the wealth they had accumulated, they had to come to some kind of accommodation with legal, as well as their own, definitions of slavery. They could, and did, separate families at the Forks of the Road slave market, whip disobedient slaves, and even executed them if they felt the situation warranted it, but once the slave population boomed with the ascendance of cotton cultivation as the cornerstone of the region's economy, whites did not have the manpower to exercise vigilance. Certainly, paranoia among whites increased; and any hint of insurrection usually resulted in executed slaves, but ultimately whites watched, and hoped, that they could maintain the status quo. For the enslaved, those limitations on white power allowed them to steal away from the plantations in the middle of the night, loiter about town on the weekends, and retain at least a small measure of personal independence. Some bore grudges, and planned to murder their masters, but most just watched and waited on Mr. Lincoln's armies. With the coming of the Union armies, most everyone in the region, both black and white, wondered how the former slaves would react to freedom.

Chapter 2

New Orleans surrendered to Union forces on April 28, 1862; giving the Federals the South's largest city and opening the Lower Mississippi Valley to conquest. Panic reigned up and down the Mississippi as ill prepared Confederate garrisons sought to shore up their defenses. Planters burned cotton on orders from the Confederate government, while openly wondering if the Federals were on a "nigger stealing expedition." On May 12, a squadron of Union vessels dropped anchor at Natchez, Mississippi, sent a party of officers and marines ashore, and accepted the surrender of the town. The party promptly returned to their boats and moved on, leaving no troops to hold the town. Three days later another boat temporarily deposited union infantry across the river from Natchez at Vidalia before moving on to Vicksburg. Finally, on the 18th, near Vicksburg, Farragut and General Benjamin Butler called for the town's surrender, to which the Confederates cheekily admonished them that "Mississippians don't know, and refuse to learn, how to surrender to an enemy."¹

While their white masters fretted, blacks had already begun making their presence felt on behalf of the Union. The former slaves warned naval officers of obstructions in the river, served as guides, and pointed out Confederate ambushes set up in the brush and bluffs lining the river. By June 1862, Brigadier General Thomas Williams, commanding the infantry during the joint operation, had assembled 1,100 to 1,200 contrabands to dig a canal across Young's Point, just opposite Vicksburg, to change the course of the river so that ships

¹ United States Naval War Records Office, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, D.C., 1904), Series I, Volume 18: West Gulf Blockading Squadron (February 21, 1862 - July 14, 1862), p. 531, 491, 809-10,109-110, (hereinafter cited as *Naval ORs*).

could by-pass the town's batteries. It did not take general Williams long to realize that "the labor of making this cut is far greater than estimated by anybody." The hard clay ground proved unyielding, the river uncooperative, and disease had not yet even begun to take its toll. Unconvinced by such difficulties, Federal forces experimented with canals for almost another year. Despite such fruitless endeavors, the union high command had come to appreciate the impact blacks could make on the war effort.²

By the end of the summer of 1862, events far away at Antietam Creek, Maryland, ultimately determined the fate of the contrabands gathered up by Union forces along the Mississippi. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia marched into Maryland, hoping to bring recruits to the Confederate cause and deal a defeat to northern arms on northern soil, found himself checked at the Battle of Antietam Creek, outside Sharpsburg. While not much of a victory for General George B. McClellan, it was enough of one for Abraham Lincoln to announce the Emancipation Proclamation which freed slaves in the states still in rebellion on January 1, 1863. Coinciding with the question of liberty for slaves came the question of arming them. Frederick Douglass had pushed for arming blacks since the beginning of the war, while some of the more radical Union generals such as David Hunter tried to push ahead of the president. Benjamin Butler, who answered the legal question of the status of slaves who escaped into union lines at Fortress Monroe in May 1861, again put his legal training into the service of the cause when he issued a general order enrolling the Louisiana Native Guards into U.S. service at New Orleans on August 22, 1863—a full month before Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation. Butler operated under the assumption that since the Native Guard was a duly organized body of state militia and the members were

² U. S. War Department, *The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Series I. Vol. 15, Serial No. 21, p. 27 (hereinafter cited as *ORs*).

free blacks, he was not technically enlisting freed slaves into the Union army. His argument was sound, and it held. While Butler wrapped his mind around the legalities of the Native Guard, Senator James Lane, a Jayhawker in Kansas attacked the problem head on—he raised the First Regiment, Kansas Colored Volunteers, and began conducting raids into Missouri. On January 13, 1863, Lane's regiment entered federal service. His and Butler's pioneering work, combined with the Emancipation Proclamation, loosed a flood of recruiting.³

Until the early spring of 1863, most recruitment of black men occurred on the periphery of the Confederacy and in northern abolitionist strongholds. Yet, in General Ulysses S. Grant's theater of operations in northern Mississippi and western Tennessee, circumstances looked promising for the development of a wellspring of black recruits in the heart of the Confederacy. The Union occupation of Memphis, Tennessee, on the Mississippi River, and later, Corinth, in the northeastern corner of Mississippi, created shining cities on a hill for freedom-seeking slaves; and these towns' populations exploded with northern speculators, Union army contractors, and liberated slaves--so much so that the authorities struggled to maintain order. Grant's abortive December campaign into central Mississippi further ballooned the contraband population, leading to the establishment of contraband camps from Corinth to Memphis.

The creation of the camps necessitated competent administrators to oversee them, for the southern infrastructure was not built to accommodate large urban concentrations of people dependent on the delivery of food, water, and clothing to survive. Most southern cities existed to facilitate the cultivation of cotton, with the flow of food and clothing going to the countryside, and not vice versa. Moreover, the freedmen were not producing anything,

³ Dudley Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1861* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1956, reprint 1987), 69-78.

thus further skewing the war bent disparity between needs and supplies in the region. Union commanders, therefore, stepped into the gap in an attempt to forestall the worst of the human suffering, lawlessness, and despair left in the wake of the advancing armies. Grant, to his credit, chose his administrators based on their competency and liberality of spirit toward blacks. Many of these officers later took the lead in organizing, recruiting, and training black regiments, leading to a strong interdependent relationship between the Freedmen's Bureau and the USCT, a bond that would last until both organizations ceased to exist.

Grant's choice for superintendent of freedmen in his command went to the thirty-four year-old John Eaton, Jr., a Dartmouth educated chaplain in the Twenty-seventh Ohio Infantry Regiment. Enlisting in the summer of 1861, Eaton found himself serving in Missouri under General John C. Fremont and later David Hunter, both strong abolitionists. Although in the beginning he proclaimed himself a moderate, declaring, "A pro-slavery fanatic in Missouri is twin brother to an antislavery fanatic in Ohio," by 1863 he had seen enough of the peculiar institution to make him a full fledged abolitionist. In November 1862, as the army prepared for its big push on Vicksburg through central Mississippi, the Union Army of Tennessee met an "army of slaves and fugitives, pushing its way irresistibly toward an army of fighting men." Eaton likened it to the "oncoming of cities" but with "no plan in this exodus, no Moses to lead it." He and other chaplains sought to bring as much order to the chaos as they possibly could, which attracted the attention of higher ups. On November 11, 1862, he received orders from Grant directing him to take charge of "contrabands in the vicinity of the post, organizing them into suitable companies for working, [to] see that they are properly cared for, and set them to work," which became Union army policy toward freedmen in the region for the remainder of the war. A later special order explained his duties and powers in

greater detail, provided for the establishment of a formal camp for the contrabands, and assigned a regiment of white troops to guard them—another precedent-setting order that endured.⁴

Those orders, and Eaton's belief that he was not equal to the task, formed the basis for the first meeting between him and Grant. Upon their initial meeting in Grant's tent, the general did little to ease his concerns when he jovially greeted him with, "Oh, you are the man who has all these darkies on his shoulders." Eaton then launched into a laundry list of reasons why Grant should not have chosen him for the job. The general remained sphinx-like through it all, and finally, after the chaplain exhausted his excuses, the general said, "Mr. Eaton, I have ordered you to report to me in person, and I will take care of you," which he ultimately did. The two then struck up a long conversation in which Grant unveiled his plans for the contrabands—plans that ultimately rested on the pragmatic foundation of how free blacks could contribute to the defeat of the Confederacy. As a matter of primary importance, the general did not want them to impede his nascent campaign for Vicksburg; secondly, to protect their health and feed them during the upcoming winter; and finally, to make them self-sufficient, particularly in the financial realm. Winning a war requires money, and every dollar spent on contrabands was a dollar that did not go toward defeating the Confederacy. Grant proudly, but erroneously wrote in his memoirs that "At once the freedmen became self-sustaining." Regarding their labor, his statement "The money was not paid to them directly, but was expended judiciously for their benefit" became in itself the root of a larger question regarding their civil liberties as freedmen. But, as Eaton noted in a report for the American

⁴ *The Liberator*, July 11, 1856; John Eaton and Ethel Osgood Mason, *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1907), xv, xiv, 2-5; *ORs*, Series I. Vol. 52, Part I, Serial No. 109, p. 301-02.

Freedmen's Inquiry Commission later in 1863, "Most of these people were supposed to have merely exchanged masters; and were expected as a ma[t]ter of course to be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the United States without pay and even without clothing." The situation stabilized somewhat into a form of organized chaos over the next couple of months as Grant's army advanced, retreated, and probed its way toward Vicksburg, gathering freedmen and depositing them in camps in the rear along the way.⁵

Eaton and his superintendents performed heroically in the spring of 1863. During the midst of a strenuous military campaign he had supervised the feeding and housing of over twenty-two thousand freedmen in scattered camps in a huge triangle from Lake Providence, Louisiana, to Corinth, Mississippi, to Cairo, Illinois. A meticulous record keeper, Eaton documented nearly every aspect of the contraband's conditions as they arrived in camp. For example, he recorded that of the 6,747 refugees in the Corinth, Grand Junction, and Memphis camps, only two hundred could read, while only one hundred could both read and write. He wrote that they "came into our lines wretchedly clad" and "were sheltered in tents, in barracks or in old or deserted houses; but in many cases, men made cabins for themselves." They brought property in with them such as livestock and farm implements, but were soon relieved of anything of value by unscrupulous Union officers and enlisted men. Eaton bitterly remarked that they "were rewarded for having spoiled their and our enemies, by being spoiled in return." He also noted the brutalities visited on the freedmen by white Union soldiers especially when he employed white enlisted men as guards. Only after a

⁵ Grant, *Lincoln, and Freedmen*, p. 5; Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster and Co., 1885-86), I:424-6; Robert Dale Owen to Abraham Lincoln, Wednesday, August 05, 1863, *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*. Transcribed and Annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College. Galesburg, Illinois, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(d2533300\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d2533300))).

court of inquiry in June 1863 shamed Grant into taking action did the more egregious abuses by officers and enlisted men abate.⁶

Eaton, ever the record keeper, queried his charges about their motivations for fleeing to Union lines. Some, "had a clear and precise idea that the war was to bring emancipation, and acted upon that idea." Many had a sense of "strong local attachment" which he found curiously strange. They fled their homes seeking freedom but wished to go back home if they could return as free men. Not surprisingly he noted that the freedmen expressed "in a great many cases, a fear of being baulked of freedom by being sold 'down South'" and that "Many alledge cruel treatment as the cause." Many years after the war, in an interview with a Works Progress Administration writer, J. T. Timms cited cruel treatment as the reason for his family's flight to freedom. Ten years old at the time of the Yankee invasion of the region, Timms lived on Blount Steward's plantation in Jefferson County, Mississippi—between Natchez and Vicksburg. He recalled how Mr. Steward was "kinder good" but that "Miss Ann," Blount's wife, whipped him for nothing. As a young slave, and apparently not ready for the cotton fields, Timms was responsible for walking the Steward's daughter to school every day. He could not recall doing anything wrong, but one day while he was playing on the kitchen steps, Miss Ann decided to whip him. The young boy protested that "he hadn't done nothing," but that did not satisfy the thoroughly angry Miss Ann. She grabbed him, then scissored his head between her legs so she could immobilize him and whale away on his then outthrust rear end with greater effect. Young Timms had had enough. He cocked his head to one side, opened his mouth, and sunk his teeth into the flesh of Miss Ann's tender inner thigh. It got the desired result. She turned him loose and hollered; either in pain or anger, or possibly both, Timms did not say. His victory, however, was short lived. Miss

⁶ Ibid.

Ann called in reinforcements, yelling for William, another slave, to come finish the job. Timms laconically recalled, "William come to do it." At that point, Timms' mom joined in what was becoming a serious contest of wills. For when William stepped up to beat the ten-year-old, Timms' mother, who had been watching the escalating fray from the kitchen window, charged out the kitchen door with a very businesslike carving knife, telling William, "That's my child and if you hit him, I'll kill you." Miss Ann then pulled her trump card, calling her son Tully to beat the threatening cook. Tully, apparently more even keeled than his mother, went to Timms' mother saying, "I know you ain't done nothin' nor your child neither, but I'll have to hit you a few light licks to satisfy ma."⁷

The following day, Blount Steward showed up. He found Timms' father Daniel, making shoes. Noticing that something was amiss, or having heard about the disturbance from his wife and possibly fishing for an indication of Daniel's reaction to the beatings, Steward said, "Daniel, you're looking mighty glum. Daniel shot back, "You'd be lookin' glum too if your wife and chile had done been beat up for nothin'." Hotheaded like his wife, Steward flew into a rage, "snatched up a hammer and hit pa upside the head," remembered young J.T. Timms. Pa had enough of the hair triggered Stewards, and faced Blount down, "By G-d, don't you try it again." Pa Timms meant it, and Blount knew it, and backed down. They parted with Timms' words, "You won't hit me no more," lingering in the air.⁸

Within the week, Daniel Timms, his family, and several other slaves, a party of twelve in all, made their escape in the middle of the night. They journeyed toward the settlement of Rodney, thirteen miles to the northwest on the Mississippi River, where they

⁷ *Work Projects Administration, Slave Narratives A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interview with Former Slaves, Arkansas Narratives*, pt. 6, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/11709> (Accessed March 10, 2009), J. T. Tims (hereinafter cited as *WPA Narratives, Arkansas*).

⁸ *Ibid.*

hoped to flag down a Union gunboat. The captain, unwilling to place the fugitives in harm's way aboard a vessel of war, refused to pick them up. Undaunted the party turned south, and from "Sunday night to Sunday night, walking and wading," and avoiding the hounds trailing them, they made their way toward Union lines. Across the region, variations of the Timms' journey played out thousands of times. Sometimes just one fugitive at a time, and at others small bands of runaway slaves braved the bloodhounds, swamps, and guerillas, to find freedom with the Union army. Unless they found employment as a cook or teamster in an army regiment, they usually ended up languishing in a contraband camp, until the U.S. government figured out what to do with them.⁹

John Eaton thought arming them might be a good idea, and asked his camp superintendents what they thought about the subject. One said, "I believe in giving them their freedom by their swords. Policy and humanity say, Arm the negro. History affords all the necessary precedents for liberating slaves and arming them as soldiers, to fight in defence of their county. Blacks fought in the Revolutionary struggle, and in the War of 1812. Let them fight in the war for their own liberty." Not to be outdone in florid language, the superintendent at Memphis waxed even more eloquent, "Yes, arm him! It will do him worlds of good. He will know then that he has rights, and dare maintain them -- a grand step towards manhood. Arm him! for our country needs soldiers. These men will make good soldiers. Arm him! for the rebels need enemies, and heaven knows the blacks have reason to be that. Once armed and drilled, the black man will be an enemy the rebels will neither love nor despise. Arm him, and let the world see the black man on a vast scale returning good for evil, helping with blood and life the cause of the race which hated, oppressed and scorned him."

⁹ Ibid.

The superintendent at LaGrange, Tennessee, piled on, "Arm them at once. We can hurt the rebels more by the use of the negro than by any others means in our power. Arm him -- use him; do it speedily. Why leave him to labor for our enemy, and thus keep up the strife? Arm him -- he is a man -- he will fight -- he can save the Union. I pledge you and the world they will make good soldiers." Powerful voices in Washington were asking the same question, and getting much the same response. During a meeting on the subject, Charles Sumner reportedly declared, "that the greatest name to be written in these times will be written by the hand of that man who organizes the colored people into an army for their own deliverance and the restoration of the Union." The president agreed, Freedmen in the Mississippi Valley must be enlisted into the Union army to help put down the rebellion.¹⁰

Just as Grant needed John Eaton to take charge of the Freedmen in his department, Abraham Lincoln needed someone to take charge of recruiting black troops. If prognosticators had said in 1861 that the man who would ultimately supervise the recruitment of nearly 200,000 freedmen was John C. Fremont or David Hunter, no one would have been surprised. But if they had predicted that Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas would play such a role, their forecast would have been met with guffaws of laughter. By 1863 Thomas was at the nadir of what little influence he had ever wielded in Washington. At the beginning of the war many viewed him as General Winfield Scott's lapdog. When Lincoln had him investigate Fremont, then the darling of the Radical Republicans, Thomas, a former slave owner with strong ties to the South, made a number of mortal enemies. His boss, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, detested him. Therefore, when the need arose for a veteran

¹⁰ Owen to Lincoln, August 5, 1863, *Abraham Lincoln Papers; The Daily Dispatch*, (Richmond), June 17, 1863.

senior officer to take charge of recruiting black troops in the South, a task that would require that officer to travel a great deal, Thomas seemed like the perfect candidate in Stanton's eyes. On March 25, 1863, Stanton summoned Thomas to his office, and told him he wanted him "to go West," asking the general, "How soon do you think you can be ready? I want you to go at once." Thomas replied, "I can go tomorrow, sir," and within twenty-four hours the granite-jawed, white-haired, adjutant general found himself aboard a train bound for Cairo, Illinois, and the front lines of the war in the western theater. Only after the initial exchange did Stanton tell Thomas the purpose of the mission.¹¹

In 1919, Winston Churchill likened Vladimir Lenin's return to Russia in a sealed car to the injection of a bacillus intended to infect and ultimately kill the nation. In 1863, from the Confederate perspective, Lorenzo Thomas served a similar purpose. The Union army had nearly severed the Confederacy in two by the spring of 1863—all that remained was Vicksburg and Port Hudson to hold it together. Thomas's orders directed him to travel in the wake of the advancing Union army down the Mississippi Valley, authorize the formation of regiments "of African Descent" (as they were labeled at that time), discipline any white soldiers who opposed the plan, and pass out commissions to men who wanted to lead black regiments. His mission ultimately helped seal the fate of the Confederacy.

After a journey half-way across the continent by train, in which he did not leave his car for three days and three nights, Thomas disembarked at Cairo, Illinois. What he saw did not please him; a regiment recruited in southern Illinois, and assigned to garrison the town, had fallen completely apart due to the negligence of its officers. One company could muster only two men for duty. Thomas, an old Regular Army hand, saw red. He summoned

¹¹ Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: The Lives of Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1964), 503; David Cornwell, *The Cornwell Chronicles*, Edited by John Wearmouth (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1998), 186-87; *New York Times*, July 20, 1863.

General Napoleon Bonaparte Buford, and together they spent three hours examining every officer in the regiment, then dismissed every single one of them on the spot for incompetence. The army's treatment of the freedmen who had sought refuge at the post sickened him to the point that he could not sleep during his first night in town. In an interview with the *New York Times* after he returned from the trip Thomas recalled "Seeing these black people huddled together, abused and neglected by those who had charge of them, and all sorts of expressions, constant and stereotyped, of which was 'D---n the N---r' used toward them, it made an impression on my mind that I shall never lose." The officers used them for servants, and when the servant got sick, turned them out without paying them for their labors. Later in the summer Union authorities would discover that their own officials had engaged in selling freedmen back into slavery across the Ohio River in Kentucky. Such was the state of affairs at Cairo. Yet, despite all of the disappointment Thomas experienced upon his arrival at the sickly confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, he offered a message of hope in his first speech on the recruitment of black troops. Speaking to the assembled Freedmen, he acknowledged that the Union forces had mistreated them, neglected them, and allowed them "to die like diseased sheep" but that now that Washington knew about it, such treatment would cease. Continuing, he announced that any black men who entered Union lines would receive food and clothing and then be enlisted into the army. He also promised summary punishment for any white soldier, enlisted or officer, who opposed the President's wishes in regard to black enlistment. He had already proven himself perfectly capable of summarily dismissing officers, and would enhance that element of his reputation as his tour progressed through the region.¹²

¹² Ibid; *The Liberator*, November 27, 1863.

The next day, April 2, the sixty-year-old general boarded a steamer and traveled south to Columbus, Kentucky, where he ordered General Benjamin F. Scribner to assemble the troops. There, he announced his method for choosing officers for the black regiments. First, he declared, only "those whose hearts were fully in the work" would be selected. He would appoint a board to examine the applicants. Then, too much in a hurry to rest, he boarded the steamer and chugged south to Memphis, where he authorized the formation of six companies of heavy artillery of African Descent on April 4th. Two days later on the sixth, at Helena, Arkansas, he met General Benjamin M. Prentiss who favorably impressed him with his ardor for arming black troops. Prentiss, who had seen firsthand the effect of black labor on the southern war effort during his stint as a prisoner of war, already used a black sentinel to guard his tent before he ever got word of Thomas's mission. Upon hearing of the goal of the Adjutant General's mission, Prentiss "earnestly requested the privilege of organizing a colored regiment," which Thomas granted. The officers then assembled the 7,000-man garrison for a speech. Thomas led off with his criteria for officers in the new black regiment. Next Prentiss "made quite an interesting speech" followed by an elected official who drew the most enthusiastic response from the soldiers. Then, as Thomas recalled, "a roster for a regiment was given and called the First Arkansas." The adjutant general, catching the martial spirit and excitement of the historic moment, waxed fiery, declaring that the new black regiment would "be detailed to protect the Valley of the Mississippi; that they knew the haunts of the guerillas and would hunt them down like dogs." Before he left Helena he organized a second regiment of African Descent, and met Colonel William A. Pile of the Thirty-third Missouri Infantry Regiment, whom the general authorized to organize five more regiments of black troops. (Pile, a Episcopal minister prior to the war, enlisted in the Union

army as a chaplain, and mustered out as a major general in 1865.) After departing Helena, Thomas again boarded the *Rocket*, a 300 ton sternwheeler piloted by one of his sons and his preferred mode of transportation while in the region. Pulling away from the bank and easing into the muddy channel, the steamer turned its bow south toward Lake Providence, Louisiana, where Thomas expected to encounter elements of Major General James Birdseye McPherson's corps of the Army of the Tennessee.¹³

The adjutant general planned to bring his tour to a triumphant crescendo at Corinth, Mississippi, the site of his final speech, after taking care of business along the river. But before he could begin the overland part of his journey he had to take care of business in the principle field army in the western theater. The Army of the Tennessee had known almost nothing but victory up to that point and planned to keep its record intact during the final thrust down the Middle Mississippi Valley to Vicksburg. Stretched out in camps from Lake Providence to Young's Point, just across the river from Vicksburg, (a distance of thirty-eight miles as the crow flies) the army was preparing to move even further south where it could cross the river unmolested by the Confederates. In these camps, Thomas faced his toughest test; he had no way of knowing how the soldiers would react. Many came from southern Illinois, a Democratic stronghold of uncertain loyalties when the war began and General John A. Logan's political fiefdom. If those soldiers and their charismatic politician-turned-general objected to Thomas's message, they could seriously undermine the acceptance of black troops in the West.

¹³ Ibid.; *ORs*, Series III. Vol. 5, Serial No. 129, p. 119; Alonzo Leighton Brown, *History of the Fourth Regiment of Minnesota Infantry Volunteers During the Great Rebellion* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press, 1892), 226; Lawrence N. Powell, *New Masters: Northern Planters during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 137; Gibson, Charles Dana, and E. Kay Gibson, compilers, *Dictionary of Transports and Combatant Vessels Steam and Sail Employed by the Union Army 1861-1868* (Camden, Maine: Ensign Press, 1995), 274.

Thomas landed at Lake Providence on the morning of April 8th and must have felt at least some concern about what the day would bring. He met with General McPherson and the division commanders that morning, scheduling Brigadier General John McArthur's division for the first speech of the day. In choosing McArthur's first, Thomas may have played a strategic hand. McArthur's division contained just three regiments of Illinois troops, and McArthur himself hailed from the more anti-slavery northern part of that state. Thomas may have hoped that the expected positive reaction of McArthur's men would influence the men of Logan's division, more than half of whom were Illinoisans. In all, the division included eight regiments and three artillery batteries from the Sucker State. That afternoon, at the appointed time, Logan's division assembled around a makeshift platform nailed onto some wagons. The brass, including Thomas, McPherson, and Logan ascended the platform along with a host of brigade commanders and other lesser lights. One of the regiments showed up late, offering the officers a bit of time to catch up and chat among themselves. But, after a few minutes, General McPherson stepped "gaily to the front and called his corps to 'Attention.'" He then proceeded to give a very detailed speech on the government's policy to arm black troops, calling on any officers who objected to step forward so that he could muster them out of the service. One eye witness recalled McPherson's speech as thorough, saying the general "talked all around it, on all sides of it, over it and under it and elaborated it until it seemed nothing more could be said on the subject," which is exactly what the general wanted. He obviously took notes during Thomas's earlier speech and preempted everything the adjutant general had to say in the later speech to Logan's men. If McPherson was not grinning on the outside, he almost certainly must have been laughing himself silly on the inside for his practical joke on the old veteran.

Poor Thomas could do nothing but get up, put on a brave face and try to deliver his speech, which for the most part had remained unchanged since he delivered it for the first time at Cairo.¹⁴

Thomas mumbled and sputtered "something to the effect that Gen. McPherson had unkindly taken advantage of him and told them all about his mission, and had left them nothing new to tell them" but determined to give his speech anyway as he had orders to personally deliver the message to the troops. He began, "Your Commanding-General has so fully stated the object of my mission that it is almost unnecessary for me to say anything in reference to it." He continued, "Still, I come here with full authority from the President of the United States," before launching into the introductory portion of his speech. Thomas took special pains in all of his speeches to claim the mantle of presidential authority. That day was no different when he said "I come from him fully clothed with the fullest power...I am directed to refer nothing to Washington...to strike down the unworthy and lift up the deserving." In other words, he became judge, jury, and executioner to any man who opposed the government's program. He plowed on to the next part of his speech—the message of confession and redemption. Here, he revealed his southern roots to the men, telling them that he had spent most of his lengthy military career in the South, had owned slaves, and was "born with Southern prejudices." But, he revealed, claiming redemption for his past faults, that he supported the new policy with his "whole heart." Some who knew of Thomas's ability to weather the D. C. political storms took a less than charitable view of the general's conversion, attributing his change of heart on slavery less to a newfound liberalism than to his keen political senses. Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, however, took heart in the general's conversion; not because of any affinity for Thomas but because, as he later

¹⁴ *ORs*, Series III. Vol. 3, Serial No. 124, p. 121; Cornwell, *The Cornwell Chronicles*, 186-187.

sarcastically remarked, “The tendency of the country is to universal freedom, when men like Thomas make abolition speeches at public dinners.”¹⁵

Sincere, or not, Thomas persevered in his deflated speech, next appealing to the soldiers' logic. He reminded them of what they had seen since entering the south—fields full of crops cultivated by slaves which enabled the Confederacy to send more able bodied white men to the front lines. He appealed to the soldiers' sense of fair play--if the Confederacy could mobilize blacks for their war effort, then why not the Union? Moreover, he reminded them, President Lincoln had given the South every opportunity to do the right thing and give up slavery in the Emancipation Proclamation, thus laying the decision to arm blacks squarely at the feet of the South. He asked the soldiers to "Look along the river, and see the number of deserted plantations on its borders. There is the place to put these men—where they can be made self-sustaining and self-supporting" and more importantly for the immediate mission and for the cooperation of the enlisted men, the army had no plans on sending the freedmen to northern states. The adjutant general maintained that because many northern states had laws prohibiting their entry, the best solution was to keep the former slaves working in the South, which is precisely where the vast majority of Union soldiers wanted them to remain. After this appeal to their self interest, the white-haired soldier told the men to welcome blacks into their lines with open arms and to feed and cloth them. He added, "they are to be armed." Appeals to logic and self-interest taken care of, he challenged their vanity and competitive nature. Comparing them to Napoleon's veterans, Thomas said that he hoped to "raise at least one regiment from this division" and reaching the climax of his speech exclaimed "I don't want to stop at one regiment—I must have two." If that did not get the

¹⁵ *Natchez Weekly Courier*, May 6, 1863; *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), May 11, 1863; Michael Burlingame, John R. Turner Ettliger, editors, *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 69.

7,000 assembled men roused, then his next statement should have been when Thomas remarked that McArthur's division had committed to raising two black regiments. No self-respecting member of Logan's division could sit back and let the Scotsman's men beat them. The appeal to vanity met, the general switched to logic, spelling out how blacks could do manual labor in the rear areas, chase guerillas, and free up white troops for combat on the front lines. He then concluded with another reference to Lincoln, telling the troops that once the president "puts his foot down, it is there, and not going to come up" or, in other words, do not resist the government's policy to arm blacks—it is settled.¹⁶

If Thomas had delivered the last speech of the day and then left, backers of the plan would have considered it a success. He spoke to two divisions of questionable troops, no cross words were heard, and the men, more or less, reconciled themselves to the cause of arming blacks. But, Thomas still had one last card to play. At his previous stops along the river, after finishing a speech he allowed the troops to call on the officer of their choice to speak. This allowed the troops to hear from their favorite commanders while at the same time putting them on the hot seat in front of Thomas. It was a test they had to pass at the risk of losing their command if they proved unenthusiastic. All eyes, therefore, were on John Logan when McPherson called on him to follow Thomas's speech. If the hugely popular Illinois politician remained true to his past positions on race in southern Illinois, then the administration's policy faced some tough hurdles in the upcoming months. Moreover, rumors had spread that "Black Jack" as he was called, would openly oppose Thomas. Therefore, when the walrus-mustachioed, thick-maned general stood up to speak, he had the ears of everyone, from Lorenzo Thomas to the lowest private. Very few officers on either side possessed the ability to motivate men like Logan did. One observer wrote that the

¹⁶ *Natchez Weekly Courier*, May 6, 1863; *Daily Evening Bulletin*, May 11, 1863.

setting must have reminded the general of his political campaigning in Illinois, for he delivered a barn-burner of a speech. Thomas later recalled, "I must refer to the eloquent remarks of Gen. Logan, who not only fully indorsed my own remarks, but went far beyond them, stating most emphatically that he would never return to his home...until this wicked rebellion shall be utterly crushed." The soldiers loved it. Afterwards, Thomas, McPherson, and Logan retired to the division commander's tent where they passed around a bottle, made racial wisecracks to one another, and explained McPherson's practical joke, which came in response to Thomas denying the corps commander's request for thirty days leave the previous fall. In the end, Thomas accepted half a dozen bottles of whiskey in compensation for his embarrassment.¹⁷

Publicly, the army reacted positively to Thomas's mission. Jacob Bruner, an enlisted man in the Sixty-eighth Ohio Infantry Regiment, heard the speeches and thought, "It was a great treat... Uncle Abe has at last sensibly concluded to arm the darkey and let him fight." He wrote to his wife that the general's speeches "produced the most cheering and beneficial result among the soldiers. They received it with shouts and acclamations of applause." Others did not behave so happily. William Moore Parkinson, of McArthur's division wrote home to his wife, "I never in all my days seen such enthusiasm, but it was not a unanimous thing. A good many are bitterly opposed to it." The ever blustery Brigadier General Andrew Jackson Smith, commanding a division in Major General John McClelland's XIII corps, wanted no part of Thomas's mission, saying he would "hang old Thomas if he comes into his camp making such a speech." Declaring that he hated "abolitionists worse than he does the Devil," Smith continued his sacrilege by claiming that "If Jesus Christ was to come down and

¹⁷ *New York Times*, July 20, 1863; *ORs*, Series III. Vol. 3, Serial No. 124, p. 301-02; Cornwell, *Cornwell Chronicles*, 187-88.

ask him if he [Smith] would be an abolitionist . . . , he answers that 'I would say NO! Mr. Christ, I beg to be excused. I would rather go to hell than be an abolitionist.' Said he expected to have his official head cut off for his sentiments, but by God he would never back down from his long established principles." Smith ultimately did back down from his "long established principles" later in the war by commanding black troops in combat. Major General William T. Sherman, commanding the XV corps, did not care much for the mission either. Later, in 1864, his disdain for black troops erupted into an open argument with Thomas. To the end of the war, Sherman never considered black troops fit for anything but duty in the rear, guarding depots and chopping wood. Mississippi's white population took a view similar to General Smith's. Mississippi state representative Henry C. Chambers pronounced, "the negro, whether slave or free, cannot be made a good soldier. The law of his race forbids it." He, and most other Mississippians, found it incomprehensible that blacks could make good soldiers. As for chivalry and honor, qualities most dear to Confederates at the beginning of the war, the congressman found it "difficult to conceive a being less fit for plucking honor from the cannon's mouth" than blacks. What makes his statement even more ignorant is that he made it in November 1864, almost two years after blacks began serving in the Union army, and a year and a half after black soldiers had proven themselves in combat.¹⁸

In addition to impressing upon white troops of the correctness and permanence of the government's policies, a major component of Thomas's mission consisted of organizing black regiments in the region. Toward that end, he had to identify suitable white officers to manage the new regiments. Initially, he thought whites could also serve as first sergeants in

¹⁸ Jacob Bruner to Dear Wife, April 9, 1863, Jacob Bruner Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio; William Moore Parkinson to Dear Sarah, April 13, 1863, Letters in Private Collection of Cynthia Parkinson, 2201 Ranch View Terrace Encinitas, CA 92024; Henry Clay Warmoth Diary, April 26, 1863, Henry Clay Warmoth papers, 1798-1953 (#752), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; *ORs*, Series III, Vol. 4, Serial No. 125, p. 734; *New York Times*, November 19, 1864.

the black companies, but abandoned the effort after discovering that applicants for those positions did so purely to obtain rank, and not out of any concern whatsoever for the freedmen. Above all, Thomas required candidates "whose hearts were in the work." To ensure that just such men got the coveted commissions, he authorized the corps and division commanders to establish examination boards to weed out unsuitable applicants.

Unfortunately, many commanders found Thomas's call for officers a convenient means of getting rid of bad apples. As a result, six months later, in November, USCT commanders found themselves still saddled with deadwood officers. But in April 1863, all was sunny on the western banks of the Mississippi. Grant's army moved toward destiny and the adjutant general had authorized the formation of ten regiments of African Descent. That evening, after completing his speeches to McPherson's corps, Thomas sent a telegram to Edwin Stanton requesting "ten thousand pairs of negro shoes of large size" and "also arms for that number." Thomas's efforts had paid off in a big way thus far.¹⁹

All of the traveling and speaking took a toll on Thomas, forcing him to retire to his quarters aboard the *Rocket* for a few days of rest after leaving McPherson's troops. On April 11 he landed at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, the site of General Grant's headquarters, but found himself too fatigued to leave the boat until the next morning. In Grant, he found a strong supporter of arming freedmen, for the general from Galena, Illinois, understood the calculus of removing blacks from the Confederate resource column. There at Milliken's Bend, appointed general John P. Hawkins to take charge of them. Hawkins, aged thirty-three at the time of his promotion, had graduated from West Point near the bottom of his class in 1852. He served in the regular army until the war broke out, whereupon he

¹⁹ *ORs*, Series III, Vol. 5, Serial No. 126, p. 119; John P. Hawkins to Caleb Mills, November 12, 1863, Caleb Mills Papers, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana; *ORs*, Series III, Vol. 3, Serial No. 124, p. 121.

transferred to the Commissary Department, through which he steadily advanced until he became chief commissary of the Army of the Tennessee. That position brought him into daily contact with General Grant where his performance likely earned him a position with the newly formed units of African Descent in the Department of Tennessee. For Hawkins, as for John Eaton, working with the USCT became not only a patriotic duty, but a religious one as well. Unlike Eaton, Hawkins had considerable experience in the regular army, which proved invaluable to the men under his command. Unfortunately, like many stationed at Milliken's Bend in the spring and summer of 1863, he contracted an illness, and within days of his appointment found himself unable to perform his duties. He spent the remainder of the summer trying to regain his strength outside of the theater of operations in Kentucky.²⁰

After linking up with Grant at Milliken's Bend, Thomas lessened his pace somewhat. His health had begun to bother him, the grand southward movement of the army made it difficult to assemble large bodies of troops to hear his speeches, and more than likely, he was just a little bit awestruck by what was going on around him. After nearly six months of trial and error, Grant had finally figured out the solution to Vicksburg, to march down the western bank, cross to higher ground below the Confederate citadel, and take the city from the rear. Later, when interviewed about his trip, Thomas clearly enjoyed telling about seeing the Union fleet run the batteries and work on the huge canals where Grant tried to change the course of the Mississippi River. After the army crossed the river, defeated the Confederates at Port Gibson, and took Grand Gulf, Thomas got back to his primary mission of forming

²⁰ *ORs*, Series III. Vol. 5, Part I, Serial No. 126, p. 119, Series I. Vol. 52, Part I, Serial No. 109, p. 352; Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 218-19.

black regiments since the movement flushed thousands of freedmen out of the countryside into Union camps.²¹

At the former Confederate stronghold of Grand Gulf, Mississippi, Thomas met Colonel Isaac F. Shepard of the Third Missouri Infantry for the first time, and liked him a great deal. Shepard brought an unusual resume to the job. Educated at Harvard, he wrote children's books, published a newspaper, and served in the Massachusetts legislature prior to the Civil War. An ardent abolitionist, he journeyed to Missouri and joined the state militia when the war began. From there he moved up the ranks to serve on Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon's staff, and eventually to command the Third Missouri. Shepard performed so well in the battle of Arkansas Post that General Sherman mentioned him in his official report, recommending the Colonel for higher rank. He also caught the eye of his superiors for his affinity for working with freedmen; Shepard took a leading role in caring for the freedmen when Union forces evacuated from Greenville, Mississippi, a few weeks earlier. Lorenzo Thomas found Shepard appealing due to his humanitarian instincts, explaining to General Henry Halleck that Shepard's "heart was in the work." It also impressed Thomas that Shepard became the only Union colonel to apply for a colonelcy in a black regiment, meaning that he did not expect a promotion. On May 28, with General Hawkins too sick to fulfill his duties, and both Thomas and Sherman on record praising Shepard, Grant gave the Massachusetts colonel temporary charge of the black regiments in the District of Northern

²¹ *New York Times*, July 20, 1863.

Louisiana, which essentially consisted of the western bank of the Mississippi River from Vidalia to Lake Providence, Louisiana.²²

Thomas remained in the field of active operations until May 5, when he boarded the *Rocket* once again for Memphis. There he met Major General Stephen A. Hurlbut and authorized the recruitment of more black troops. He then boarded a train to visit the scattered units of Hurlbut's corps, which stretched from Memphis to Corinth, Mississippi, eighty-five miles as the crow flies, but one-hundred and sixty via Thomas's roundabout route. Physically weakened by his trip down the river and back, the sixty-year-old general got no rest on the journey to Corinth. Word had preceded him, and at every station crowds waited on his arrival, and of course a speech. After having seen his career wither in the War Department during the previous two years, the temptation to savor the cheers of the crowds was understandable. Despite the frequent stops he finally arrived in Corinth a day after leaving Memphis.²³

The adjutant general met John Eaton, Jr., for the first time in Memphis, and invited the chaplain to accompany him on his tour of the camps. A study in contrasts: white hair versus youth, Washington staff officer versus idealistic chaplain, and tarnished veteran versus a young man on the rise, the two men needed one another for their missions to succeed. Eaton noted in a report that white soldiers had proven too encumbered by prejudice and greed to guard the contraband camps—his mission needed an armed component. Thomas, on the other hand, needed access to the masses of black men drawn to Eaton's

²² Stewart Sifakis, *Who was Who in the Civil War* (New York: Facts on File, 1998), 586; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 17, Part I, Serial 124, p. 214, Series III, Vol. 3, Serial 124, p. 357-358, Series I, Vol. 17, Part I, Serial No. 24, p. 760.

²³ *Ibid.*, Series III, Vol. 5, Serial No. 126, p. 120; *New York Times*, July 20, 1863.

camps. Working together, the two disparate men could fulfill their immediate missions, and in the long term help defeat the Confederacy.²⁴

Eaton marveled at how enthusiastically the soldiers and civilians along the route received Thomas' message. The chaplain remarked that it "was especially surprising to those of us who know how strong were their prejudices how bitter their opposition a few months ago." His only logical explanation: "This is the work of the Lord." How else could men's hearts' change so abruptly? Major-General Richard J. Oglesby, expressed similar amazement. After a particularly rousing speech, he approached Thomas, telling the fatigued veteran, "General, you are the boldest man I ever saw. Had you dared to announce such principles in this place a month, or two months ago...you would inevitably have been kicked out of this wagon, and probably treated to a coat of tar and feathers." Finally, after addressing all of the troops stationed at Corinth, Thomas, accompanied by a gaggle of generals, made his way to the large contraband camp. The camp superintendent, an army chaplain, spared no effort in ensuring that his esteemed guests did not leave unimpressed. He had the freedmen and black soldiers form three sides of a hollow square while the officers toured the camp. Thomas found the camp's streets well kept, and the interior of the cabins very satisfactory. They even found time for a little jocularly when the adjutant general put the inexperienced black troops through the manual of arms, which he pronounced as excellent in execution. Finally, the teachers and children who attended the camp school paraded into the square with flowing banners and put on a concert for the esteemed guests.²⁵

²⁴ *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, 27.

²⁵ *New York Times*, July 20, 1863; John Eaton Jr. to Rev. S. S. Jocelyn, May 18, 1863, Letters sent by John Eaton Jr., Records of the Mississippi Freedmen's Department ("Pre-Bureau Records") Office of the Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Land, 1863-1865, RG 105, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C., (Hereafter cited as *Pre-Bureau Records*).

The inspection and entertainment completed, all eyes focused on Thomas. There he stood, atop a platform, in the model camp of what the United States could do when it put its heart into the work of freedom. Sticking to his previous script, he opened his speech with remarks about his association with Lincoln, how white soldiers should treat freedmen, and how Lincoln intended to use blacks to break the rebellion. He then asked the assembled black troops, "Will you fight soldiers?" The response must have pleased him, for he continued, "Yes I know you will, I have seen many black soldiers. Half the guns at the late great battle of Grand Gulf were manned by blacks. I have ten thousand black soldiers down the river." Abruptly changing gears, he repeated his confession of having owned slaves in the past, but in a departure from his other recorded speeches, told the assembled freedmen that a slave raised him, and offering himself as an example of how attitudes could change, declared that "I know what all the prejudices are upon this subject, but I have overcome them." In another curious departure from his earlier speeches, probably resulting from his recent introduction to John Eaton, Thomas delved into theology, telling the freedmen that they had received a great opportunity. He asked them, "Will you...make men and women Christian citizens? He testified that for the previous twenty years he had served as a Sunday school superintendent at his church and that they had "colored classes." From that experience, along with his observations of blacks in the south, he determined that blacks could indeed "learn, learn readily that you can be Christian men & women as well as soldiers."²⁶

His climactic speech of his mission about finished, Thomas concluded with a ringing promise to, "tell the President of what I have seen here to day and he will be very glad to know that you are doing so well." The crowd responded accordingly, "Vociferous cheers

²⁶ Ibid.; The United States Navy tolerated black crewmembers long before the army admitted blacks.

rolled up from the depths of their hearts for the President, for the good news, for the General. Cheer following cheer, then echoes flying along the defenses" Afterwards, Thomas and the generals toured the camp farm, consisting of 300 acres of cotton and 100 acres of vegetables, in which all of the freedmen were required to work if not employed elsewhere in the camp. Afterwards, as Thomas and his entourage departed the camp, the superintendent, Chaplain James M. Alexander, "deeply moved by this ostentatious recognition of the success of his efforts to prove these people capable of improving their freedom," turned to Eaton and joyfully proclaimed, "Now I am prepared to die." After escorting the adjutant general to his quarters that evening Eaton returned to a scene of celebration in the camp. Part of the population was "celebrating the day of Jubilo" with a dance, while another held a prayer meeting. One of the speakers especially caught the chaplain's ear, proclaiming, "I am a soldier, I am a soldier of the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ is the captain of our salvation. He is never conquered, He can bring us forth."²⁷

Despite the tour de force at Corinth, Thomas found disappointment on the route back to Memphis. Stopping at Lafayette, Mississippi, little more than a whistle stop on the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, the thoroughly fatigued adjutant general made his case to the Ninetieth Illinois Infantry, an all Irish unit. After giving his speech, Thomas called for three cheers for Abraham Lincoln, to which the Irishmen heartily responded. But, when the general called for three cheers for the "settled policy of the United States with regard to the negroes" (hopefully he used a less awkward rallying cry) the Sons of Erin balked, shouting "No! No!" Thomas became livid. He immediately asked the ranking regimental officer (the colonel being absent) "what such conduct meant?" to which the hapless officer lamely replied, "that they had had no opportunity to think over the matter." Thomas called him a

²⁷ Ibid.; *New York Times*, May 31, 1863.

liar, "You are not telling the truth, Sir! I know that they have been discussing this question for a week past. I know the fact if you do not." Returning his attention to the assembled troops, he ordered anyone opposed to the policy to step forward. Some did, and off to the guardhouse they went. He gave the remaining troops a week to reconsider their opinion, at which time, if they still opposed the government's policy, he would disband the regiment. On that note he boarded the train for the next town. Upon arriving at the next stop, he met the colonel of the Ninetieth, who begged the adjutant general to let him handle the situation. Thomas relented and the men of the Ninetieth Illinois "learned the duty of the soldier" at the hands of their embarrassed colonel. The strain of the trip finally caught up with Thomas when he returned to Memphis. He took sick, and his physician ordered him out of the theater, thus concluding the first of his many trips to the region.²⁸

Until Thomas came to the region, government policy toward freedmen and arming blacks consisted of a collection of ad hoc prescriptions applied by local military commanders in response to pressing basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and self-defense for the contrabands. For the most part, chaplains inherited the superintendencies of the camps, primarily because of mid-nineteenth century conceptions of the Church's role in society—the church helped the poor and unfortunate while the government governed, and only rarely, if ever, should the government get involved in the latter. When the armies encountered the thousands of destitute freedmen, commanders looked to the only men in their commands who had the experience and the aptitude for such work--chaplains. The chaplains, in turn, put their own unique stamp on the effort, giving the entire effort a strong missionary cast. In an age where public figures freely invoked Christian imagery without backlash or retribution, the individuals who worked with the freedmen carried it to an higher level, hoping to make

²⁸ Ibid.; *New York Herald*, May 26, 1863; *ORs*, Series III. Vol. 5, Serial No. 126, p. 120.

Christian citizens of their charges along the lines of the Protestant ethic of hard work and frugality. Fiscally conservative, Americans of the Civil War era expected the freedmen to earn their own keep and become self-sustaining as early as possible. The solution, to put the freedmen back in the cotton fields as early as possible, seemed logical. Therefore, when freedmen sought government protection, they had to accept that they would have to work, whether they liked it or not. They could labor in the cotton fields, chop wood, and work at a host of other tasks, or they could join the army, but one way or another, entry into the camps came with responsibilities. In short, one can make the case that the army chaplains, in the United States' first effort at nation-building, sought to recreate Jeffersonian democracy on the banks of the Mississippi.

As for the black troops, Thomas had the benefit of not having to start from scratch. In contrast to 1861 when almost everyone was an amateur, the men who stepped forward to lead the regiments of African Descent had experience in leading men in combat, or had seen significant combat. While not all of them knew the intricacies of Hardee's, Gillem's, and Scofield's drill manuals, they had a fair knowledge of how the U.S. Army operated, and how to comport themselves as officers. The primary problem at that time consisted of how to screen officers effectively. Thomas's original scheme of allowing corps and division commanders to oversee the process did not work out as he had hoped. Many dregs ended up in the USCT, as the white units found that organization a convenient means of flushing away bad officers. But, as in the case of the civilian freedmen, Thomas put the army off to a good start. Tweaking of the system would eventually yield better officers and better troops.

Thomas fared better with the higher ranking officers. Grant's appointment of Eaton to supervise the freedmen in his department was a stroke of genius. In the former school

teacher he found a man who had a heart for the freedmen, and a brain to administrate a far flung collection of camps--feeding, clothing, and housing tens of thousands of destitute people. Likewise, while he had high hopes for General John P. Hawkins, Thomas did not know in May 1863, how good a choice the Christian General would turn out to be, for like Eaton, and as the adjutant general constantly repeated, Hawkins had a heart for the work. The same could be said for Colonel Isaac F. Shepard. During Hawkins' sickness in the summer of 1863, Shepard guided the black regiments through some of their toughest tests.

Ultimately, Thomas's labors cemented the establishment of a new institution in the region to replace the defunct institution of slavery. While the army operated as a benevolent institution in regard to blacks, it was, like slavery, a controlling institution. It had the power of life and death over black soldiers as well as freedmen. It controlled their movements by preventing them from migrating to northern states in significant numbers, and it sought to control their labor by putting them to work when they entered the lines. Moreover, the army sought to instill a system of values in the freedmen, a set of values in regard to work, frugality, and morality. In essence, when blacks in the Middle Mississippi Valley escaped to Union lines, they exchanged one controlling institution for another.

Chapter 3

Lorenzo Thomas left the region with a cadre of aspirant officers in his wake, their commissions contingent upon their ability to locate black men and enroll them into the Union army. These officers typically fell into one of two categories—men seeking field grade ranks (major to colonel) primarily for patriotic and humanitarian reasons, and men seeking company grade ranks (lieutenant to captain) often for much less noble reasons. Only one officer, Isaac Shepard, moved sideways, from a colonelcy in a white regiment to an equal rank in a black one. Nevertheless, surviving documents indicate that many of the field grade officers seeking the higher ranks held genuine feelings of concern for the welfare of blacks. Their official records, letters, and diaries most often contain references to their service among the black troops as a higher calling. General Hawkins believed that he had embarked on a history making mission when he took over the black regiments in the region. Colonel Herman Lieb, a Swiss immigrant, and a hardboiled liberal until the day he died, considered his service with black troops a social mission. He wrote, "I felt that I was upon trial as much as these half-civilized recruits. After consultation with my officers, I resolved to impart to all of these negroes as much elementary education as would be required for a discriminating American citizenship." In short, Lieb "believed the army was a civilizer." Colonel Isaac Shepard, coming from the Third Missouri Infantry, wrote that he felt it "noble and godlike to aid a degraded wretch to rise...I left a good command as you have in service to take equal rank in a regiment of African descent, because I saw a greater field for good influence, than in the Regiment I had trained." Hiram Scofield, another colonel who believed in the nobility of the endeavor and the historic nature of the moment proclaimed to his

officers, "The eyes of the world are now turned to the Colored Regiments organized and being organized in this country. And you may be assured that if they are made a success, a gratified county and astonished world will do you full credit." While a bit ornate, his words did, indeed, capture the sense of curiosity the rest of the country had toward the new policy. John Eaton, came around to the cause after observing the physical evidence of the suffering blacks had endured under slavery. He was particularly impressed with their physique, writing to his father, "There is not the same number of white men in the army equaling them in their physique. All of them are most anxious to fight for the freedom of their labor." He explained that seeing "more than half covered with marks from being flogged" is what converted him to abolition. Sagaciously, he predicted that after the war "colored troops under white officers will form the only standing army," thus foretelling the rise of black troops as new masters over the region. But, at the time he wrote that the ideological makeup of many of those white officers was still very much in doubt.¹

Reasons for applying to black regiments varied greatly among those aspiring to company-grade ranks. Of the surviving opinions of officers in the Middle Mississippi Valley, the dominant motivations were pay, status, and independence. The jump from enlisted to officer's pay was substantial, as well as socially meaningful, conferring upon the men a new status as "gentlemen." With independence they gained more freedom than the enlisted men, ranging from the option to resign their commissions and quit the war, to sending for their wives to join them near their camps along the river.

¹ John P. Hawkins to Caleb Mills, enclosure, December 11, 1863, Caleb Mills Papers; Isaac Shepard letter to the court, June 1, 1863, Isaac F. Shepard Court of Inquiry Papers, Isaac F. Shepard Papers, Department of Special Collections, Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara, 3 (hereinafter cited as *Shepard Inquiry*); RG 94, Regimental Books 47th USCT. Regimental Order Book, Vol. 1, HQ 8th La Inf. Lake Providence, May 8, 1863, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; John M. Eaton to father, June 9, 1863, John Eaton Papers, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

When Lorenzo Thomas and his generals spoke at Lake Providence they completely won over Sergeant William Parkinson of the Eleventh Illinois Infantry. A few days after the event, the Sucker State sergeant wrote a bubbly letter his wife. "The negroes is all the news here now," Parkinson wrote, recounting how enthusiastically his comrades received the speeches, before dropping the bomb on her with, "Now Sarah, what do you think of William M. Parkinson, Captain of a negro Reg." Of course, what Sarah thought was immaterial, for he had already committed himself to the task and could not turn back. Hoping to dispel any shock or disapproval with humor, he followed with an aside to his daughter Zetty, asking her if she was afraid her "Pa will get black?" Joking aside, he revealed his trump card by explaining that if he could "succeed in raising about seventy darkies," he would become a captain, with the all important pay that a captain received. He went on for a short while about his recruiting efforts, but sensing that he may have gotten himself into seriously hot water with his wife he asked, "Sarah, do not be too hard on me for any of this. I hope I did right." He then turned lighthearted toward Zetty again, telling her that he would not forget her when he became a captain, but perhaps feeling a bit nervous about the whole endeavor, noted that "I may fail" before closing. He need not have worried, for Sarah and his family were pleased that he went "into the negro business."²

Some men did fail at getting commissions. Dan Coleman of the Ninety-fifth Ohio Infantry could not get his own colonel to support him for a captaincy, much to the mirth of some of his comrades. One of them wrote, "It is a good joke on Dan, just think of his being at the head of a Co. of Black Cusses is enough, but to fail in the attempt is a bore." He continued, "for my part if I could not command a Co. of white men, I would not command

² William Moore Parkinson to Dear Sarah, April 13, May 6, 1863.

any." He did not mind black men fighting for their own freedom, he just did not want any part of it, preferring to "be excused from having anything to do with them. There are enough Abolitionists to do that."³

Jacob Bruner, a sergeant in the Sixty-eighth Ohio Infantry Regiment of John Logan's Division, shared Parkinson's attitude and experiences. On April 15, 1863, he wrote to his wife, Martha, telling her about Lincoln's policy, that several regiments were in the "course of organization," and that he had accepted a spot in one of the regiments. To ensure there was no mistaking his primary motivation, he wrote, "my wages will be one hundred and ten dollars and fifty cents per month: or \$1,326 per year!" Again like Parkinson he asked his wife if he met her "approbation in accepting?" He reasoned that he could "serve his country in that capacity as well as any other" and if any of his friends had a problem with his decision, then he "could buy them or their favor with my wages." But, in the end, what really mattered was his wife's opinion. "Tell me you are content and I do not care what the rest of the world may say," he pled. Five days later he wrote her again, still second guessing himself somewhat, but finding comfort in the opportunities the increased pay would provide to his family, whom he loved dearly. By April 28, his insecurities assuaged, he could write, "I am happy and think myself fortunate in enjoying so much of the confidence of my country and the President as to be able to assist in this new and I believe successful experiment." Some did not attempt to rationalize their decision. Richard Allen Hall of the Sixth United

³ Joseph M. Maitland to Brother, April 22, 1863, Gilder Lehrman Collection, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York City.

States Colored Heavy Artillery (USCHA) wrote home that he had been thinking of accepting a commission in a black regiment, and if he did, "It will be for the green back."⁴

Even near the end of the war, white men aspiring to commissions in black regiment still felt compelled to explain themselves. Samuel Glyde Swain of the Twelfth Wisconsin wrote home, "The reasons for going into that Regt. are that I shall stand a very good chance of getting a Commission in a few months and if I can do that I can get out of the service, about as soon as I had calculated." Benjamin Marshall Mills, a true believer in the cause of abolition, became thoroughly offended at his friend "Dick" who accepted a commission in a black regiment solely for profit. Dick told Mills that "it was only the pay that induced him to become a 'N-----r' Officer and if he could only get half of what he now gets per month, he would resign immediately." According to Mills, men motivated by money made poor officers, as Dick "never showed any interest in the welfare of the men in his Co.... and cannot call half of the men in his company by name." Walter Chapman of the Fifty-first United States Colored Troops seriously considered failing the examination for a commission, but decided against it after finding out that he could not make any more money as a civilian. General Hawkins observed, "The best class of officers, as a general thing, did not offer themselves, owing to the prejudices existing against colored troops and a number merely wanted higher positions," but in the end, "some good and zealous officers were obtained."⁵

No matter what their motivations, the newly minted officers faced serious obstacles. For all of the bragging about high pay, it did not take them long to understand why officers

⁴ Jacob Bruner to Wife, April 15, 20, 28, 1863; Richard A. Hall to Parents, August 27, 1863, Richard Allen Hall Papers, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

⁵ Samuel G. Swain to [illeg], January 27, 1864, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Benjamin Marshall Mills to Father, June 16, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers, Indiana Historical Society; Walter Chapman to Parents, January 30, 1865, Walter A. Chapman Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; *ORs*, Series III, Vol. 5, Serial 126, p. 120.

got paid more—they had more expenses and responsibility. Most of the men who jumped from the ranks to commissions had to buy a new kit and start paying for their own meals, something the government took care of while they were enlisted men. For most, this initial expense proved extraordinary. They had to replace everything except their underwear, and given their location out in the field, they had to send orders to tailors in St. Louis and Memphis. The well adorned officer required fine, highly tailored frocks, vests, and trousers, all made of broadcloth, as opposed to the heavy but inexpensive wool uniforms they wore as enlisted men. New shirts were in order as well, with officers wearing higher quality white cotton or linen shirts, in contrast to the wool felt and civilian style cotton shirts they wore previously. Their old hats had to go to the wayside as well, again, to be replaced by ones made of higher quality materials. Of course, the ultimate symbol of rank for a commissioned officer consisted of his sword, which all officers had to purchase. As Walter Chapman noted, "if I get promoted it will cost me \$300 to get fitted out; and with the pay at the present time, an officer couldn't save a cent." Given that most of them had sent their pay home in allotments, few candidates had the cash on hand to meet the large initial costs of becoming an officer. Many, therefore, had to rely on loans from home to get accoutered up.⁶

Uniforms and pay counted for little unless the candidates could round up enough men to form companies and regiments. That task proved infinitely more difficult than they had imagined when they signed up. Union forces had been operating in the region for almost a year by mid-1863, and many plantation owners had moved their slaves into the interior, either to the west beyond Monroe, Louisiana, or to the east, towards Alabama. Those left behind, or able to escape their masters when Union forces first entered the region in 1862,

⁶ Walter Chapman to Parents, January 30, 1865.

found a multitude of employment opportunities. Admiral David Dixon Porter claimed as many as one thousand black men went to work aboard naval vessels during that period. Others found employment chopping wood in occupied river towns, driving wagons for the army, or digging diversion canals across from Vicksburg. Ultimately, what many newspapermen and soldiers recorded as a bounty of refugees when they first entered the region in 1862, had by mid-1863 slowed considerably. Therefore, the men who sought commissions in the black regiments had to work hard to fill their quotas.⁷

The camps where Thomas stopped to give speeches served as the initial recruiting depots and camps of instruction. From those camps, aspirant officers fanned out in the wake of Grant's advance on Vicksburg. First, down the river to Hard Times, Louisiana, then to the northeast towards Jackson, Mississippi, officers sifted through the chaos in search of fresh recruits. Telling his wife of the difficulties, William Parkinson told her, "Do not think I am Captain yet, I am not. It is rather slow work getting there." He then explained his recruiting strategies, of traveling up and down the Mississippi aboard a steamer passing out provisions at the various freedmen's camps, making speeches, and taking "all that want to come in." Although disappointed with the lack of recruits, Parkinson took heart from freedmen's reactions to the recruiting speeches. "The negroes cheered and the women cheered and cried for joy," he recalled. "I am so engaged with the negro now that I can't write about anything else."⁸

Lieutenants David Cornwell and Edward Smith, and Captain Corydon Heath, of the Ninth Louisiana Regiment, African Descent, decided to test their luck at recruiting on the

⁷*ORs*, Series III. Vol. 5. Serial 126, p. 121.

⁸ William Parkinson to Wife, April 13, 1863.

plantations around their camp near Milliken's Bend. After getting Colonel Lieb's blessing, they dashed over to a sutler's for a quick makeover into officers by purchasing some fatigue blouses and shoulder straps, then set about securing transportation, with little success. Heath got a pretty decent horse, Cornwell settled for a mule, and Smith found nothing at all, so they left him in camp to do housekeeping. Heath and Cornwell then set out for the plantations.⁹

They stopped at the first plantation they came to, where according to Cornwell, they found "six or eight eligibles loafing around." The two officers then tethered their horses and proceeded to take a stab at recruiting. The freedmen expressed a great amount of interest in joining the army, but would not commit. "They would not say they would not go, neither would they say they would," much to the officer's discontent. But they seemed to enjoy spending their newfound leisure with two army officers, which perturbed Cornwell to no end. He detected a bit of mischief in their behavior, thinking that "it created a new sensation that was flattering to their vanity." Captain Heath did most of the talking, which under normal circumstances should have worked, but he could not compete with the women. Every time the men appeared ready to join, the women intervened, and Heath had to start over. The two officers finally tired of the game, and moved on, stopping at three more plantations that day without any success whatsoever. Even Cornwell's tactic of taking one of the freedmen aside away from the influence of the others failed, for even if he got his prey to agree, they always added the caveat that only if their woman would let them go. "But of course she never would and I had no better success than the captain," Cornwall ruefully remembered. The two returned to camp that evening, pondered the day's events over a couple of cigars, and bedded down, hoping for a better day when they woke up. The next morning, they saddled up, went

⁹ David Cornwell Memoir, Civil War Miscellany Collection, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, p. 122-25.

to the same plantations, and got the same response, leaving Cornwell firmly convinced that "They enjoyed these visits and would have cheerfully talked until the war closed." Heath was so depressed over their lack of success that he did not even talk about it before going to bed.¹⁰

Cornwell, went to bed, but he did not go to sleep. His pride wounded, he "swore that none of them would ever get very much entertainment of that nature at my expense." He laid there for a while thinking about the previous couple of days, their lack of success, and how to get the last laugh on the freedmen who refused to enlist. He concluded that their masters had left plenty of food on the plantation, that the Union army was winning, thus guaranteeing their freedom, and that if they left the area, someone else would get their women—all powerful motivations to do nothing while the war passed them by. As soon as Heath and Smith drifted off to sleep, Cornwell slipped out of their quarters in search of "Big Jack."¹¹

"Big Jack" Jackson attached himself to the three officer's artillery battery near Jackson, Tennessee, in 1862. According to Cornwell, the six-foot-six-inch freedman ran away from a plantation on the Yazoo River in Mississippi. The artillerymen liked him so much that they made him their cook and gofer. Throughout much of Cornwell's memoir, Jack served as a tragicomic figure, cartoonish and often the butt of much ridicule and stereotyping, but good natured about it. Whenever Cornwell needed a partner in mischief, Jack always seemed ready and willing to join him. That night, in their camp on the Richmond Road, near Milliken's Bend, the two plotted and connived into the night. The next morning they let Smith and Heath have the day off—they did not want any objections to the new recruitment methods they had planned to try that day. Cornwell took the horse, while

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Jack mounted the mule; "His large bare feet just cleared the ground and the sleeves of his jacket which bore a sergeants chevrons, stopped about halfway between his elbow and wrist, while his trousers were practically knee pants," as Cornwell recalled. They rode off toward the plantations, but instead of engaging in argument to get the men to enlist, Jack hopped off of his mule and placed the freedmen "in line with about as much ceremony as he would use if he was setting up so many tenpins," his physical presence and uniform awing the freedmen into compliance. After a short lesson in marching, Cornwell cut out the older ones, and Jack marched them right off of the plantation toward camp. Once the women realized what had happened, "they set up a terrible howl," but Jack did not care—he continued the march to Milliken's Bend. Naturally, Heath and Smith had questions, but Cornwell sidestepped them, giving "Jack all of the credit."¹²

After exhausting the recruiting grounds in Louisiana, Lieb applied for and received permission for him, Cornwell, and Heath, to accompany Grant's army as it marched into the interior of Mississippi. The trio did well. After rounding up a number of freedmen, Cornwell and Heath returned to their camp in Louisiana while Lieb continued on with the Army of the Tennessee, where he endeared himself to the commanders by participating in some of the battles. From that point on, he got first pick of the black men brought in by the army. As a result of all of the recruiting parties roaming about on both sides of the river, the state affiliation of black regiments had little meaning. A Louisiana regiment was just as

¹² Ibid.

likely to be full of Mississippians as vice versa. All in all, by May 18, Lieb and his men had signed up about 350 men.¹³

The freedmen's reactions to the presence of the Union army ran from fear to delirious celebration. Mollie Williams, a child at the time of the Union invasion, was terrified of the Yankees, for she had bought into the notion that they were some kind of devils—a thought no doubt encouraged by her former masters. For others, the blue uniforms and brass buttons made an impression that lasted to the end of their days. When a W.P.A interviewer asked Frank Fikes about his first encounter with Union troops, the elderly former slave said, "The reason I recollect it so well they all was dressed in blue suits with pretty gold buttons down the front they passed a whole day and we watched them all day." Impressed with the uniforms or not, many took a proactive approach, seizing the first opportunity to escape to Union lines, including Daniel Timms and his family. Upon arriving in Natchez later that summer, Timms immediately enlisted in a regiment of African descent. His son, J. T. found work in a white regiment. A good portion of the freedmen who came into the camps that summer either attached themselves to, or were forced to go with, advancing Union columns. On the eve of Grant's final thrust toward Vicksburg, Union General Frederick Steele landed his division at Greenville, Mississippi, and proceeded to lay waste to the countryside. Although he specifically advised the recently enslaved blacks to remain on their plantations, freedom was too close for them to let it pass them by. They joined the army's march back to Greenville where Steele, much to his credit, refused to abandon them. He placed them on his transports and delivered them to Milliken's Bend, where they languished until someone could take charge of them. In late May, General Frank P. Blair faced a similar dilemma during his

¹³Johns, Jane Martin. *Personal recollections of early Decatur, Abraham Lincoln, Richard J. Oglesby and the Civil War* (Decatur, Ill.: Decatur Chapter, D.A.R., 1912), p. 138; Jacob Bruner to Wife, May 18, 1863; *ORs*, Series II, Vol. 5, Serial 126, p. 124.

raid up the Yazoo River. He reported that upon his return he brought "an army of negroes, nearly equal to the number of men in my command." White planters in the direct path of the Union advance had few options; those on the periphery of Grant's march tightened up, increasing slave patrols and punishments for slaves caught off of the plantations, but still the slaves escaped.¹⁴

Charlie Washington enlisted in the Eight Louisiana Infantry, African Descent, near Lake Providence within a month of Thomas' visit. Born in Florida, he ended up at the slave market in New Orleans where a Dr. Vincent, who lived on Joe's Bayou, about eighteen miles from Lake Providence. From there, Vincent sold him to James Berry, who owned a plantation closer to the Mississippi River and Lake Providence. There, Washington met, Julia Ruffin, his wife to be. They had three children by the time the war came to the region. In May 1863, Washington ran off to join the Union army; the only slave of Berry's to do so. Unwilling to lose any more of his chattel Berry took his remaining slaves, including Washington's wife and children, to Texas. Forty years after the war, Washington still did not know what became of them, for he never saw them again.¹⁵

When Charlie Washington and the thousands of other freedmen entered the camps along the Mississippi in the spring of 1863, they experienced a bit of culture shock. The Yankees spoke in different accents, ate different foods, and engaged in different religious practices than the freedmen. Likewise, Jacob Bruner, David Cornwell, and Herman Lieb experienced a period of adjustment, coming to terms with the strengths and weaknesses of

¹⁴ Mollie Williams, *WPA Narratives, Mississippi*, Frank Fikes, *WPA Narratives, Arkansas*, J. T. Timms, *WPA Narratives, Arkansas*, p. 157-64; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Part I, Serial 36, P. 502, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt. II, Serial 37, p. 436.; R. O. Gerow, ed., *Civil War Diary, (1861-1865) of Bishop Henry Elder, Bishop of Natchez* (Jackson, Mississippi: Privately Published, 1960), p. 39.

¹⁵ Civil War Pension File of Charles Washington, 47th United States Colored Infantry (hereafter USCT), Record Group 15, Records of the Veterans Administration, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter RG 15).

the men they had chosen to lead into battle. William Parkinson complained that the "negroes are a great deal of trouble, and I have to use all my patience to keep from cursing them." In his opinion, heightened expectations rested at the center of the problem, "They thought they would be perfectly free when they became soldiers, and could almost quit soldiering whenever they got tired of it, and could go and come as they please. But they find they were very much mistaken." He tried to help them understand the legal nature of their enlistment, but was not quite yet willing to tell them that it was for three years. He claimed that he did not force them to enlist, but he believed if the freedmen had known the true extent of what they had signed up for, then his fellow officers would have had to resort to impressment.¹⁶

What they did sign up for, unwittingly or not, was a lot of work. In the Eighth Louisiana, A.D., then stationed at Lake Providence, the men had to drill every day except for Sunday from 5 a.m. to 6 a.m. have breakfast, then drill from 7:30 to 11:30 a.m. break for lunch, then drill from 3 to 5 p.m. According to Colonel Scofield's orders, "every enlisted man not detailed on other duty or excused for sickness must be present, as idleness fosters disease, even those sick will be put upon such drill or duty, as they...are able to perform." Colonel Cyrus Sears, stationed at Milliken's Bend with the Eleventh Louisiana, A.D. was a bit softer, only allowing his company officers to drill the new recruits three hours a day at the most. Even under less diligent commanders, they drilled until they were sick of drilling, learning the infantry basics of the era: their right foot from their left, how to dress ranks, how to stand at attention, and those were just the elementary requirements. Jacob Bruner wrote, "As fast as we get them we clothe them from head to foot in precisely the same uniform that 'our boys' wear...and the are highly pleased and hardly know themselves."

¹⁶ William Moore Parkinson to wife, May 28, 1963.

Once they received firearms the required knowledge increased significantly.¹⁷

The required drill also benefited the newly commissioned company officers, many of whom had never trained men before. While better off than the officers of 1861, many of whom had no clue on how to conduct proper training, the new officers of 1863 had one or two years of combat experience and countless hours of drill under their belt as enlisted men. Nevertheless jumping from the ranks to command proved a major hurdle for the new officers. One wrote, "I have to do things I scarcely know whether it's right or wrong, but I put on a bold face, and go it blind." Some of the confusion arose from the drill manual specified for the black troops. At that time, the army used a variety of drill manuals to train the men. As a result, men came up under Hardee's, Elsworth's, or Gilham's manuals had to relearn the drill according to Casey's manual, which was the one used in the camps along the Mississippi. Lieutenant Parkinson's solution was to bluff his way through it, to "put on a bold face, and never let on, but what I know all about it" which many young officers undoubtedly did. Benjamin Mills, who came to the field directly from college and had never commanded men before, found it tough going. He told his father that anyone who accepted a commission in a black regiment and expected "to have a good time and lay on his back all the time will find to his sorrow that he had 'barked up the wrong tree.'" He compared drill to manual labor, proclaiming that he would rather "swing the scythe all day than to endeavor to teach a squad of recruits" and that "drilling is as hard work as I ever got hold of."¹⁸

Aside from the labor necessitated by unfamiliarity with drill, a commission in a black regiment generated more work than an equivalent position in a white unit. With almost all of

¹⁷RG 94, Regimental Books, 47th United States Colored Troops, General Order No. 2, Regimental Order Book, Vol. 1, HQ 8th Louisiana Infantry, Lake Providence, May 10, 1863, NARA; Jacob Bruner to wife, April 28, 1863.

¹⁸William M. Parkinson to Wife, May 17, 1863; Benjamin Mills to Father, April 11, March 4, 1865.

the enlisted men illiterate, officers had to perform tasks normally relegated to noncommissioned officers, effectively doubling their duties. The officers found themselves doing unnecessary paperwork, working through the nights to fill out rolls, which if found to contain errors, were rejected by their commanders. They had to chase down clothing and arms for the men, with limited success. Some units received their gear rather quickly, while others had to wait until it was almost too late, like the men who received their firearms the day before the battle of Milliken's Bend. As for pay, neither they nor the enlisted men receive any wages between April and August 1863.¹⁹

If that were not enough, Confederate authorities added an additional level of worry to the white officers' already heavy burden by promising to execute them if caught leading black troops. George Bailey of the 12th Louisiana, A. D., writing about it years after the war, remembered that he "was rather glad of it for we knew where we was at." William Parkinson, however, seemed thoroughly shaken by it. In his letters to his wife he alternated between bravado and resignation, proclaiming that he would "do some tall fighting or running before they" got to him. In mid April he claimed that the enlisted men "fully understood that it is worse than death if taken," but contradicted himself a month later when he admitted that "I am the only one in the regiment that thinks so." On the night of May 27, the rebels proved him right when they ambushed a picket party just outside of camp. They killed an enlisted man, captured several others, and severely wounded Captain Franklin S. Bishop in the legs. Finding him helpless on the ground, the bushwhackers looted him of everything of value, "sword, coat, boots, and money" before they left him to die. They later

¹⁹ John Parker Hawkins, *Memoranda Concerning Some Branches of the Hawkins Family and Connections* (Indianapolis: unknown printer, 1913), p. 110; Benjamin Mills to Father, March 4, 1865; Cornwell Memoir, p. 128; John Matthews to Father, August 7, 1863, John L. Matthews Letters, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

decided to murder him and sent a man back to finish Bishop off, but the man could not bring himself to shoot a helpless wounded enemy. Parkinson thought the captain would survive the shooting, but he was wrong, Bishop suffered for nine days before finally expiring.²⁰

If the officers found the going difficult, so too did the enlisted men. They had to endure the mistakes of the novice officers while drilling day after day in weather that got progressively hotter with each passing week. Some of the new officers proved unsuitable, screaming and cursing at the men. Moreover, army punishment resembled plantation punishment. While no whippings occurred--at least whippings of black soldiers--an infraction of the rules sometimes resulted in bucking and gagging, having their thumbs or wrists tied to an overhanging tree limb, or in the case of severe crimes, execution. Most punishment for minor offenses consisted of extra duty or some form of manual labor. Plus, in what must have reminded some of their existence under the old masters, some enlisted men became servants for the officers. As one officer wrote home to his wife, "I have a boy to black my boots and get me water and any other little things I want done. He is a soldier, so I pay nothing, so is the cook."²¹

In the realm of equipage, the enlisted men wore the same uniforms as white troops, (dark blue wool fatigue jackets, forage caps, and kepis, with sky blue trousers) despite Lorenzo Thomas's request (which someone mercifully denied) for something less expensive and "a little more gay." They stenciled their canteens and knapsacks with their company letter and their identification number, so that if anyone misplaced their equipment, they could

²⁰ George E. Bailey Memoir, p. 19, George E. Bailey Papers, Western Illinois University; William Parkinson to Brother James, May 28, 1863; Frank S. Bishop in Civilwardata.com.

²¹ William M. Parkinson to Wife, May 28, 1863; RG 39,3 U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110, E2023 Pt. 2. Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops. Vol. 210, p 48 General Order No. 36. Vicksburg, August 28, 1864, RG 393, NARA, (Hereinafter cited as *Continental Commands*).

easily identify it. As for firearms, they received Austrian Lorenz rifles, which even the most optimistic officer called "second class." Herman Lieb called them "indifferent," and John Hawkins, unwilling to perfume a pig, declared them "not fit for a soldier." But in the early existence of the black regiments, the secondhand guns had to suffice. After Vicksburg fell, and the black troops proved themselves in battle, they began requesting higher quality rifles. By the end of the war, many black soldiers carried the latest Springfield rifles, along with a smattering of lesser weapons.²²

Life in the camps proved quite a departure from what the white officers had grown accustomed to during the first two years of the war. While many white regiments had obtained their fair share of black laborers during their marches through Tennessee and northern Mississippi, the black regiments were positively awash with civilians. Since many of the freedmen had escaped from slavery in family groups, the men who enlisted in the army often had wives and children camped nearby. Furthermore, the primary mission of the early black regiments consisted of guarding freedmen's camps so that white troops could serve on the front lines in battle, resulting in even more blending of the civilian and military. Combine those with the fact that the initial army camps were sited at steamboat landings along the Union army's supply lines, barely controlled chaos resulted. A stranger strolling through one of the army camps may have found it difficult to know where the army camp ended and the freedmen's camp began. Children frequented the area, often serving as errand boys for the officers. Women washed clothes, cleaned, and cooked for enlisted men and officers alike. Sutlers, finding a readymade market, set up shop, selling the civilian freedmen

²² *ORs*, Series III, Vol. 3., Serial 124, p. 214; Benjamin Mills to Father, February 18, 1865; William M. Parkinson to James, May 28, 1863; Johns, *Personal Recollections of Early Decatur*, p. 138; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 26, Part I, Serial 41, p. 800; Invoice of Ordnance and Ordnance Stores, November 14, 1865, 5th United States Colored Heavy Artillery, George E. Bailey Papers, Western Illinois University, Moline, Illinois.

as well as the black enlisted men--among other things--gingerbread, candy, and brass rings which they considered to have healing properties.²³

If the nascent regiments did not already face enough turmoil, confusion, and obstacles, another entity stood in their way—the United States Army. During Lorenzo Thomas's speeches he frequently called out anyone opposed to arming blacks. He warned the white soldiers that he had the power to summarily dismiss any objectors from the service, and he would use it. Such forceful threats were usually enough to cow any opponents into silence. However much Generals Sherman and Smith may, or may have not, have grumbled in private, during the spring of 1863 they did not make any public demonstrations of their displeasure with the policy. Once, the Adjutant General left the region, a number of white officers and enlisted men felt emboldened to vent their wrath on the freedmen and black troops congregated along the river. While such behavior was not unusual among the white Union soldiers, Thomas's tour was supposed to have put the such brutes on the defensive. Some white soldiers may indeed have reconsidered their behavior after Thomas's speeches, but to others, the hard case racists, the mere thought of blacks in uniform infuriated them. In the camps at Milliken's Bend, a particularly vicious set of white Union soldiers made it their sport to torment the black men and women sheltered there. Picked up by Steele's expedition, away from home, and in many cases separated from loved ones, the freedmen made easy targets for the evil. Murder, rape, and robbery became routine at the Bend.

The final insult came on Saturday, May 30. Private Henry Lee of the First Mississippi, A. D. was confined to camp that day, tied to a tree, for violating a minor rule. That afternoon, apparently after a morning of drinking liquor at one of the sutler's tents, two

²³ John L. Matthews to Sister, July 30, 1863.

members of the Tenth Illinois Cavalry came stumbling through the First Mississippi's camp. Upon spying the immobilized Lee, the two drunk cavalymen stumbled over to the tree and one of them, jerking the rope, hollered, "what is this d__d nigger doing tied up here?" He then tried to kick Lee in the groin, but missed; too drunk to aim properly. He reared back again and let fly with a heavy black boot, catching the tormented private squarely in the lower stomach, doubling him over in pain. Boring of their malignant sport, the two headed toward a cotton shed where Lizzie Briggs, her daughter, a young boy, and another freedwoman had taken shelter.²⁴

After gaining entry to the shack, one of the white soldiers took the little girl by the arm and began leading her away. Her mother, horrified at what was about to happen, confronted them, grabbing the girl, yelling, "Don't hurt my little child! What are you doing? I do not want you to hurt my child." A tug of war and shouting match commenced. Lizzie Briggs threatened to call the sutlers, but that did not faze the drunken soldier. "D__n the sutlers, go and tell them—they've nothing to do with me. I'll do as I please" he mocked. The alcohol, however, had, in addition to corrupting his judgment, sapped his physical strength, and he could not hold his own in the struggle over the child; her mother finally wrested her away. The frustration of loosing his prey only magnified his rage. He picked up a hatchet and dared Lizzie to utter another sound, saying "You d__d niggers think you are free, and you are not as well off as you were with the Secesh! If you say a word I'll mash your d__d mouth!" Throughout the melee the twelve-year-old boy had not gotten up, probably scared out of his wits and hoping they did not notice him—but they did. The hatchet wielding soldier, finding Lizzie's defiance too tough for him, turned to a weaker victim. "What are

²⁴ Testimony of Henry Lee, Morris Fonteroy, Lizzie Briggs, Statement by Isaac Shepard, June 1, 1863, *Shepard Inquiry*.

you listening at me for?" he yelled at the child. The boy, hoping to avoid trouble, said that he was not listening. Of course, the drunken would-be-molesters did not believe him. The other soldier snatched the hatchet away from his colleague saying, "I've a mind to chop the boy!" But, before he could act, his comrade took the hatchet back, telling him to "Beat him with your boot heel all you want to!" Instinctively, the child covered his head with his arms, trying to defend himself when the profanity-spewing soldier began kicking him in the back of the head, but the boy was too small to put up much of a defense. After several kicks to the back of the child's head, the Yankee cavalryman landed several blows on the boys face, going so far as to grind his boot heel into the boy's eye. Only one occupant of the shack remained untouched—a woman, but not for long. The soldiers tore off her clothes and tried to rape her, but she got away.²⁵

The youngster escaped from the shack and made his way to the camp of the Eleventh Louisiana, A.D., where he met Lieutenant Colonel Cyrus Sears and another officer who were participating in a Board of Survey that day. Face bloody and head bruised, the boy told the officer that two white soldiers had tried to murder him. The officers instructed the boy to go to Colonel Isaac Shepard's quarters, as he was in charge of the black regiments in the region. The boy, disoriented by the blows to his head, instead, went to the quarters of George B. Field, the Commissioner for Leasing Abandoned Plantations where he met Lt. John Stonemetz who was in charge of a detachment from the Fifty-seventh Ohio Infantry assigned to guard the commissioner. The boy told the lieutenant that one of his white soldiers had kicked him, but did not know which regiment the man belonged to. The officer decided to find out who did, and accompanied the boy back to the cotton shack. The two drunks had departed the scene by that point but Stonemetz decided to hang around a little while in case

²⁵ Ibid.

they returned. Ten minutes later one of the miscreants did. Stonemetz immediately confronted him, asking him, "if he kicked the n-----r?" The drunk, or course, responded in the negative. But the Ohioan was not buying it, "I think you did, sir!" To which the smart aleck rapist replied, "Where are the witnesses?" The officer snapped back, "I think there is plenty of witnesses down here in the negro regiment. Come along with me." But the miscreant still was not having any part of it, "[I will] Be d__d if I do! I'll kill every d__d one that is around here!" Stonemetz sent for a guard from a black regiment camped a couple hundred yards away. In the mean time, the drunk soldier nonchalantly disappeared into the sutler's store, where the lieutenant and guard had to go retrieve him. When they told him to go with them, he replied with a saucy, "I do not know if I will or will not." Surprisingly, (or perhaps not) a lieutenant from the Tenth Illinois Cavalry was sitting in the store, drinking ale, when the rapist, (now identified as John O'Brien) came in. Overhearing the exchange between Stonemetz and O'Brien, the lieutenant from the Tenth Cavalry told the private to go along, which he did.²⁶

The sight of the bleeding boy and story of attempted rape and murder infuriated Isaac Shepard. White soldiers had tormented his men and their families ever since the Steele's transports deposited them at the bend. Whenever he, or any other officers from black regiments complained about it, or arrested the offenders, the officers of the white regiments did nothing about it. Even his own superior, General George C. Sullivan, appeared to have had it in for the black regiments stationed in the area. Sullivan seemed to think the black regiments existed in order to unload steamboats and do jobs white regiments disliked. To add insult to injury, rather than referring to Shepard as "Colonel" in their official

²⁶ Testimony of Cyrus Sears, John Stonemetz, Orvill C. St. Clair, John O'Brien, Shepard Inquiry.

communications, Sullivan addressed him as "Superintendent of Contrabands"—a calculated slight implying Shepard did not have a real military command. Shepard tried to address the issue in a civil manner, but Sullivan persisted. Therefore, on May 30 when the two drunk cavalymen attempted to rape and murder freedmen within sight of his camp, Shepard took the law into his own hands. He ordered O'Brien whipped by black soldiers.²⁷

Shepard could not have picked a more antagonizing, and some might say, more appropriate punishment for the offending soldier. Cyrus Sears, after seeing the boy's damaged eye and hearing about what went on in the cotton shack, thought the punishment was too light—saying that execution would have been more appropriate. Shepard's judgment passed, O'Brien was led back to the camp where a half civilized gang of black soldiers beat him bloody with a braided lash. When one of his tormentors grew tired, another took their place, beating the white soldier even harder. That was the story as it circulated among the white regiments camped in the area. The reality is that "O'Brien's punishment was quite mild," more "calculated to irritate a man than to injure him physically." The soldiers assigned to whip the miscreant, perhaps remembering their own beatings on the plantation, had chosen light switches for the punishment, so light, in fact, that they disintegrated. In reality, however, neither the method, nor severity of the punishment really mattered—it was all about who carried it out. The image of black men beating a white man, stoked the baser instincts of men already chafing over the admission of black men into the Union army. Thus, for them, the policy that brought near-equality to the races threatened to upset their ideological applecart even further with black superiority. In short, every white soldier on that

²⁷ Ibid.

side of the river, from the lowest enlisted man in the Tenth Illinois Cavalry, to General Sullivan, the top white officer, found Shepard's actions intolerable.²⁸

General Sullivan ordered Shepard's arrest that same day. But, before Shepard could appear at Sullivan's headquarters, General Grant sacked Sullivan for "inertia," leaving Shepard's status in limbo. In the meantime word of the whipping had spread among the white troops, and inflamed even further by their intemperate officers, some vowed retaliation against Shepard. But they misjudged the Missouri-transplanted Yankee if they thought arrest or the threat of assassination would intimidate him. Unlike Sullivan, he did not suffer from inertia, and went on the offensive against his accusers on June 1, requesting a Court of Inquiry to clear his name. General Grant agreed to the inquiry and Shepard took the battle to his accusers.²⁹

On June 4, 1863, the Court of Inquiry opened aboard the steamer *America* at Milliken's Bend; Colonel Kilby Smith of the Fifty-fourth Ohio served as president. The witnesses sworn in, Shepard had a statement read into the court record in which he cataloged instances of rape, murder, and robbery committed by white soldiers camped in the region. "Yes," he admitted, to the charge of having the white soldier whipped; but claimed it was legal and justified based on the unceasing abuse due to the inaction of officers in white regiments. For him the trial was not about him having a soldier whipped, but about the conduct of the United States Army toward freedmen. With such a gambit he risked losing his command, rank, and possibly his freedom. With the statement and administrative matters taken care of, the court opened with Private O'Brien giving his version of events. It was a

²⁸ Eben F. Cutter testimony, Samuel Shonessy, Shepard Court Martial; Isaac Shepard letter, August 18, 1863, *Shepard Inquiry*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 34, pt. 1, serial 36, p. 93; Frederick M. Crandal Testimony, *Shepard Inquiry*; Shepard Opening statement, p. 14, *ibid.*

tale of woe and innocence on his part, but Shepard conducted a skillful cross-examination that exposed the private as a drunken liar. Likewise when O'Brien's officers took the stand, Shepard took them apart as well. By that evening, Shepard had satisfactorily proven his side of the case. If it had ended there, the court would have pronounced Shepard innocent and restored him to command of the black troops at the bend, but his gambit paid off; the court took the bait and decided to hear testimony about the abuses going on in the region, "with a view to eliciting information evidently not publicly known and appreciated, and thus make this investigation a source of benefit to a great public interest."³⁰

With that opening, Shepard called in a parade of freedmen, army officers, and government officials, each with horrific stories. The first officer called to testify, Captain Abraham E. Strickle, a U. S. Commissioner, told of his fruitless efforts to bring several rapists to justice. When asked by the court about the interactions between white and black troops, he responded, "There is a decided hostility on the part of the white towards the black regiments. There is no harmony of action between the black and white soldiers in this vicinity—but the very opposite." Even the white officers demonstrated hostility. In one act of exceeding cheekiness, a captain of a white regiment confronted Shepard, telling him that his men demanded that he admit that he "had disgraced my office, disgraced myself, disgraced my country, and deserved to be excluded from all decent society" or violence would break out. Major Julian Bryant, of the First Mississippi Regiment, A. D. followed, with similar testimony. He recalled how, on his first night at Milliken's Bend, he had "12 or 15" reports of "white soldiers coming and attempting to ravish the women." He continued his testimony with a laundry list of random acts of mindless evil committed by white soldiers in the area. In another instance, he personally apprehended several white soldiers he caught

³⁰ Ibid.

in the act of rape—their defense: "They are only niggers." He turned them in to the Provost Marshall, who released them the next day. The testimony continued well into the evening before the court adjourned for the night.³¹

Court resumed the next morning, Saturday, June 6, much as it had ended the night before, with more testimony of rape and mayhem committed by white troops. George M. Fields, U. S. Commissioner of Abandoned Plantations, testified that hardly a day passed by without reports of such criminal acts. He also revealed that he suspected some white officers and their men of selling blacks back into slavery. Captain Eben F. Cutter of the Third Missouri Infantry followed Fields with more of the same—white abuse of blacks. But was interrupted in mid testimony by a cry of alarm: "The Rebels are coming!" The court then adjourned for the morning so the officers could determine the seriousness of the threat. Upon learning that Rebel forces were indeed in the region and planning to attack at any moment, inexplicably, the trial resumed. Testimony continued for the rest of the day, differing from earlier sessions only in that black enlisted men and black civilians testified. By that evening, the case had reached its climax, Shepard had proven without a doubt that white soldiers from a variety of Union regiments had committed rape, robbery, and assault upon the black refugees at Milliken's Bend. Furthermore, their officers were complicit, sometimes committing the rapes themselves, but more often, turning a blind eye while the enlisted men ran amok. The court was scheduled to meet again on the morning of June 7, to hear more testimony about the abuse of blacks, but in reality, the court got testimony of a different sort, when Confederate forces attacked the camps at the bend.³²

³¹ Testimony of Abraham E. Strickle, *Shepard Inquiry*.

³² *Shepard Inquiry*.

The months of April, May, and June, 1863, served as a period of adjustment for the officers and enlisted men of the black regiments then being formed on the western banks of the Mississippi River. The white company grade officers, many of them newly minted, adjusted to their newfound authority and responsibilities, while at the same time attempting to explain their decision to family members at home. Primarily motivated by money and social status, those officers, nevertheless, had advantages that the officers of 1861 did not have, such as familiarity with drill and army regulations, and most importantly, combat experience. Therefore, their ability to bring black regiments up to par with white troops in terms of drill was markedly speedier than with the green army of 1861.

Among the black enlisted men, the situation was somewhat more complex. If they expected freedom of movement, no more corporal punishment, and an end to forced labor, the army disabused them of such notions. The army intended to put them to work toward Union victory, as inexpensively and as quickly as possible, be it as a steward aboard a steamer, a teamster, or an infantryman carrying a rifle. Little is known about how the black soldiers felt about their new circumstances, other than they endured it, possibly even relishing it, given it provided them the opportunity to fight for their freedom.

Among the higher ranking white officers, a different attitude prevailed. Some bad apples had indeed managed to weasel their way into the black regiments, but for the most part, the majors and colonels found their motivation in promoting the general welfare of blacks. For them, Christianity and the Army could provide the freedmen with all of the tools they needed to become productive citizens after the war ended. As Lorenzo Thomas put it, "Their hearts were in the work."

Unfortunately, many white soldiers opposed the new policy. Captain Christian H. Anderson of the 10th Illinois Cavalry testified that the major part of his men wanted no part of the black regiments, and that they became very displeased upon discovering that they were to remain at Milliken's Bend with the black troops while the rest of the Union army campaigned for Vicksburg. They very much disliked appearing as a part of "the Negro Brigade." He claimed that he had never seen white soldiers abusing blacks, but admitted that he had heard of men in his command engaging in such behavior, but apparently never saw fit to do anything about it. When pressed about the general conduct of his men toward blacks, he allowed that they talked insultingly when they marched past black camps, in words, "which white soldiers would take offense," again a behavior he did not deem worth confronting.³³

Shepard's call for a Court of Inquiry ultimately had a salutary effect on the freedmen in the region. It forced the Army to own up to the behavior of enlisted men by holding officers accountable. It also showed blacks that they had certain rights, for aboard the *America* blacks testified against whites in court, something that was unheard of in the region prior to the arrival of the Union army. The Union army had a long way to go in terms of equality for blacks, and it was indeed a controlling institution. Nevertheless, it recognized that black men had certain rights on a par with white men. In that sense, Shepard, Eaton, and Hawkins were correct in their assessment of the army as a positive force for black welfare.

³³ Testimony of Christian H. Anderson, *Shepard Inquiry*.

Chapter 4

While the courtroom drama unfolded aboard the *America*, a new challenge emerged from the west. With Grant marching on Vicksburg and Nathaniel P. Banks threatening Port Hudson, Confederate General Kirby Smith determined that more soldiers were needed in Louisiana. Toward that end he sent General John G. Walker's division of Texans to assist General Richard Taylor's forces, then operating in central Louisiana. General Taylor, son of former President "Rough and Ready" Zachary Taylor, of Mexican War fame, was a true son of Louisiana, having plantations on both sides of the Mississippi River. He knew the region well, and did not believe an infantry division, even one made up of Texans, had much hope of relieving Pemberton at Vicksburg. The land on the western side of the Mississippi was mosquito-ridden and swampy, and even if he did break through to DeSoto Point, directly across the river from Vicksburg, what good would it do to join Pemberton's army? Taylor suggested sending his forces south to threaten New Orleans. He believed that if a small force of Confederates could insert themselves between Banks and his supplies in the Crescent City, Banks would have to lift the siege of Port Hudson, freeing Confederate General Franklin Gardner's 6,800 men to link up with General Joseph E. Johnston to attack Grant from the rear. But, it was too late by that point, Banks had too many men in the region for a mere 4,000 Confederates to dislodge, by ruse or crafty maneuver. With that option off of the table, the Confederate high command could not simply recall Walker's men and start afresh in Arkansas, some kind of effort or gesture, had to be made on Vicksburg's behalf, or the public outcry would be deafening.¹

¹ Richard Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction: Personal Experiences of the Late War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1879), 137-139.

Taylor, therefore, determined to strike Grant's supply line, then thought to extend down the western side of the Mississippi. Unknown to the Confederates, once Grant had ensconced his army around Vicksburg, he had moved the lower arm of its logistics chain from the western side of the Mississippi to a large depot on the Yazoo River, north of Vicksburg, effectively out of reach of any roving Confederate generals. But Taylor had already cast the die. In order to speed up the movement of Walker's Division, he had them board steamboats on the Little River near Pineville, Louisiana, for a journey to the Tensas River, where they disembarked on May 30 near New Carthage (about fifteen miles below Vicksburg in Louisiana). There, Brigadier General Henry E. McCulloch's brigade launched an assault against an abandoned Union army camp at Perkins' Landing and engaged in some skirmishing with a fully armed gunboat. Many men in Walker's command had never heard a shot fired in anger until that day. Thinking that they had truly participated in a real battle, Captain Elijah P. Petty of the Seventeenth Texas Infantry bragged, "If this is all the fear I don't mind a battle." He recalled how they laughed and joked during the "combat." If anything, the brush with Union forces at Perkins' Landing put a dangerous swagger into the Confederates' steps—dangerous to themselves.²

As the Texans marched through the swamps and bayous toward Richmond, Louisiana, the jumping off point for their attacks, the soldiers in the black regiments at Milliken's Bend continued with their training. Great and terrible events had taken place at Vicksburg in the previous week. Grant had bottled the Confederates up in their works, and on May 19, elements of General William T. Sherman's corps assaulted the Confederate fortifications along the Graveyard road--and failed. Still convinced he could take Vicksburg

² Ibid.; M. Jane Johansson, *Peculiar Honor: A History of the 28th Texas Cavalry, 1862-1865* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 52.

by storm, Grant three days later hurled all three of his corps at the Confederates, with much the same results. His hopes for a swift conclusion to the campaign lying dead and dying in the gullies in front of the Confederate fortifications, the former shopkeeper from Galena, Illinois, settled on a siege as the method for breaking Vicksburg open. News of the attacks left the white officers of the black regiments in great suspense, for many of their former comrades took part in the attacks of the 19th and 22nd of May.³

Across the river, the proverbial calm before the storm reigned. "Rebel shot gun cavalry" operated in the area for sure, but that was to be expected near any garrison in the South. Only by their absence would local bushwhackers have been considered unusual. Besides, if they got too saucy, in William Parkinson's opinion, "us or them will suffer, I do not believe we can keep the negroes from murdering everything they come to." Aside from Shepard's battle with the army aboard the *America*, training and health concerns dominated the men's time. The warm weather and abundance of water had given birth to the perennial plague of the region—mosquitoes. Knowing neither race nor cause, the pests tormented black, white, Yank, and Reb equally, to the point that some men could not sleep at night for the infernal buzzing and stinging. Equally unpleasant was the water, for while it existed in abundance, none of it was fit to drink. Most of the men got their water directly from the river, and it showed. In Parkinson's camp near Lake Providence, two to four men died every day.⁴

Some twenty-six miles to the south at Milliken's Bend, Colonel Cyrus Sears of the Eleventh Louisiana A.D. engaged in some house cleaning that week, ordering the company

³ Jacob Bruner to Martha, May 23, 1863.

⁴ William M. Parkinson to Wife, May 17, 28, 1863.

officers to remove all of the rubbish and tents that had accumulated behind theirs and the field officers' tents. He sought to remove unwanted civilians from the camp as well, ordering "all colored women now employed and staying in their companies to leave permanently this camp, and under no circumstances will they be permitted to come within the Guard lines after this day." He had them assemble at 10 a.m. and marched out of camp by an officer. About two miles south some two thousand sick and wounded white soldiers convalesced at the Van Buren Hospital complex, consisting of a plantation home and tented camp. A patient in the One hundred and twentieth Ohio Infantry, waxing poetic with the arrival of spring in the region, wrote to his home newspaper, "Our tents are situated beneath o'er shadowing branches of the China trees, which are set out in a perfect alignment; the air is made melodious by the singing of the birds, and the odoriferous effluvia exhaled from the flowers and shrubs, wafts in a delightful cloud of fragrance on the breeze." It was probably the most florid description of a Union hospital ever written. Jacob Bruner, struck with spring fever and a touch of loneliness felt the same way, telling his wife, "Martha, it is very pleasant here. Roses are in full bloom numberless flowers of rare beauty now scatter their fragrance to the air."⁵

When David Cornwell and Corydon Heath returned to Milliken's Bend from their recruiting expedition on the other side of the river, they found that things had deteriorated somewhat in their absence. Lieutenant Colonel Charles L. Page, in command during Lieb's absence, did not seem to have much heart for the work. Discipline suffered, and by the time the two junior officers returned, nearly as many women lived in the Ninth Louisiana A. D.'s camp as men. When the Swiss colonel returned from Grant's army, he moved the Ninth's

⁵ RG 94, 49th USCT Regimental Records, Regimental Letters Received, Vol 3. Special Order No. 7 Special Order No. 8. by order of Lieut Col. Cyrus Sears. June 3, 63; *Wooster (Ohio) Republican*, May 28, 1863; Jacob Bruner to Wife, April 28, 1863.

camp closer to the river, within the safety of the levee and under the guns of the navy, leaving the women behind. There, they resumed training, showing a particular aptitude for drill, which encouraged the newly minted officers. Jacob Bruner bragged to his wife, "They learn very fast and I have no doubt they will make as rapid progress as white soldiers." Target practice was a different story, for many of the men had never handled a firearm before—it was a skill their former owners preferred they not master. David Cornwell humorously recalled how training went with his men at the bend. He had them set up the targets about two hundred yards from the levee with a pit in front for a spotter to register hits and misses. He then instructed them on how to align the front and rear sights on the target, which they consistently missed. After a day's practice they showed some improvement, "and when one of them would accidentally hit [the target], he would be as proud as if he had killed his overseer." Cornwell ominously noted that they would have become pretty good shots with a few weeks training, if something else had not happened.⁶

That "something else" was the arrival of General Taylor's Confederate raiders. Major Isaac F. Harrison's Fifteenth Louisiana Cavalry Battalion, had already swept the country south of Richmond and took possession of the village on the 4th. Many of Harrison's men lived in the area, and probably knew a number of the black soldiers by first name, if they did not outright own them before they joined the Union army. Taylor arrived on the evening of the 5th and began pouring over intelligence gathered by Harrison's men. Among the more interesting tidbits that passed through his hands was the intelligence that there was a "deadly feud" between the black troops at Milliken's Bend and the Tenth Illinois Cavalry—He noted that the camps of the two forces were quite a distance apart, perhaps because of the dislike.

⁶ William M. Parkinson to wife, April 19, 1863; John Parker Hawkins, *Memoranda*, p. 110; Jacob Bruner to Wife, April 28, 1863; David Cornwell Memoir, p. 129.

Far more critical, however, was the discovery that Grant had shifted his major depot to Haynes Bluff on the Yazoo River, a move that rendered the entire effort useless. Still, Taylor recognized that the political situation required that he make some kind of effort on Vicksburg's behalf; the opportunity to annihilate armed black men was icing on the cake. Toward that end, he determined to divide Walker's division into its three component brigades, with General Henry McCulloch's attacking the camps at Milliken's Bend, and Brig. General James M. Hawes taking Young's Point, while Walker and Brig, General Horace Randal held steady in reserve at Oak Grove Plantation, where the roads to the two points diverged. Colonel Bartlett of the Thirteenth Texas Cavalry Battalion was already on the way to Lake Providence with 900 men to destroy the black units mustering there. Before he could launch his plan, he had to wait on Walker's division to arrive at Richmond ⁷

Harrison's occupation of Richmond terrified the freedmen and white plantation lessees in the area. Near panic reigned in the vicinity of the bend as the freedmen and lessees alike abandoned the plantations and headed for the safety of the army camps along the river. Nearly five hundred black men, women, and children crowded the banks, carrying what few possessions they owned, hoping for a steamer to evacuate them to a safer locale. On the evening of the 5th, some minor skirmishing took place between the Tenth Illinois Cavalry and some rebel squads that had been buzzing around in the region. At daybreak the next morning, under orders from Brigadier General Elias Dennis (who had replaced Sullivan as commander of the District of Northeastern Louisiana, to scout toward Richmond, the Tenth Illinois and Ninth Louisiana, struck out on the Richmond road. They got to within a few miles of the village when Colonel Lieb spotted a large body of Rebel cavalry in the distance.

⁷ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt. II, Serial 37, p. 458; Arthur Bergeron, *Guide to Louisiana Confederate Units, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 179.

Guessing that the Confederates were attempting to flank his infantrymen, Lieb faced his men about to head back to the eastern side of Walnut Bayou. The Illinois troopers continued toward Richmond, meaning the black soldiers had to step to the side of the road so the horses could pass. Even then, on the eve of the first combat for both commands, the Sucker cavalrymen could not resist mouthing off to the black men. One Irish trooper jeered, "A 'an 'ud be a d__ fool to try to make soldiers out ah niggers." Another, unaware of the flanking maneuvers of the Confederate horsemen, interpreted Lieb's movement as cowardice, loudly proclaimed that "Any one ought to know a n-----r wont fight; they're running now, before they seen a reb." The white soldiers also promised show the black soldiers "how it is done if we find any of them."⁸

Find them they did—in abundance. The Illinoisans pushed ahead, ignorant of their predicament until they noticed a superior Confederate force attempting to flank them. The Yanks reined up in line of battle, preparing to fight it out with the gray cavalry when a Confederate officer rode toward them telling them "it was useless to fight" for they "were outnumbered 4 to 1." "There was some excitement with [the] men and horses" as the Sucker cavalrymen quickly determined that their best chance lay in a panicked stampede toward the bridge over Walnut Bayou. They certainly showed the black soldiers "how it is done."⁹

In the meantime, back with the Ninth Louisiana, David Cornwell attempted to raise the morale of his men. The comments by the Illinoisans combined with the retreat toward Walnut Bayou had dampened their spirits. Cornwell, possessed an expansive personality and a wit to match, cheered them up. "Step up lively, bullies, and lets get over that bridge," he

⁸ *Shepard Inquiry*; Yazoo Pass Expedition, 1863, in L. Hadley Papers, Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan; David Cornwell Memoir, p. 130.

⁹ Yazoo Pass Expedition, 1863, in L. Hadley Papers.

ordered, "Then if they hit us we will have a fair show." Having explained the march toward the bayou, he must have certainly elicited some grins with, "I could clean out that whole bunch with this company and would like the fun of doing it." Their feelings soothed, and the prospect of killing Confederates imminent, the black troops "struck into a brisk walk" toward the bridge. A thousand yards beyond the bridge in the direction of the bend, they heard a terrible commotion behind them. The remnants of the Tenth Illinois hurdled at them in full flight, looking like anything but a cavalry troop. Cornwell immediately turned his men about and posted them in two squads astride the road to Milliken's Bend, with orders not to fire until his command. As the young officer remembered it, the lead fugitives shouted, "Save us boys for God's sake save us." A member of the Tenth remembered it slightly differently when he wrote, "after crossing the bridge we found some colored soldiers waiting to help us out of the hole." But both eyewitnesses, agreed on what happened next—the black soldiers leveled their rifles and let loose a volley against their former masters in the Thirteenth Louisiana Cavalry. The range was so great that they probably did not hit anyone, but the Confederates retreated back across the bridge to the other side of the bayou. The white infantry officers tried to convince the Illinoisans to pursue the Rebel cavalymen, but the Tenth had had enough fighting for that day. The extremely high temperature (mid 90s) and helter-skelter flight from the Rebels had thoroughly winded their horses. Plus, they had lost a quarter of their comrades along the way, including one Lieutenant Vandenberg, who was supposed to testify aboard the *America* later that day in reference to transgressions committed by his men against freedmen. A lot of crow-eating occurred on the march back to camp as the Illinoisans, their horses too winded to carry them, marched with their black comrades.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cornwell Memoir, 130-31; Extract of letter by L. Hadley, June 8, 1863, L. Hadley Papers.

Upon returning to camp, Herman Lieb sent word of the skirmish to General Dennis, setting in motion a series of moves intended to bolster the defenses at Milliken's Bend. Dennis ordered a battalion of about one hundred men from the Twenty-third Iowa Infantry to the bend aboard a steamer (they did not disembark that evening) while the navy pitched in with the *Choctaw*, one of the more unusual vessels in the brown water navy. With two colossal enclosed paddle wheels astride her stern, and a long low-lying bow crowned with an armored gun deck, the *Choctaw* looked more like a goose laying on the water than a vessel of war. But she packed a powerful punch with a 100-pounder parrot rifle, a nine-inch Dahlgren, two thirty-pounder parrots, and a pair of twenty-four-pounder smoothbore cannon. As no one had seen fit to station any federal artillery units at the bend, the *Choctaw* was a welcome arrival. The officers of the court pitched in as well, Colonels Kilby Smith of the Fifty-fourth Ohio, Thomas Bringhurst, of the Forty-sixth Indiana, and Thomas McMahon of the Seventeenth Wisconsin tendered their services, and made the *America* available to transport the refugees to safer points.¹¹

The earthworks at the bend consisted of a low levee, about six to twelve feet high, topped with cotton bales, and forty feet wide at the base. Somewhat crescent shaped, it ran about 150 yards from the river, protecting the landward side of the camps and connecting to the riverbank at the southern end of the camp. Another earthwork connected the levee to the riverbank at the northern end of the camp. Further strengthening the position, the soldiers had dug a trench along the inner perimeter of the works from river bank to river bank, with a bisecting trench connecting the center of the line to the river, thus providing protection from all angles. Behind them, ran the Mississippi river, which was low at the time, creating

¹¹ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt. II, Serial 37, p. 447; Cornwell Memoir, p. 131; *Naval ORs*, Series II, Vol. 1, p. 57; Detail of the Court to U. S. Grant, June 12, 1863, Shepard Inquiry.

another, and final, natural defensive position just above the waterline. From the west, the Richmond Road entered the camp at the southernmost earthwork. Except for a small gap of about thirty yards at the southern end of the fortifications, a nearly impenetrable, highly thorny, Osage Orange hedge crisscrossed the fields, keeping livestock out of the various crops that normally grew there. In the field abutting the northern end of the levee, rested a farmhouse and cluster of outbuildings. That was all the protection the black troops would have come morning.

At dark on June 6th, about one-hundred to one-hundred and fifty men of the Twenty-third Iowa rested aboard a transport in the river while another one-hundred men in the Tenth Illinois Cavalry camped downstream, between the black troops and Van Buren Hospital a few miles to the south. According to Isaac Shepard, Colonel Lieb commanded 482 men in the Ninth Louisiana, Colonel Edwin W. Chamberlain of the Eleventh Louisiana had 307, and Lt. Colonel Watson Webber of the First Mississippi had 153 for a total of 1,092 including the Twenty-third Iowa. On the Confederate side, General McCulloch's brigade consisted of four regiments: the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Nineteenth Texas Infantry Regiments, the Sixteenth Texas Cavalry (dismounted), and a sprinkling of scouts from the Fifteenth Louisiana Cavalry, bringing his total force to about 1500 men. Neither side had any artillery.¹²

General Taylor concluded that if he attacked the Union camp before sunrise, his men would have a fair chance of surprising and routing the Yankees before the navy could interfere. He did not plan to hold the place, just cart away and destroy as many supplies as

¹² Disagreements exist regarding the number of defenders present at the bend. Cyrus Sears claimed 1046 men were present in his after action report, while Elias Dennis claimed 1061, *National Tribune* (Washington, D. C.) February 13, 1908; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt II, Serial 37, p. 447-448.

possible. Plus, if he captured the Van Buren Hospital and paroled the inmates there, it would provide the Confederacy with a couple thousand more parolees to exchange. Another advantage to a night march was that early June 1863 was unseasonably hot, pushing to the mid-90s in the steamy Mississippi River bottoms. The Confederate battle plan, therefore, relied on speed and surprise.¹³

Walker's men spent the waning daylight hours of the 6th cooking rations, writing letters, and preparing for the impending battle, the first real combat for many of them. Finally, at about 7 p.m. (an hour later than planned) they set out toward the Mississippi River, marching four abreast and as quietly as possible. Joseph Blessington of the Sixteenth Texas Cavalry, recalled a bit melodramatically that the men marched in "breathless silence" and "not a whisper was heard—no sound of clanking saber, or rattle of canteen and cup." Hyperbole aside, the Texans needed all of the stealth they could muster. The morning skirmishes between Harrison's cavalymen and the scout from Milliken's Bend had removed operational surprise from the Confederate quiver, but if the Texans achieved a tactical surprise, their chances for success looked promising. Guided by the light of a waning gibbous moon, the soldiers marched until they came to a fork in the road at Oak Grove Plantation where the different brigades parted ways. Walker kept the artillery and Randal's brigade in reserve at the forks with him, to reinforce the other two brigades if either one got in serious trouble. In accordance with Taylor's orders, Hawes' brigade took the road toward Milliken's Bend. The commander also sent a party of signalmen, hoping they could establish contact with General Pemberton's forces across the river in Vicksburg—not that it would do

¹³ Ibid.

either party any good, for Pemberton sealed his own doom as soon as he retreated into the works surrounding the "Southern Gibraltar."¹⁴

Herman Lieb, as the ranking officer in Shepard's absence, made every effort to ensure that the Confederates got nowhere near his camp undetected; but if the Rebels did attack his camp, he wanted to have a proper reception prepared for them. Toward that end, he doubled the number of pickets guarding the approaches to the camp and sent out a squad of mounted men to serve as videttes. At 2 a.m. he ordered all of the regiments of African Descent under his command into the trenches. He posted his Ninth Louisiana on the left of the line, covering the Richmond Road and southern boundary of the camp. Next came the miniscule First Mississippi, followed by the Thirteenth Louisiana, which never officially became a regiment due to lack of recruits. He left a gap on the right of the Thirteenth, which the Twenty-third Iowa would fill when it disembarked from the steamer at the landing. The Eleventh Louisiana, under the command of Colonel Chamberlain anchored the right. The disposition of the troops was a sensible one. He placed his veteran white troops, who had seen combat, near the center of his line. Adding to their strength, they carried Enfield rifles, which were more accurate and reliable than the weapons carried by their black comrades. With Chamberlain commanding the Eleventh at the far end of the line, Lieb felt he had a commander who could manage on his own once the battle was joined. As for his own sector of the line, by keeping the First Mississippi and Thirteenth Louisiana under his direct supervision, he could manage them as de facto companies (which in organization and size is what they were at the time) in his much larger Ninth Louisiana. At about the time Lieb ordered the Twenty-third Iowa from the boat and into the line, the Confederates received the

¹⁴ Joseph Palmer Blessington, *The Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division* (New York: Lange, Little, 1875; rpt., Austin: State House Press, 1994), 94; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt II, Serial 37, p. 447-448.

first of a number of rude surprises they were to get that day. As the grey-clad Texans silently marched toward the bend, their hearts must have sunk when they heard shots blast out in front of them—a detachment of Harrison's Pelican State cavalymen had stumbled onto Lieb's videttes in the misty predawn darkness, prompting the first shots in the battle of Milliken's Bend.¹⁵

With the alert sounded, the troops at the bend braced themselves, staring out into the darkness. Somewhere in the river bottoms beyond the Osage Orange hedges lurked a Rebel force with the stated intent of enslaving the enlisted black defenders and murdering their white officers. Out on the Richmond Road, the Louisiana cavalymen fled pell-mell from the black videttes, right into the guns of their own equally startled comrades, who let off a volley of their own before realizing they were shooting at their own scouts—such was the green nervousness on both sides that morning. With surprise gone and the alarm sounded, both sides made their final dispositions. The Texans deployed from their marching column into a line of battle in a field adjoining the Richmond Road. The Nineteenth Texas served as the right flank, the Seventeenth the center, and the Sixteenth cavalry formed the left end of the line. The Sixteenth Texas Infantry hovered in the rear as a reserve force.¹⁶

By the time the sky began to lighten after 4:00 a.m., McCulloch's men still had not reached the Union lines—the hedgerows had slowed his approach considerably. The Osage Orange bushes, planted in such a manner as to keep large livestock out of the crops, proved doubly resilient against Confederates. The Rebels' only alternative was to break ranks every time they came to a row, march single file through the openings like a line of turkeys, and reform on the other side; a quick task for a dozen men, a moderate one for a hundred, and a

¹⁵ Cornwell Memoir; Blessington, *Campaigns*, 94-95

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

very time consuming one for fifteen hundred. The Union soldiers watched, impressed at the display. By the time the Confederates cleared their last hedgerow, the black soldiers could clearly hear the officers barking orders as they reformed their line for the final stretch of field. The Union officers, with nearly twice as many colonels as regiments (due to the Shepard inquiry), remained calm, walking back and forth among the men, reassuring them, giving them pointers, and most importantly, maintaining an air of confidence, competence, and bravery. With new troops, the slightest sign of weakness on an officer's part could lead to a stampede; and, with the Mississippi River only 150 yards to the rear, the Federals did not have that luxury. They had to fight, die, or surrender where they stood. If they had any doubts about which option to pursue, the rising sun erased them when the Rebels' flags became visible. Beyond their regimental flags, and other militarily required banners, the Confederates had procured two more: a black flag, and a white one. The presence of the black flag symbolically conveyed their message plainly enough, but so as to ensure not a single soul misinterpreted their intentions, the Rebels had emblazed a skull, crossbones, and coffin on the white flag.¹⁷

After a seemingly eternal march across the fields, at about 200 yards out, the Confederates broke into double quick time of 165 steps per minute, aspiring to the "same erectness of body and composure of mind, as if marching in quick time" (110 steps per minute) according to Silas Casey's drill manual. Given the lack of practice and generally despised Lorenz rifles, the blue-coated officers had their men hold fire until the southerners neared point-blank range. In the mean time, the Twenty-third Iowa double-quickened toward their open spot in the line, arriving just in time to receive their share of the jaw-smashing

¹⁷ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt. II, Serial 37, p. 464; Shepard Inquiry.

assault. Confederate troops poured through the gaps in the last hedgerow, just a few yards in front of the levee. At the south end of the line where a Union officer foolishly ordered the hedge cut down a few days earlier, nothing impeded the Confederates. They rushed up the levee without even bothering to dress their lines. They black troops, having fired the first shots, met the final rush with empty guns. David Cornwell's two companies had waited impatiently up to that point. But on the command of "Now bounce them bullies!" they rushed into the melee that was spreading all along the levee.¹⁸

At that point, the combat broke into a thousand individual hand-to-hand battles as both sides resorted to the bayonet. The sound of the battle changed at that point too. The crescendo and decrescendo of musketry typically indicated the ebb and flow of most Civil War battles, but at Milliken's Bend, it probably sounded much different as it was replaced by the sounds of men swinging guns, punching, and stabbing one another—it took on a medieval quality. It also benefited the black troops. They no longer had to rely on their dreadfully inadequate marksmanship; with the bayonet they were equal to the whites. Jack Jackson, Cornwell's recruiting compadre, waded into the melee swinging his rifle until it disintegrated, leaving him with just the barrel which he continued to use as a cudgel, cracking every Confederate skull within his considerable reach. Having momentarily cleared his section of the levee of Rebels, Cornwell withdrew his men to the Union line. But Jack refused to go, his passions had taken control of him. He stood alone; sole possessor of the

¹⁸ Silas Casey, *Infantry Tactics for the Instruction, Exercise, and Manoeuvres, of The Soldier, A Company Line of Skirmishers, Battalion, Brigade, or Corps D'Armee* (New York: D. Van Norstrand, 1862), 123; Shepard Inquiry; Aquilla Standiford Diary, June 7, 1863, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Missouri University of Science and Technology, Rolla, Missouri; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt II, Serial 37, p. 447-448; Cornwell Memoir 134.

crest of the levee, challenging the Rebels to come up and fight him. "Shoot that big n-----r! Shoot that big n-----r!" and a bullet to his brain came the response.¹⁹

Cornwell's temporary triumph did not last long. Even though in his memoirs he described the initial clash as lasting several hours, in reality, the Confederates took control of the top of the levee in a matter of minutes. The Union line broke. Some say the Twenty-third Iowa broke first, having arrived to the battlefield too late to properly prepare for the onslaught, while the white soldiers blamed the black troops. The evidence is inconclusive on that count, but more conclusive is that after the Union forces retreated through the camp to the cover of the riverbank, the white soldiers abandoned their black comrades. The Tenth Illinois Cavalry, in their camp just south of the black troops, watched the drama unfold from their saddles. One cavalryman said that they fully expected orders to go into battle, but were instead told to go south to protect Van Buren Hospital. The Twenty-third Iowa, however, had no excuse. They had taken horrendous casualties to be sure, but when they reached the safety of the riverbank and the *Choctaw* opened fire on the Rebels, their colonel decided that "they must not be taken with the negroes." His men shouldered their rifles and marched south under cover of the riverbank until they passed from the danger. In at least one instance, the black troops' own officers let them down when Colonel Edwin Chamberlain of the Eleventh Louisiana, seized a row boat and paddled out to the *Choctaw*. His actions led to countless rumors about cowardice among the white officers.²⁰

Surrendering control of the levee to the Texans and retreating to the riverbank was the nadir for the defenders. The Texans exulted on top of the levee, shouting "No quarter" and

¹⁹ *San Antonio Semi-Weekly News*, July 23, 1863; Cornwell Memoir 133.

²⁰ Standifird Diary; Cornwell Memoir.

other expressions of affection—but shout was all they could do. For as soon as the Union infantrymen cleared out from the levee, the *Choctaw* took over, firing monster shells, some weighing as much as 100 pounds, at the Rebels. But with the water low the sailors had difficulty targeting the Confederates and in some cases accidentally killed black troops. The Confederates could not withstand the naval shells, and had to retreat to the lee side of the levee. All the black troops had to do was return fire and wait them out. Finally, at about noon, after they had removed their wounded and prisoners, the Confederate raiders gave up. Randal's brigade, which stood in reserve all morning, marched out to cover the retreat. Posting his artillery as best they could, Randal made sure nothing inconvenient emerged from the Federal camps along the riverbank.²¹

Hawe's brigade did not do much better at Young's Point where he was expected to open up communications with his besieged countrymen across the river in Vicksburg. His force marched toward the point accompanying a signal corps officer whom General Taylor had tasked with contacting Pemberton's forces. They made the nineteen mile journey in an excruciatingly tardy seventeen hours, forming a line of battle in an open field about a mile away from their goal at about 11 a.m. Certain that he could have taken the position, but even more certain that "it would not pay," Hawes called off the movement and beat a swift march back to Taylor's headquarters, breaking his record of nineteen miles in seventeen hours.²²

At the same time Walker and Hawes disembarked on their journeys toward the Federal camps, another smaller force of 600 men under the command of Colonel Frank

²¹ Standiford Diary, June 7, 1863; Account of Milliken's Bend, TCM94.1.0455.a, Texas Confederate Museum, Texas Division United Daughters of the Confederacy on deposit at the Haley Memorial Library and History Center, Midland, Texas.

²² *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt II, Serial 37, p. 460.

Bartlett of the Thirteenth Louisiana Cavalry marched north toward Lake Providence. Arriving a few miles from the town on June 6, they skirmished with the First Kansas Mounted Infantry, driving the Union soldiers toward the town. Hiram Scofield and the Eighth Louisiana Regiment, African Descent, then came up and with a series of volleys and drove the Confederates back, which "greatly encouraged the darkies," according to Union Brigadier-General Henry T. Reid, commander of the small Union force at Lake Providence.²³

Having suffered repulses at all points along the river, Taylor pulled his forces back to Richmond, Louisiana. Among the harvest of supplies taken in the raid, his men had acquired a number of prisoners in the battle of Milliken's Bend, something the general considered "unfortunate." Captain Corydon Heath was among them. During the fight for the levee at the Bend he had taken up a rifle, firing alongside his men until the line broke and the Confederates cut off his small squad, taking them prisoner. In the days, weeks, and months after the battle lurid descriptions of crucified murdered officers filled the nation's newspapers, yet Confederate leaders, from Jefferson Davis, down to General Richard Taylor claimed no murders occurred after the battle. All of the evidence, however, points toward murder. Heath and the other officer never showed up on any prisoner of war lists, and persistent rumors of their demise continued in the region long after the event. When Union reinforcements marched into Richmond, Louisiana, a week after the battle of Milliken's Bend, they picked up a Confederate deserter from Harrison's Battalion who claimed to have witnessed the hanging of Captain Heath and some of the enlisted men captured in the battle. That the witness came from Harrison's command may have significance, for in a battle in which most of the Confederates could have found reasons to execute white Union officers, Harrison's command had more reasons than most: many of his men came from Madison

²³ *Ibid*, p. 450.

Parish, Louisiana, the location of Richmond and Milliken's Bend. They likely faced some of their former slaves, and almost certainly knew some of the men now wearing Union blue at the Bend. To them, Heath would have been guilty of fomenting a slave insurrection, a crime punishable by death in the Confederacy. Further implicating the Louisianans, a chaplain in the 11th Louisiana A.D. heard rumors of a confrontation between the Texans and their Louisiana comrades in Richmond over what to do about the prisoners, with the Louisianans favoring execution. While the chaplain had heard that the Texans had prevailed and saved the prisoners lives, enough smoke exists to claim fire as far as Harrison's troops are concerned. Another plausible rumor that could have provided cover for Taylor was that Heath was secretly hanged in the middle of the night with the cover story being that he and the other white prisoner had escaped. Heath's service record states that he was murdered near Monroe, Louisiana, after the battle. The story that circulated among his comrades was that he was "taken prisoner, kept 2 or 3 days and then taken to a bridge over some considerable sized stream his hands handcuffed and his feet tied together and then thrown into the water and drowned." Later, in July, after word had spread of the alleged atrocities, General Grant sent a rather subdued but direct letter to Taylor seeking an explanation for the murders. Taylor disavowed knowledge of any executions, which Grant accepted without question. Ultimately, Abraham Lincoln stepped in. On July 31, 1863, he issued a general order declaring an eye-for-an-eye policy if the Confederates persisted in their officially sanctioned mistreatment of black prisoners.²⁴

²⁴ Ibid, p. 460; Cornwell, 132; Frank Moore, ed., *Rebellion Record: a Diary of American Events: Poetry and Incidents*, Vol. 7 (New York City, Van Norstrand, 1863); *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, December 23, 1863; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt III, Serial 38, p. 425; *Rebellion Record*, Vol 7, p. 12-15; *Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops*, NARA microfilm M589, roll 39; Benjamin Mills to Caleb Mills, June 7, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; *ORs*, Series I, Vol 24, Pt. III, Serial 38, p. 443-44; *New York Herald*, August 3, 1863.

Aside from the issue of prisoners, the effects of Milliken's Bend echoed across the country. Among white Union soldiers in Grant's command, the battle changed opinions precipitously. Prior to June 7, 1863, the overarching question among Grant's soldiers was "will the black soldier fight"; after June 7, the white soldiers throughout Grant's army were writing home about how well black soldiers performed at Milliken's Bend. But, they still did not want to serve alongside black men; the performance of the black troops at Milliken's Bend changed a lot of minds about black recruitment, but the mens' hearts proved more resilient, and it would not be until July 26, 1948, before the U.S. Army is officially desegregated.

The day after the battle the Court of Inquiry reconvened aboard the *America*, resuming where they had left off with more testimony regarding Shepard's punishment of the white soldier. More witnesses testified, and by afternoon the panel said they had heard enough, that Shepard had proved his point, and for him to prepare a final summation to be delivered the following day, Tuesday, June 9th. Shepard, never at a lack for words, took all of Tuesday and part of Wednesday to speak his peace, but in all reality, he need not have said anything, for after the members of the court had fought alongside the black troops in combat, no more testimony was needed. The officers of the court had seen the Iowans slink away to avoid being captured with black troops, they had seen the Tenth Illinois Cavalry stand idly by while they had fought for their lives, and they had seen the black flag and heard the shouts of "no quarter." The attitudes exhibited in battle by both supposed friend and sworn foe were the culmination of the week's previous testimony. The officers, being honorable men, had no other choice; they could only conclude that tremendous wrongs had been done to the black soldiers and their families at Milliken's Bend and that Shepard was fully justified in his

actions given the absence of positive leadership by the officers of the Tenth Illinois Cavalry. Grant, in the midst of starving out Vicksburg, had bigger fish to fry at the moment, but once the town fell and a semblance of calm returned to the region, he issued general orders on August 1, 1863, addressing the conduct he expected from southern white civilians toward his army, his army toward southern whites, and his army toward Freedmen. He specifically singled out the cavalry branch for the sins of the Tenth Illinois, but declared that any further wrongs would not go unpunished, and if they did, collective punishment of military units could result and that commanders would be punished for their men's behavior. No evidence exists one way or the other as to the efficacy of Grant's order. If one believes in the triumph of actions over words, then the performance of the black troops at Milliken's Bend must have gone a long way towards earning the grudging respect of white soldiers.²⁵

The initial clashes of arms between white and black soldiers in mid-1863 had special significance in the North. Just a few weeks earlier, black troops under Nathaniel Banks unsuccessfully assaulted the works at Port Hudson, Louisiana, and a short time after Milliken's Bend, the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts failed at taking Battery Wagner, making Milliken's Bend the only black victory in those initial encounters. But while the black troops' efforts, through no fault of their own, had suffered from mixed results, northern activists treated them as victories, and in a sense they all were victories. As one northern editorial put it, "Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, Fort Wagner, have made the black race Men—have made them brethren." If nothing else the battles elevated black men to a level approaching that of white men in terms of heroism, bravery, and sacrifice in the public mind of mid-century America, themes not taken lightly during that era. They also gave African Americans their own history at a time when they had no history. At a contraband relief association meeting

²⁵ Shepard Inquiry; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt III, Serial 38, p. 571.

held in Washington D.C. featuring a who's who of African American leaders (such as Elizabeth Keckley, whose mother was once enslaved at Vicksburg) the crowd broke out into applause when a speaker declared, "To-day we are making our own history—history that will bid defiance to prejudice and partiality, history as such imperishable material as...Milliken's Bend...Port Hudson, and Battery Wagner." Walt Whitman proclaimed, "Wherever tested, they have exhibited determined bravery, and compelled the plaudits alike of the thoughtful and thoughtless soldiers." And just as importantly, Milliken's Bend had a profound effect on new recruits, for as Herman Lieb put it, "They had all heard of the fine conduct of their comrades at Milliken's Bend, and now met their white brothers in arms with the proud feeling of equality." No more would they hear comments about how "The niggers wont fight" nor would they tolerate them.²⁶

For Confederate sympathizers in the region, Milliken's Bend was impossible, illogical, and incomprehensible. Kate Stone, a belle of Tallulah, Louisiana, typified most southern sentiment when she recorded in her journal, "It is hard to believe that Southern soldiers—and Texans at that—have been whipped by a mongrel crew of white and black Yankees. There must be some mistake." Later that evening after preparing for the wounded soldiers returning from the battle, she again registered her disbelief. "It is said the Negro regiments fought there like mad demons, but we cannot believe that. We know from long experience they are cowards." Likewise, Bishop Henry Elder of Natchez registered surprise in his diary when he wrote of the Confederate casualties at Monroe, Louisiana, "wounded at Milliken's Bend & by Negroes." Some southern newspapers could not bring themselves to mention race in their reports of the battle, calling the black troops at Milliken's Bend, "the

²⁶ *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal* (Boston), September 2, 1863; *The Liberator*, September 25, 1863; *The North American Review* (Boston), January 1887, Vol 144, p. 58; Johns, *Personal Recollections*, 139; *ORs*, Series III, Vol. 3, Serial 124, p. 452.

enemy" or "Yankees." Perhaps they feared such news would encourage slave revolts, or perhaps they could not bring themselves to admit that their former slaves had bested the sons of the South, "and Texans at that," in fair combat—the ultimate test of southern manliness, right, and honor. Some papers cast the battle as a southern victory, keying on General McCulloch's report, which emphasized the ferocity of the fighting, the Confederate seizure of the levee, and Union withdrawal to the river bank. In making excuses for Confederate abandonment of the field and their dead, the papers grasped at straws with "it was not their intention to hold the place...the gunboats made it untenable," and in a fascinatingly contradictory statement, "they retired as conquerors to Richmond." Clearly the Confederacy was not psychologically prepared for victorious black troops.²⁷

In the weeks after the battle, the Confederates attempted one more thrust at the USCT camps hugging the river when they raided Lake Providence. There, in one of the more shameful acts committed during the war, three Union officers agreed to surrender unconditionally their black enlisted men in exchange for leniency for themselves. The raid, conducted by William Henry Parson's brigade of Texas cavalry, caused a great deal of mischief on the western bank of the Mississippi River, but was too little, too late, for the sick and hungry Confederates at Vicksburg. Less than a week later Pemberton surrendered the town, and major fighting in the region petered out.²⁸

With the first test of the Colored Troops coming so quickly after their formation, July 1863 brought a welcome denouement. Too much needed to be done in the region, and the

²⁷ John Q. Anderson, ed., *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), 218-19; Gerow, R. O., *Civil War Diary, (1861-1865) of Bishop Henry Elder, Bishop of Natchez* (Natchez, n.d.), 39; *San Antonio Semi-Weekly News*, July 23, 1863.

²⁸ Gregory J. W. Urwin, *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 24.

less Rebel interference the better. Grant's campaign had shaken the region to its very core, uprooting centuries-old institutions, and not just the peculiar institution either, but also every other institution in the region, from family to church to business. Provision for the poor, once the domain of local churches, proved inadequate in the face of the massive migration of Freedmen into the protection of the garrisons along the river. Help had to come from the North.

It would be nice to say that the summer of 1863 saw an orderly, organized, approach to the chaos along the river, but that would be extremely untruthful. Even among the most optimistic, hearts quailed. John Eaton and the army did their part, organizing camps up and down the river and supplying as much food and clothing as permissible from the army's storehouses. But Grant did not have the men to spare to do a proper job of it. Nor was he inclined to send them; he was in the business of defeating rebels, not nation-building. They called it reconstruction, but essentially northern soldiers, missionaries, and philanthropists were charged with taking a pre-democratic people who had been denied civil rights, denied their own institutions (or at the very least their own autonomous institutions), denied personhood theologically and before the law, and to bring them up to mid-nineteenth century standards by war's end so they could take control of their own destinies—a tall task by any measure. Therefore, while the U.S. government considered its task to be the reconstruction of the South, those involved in the great humanitarian effort along the Mississippi could more aptly characterize their work as "construction," for there was nothing to reconstruct, but every thing to build where nothing had existed as far as black society was concerned.

The summer of 1863 saw the establishment of an archipelago of Freedman's camps throughout Grant's department from Cairo, Illinois, to Natchez, Mississippi. The army

parked the freedmen on islands, river landings, abandoned plantations, and created new settlements where none existed before. The general idea was for them to become self sufficient as quickly as possible, for profitable labor on their part not only removed the burden of their care from the government but served as a net gain for the U.S. war effort. Places like Paw Paw Island, Island No. 102, Palmyra Bend, etc., all became significant in the larger scheme of the war, not as places of battle, but as strategic points in the construction of black society. Treasury Department agents leased abandoned plantations to investors who contracted for labor with the freedmen, and in some cases leased land to "the more thrifty and intelligent freedmen." For those unfit for labor on a plantation due to age or disability, the government established Home Farms, which were designed to supercede the old "Contraband Camp" model the army had employed during the first two years of the war. Treasury agents saw the new system as being much superior, for it put the freedmen to profitable labor, removed them from the cities and army camps, and provided for a more efficient means of distributing aid. But mobilizing such an effort took time, and in the immediate months after Vicksburg fell, through the fall and winter of that year, the freedmen endured a precarious existence.²⁹

Given the sites of the camps, in some of the most unhealthy locations in the South, it is little wonder that sickness soon became the biggest foe. At the beginning of the war, both Union and Confederate soldiers endured a seasoning period in the camps, during which their immune systems were subjected to a bombardment of viruses and bacteria that they had not previously encountered. The same happened to black soldiers, their families, and white

²⁹ *Pre-Bureau Records*, Miscellaneous Reports from Subordinate and Staff Officers, Dec. 1863-July 1865, "Office Medical Director and Inspector of Freedmen, Memphis, Tennessee, July 1865" report by D. O. McCord to John Eaton, Jr.; Mellen, William P., *Report relative to leasing abandoned plantations and affairs of the freed people in First Special Agency* (Washington, D.C., 1864).

humanitarians along the Mississippi. Sanitation was primitive, and in many cases the freedmen got their drinking water straight from the disease ridden river. Most of the responsibility lay in a general mid-nineteenth century ignorance of basic sanitation, the remainder in the belief that people of African descent had some kind of special tolerance for climates unsuitable for whites of European descent. After Vicksburg fell, General Grant ordered black troops into the town to work on the fortifications, stating, "During the present hot weather it is necessary to save our men as much as possible from fatigue duty in the sun." Indeed, one of the arguments for recruiting black soldiers was that, being immune from a host of tropical illnesses, they would function better in the deep south than white northerners. The summer of 1863 proved otherwise, for black men, women, and children, along with the white civilians sent to help them, suffered greatly. Frequently without proper shelter, they languished in the summer heat. In Natchez, where the problems seemed most severe, visitors were appalled by the squalor. There, more than two thousand freedmen lived in make-shift camps along the river and at the site of the Forks of the Road slave market. They lived in shacks constructed from wooden planks with no fireplaces or windows--smoke from the cooking fires exited the hovels via a plank removed from the walls. Western Sanitary Commission observer James Yeatman wrote that death had touched every house he had visited and that upwards of 75 freedmen were dying each day in Natchez. Ultimately, though, reports such as Yeatman's spurred northern sanitary organizations to greater efforts in the Mississippi Valley.³⁰

³⁰ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt. III, Serial 38, p. 442; Gerow, R. O., *Elder Diary*, 59-60; Yeatman, James E., *A Report of the Condition of the Freedmen of the Mississippi Presented to the Western Sanitary Commission, December 17th 1863*, Alfred Holt Stone Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi (hereinafter cited as *Yeatman Report*).

The chaos had an impact on the USCT, for even as the soldiers suffered greatly at the from a host of illnesses, it was their wives and children who were dying in the camps they guarded. In unprotected camps, or on exposed plantations where fresh water was available, danger still lurked in the form of Rebel partisans. In mid-July a band of Rebels hit a plantation near Milliken's Bend, carrying off about one hundred women and children, causing one USCT officer to comment, "A good many of those who were carried off were wives of members of our company, the boys think tis pretty hard." Such events hit at the heart of the purpose of the USCT, for many in the army and Treasury Department saw the USCT as the guardians of the lease system, protecting the plantations along the river. General Grant initially viewed them as laborers and caretakers who served to ensure that the white army moved forward, unimpeded by lesser labors. Ever the pragmatist, Grant continued to modify his view as the war changed. Sherman, on the other hand, never really shed his disdain for black troops, even when they could have materially contributed to his campaigns. Given that General Hawkins was sick and out of commission during those formative months, the USCT drifted along, unmoored by any particular personality. Only after he returned to the theater in August 1863 did the USCT begin to find direction and move forward as a fighting force. But even then it took time, and with the campaign season coming to an end, Hawkins had the fall and winter to whip his men into shape for 1864.³¹

Book-ending the summer of 1863, Lorenzo Thomas chugged down the river again in mid-August, looking for black recruits, clarifying policy toward freedmen, and establishing new policies. From that point on, all able bodied males of African descent who come within the Union lines were to be mustered into the army and all women, children, and infirm to be

³¹ John L. Matthews to Sister, July 12, 1863, *Matthews Letters*; ORs Series I, Vol. 24, Pt. III, Serial 38, p. 548.

cared for in a manner most beneficial for their welfare. It was a pronouncement pregnant with implications. As Thomas explained the new policy, "It has become apparent that the system of receiving all negroes who may have sought the protection of our Government, and allowing them to remain, in many instances, in a state of almost inactivity, has become at times, not only injurious to the interests of the service, but the welfare of the negroes themselves, resulting in habits of idleness, sickness, and disease." He added that women and children should remain on the plantations "provided such place be under the control of Federal troops." Such a policy of mandatory enlistment and forced labor had serious implications for the freedmen, calling into question if they had indeed truly achieved freedom once they entered union lines.³²

If anything, 1863 represented a change of masters for the men of the USCT and their families. Free, but not free to do (or not do) as they wished, once the former slaves entered federal lines they were subject to rules imposed by the army. Mid-nineteenth century conceptions of freedom required responsibility from those relying on the government for help. Yet they were not totally without freedom, for they could marry whom they wished, choose from a variety of occupations (limited as they were), and receive compensation for their labors. Finally, they had rights. Once they crossed into Union lines, they became persons in the eyes of the law. While Isaac Shepard's court of inquiry exonerated him from any blame in the beating of the white soldier and caused Grant to take a stand for the protection of the freedmen in the region from predatory white Union soldiers, unmentioned in the court proceedings or any subsequent official records is the fact that for the first time in that region, the testimony of black men and women trumped that of whites in a court of law.

³² *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 24, Pt. III, Serial 124, p. 686,

But such milestones were overshadowed by the much larger battle that occurred ashore during the inquiry.

The battle of Milliken's Bend meant nothing, and it meant everything. If the Confederates had won the battle and swept the banks clear of any sign of Union troops, it still would not have made the slightest difference in Grant's siege of Vicksburg. He had ample troops to drive them away if for some miracle they withstood the pounding the navy would have surely given them. He had already learned his lesson about Confederate raiders when General Earl Van Dorn destroyed his supply base at Holly Springs in December 1862. Grant was too wise a general to allow raiders to stymie his efforts twice in a row. Finally, if only white troops had participated in the battle, it would have rated little more than a skirmish in the minds of contemporaries, and historians. Yet, it was black troops who did the lion's share of the fighting, and that is what made the battle important. As the only significant victory by troops of African descent during the late spring and early summer of 1863, it made headlines and served as a rallying cry for boosters of the new policy of enlisting black men into the Union army. It silenced detractors, and proved to white enlisted men that the "black man would fight." Finally, for the black soldiers themselves, it represented the experience of standing toe to toe, in some cases literally, with their old masters, and besting them, cracking the foundation of the idea of white superiority. It was a major step in the USCT's mastery of the region.

Chapter 5

While 1863 marked the birth and initial battles for the survival of the USCT, 1864 marked the adolescence and maturation of the sable arm in the Mississippi Valley. The primary question facing the black troops in respect to Union authorities became how would the army employ them. Were they destined to become uniformed slaves, performing menial tasks so that white soldiers could do all of the important fighting, or, would they passively wait out the war as garrison troops, ensconced in river towns and freedmen's camps throughout the Mississippi Valley, never doing much more than raiding the local countryside in search of cotton—again, while white soldiers did all of the important fighting? Finally, a few resourceful, and very able, Confederate generals hovering on the periphery of the Union controlled towns, landings, and plantations, insisted on having their say, testing the USCT at every opportunity. How the black soldiers and their officers reacted to each of these challenges largely determined their role in the battles to come.

While the major Union and Confederate armies slipped into a semi-hibernatory state during the winter of 1863-64, the USCT became engaged in a far different battle—one of mastership. During the army's rush through the region on its way to Vicksburg in the spring of 1863, it put in place ad-hoc measures to deal with the sea of freedmen it encountered. If Generals McPherson and Sherman served as Grant's most valued subordinates in the command of white troops, and John Hawkins in charge of the black, then John Eaton served as Grant's field marshal of freedmen—a situation that appears to have suited Grant perfectly. But, unfortunately for Grant and his officers, another interest also vied with the army for the resources of the region—the U.S. Treasury Department.

The Army and Treasury held similar, competing, and at times seemingly irreconcilable visions for the future of the region. They both sought to put the freedmen back to work as soon as possible: to make productive citizens of the masses of freedmen lying idle along the river. But the division centered on the word "productive." Treasury officials defined it in terms of revenue generated by means of cotton cultivation while the army defined it as becoming governing enough to relieve the army of their care. It would seem that the two goals went hand in hand, but that did not become the case. The principal footmen of the treasury department, the oft maligned treasury agents, served as the accountants of the region, calculating the success or failure of the grand experiment in terms of cotton bales and dollars. The army's spiritual foot soldiers, the regimental chaplains, existed to "work for the moral and intellectual improvement" of the enlisted black men, according to John Hawkins. His definition, simple and direct—as well as accurate—like many pat solutions proved infinitely more difficult in the execution than in the conception. Herman Lieb, putting it even more succinctly, declared the army a "civilizer" and put his chaplain in charge of a "bevy of school ma'ams" who proceeded to "impart to all of these negroes as much elementary education as would be required for a discriminating American citizenship." Indeed, army chaplain-run-schools became a fixture of the USCT, and usually mandatory; and when not, the only acceptable excuse for missing drill. Nevertheless, the competing definitions became the root cause of many disagreements that flared up between the treasury agents and USCT during the war and Reconstruction.¹

The winter of 1863-64 also marked General Hawkins's coming into his own as a commander, stamping his own imprimatur on the organization. Prostrate with illness during

¹John P. Hawkins to Caleb Mills, April 22, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; Johns, *Personal Recollections*, 139.

the formative months of the USCT in 1863, the units he inherited upon his return to the region at the end of the summer did not come close to his standards of discipline, knowledge, and appearance. Much of what he saw grated on his West Point-trained spit and polish sensibilities. His troops lived in camps scattered from Natchez to Arkansas and commanded by officers he did not choose. He found the field officers especially deficient, both in knowledge and character, and surmised that white regiments had used the USCT as a dumping ground to get rid of all manner of unsuitable officers. He wrote a friend that "these characters I am having moved out as fast as possible and I want others to replace them." As for the replacements he sought, he wanted "young men of education and good character & physique"; military knowledge came second as a desired trait. Essentially, he wanted men like himself: educated, moral, and prepared to put their shoulder to the plow in the fields of the Lord. Like Lorenzo Thomas, he sought men who had a heart for the task, but he wanted more than that; he wanted men who shared his vision for the freedmen of the region. But Hawkins was also a realist, recognizing that even pious men needed the promise of advancement. He told his friend that any applicants, "if worthy will soon be promoted Captain and higher, for promotion is made by merit and not seniority of rank, there is a better chance rapid promotion in these Regts than any others in service." He declared that politics had nothing to do with promotions. He was half right. Technically, since the United States army supervised the formation of the regiments, the officers earned their commissions based on merit, not on local politics, patronage, or popularity, like so many officers had done back in 1861. Outside of Hawkins's command, party politics indeed played a role, especially in Tennessee where Governor Andrew Johnson packed the black regiments with his cronies. Within Hawkins's command, family and school connections sometimes got men a

commission, but beyond that merit counted for much. Despite fishing for officers from his home state and alma mater, the general carefully dispersed the successful applicants among different companies and regiments so as to prevent them from forming cliques. Indeed, Hawkins had a seventeen year old lieutenant in his command, the son of a close friend. But as the general stated "I want the material for a good officer and will round it up afterwards." No surviving correspondence indicates whether Hawkins ever regretted that policy, but he likely did, for as 1864 broke over the horizon, he had a lot of work to do to elevate his officers up to the level of competence he expected from them.²

From a cursory reading of the surviving records the USCT regiments assigned to Hawkins, he comes across as every volunteer soldier's mortal enemy, a sarcastic micromanaging martinet. In one general order, obviously written in response to excuses offered up by his subordinates, Hawkins generously admitted that the "Officers of this command have very justly complained that they had no opportunity for drill and military instruction." Then he dropped the hammer: "An opportunity is now presented, and it is expected that all Officers will apply themselves with zeal to perfect their military knowledge and the drill and discipline of their commands." He informed the officers that he would neither tolerate nor excuse any absenteeism on their part. No details escaped his eagle-eyed scrutiny. In one lengthy circular he pointed out that "Very vague notions exist among Officers and men concerning the distances mentioned in tactics." Doing the work of a sergeant, he let them know that "28 inches the pace in command or quick time direct march measured from heel to heel" and that "9 and 11 inches the length of step of pivot man in a marching wheel or common or quick and double quick time." If the officers had any doubt

² John P. Hawkins to Caleb Mills, November 12, 1863, Isaac Shepard to Mills, December 11, 1863, Hawkins to Caleb Mills, April 22, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers.

about his seriousness, he let them know that "Officers will instruct themselves and men in these distances at Company drill, and all the distances will be exactly measured." Piling on, he continued, "Officers will instruct their men that in aiming, the rear rank men, will in the oblique fire to the left, aim over the left shoulder of their left leader, stepping off with the right foot as directed in tactics." At one point he went so far as to assemble the Forty-ninth and Fifty-third USCT for personalized instruction from himself. Even the improper completion of administrative tasks caught his eagle eye, leading him to issue a circular on the proper method of company record keeping. In short, Hawkins behaved like many of his regular army colleagues at the beginning of the war when they faced their own deluge of green volunteer officers.³

But the larger question at this point in the career of the USCT was, toward what end? Were Hawkins's long hours of drill and spit and polish all for naught, to make show soldiers out of the black men for the purpose of philanthropic self esteem, or would they get to shed the white gloves and participate in the war in a meaningful way? Each unit addressed the question individually. For the small detachments guarding Freedmen's camps, home farms, and leased plantations, meaningful participation meant something different. Instead of participating in sweeping campaigns intended to destroy Confederate military forces and hasten the close of the war, their war consisted of fending off Confederate and irregular raiders, intent on thievery, murder, and reenslavement of the black soldiers and their families. For those soldiers, the war was a matter of defending home and hearth. Other units, the Third United States Colored Cavalry being the most notable example, were thrust into a

³ *Continental Commands*, p 18-19 General Order No. 27, July 26, 1864, Vicksburg, Mississippi; p 21. July 30, Vicksburg, Mississippi, Hawkins; p. 21, Circular. Vicksburg, Aug 1, 1864; p. 20, Circular, for instructions of Commdg Officers of 49th and 53rd Regts, U. S. Col. Troops, July 27, 1864. Vicksburg, Mississippi; p 20-25.

central role early in their careers. Due to a shortage of effective Union cavalry in the region, the Third, which had adopted the nickname of “The Black Horse Cavalry,” found themselves, along with their brother regiment, the Fourth Illinois Cavalry, carrying the war to Confederates in a series of raids before the onset of winter. Thus, in the case of cavalry, necessity overrode prejudice in terms of their utility, but that was not the norm. From the onset, many saw the USCT as regiments of slaves rather than regiments of soldiers. Isaac Shepard, at his court of inquiry exposed the prejudice of many of his brother officers in white regiments when he shared correspondence from General Sullivan addressing him as Superintendent of Contrabands, an intentional slight to both Shepard and his men.⁴

Six months later, in January 1864, the problem remained, so much so that Colonel Julian Bryant of the Fifty-first USCT, in a fit of frustration, sought to use the newspapers to expose the abuses of black enlisted labor. He had the connections to do so; his uncle, William Cullen Bryant, edited the *New York Tribune*. A few months earlier the elder Bryant had published an article on the misuse of black soldiers posted in South Carolina. Julian read it, and in January pointed out to his uncle that the same circumstances existed in Vicksburg, that black soldiers “have been constantly at work upon the fortifications, doing common laborers duty at the landings, loading and unloading boats and barges, or policing the streets of the town, while white regiments are lying idle in camp, or are occupied only in soldierly duties.” That senior officers in Vicksburg professed “sympathy and friendship for the colored troops” while “imposing on them all the menial duties of the post” further agitated Bryant. At least in Shepard’s case, enemies of black recruitment did not cloak themselves in declarations of friendship. Of course, the army needed men to unload boats, dig ditches, pick up trash, and dig latrines; Colonel Bryant understood that, writing, “It is true that these duties

⁴ *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, August 27, October 13, 1864; Shepard Inquiry.

must necessarily be performed, but if the colored troops are recognized as United States soldiers, it is not only an injustice but a violation of military regulations, to show such partiality in assigning them to duty.” He asked his uncle to “give this subject a ventilation” but, to ensure anonymity added that as an officer he should not “complain or criticize the actions” of his superiors. Samuel Swain, an officer in Natchez noted that the constant manual labor harmed moral: “They are so indolent naturally after being worked as they have in this Regt. since it was organized that it takes constant driving to keep them at work. The most of them have not much pride or ambition about work but they improve in drill and efficiency very fast.” Lorenzo Thomas, whose son became an officer in a USCT regiment in Vicksburg, wrote Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that the army drove black enlistees harder than their former masters. These sources, however, represent only a portion of the USCT experience, for between the time Colonel Bryant pled for help from his uncle, and Thomas complained to Stanton, the 1864 campaign season had begun to heat up, and the black soldiers of the region saw enough of war to last them a lifetime.⁵

1864 marked a significant change of pace for the USCT around Vicksburg. While the focus of the war's fighting had shifted eastward, significant bodies of Confederate troops remained in Mississippi, under the command of General Leonidas Polk. The fighting bishop had two divisions of troops under his command, General Samuel Gibbs French's in Brandon, Mississippi, and General William W. Loring's, the lost sheep of Champion Hill, in Canton. He had veteran cavalry too, with General Stephen D. Lee commanding all Confederate cavalry in Polk's little army, directing the likes of Sul Ross's, Wirt Adams's, and Colonel Peter Starke's brigades in central Mississippi, while Nathan Bedford Forrest operated toward

⁵ Julian Bryant to William Cullen Bryant, January 22, 1864, Bryant Family Papers, New York Public Library, New York City; Samuel G. Swain to Sister, March 23, 1864, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers.

Memphis. William Tecumseh Sherman, passionately averse to disorder, therefore decided to clear the state of any significant bodies of Rebel forces and destroy Rebel war making capacity along the railroad to Meridian. Marching out of Vicksburg toward Polk, while General Sooy Smith rampaged out of Memphis with Forrest in his sights, Sherman had little difficulty shooing Polk's infantry out of the state, ruining the railroad all the way to Meridian before pushing the Rebel infantry into Alabama. Sooy Smith, however, did not show up at the appointed time, having delayed his departure from Memphis and getting beat by Forrest's smaller force in a series of battles near Okolona, Mississippi. Sherman never forgave Smith. The 7500 cavalrymen Sherman marshaled on his behalf should have made quick work of the Wizard of the Saddle but instead added more glory to the Tennessean's stature as a Confederate hero. Nonetheless, the Meridian campaign proved a tremendous success. It exposed the Confederacy as a hollow shell, drove Polk's infantry from the state, and yielded a bounty of black recruits for the Union army.

Sherman's raid flooded Vicksburg with even more freedmen. A census taken on the eve of the raid shows 870 at Paw Paw Island, 575 at Van Buren Hospital, and 625 at Milliken's Bend, just north of town in Louisiana. Across the river, 3000 freedmen occupied Young's Point, 2000 labored on miscellaneous plantations, and 1325 rested at Jefferson Davis' former plantation. In Vicksburg proper another 2000 eked out an existence unloading steamboats and working for the army. That number increased by 5000 when Sherman's column returned to town in late February. It was a sight to behold. Most of the town and garrison turned out to see the spectacle of thousands of freedmen strung out behind the Union column in "Hundreds of vehicles of the most varied description, from the mule cart to the family equipage of their former masters loaded promiscuously with women and children,

household and kitchen furniture, while their male protectors, not so naked as you saw them in Omdurman, but just as dirty and uncivilized, marched in file on both sides of the caravan." Herman Lieb compared it to "the exodus of the Jews from Egypt." Their clothing was as varied as their transportation, "the majority in bedraggled plantation clothing, some with boots, some in shoes, most barefoot, in parts of Confederate and Union uniforms, a few here and there with stovepipe hats, caps or colored handkerchiefs on their heads; in short, the whole cavalcade could not better be characterized than by calling them a lot of black savages returning from a pilfering expedition." While Lieb did his best to cast the scene in a humorous light, the cavalcade yielded a number of able bodied soldiers to fill out his regiment of heavy artillery. He turned his surgeons loose on them and "from this motley crew" they "selected a sufficient number of recruits to fill my regiment to the full quota. After a bath in the Mississippi with a scrubbing with brush and soap, and after shearing off their braided curls, they were given their military outfits and enrolled in one of the twelve companies."⁶

During Sherman's raid, the USCT in Vicksburg did their part. To help hold Vicksburg while the white troops did the campaigning, which was Sherman's sweeping vision of black military service, General Hawkins moved his headquarters into town on February 6th. Earlier that week, and though seemingly of little importance at the time of their disembarkation, Hawkins had sent elements of the Fifty-first USCT on a foraging expedition up the Mississippi River toward Arkansas.⁷

⁶Friends' Association of Philadelphia and Its Vicinity, for the Relief of Colored Freedmen, *Report of the executive board. Read at the annual meeting of the contributors, held at Arch street meeting-house, Philadelphia, 4th month 18th, 1864* (Philadelphia, C. Sherman, Son & Co., 1864); Johns, *Personal Recollections*, 138, 139.

⁷ *Continental Commands*, Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210. General Orders No. 1, Vicksburg, February 9, 1864. p.1.

On February 14, Lt. Thaddeus Cocke and a squad of the Fifty-first USCT disembarked from a steamer near Lake Village, Arkansas. They had hoped to secure forage; the constant stream of refugees and military commands through Vicksburg had overtaxed the town's infrastructure and resources. This was not the first foray of the USCT to the vicinity of Lake Village; six weeks earlier the elements of the Third U.S. Colored Cavalry and Fourth Illinois Cavalry had swooped through the area in search of a particularly vicious set of guerillas noted for "hanging negroes and driving off stock." Unfortunately for Thaddeus Cocke and his men, the cavalry raid did little to eradicate Confederate guerillas from the area. After the war, neither side disputed what ultimately happened to Cocke and his men; but rather how the actions of both sides contributed to the horror. In 1911 a Rebel participant positively glowed over his comrade's actions on February 14, 1864. He recollected that on that morning, a citizen told his captain that Yankees had occupied Tecumseh plantation, which caused the captain to hold an informal vote among his men as to who favored attacking the black detachment. With the ayes unanimous, the bushwhackers, twenty-two in number, snaked their way through back roads and canebrakes until they came up to the plantation. There, they spied a sentry, standing on a cotton platform near the gin. The black soldier got off a shot then fled indoors, alerting his comrades. Cocke hustled his men outside of a barn where they had found some corn, formed them into line, and ordered them to fire a volley. They missed, and ran. The Rebels, amply armed with Colt Navies and Dragoons shot them down as they fled, killing or wounding every single member of the Federal detachment. Their bloodlust not sated the rebels found no room in their hearts for charity toward their fallen enemy, but on the contrary used the fallen Union soldiers' own Lorenz bayonets (a particularly large and nasty triangular blade) to pin each dead and wounded

Union soldier to the ground. The narrator concluded his tale by invoking God's blessings and bragging about a trophy they picked up, Lt. Cocke's sword which held the inscription "Presented by Friends to Thaddeus K. Cock, 1st Mississippi Regiment, for Bravery."⁸

The "*Historic Record of the 51st Col'd Infantry*" compiled sometime after the war told a different story. In that source, mounted guerillas overwhelmed Cocke and his men. Seeing his situation as hopeless, Cocke offered to surrender and ordered his men to throw down their arms. At that point the Rebels set upon them with "fiendish brutality, their bodies being mutilated in every possible manner." They shot Cocke and his first sergeant in the mouth and left them for dead. Cocke, survived another agonizing fourteen days, finally expiring on February 28th. Of his detachment, the bushwhackers murdered fourteen on the spot and left six for dead. Of those six, only two survived, and that by feigning death. Such figures give lie to the Confederate account. Rarely in Civil War combat did one side or the other, even in small unit encounters, suffer one hundred percent casualties. When such lopsided engagements did occur, they usually came about as a result of evil doing. Murder became a fact of life for members of the USCT; it started prior to Milliken's Bend and accompanied the USCT for the remainder of the war, and though the war took a hard turn for white troops and civilians in 1864, black soldiers had known little else.⁹

While Sherman's raid may have forced the larger Confederate forces from the state, smaller units persisted in bedeviling the river garrisons on the eastern side of the river. Unlike 1863, when the USCT fought most of its battles on the western side of the river, in 1864 most of their encounters with the enemy occurred on the eastern side of the river as the

⁸ ORs, Series I, Vol. 53, Serial 111, p. 476; Weed Marshall, "A Fight to the Finish Near Lake Village, Ark." *Confederate Veteran*, April 1911, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid*; *New York Times*, March 4, 1864.

Confederate cavalymen and irregulars contested with the garrisons for control of the countryside. Two Confederate commanders stand out in this regard, General Sul Ross of Texas, and General Wirt Adams of Mississippi. Resourceful and ruthless, neither had a particularly high regard for black troops whom Ross's men called "black apes."¹⁰

Union troops stationed in Vicksburg did not become passive during February and March 1864. Though Sherman had pushed the majority of Confederate infantry forces out of Mississippi, the state fairly creaked under the weight of cavalymen, with Nathan Bedford Forrest reigning in Northeast Mississippi, Colonel Sul Ross's Texas cavalry brigade headed toward Yazoo City, and Wirt Adams operating against Sherman's columns. During this period, the Third U. S. Colored Cavalry (USCC), consisting of about 320 men, still in its infancy with only one battalion up to strength, joined a Federal raiding party up the Yazoo River comprising gunboats, transports, the Eleventh Illinois Infantry, and Eighth Louisiana Infantry, African Descent (later Forty-seventh USCT), for a total of 1,159 men.¹¹

Leaving Vicksburg on January 31, the little fleet picked up the Third USCC at Hayne's Bluff, then began leapfrogging its way up the Yazoo, stopping from time to time to disgorge detachments of black cavalymen to shoo away the horsefly swarms of Confederate sharpshooters, seemingly perched in every tree around every bend. At Liverpool Heights, on February 3, they encountered a combined force of Rebel artillery and cavalry frowning down on the river who, courteously allowed the gunboats to pass before blasting the transports with two small rifled cannon. With the navy's guns unable to train on the heights, and the transports unarmed, Colonel James H. Coates, commanding the expedition, ordered a portion

¹⁰ Sparks, A. W., *Recollections of the Great War* (Tyler: Lee & Burnett Printers, 1901), ch. 29.

¹¹ Main, Ed. M. *The Story of the Marches, Battles, and Incidents of the Third United States Colored Cavalry* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 92-93.

of his infantry and cavalry to deal with the rebels: Texans from Sul Ross's brigade. The effort proved fruitless, Ross had fortified most of his brigade atop the heights, behind barricades of rocks and logs so strong as to repel any Federal attempt at storming them. After a cursory assault demonstrated Ross's effectiveness, Coates, therefore, decided to run his fleet past the heights, and put his men to work building barricades out of anything aboard the transports that could impede the flight of a bullet. The next morning, smoke boiling from the black stacks of its vessels, steam under full pressure, the flotilla burst forth from its mooring on the west bank of the Yazoo. Again, the gunboats led the way, and again the Rebels held their fire, preferring to kill as many of the enemy troops aboard the transports as possible rather than wasting their efforts against the heavily armored, expertly gunned, naval vessels. Although the transports spent less than ten minutes under fire, it seemed like an age to the men hunkered down on the decks. Rebel iron and lead rained down on them from the heights, and they could do nothing about it but load and fire back ineffectively, knowing that the Rebels had burrowed too deeply to feel it. Remarkably enough to the men who endured the gauntlet, the Rebels sank no transports and killed only two men in the flotilla, though wounding quite a few. The flotilla continued forward, Sul Ross always just ahead of them, until finally, on February 9 the Union troops occupied Yazoo City after the Confederate cavalymen had raced away toward the southeast to help their brothers in arms defend railroad from Sherman's raid. Coates continued his expedition up the Yazoo, pushing fifty more miles to Greenwood, Mississippi, and then beyond to Carrollton, where he ultimately halted his advance upon learning that Nathan Bedford Forrest's entire cavalry division blocked the way, twenty miles north at Grenada, Mississippi. Coates did not need Forrest's attention and turned his force back toward Yazoo City where the situation had changed

significantly in the intervening weeks. The Union offensive in Mississippi that permitted him to get so far up the Yazoo had come to a conclusion and Confederate cavalry drifted back into the area. Sooy Smith, thoroughly whipped and tail between his legs, had retreated to the outskirts of Memphis while Sherman's victorious forces rested in Canton after the long march to Meridian. The Union threat diminished, Sul Ross's men returned to the neighborhood of Yazoo City, smarting that they proved unequal to Sherman's all consuming blue columns. Thus sat the stage for the battle of Yazoo City.¹²

On the morning of February 28th a portion of Coates's flotilla halted north of Yazoo City so the Third USSC could disembark to serve as an advance guard, to scour the roads leading into town of any stray Rebels, form pickets, and generally make sure no untoward surprises awaited the little fleet when it ultimately made port and landed the infantry. The town proper, rested on the edge of the Mississippi Delta, underneath a ridge of hills that marked the border between high ground that General Grant had struggled for so long to attain, and the flat soupy terrain that had so stymied his efforts in late 1862 and early 1863. In this particular section of the Delta, the ridge ran from the northeast to the southwest, parallel to the Yazoo River, and like dingy pearls on a necklace held places with names like Satartia, Haynes Bluff, Snyder's Bluff, and Chickasaw Bayou before finally joining the Mississippi River at Vicksburg. Of the roads connecting downtown Yazoo City to the rest of the state, the Benton Road which jumped the steep promontory overlooking the town, became the primary route to death as Union and Confederate cavalry patrols played a murderous game of hide and seek with one another just over the horizon. If the Confederates proved too strong or aggressive, Union forces could simply withdraw into a large redoubt

¹² Ibid.; Shelley and Richard Morrison, eds. *Personal Civil War letters of General Lawrence Sullivan Ross: With other letters by Lawrence Sullivan Ross* (Austin, S and R. Morrison, 1994), 60, 61.

built by the town's former defenders atop the bluff next to the road. Flatly stated, whoever occupied the fort controlled the town, and thus navigation of the Yazoo River from that point northward.¹³

But before they could get settled in their camps, orders came in for Major Cook to form a detachment of forty men to reconnoiter the Benton Road. Choosing his forty, Cook saddled up and rode out the Benton Road. About five or six miles out, at a sharp bend in the road, they stumbled upon a body of about sixty Confederate cavalymen. Both sides were surprised, but with the Union troopers slightly less so, Cook ordered his men to fire, getting off a round at the half-horsed Confederates before punctuating his aggression with an impetuous charge. He did not get very far. While pursuing the pell mell rebels, he encountered the main body of Sul Ross's force, some 1,000 men, and the aggressor became the quarry as Cook's men wheeled toward Yazoo City.¹⁴

Cook sent a courier ahead to warn Col. Coates of the Rebel anthill he had just kicked open, advising his brother officer to seek shelter in the hill fort while he attempted to delay the gray horsemen. Long after the war, a member of the Third USCC described it as a costly fighting withdrawal over broken country with his comrades taking casualties at every stand. Sul Ross viewed it differently, claiming "The negroes after the first fire broke in disorder, each seeming intent on nothing but making his escape. The road to Yazoo City was literally "strewed with their bodies." In addition to taking a load of buckshot in the hip Cook lost

¹³ *ORs*, Series I. Vol. 32. Pt. I, Serial 57, p. 321-326.

¹⁴ Main, *Story of the Marches*, 112-113; Douglas Hale, *The Third Texas Cavalry in the Civil War* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 206-07.

nearly half his force during the four mile retreat: eight killed, ten missing, and three wounded; hardly a road strewn with bodies.¹⁵

Colonel Coates and the Eleventh Illinois Infantry along with the remainder of the Third USSC double-quickened from their transports toward the forts, arriving at about the same time as Cook's harried patrol. The Confederates, realizing something more than a handful of Yank troopers occupied the earthworks in their front reigned in their mounts about a thousand yards out. A portion of the Rebel troopers positioned just north of the Benton Road began testing the Yanks, aggressively probing the lines until confronted by a company of the Third USSC in what became a crisp little fight until darkness forced both sides to call it off for the night. The Confederates returned to their main line where they received reinforcements in the form of brigade of Tennessee cavalymen, while the Federals, with no room to bed down over a thousand men, pulled a large portion of their command back into camps on the waterfront, leaving a smaller garrison of 200 men from the Third USCC in the redoubt. For the next few days both sides contented themselves with chasing each other's pickets up and down the roads leading to town. The Federals expected a significant attack to come at any time, but Ross did not feel strong enough to pry Federals out of their fortifications. He would have to wait until Colonel Richardson's brigade of Tennessee cavalymen arrived before he felt sufficiently confident of success.¹⁶

On March 4, as Union forces continued to secure the town, a Confederate courier under flag of truce rode into town with a message from Sul Ross. A few weeks prior, and just south of Yazoo City near Mechanicsville, a soldier from the First Arkansas Infantry African Descent became too sick to keep up with his unit and had to take shelter in a private

¹⁵ Ibid. 114-116; Series I, Vol. 32, Pt. I, Serial 57, p. 332.

¹⁶ Main, *Story of the Marches*, 116, 117; ORs, Series I, Vol. 32, Pt. I, Serial 57, p. 390.

residence until he could recuperate enough to travel. Some Confederate soldiers discovered his hiding place, and beat his skull in. When the soldier's commander returned and discovered the murder, he decided to retaliate. He rounded up the local populace and brought forward a couple of prisoners he had in his possession from the Sixth Texas Cavalry. After explaining the situation to the townsfolk, he made the two unfortunates kneel over his soldier's corpse, blindfolded them, and executed them. Ross wanted to "know whether or not such was the case" and if his men could expect the same treatment if they fell into Union hands around Yazoo City. Waxing grandiloquent he boasted "Texans, that while they have always damaged the enemies of their country to the utmost of their ability on the battle-field and in open, fair fight, they have never yet injured nor in any way maltreated prisoners." But, if "the sad fate that befell the two men captured...awaits all who may hereafter be taken, we are prepared to accept the terms," he threatened, and underscored in his conclusion, "I trust your answer may be satisfactory to my command." Col. Coates, responded in kind, though with less garnishment. He denied knowledge of the murders, condemned such acts, and matter-of-factly pointed out that "while speaking on the subject" that six of his own men, presumed missing in combat on February 28, "have been found, presenting every appearance of having been brutally used, and compelling me to arrive at the conclusion that they had been murdered after having been taken prisoner." Like Ross he professed a commitment to more honorable methods of warfare and would "not deviate from those principles dictated by humanity," and again like Ross, closed his missive with a threat that "it will only be in extreme cases of premeditated provocation that I will tolerate it in any portion of my command" thus leaving the door open for an in kind response should Ross's men murder any more prisoners.¹⁷

¹⁷Ibid.; *The Liberator*, May 6, 1864;

On the morning of March 5th, Ross sent a lieutenant under a flag of truce to the fort on the Benton Road with instructions to ask the Federals to surrender. He tossed out the threat that "in case of having to storm the works, General Ross said he would be unable to restrain his men." McKee, indignant and not at all amenable to surrendering, called Ross's statement for what it was, telling the officer "that means General Ross will murder the prisoners if he is not successful." "No, not exactly that, but you know how it will be," the Confederate weakly countered. Unblinking, McKee instructed the officer to tell Ross to put all of his future correspondence in writing, and to tell the Rebel general that if he "attacked me with the present understanding and was repulsed, I would kill every man that fell into my hands," and he meant it, and Ross knew it, for both sides had already proven they could cross that particular line with relative ease. The Confederate lieutenant returned to his lines unsatisfied.¹⁸

Ross tried again, showing his contempt for McKee's request for written communication with an exaggerated flair of specificity and formality. He demanded "An unconditional surrender of the forces holding the redoubt," sarcastically specifying the location "on Benton Road," and to make sure McKee did not miss any subtlety in his disdain, added, "of Yazoo City." Perhaps he thought of adding "in the State of Mississippi" as too over the top. He gave the Federals holed up in the redoubt ten minutes to reply. McKee, of course, responded that he had "no idea of surrendering" and unwilling to let the threat of murder pass, attempted to bait Ross into owning up to the statement, presumably to pin Ross down legally. If the Confederates then attacked and succeeded, Ross could not deny responsibility for the murder of any prisoners, as Nathan Bedford Forrest did a month later at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. By responding with, "I am sorry that your threat in regard to the

¹⁸Main, *Story of the Marches*, 125-126.

treatment of prisoners was not reduced to writing, as it certainly should have been" McKee, therefore, while expressing a righteous indignation to such barbarity, shrewdly sought to inoculate his forces from such a fate, because, though both forces had participated in the murder of prisoners on a small scale up to that point, likely with the sanction of officers, plausible deniability protected their honor. He banked that Ross was rational enough to understand that officially sanctioning the murder of enemy prisoners on paper would have severe repercussions on the larger Confederate war effort.¹⁹

With McKee's second rejection in hand, Ross tried one last time to convince him to surrender. Appealing to humanity, the Texan assured the Union officer that he could "certainly storm and take" the redoubt, but that he would try to have McKee and his men "protected if they surrender during the charge; but you must expect bloodshed." Maybe McKee had put too much stock in Ross's rationality, for the Rebel officer parsed his words, promising to protect any Federals who tossed down their arms *during* the charge, and only then *after* "much bloodshed," but said nothing about what fate would befall Union soldiers who resisted the charge. "If you have no reply to make, we will resume our operations when the white flag is down from your line and mine" he wrote in closing. McKee did not bother to draft a written response. The courier for the last exchange, Colonel Jones of the Ninth Texas Cavalry, had run out of patience with the Federals much earlier, and upon returning to his lines sent word to Ross that he "was a greater philanthropist than myself, and for him to take down his flag as soon as he reached his lines."²⁰

Negotiations over, the fight commenced. Ross divided his force, spreading his brigade of Texans in an arc around the redoubt with his artillery posted on the Benton Road,

¹⁹ Main, *Story of the Marches*, 126-127.

²⁰ Ibid.

which bisected his position. He sent the Tennesseans north of town, hoping his show of strength had caused the Federals to lower their guard in that direction. He gambled correctly; the Tennesseans found nothing but a detachment of black cavalymen guarding the northern approach. Coates discovered the movement, quickly dispatching companies of the Eighth Louisiana African Descent at the double-quick from their position over a mile away to repel the onslaught, but not quickly enough. The Confederates swept the black cavalymen aside and poured into downtown Yazoo City, cutting the defenders in the redoubt off from the town. Although he had not broken into the redoubt yet, Ross's artillery pounded the earthwork, disabling the Federals' lone artillery piece, a boat howitzer borrowed from the flotilla. Surrounded now on three sides, McKee tried to open communication with Coates by sending out a squad of the Eleventh Illinois Infantry toward town, but too many Confederates lurked about. The Rebels snatched up ten as prisoners and drove most of the remainder back to their own lines; three, however, made it to Coates, with the bad news of the loss of the howitzer. Coates immediately sent for another gun, but it never made it to the redoubt; Richardson's Tennesseans controlled the city streets. The Union officer, nevertheless, attempted to put the gun to good use with the idea of placing it behind a cotton barricade so as to sweep the Confederates from the streets. Unfortunately, the naval gun detachment felt less than sanguine about the prospects for such an endeavor, especially after the Rebels started sending bullets their way, and bolted toward the safety of their gunboat, where the captain, to his credit, denied their requests to come aboard, leaving them in a worse position than before when they at least had a cannon to defend themselves. Coates persevered, though, finding another detachment who performed admirably. Despite facing a howitzer, the Confederates still pressed him, forcing him to draw in more reserves from the Eighth

Louisiana. He now had seven companies of infantry, one white and six black, scattered throughout the town, firing from houses, alleys, and streets.²¹

By 2 o'clock Coates felt the situation had stabilized enough for him to take the offensive, and ordered his men to charge the Tennesseans. It succeeded. He routed the Tennesseans, knocking them into a headlong flight out of town beyond the outer fortifications. Ross's men, who had laid siege to the fort for over four hours with little to show for it but dead comrades, observed the Tennesseans' flight, and fearing for their flanks, "fell into confusion and began to retreat in great disorder." McKee, apparently cut from the same cloth as Coates and heartened by the sight below, sallied from the redoubt with six cheering men and turned the flank of a Rebel regiment.²²

Ross described the conclusion of the battle as a coincidence, explaining in his official report that he had accomplished all that he could have hoped to accomplish; he had driven the Federals camped in town to the protection of their gunboats, and pounded the men in the redoubt with every piece of artillery on hand. He minimized his failure to take the fort. It "would have been a sacrifice of more men that it was worth." The Federals did not drive his men from the town and from around the fort. They did not flee wildly through the streets, and certainly no squad of six cheering Yankees turned the flank of one of his veteran regiments; happenstance, he explained, caused the Federals to misinterpret what they saw. In reality, he reported, after having accomplished as much as possible with no way of defeating the gunboats, and unwilling to mount suicidal assaults on the redoubt, he decided to pull back. The Federals misinterpreted his withdrawal as a retreat and followed closely. That the

²¹ *ORs*, Series I. Vol. 32. Pt. I, Serial 57, p. 324-25.

²² *Ibid.*

Federals boarded their transports the following morning and headed back toward Vicksburg proved that *his men* had won the battle.²³

Try as he might, Ross's slight-of-hand after-action report did not quite conceal his disappointment; everything he stood for demanded destruction of the black troops. The contempt his men had for the "black apes" demanded their annihilation; the murder of his two men demanded the annihilation; the honor of the white race demanded the annihilation, but at the end of the day on March 5, a force of black and white Union troops controlled Yazoo City and the redoubt. That they boarded transports the following morning meant nothing; they had participated in a raid, not an expedition of conquest and occupation. Ross, for all of his threats to murder the defenders of the redoubt, failed, with nothing to show for it but thirty wounded prisoners taken when Richardson's men captured the house holding the Federal hospital in town. Even that small victory resulted in humiliation, when on the 6th Coates, an apparent master of sarcasm, refused to participate in any prisoner exchanges: "if I mistake not a cartel has been agreed upon in which certain parties and places have been named for such exchange; and as [neither] Gen. Richardson, C. S. Army, nor Col. Coates, U. S. Volunteers, have been named as the parties, nor Yazoo City the point for such exchange, I must respectfully decline your proposition." Coates claimed losses of 31 killed, 121 wounded, and 31 missing during the raid up and down the Yazoo; he guessed the Confederate deaths of the 5th at around forty.²⁴

A month later, in the early morning hours of April 12, just north of Memphis, Tennessee, Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest pulled up to a Federal fort with a

²³ Main, *Story of the Marches*, 144; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 32, pt. I, serial 57, p. 390.

²⁴ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 32, Pt. I, Serial 57, p. 329.

division of cavalry. By that afternoon through a series of assaults and the skill of his sharpshooters, he had succeeded in pinning down the approximately 500 defenders in the fort. Like Sul Ross at Yazoo City, he issued an ultimatum, which the Union commander, again as at Yazoo City, refused. But after that, things differed—and badly. In the ensuing assault, the Rebel troopers showed no quarter, ignoring white flags, upraised arms, and pleas for mercy, killing indiscriminately. That morning 262 black soldiers occupied the works, but when it was all over the bodies of 229 lay strewn from the fort to the banks of the Mississippi.

The Fort Pillow massacre reverberated throughout the USCT up and down the Mississippi. Benjamin Mills, a young officer in the Forty-ninth USCT in Vicksburg wrote, "The Negroes understand now what will become of them if they are captured. I can see them in groups when not on duty discussing the matter and they vow never to give any quarter and never to take any prisoners but to kill all they can lay hands on. Samuel Glyde Swain, a white officer in Natchez, echoed Mills' sentiments: "It is necessary for us to be very independent and we are so promptly resenting any indignities shown to this branch of the service. The Fort Pillow affair naturally interested us very much and we are expecting to see full retaliation made for those men massacred there." Cordelia Harvey, a northern civilian doing humanitarian work near Vicksburg wrote, "We are living surrounded by horrors & I fear 'the reign of terror' to us is fast approaching. Since the Fort Pillow tragedy our colored troops & their officers are waiting in breathless anxiety the action of the Government... Our officers and negro regiments declare they will take no more prisoners---& there is death to the rebel in every black mans eyes." Just how much the black troops resented the massacre became apparent to a cotton speculator from Chicago at Snyders Bluff when he mouthed off

that Forrest did the right thing by killing blacks. One account said that his remarks so enraged the black troops who heard him that they lynched him from a telegraph pole; another said the officers took the lead. Either way, he ended up paying with his life—the USCT would not forget Fort Pillow.²⁵

Yazoo City and Milliken’s Bend share a number of commonalities: both pitted combinations of black and white troops against Texas cavalry. Both battles had about the same number of participants, and both featured the Confederates as aggressors. But they also differed. At Yazoo City both forces had considerably more training and experience than their June 1863 predecessors. Ross’s men had seen extensive combat, had high esprit de corps, and felt capable of whipping any Union force they encountered, as opposed to the green recruits who attacked at Milliken’s Bend. The USCT that emerged from Vicksburg in early 1864 had the benefit of General Hawkins’s training regime and better officers. No longer nervous recruits, their comrades had exorcised the demons of Confederate military superiority at Milliken’s Bend, paving the way for them to contribute even more in the defeat of the rebels.

In the aftermath of the battle of Yazoo City, no Union soldiers wrote expressions of surprise at the performance of the black troops in their diaries, nor did they write to loved ones exclaiming “they will fight.” Northern newspapers took little notice, treating it as any other small engagement. Perhaps, then, Yazoo City’s place in the history of the USCT rests in its lack of newsworthiness, that when 1864 arrived, many white Union soldiers, civilians at

²⁵ Benjamin Mills to Father and Mother, May 7, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; Samuel G. Swain to Dear Sister, March 23, 1864, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers; Transcribed letter from C. A. P. Harvey to Gov. J. T. Lewis, Vicksburg, Mississippi, April, 1864, Papers of Mrs. Cordelia Harvey, 1862-1864, University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh, Libraries.

home, and reporters for northern papers, expected the same steady competency from black troops as they did from white. If such is the case, then the USCT had taken a valuable step toward mastery over the region. Black troops from the region had weakened the Confederate response to Sherman's Meridian expedition by forcing the rebels to deal with the Yazoo raid. They took on and defeated yet another Confederate cavalry division, this time while on an offensive operation rather than in a defensive fight for their existence like at Milliken's Bend. Just as importantly, and equally damaging to the Rebel psyche, they captured a significant Confederate town in the region and held it against all attempts to take it back by their former masters. They had made it their own and extended their authority over the region.

Chapter 6

Given the large geographic area occupied by various black regiments and the peculiarities of the individual garrison and regimental commanders in the region, one story cannot encapsulate the variety of USCT experiences. In addition to the fighting along the hotly contented Yazoo River corridor during 1864, black troops participated in raids toward Jackson, Mississippi, striking at railroads supplying Confederate armies in the East, guarded freedmen's camps, home farms, and plantations, and occupied Vicksburg and Natchez. Despite the successes, they faced growing pains, for if in 1863 they found freedom, then in 1864 they grew in that freedom, asserting their rights, and in some cases testing the boundaries of their new rights to the point of mortal consequences. Moreover, the uneven quality of garrison commanders and prevalence of corrupt officials caused inequalities in the progress made by black troops. The army, still a controlling institution, of course, with its rules and regulations, set the boundaries of freedom, as well as mastership.

If Vicksburg stood for stability and professionalism for the USCT, then Natchez represented the opposite. From the time Union troops occupied the town in July 1863 until after the end of the war, mismanagement, corruption, and jealousy characterized the Union sojourn there. Moreover, the successful campaign for Vicksburg, and its place in the grand strategy of the war relegated Natchez to backwater status, meaning that in the allocation of human and material resources Natchez received second best. As the largest occupied town between Vicksburg and Baton Rouge, the beating heart of the plantation south, in an area that once boasted the largest slave market outside of New Orleans, Natchez needed more.

Upon occupying the town, Union officers had little idea, and even less preparation, for what was in store for them. Seeking the safety of Union arms and President Lincoln's promise of freedom, thousands of freedmen, without food or adequate clothing, and no means of acquiring either, descended on an equally unprepared town. In an attempt to bring order to the chaos, the officers ordered camps constructed to house them. Sorry affairs that became a haven for illness and despair, the camps soon took on the name of "corrals". Pun intended or not, corral aptly described them. James L. Yeatman of the Western Sanitary Commission inspected camps along the Mississippi in late summer 1863 and decried the conditions he observed in Natchez. Estimating the number of freedmen in the Natchez corral at around 2,100 and the one across the river in Vidalia, Louisiana at 670, he described the cabins they lived in as "poorly constructed, many of them without chimneys, the only escape for smoke being through a hole left where the chimney should be. They are all without proper light and ventilation, and being overcrowded, are the most prolific sources of diseases...There was not one house where I visited that death had not entered its portals." Henry Elder, Catholic Bishop of Natchez, a Confederate sympathizer and especially sensitive to the suffering of the freedmen when he could blame the U.S. army for their condition, went to the "camp or corral as it is called, to see what was to be done for the souls of the poor people especially the dying, infants & others." He noted that "there seem to be thousands... Great numbers of children sick & they say of those that sicken seriously—very few get well." When Union officials gave Elder an opportunity to help solve the problem by assisting in the formation of "an asylum [in Vicksburg] for abandoned negro children... I told him I should put no obstacle to it, but from the very nature of the case, it was necessary that it should be conducted entirely by the people of the North & connected with the Army, without any

positive cooperation on my part.” Later, in October, when asked by a Union general about why he would not take the oath of allegiance, Elder rationalized that he “did not wish to do anything thing wh[ich] w[ould] injure my usefulness among my flock,” which apparently excluded everyone but southern white secessionists. James Lucas, a former slave, recalled decades after the war, “de slaves were worse off dan when dey had masters. Some of ‘em was pu in ... de turrible corral at Natchez. Dey warnt used to de stuff de Yankees fed ‘em. Dey fed ‘em wasp-nes’ bread, ‘stead o’ corn-pone an’ hoe cake, an’ all such lak. Dey caught diseases an’ died by de hund’eds, jus’ lak flies. Dey had been fooled into thinkin’ it would be good times, but it was de wors’ times dey ever seen.”¹

In the midst of the chaos Union officers like the hard fighting Col. Bernard G. Farrar of the Thirtieth Missouri Infantry sought black recruits. When he sent a request up the chain of command for guidance on how to proceed, he received something less than a whole-hearted mandate. General Grant responded that while all able bodied blacks should enter the Union army, Farrar should use their former master’s loyalty to determine how he procured his enlisted men. If they served a loyal master, then normal rules of recruiting applied--that is, Farrar should treat them like potential white recruits with the option to join, or not. If from disloyal masters, then Farrar should confiscate them just like any other contraband of war and press them into service. He wasted little time, and by November had enough men to begin harrying the Confederates across the river in Louisiana. His first expedition, launched on November 15, 1863, from Vidalia, Louisiana, consisted of ninety-eight white mounted men of the Thirtieth Missouri along with fourteen mounted black men, which including officers and pontoniers, totaling 148 men in all. By the time he got within a few miles of

¹ *Yeatman Report*, 14; Gerow, *Elder Diary* 59-60; *WPA Narratives, Mississippi*, James Lucas.

Trinity, some twenty miles distant, half his force had melted away, “missing, having either left to get fodder...or shirked their duty at a time when they could not be hunted up.” Given that the object of the expedition, a camp of 100 Confederates on Colton’s Plantation, now outnumbered his force, Farrar decided to pick up a consolation prize instead, scooping up fourteen Rebels at a picket post near Trinity before returning to Vidalia. Upon returning to camp he penned a lengthy report, well out of proportion to the goals of a 24-hour expedition, but Farrar had a healthy ego, and writing lengthy glorious reports seemed to soothe it.²

Through the late fall and winter the black troops in Natchez drilled and prepared defenses, all the while fighting the boredom that accompanies Mississippi winters. One night in January, their colleagues in the Twelfth Wisconsin sought to beat the malaise with barrels of ale, which the officers had supplied to each company and headquarters. “Every one indulged to the full extent of his desires,” with the usual chaotic results. A member of Company K, frustrated over his inability to fire a bullet through his ridgepole, burned his tent down while screaming “hurrah for h—l, who’s afraid of fire?” Another Wisconsinite in Company F calmly woke up from his drunken stupor and defecated on the floor of his tent. The good clean fun, however, had to come to an end in early February when the war came calling again.³

On February 7, a Confederate force of around 1500 men attacked Farrar at Vidalia, pushing him back toward the river. Farrar sent word across the river to Lt. Col. Hubert McCaleb of the Second Mississippi Artillery, African Descent, that he needed help quickly. McCaleb rounded up about 400 men from various commands, put them on a steamer, and

² Special Order No. 48, by order of Major General U.S. Grant, August 11, 1863, B. G. Farrar Papers, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; *ORs*, Series III, Vol. 3, Serial 124, p. 735.

³ Diary of S. Van Bennet, January 6, 1864, Van Bennet, S., Civil War Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

across they went. Upon disembarking they formed a tight line of battle and awaited orders from Farrar. These soon came, instructing McCaleb to form his command about 150 yards out, astride the Trinity Road with a section of artillery. The order met, McCaleb had sent a small detachment to occupy and defend the town jail, when he received orders to relocate yet once again, this time about 300 yards from his present position. By the time he completed the move, Rebel skirmishers had closed in enough to become decidedly annoying. There, the force waited. When the main body of the Confederate force came within about 150 to 100 yards Farrar ordered his men to open fire, which they did, letting off a thundering volley. It staggered the Confederate attackers, causing them to stumble and hesitate. McCaleb ordered his men to fire again, and the Rebels fled. Keeping the scare in them he ordered them “to load and fire by file at the fleeing mob, and with difficulty prevented them from breaking ranks to follow the enemy... Thus a force of 300 colored soldiers put to flight, in great confusion, four or five times their number of the chivalrous enemy, with a loss to them of 1 killed, 5 wounded (some mortally), and a number of prisoners.” Such was the cat and mouse character of combat around Natchez: small forces, quick raids, and an unwillingness to fight prolonged battles.⁴

With skirmishes rare, the white officers found plenty to keep the black troops busy and out of mischief, most notably, building Fort McPherson. Originally constructed by the Confederates, the fort had now become the project of Union officers in Natchez. Perhaps because of their distance from reinforcements in Vicksburg, fear of black-flag Confederates, or mistrust of their own fighting abilities, they increased the size of the fort to phenomenal dimensions. In March, Lt. Samuel G. Swain, an engineer from Wisconsin, after noting that black troops had already done significant work on the fort, predicted that with “Both the

⁴ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 34, Pt. I, Seral 61, p. 129.

colored Regts...at work all the time on the fortifications...it will take six or eight months to finish them.” With all of the time spent working on the fort, the men had little time for drill, and their organizations suffered accordingly. Swain noted that “They keep these Regts at work so hard all the time that no one could expect very great proficiency of them in drill and military appearance. Every man is on duty every day. After being worked as they have in this Regt. since it was organized...it takes constant driving to keep them at work. The most of them have not much pride or ambition about work but they improve in drill and efficiency very fast.” Moreover, the garrison in Natchez, black and white, did not get paid regularly, sometimes going as much as four to eight months without so much as a penny to provide for their families living in town.⁵

Despite the demoralizing duty at Fort McPherson, service in a black regiment in Natchez came with opportunities, especially in the realm of education. Largely left up to chaplains, private philanthropic interests, and the army of missionaries serving in the region, most black soldiers could count on having access to schools. True believers like Col. Herman Lieb, saw the army as the tool for bringing social benefits to the freedmen, "I felt that I was upon trial as much as these half-civilized recruits. After consultation with my officers, I resolved to impart to all of these negroes as much elementary education as would be required for a discriminating American citizenship.” Such efforts also served pragmatic ends; an illiterate soldiery made the army less efficient. Later that year, in response to calls for the consolidation of some black regiments, Lorenzo Thomas argued that he preferred small regiments, that the high rate of illiteracy put an undue burden on the officers. In white regiments, noncommissioned officers performed tasks as mundane as calling the roll each

⁵ Samuel G. Swain to unknown, March 18, 1864, to Dear Sister, Swain, March 23, 1864, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers; Benjamin Mills to Dear Father, May 2, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers.

day. In a black regiment where few could read, those tasks fell upon the officers. To solve this problem, officers emphasized education. Benjamin Marshall Mills wrote to his father, a college professor in Indiana that “The men evince the greatest zeal in learning to read when they have nothing to do you may see them with their books in their hands trying to spell out their lesson. Some of them are learning to write...They learn very fast, twice as fast as a white man...The Negroes are to be elevated as much by making them good soldiers as by teaching them.” In Natchez, the Freedman’s Aid Society provided a teacher for daily classes during the week, and for the soldiers’ spiritual needs a preacher on Sunday.⁶

In a time of slaughter, with daily reports of death and maiming from the armies in the South, northern philanthropic and Christian organizations spread light in the darkness, demonstrating that even in such difficult times, people could find it within themselves to help others. Unfortunately, baser impulses also found bloom in the destruction of slavery. Speculators, opportunists, crooked politicians, and outright criminals found fertile ground for their greed in the garrison and treasury offices along the river. With the North starved for cotton, the apparent abundance of cotton in the environs of Natchez created something of a boomtown mentality among the citizens, officials, and army officers, luring in the corrupted, tempting the incorruptible, and swaying the loyal. By April 1864, the foul reputation of Union officials in the region had grown to such proportions that Confederate officials discussed the possibility of using them as an avenue of supply. “There is in the Yankee lines a perfect mania for trading in cotton, even going so far as to control their military operations, covered under the pretense of getting out negro men, mules, and supplies of food-in truth,

⁶ Johns, *Personal Recollections*, 139; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial 78, p. 271; Benjamin Mills to Father, April 19, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers.; Samuel G. Swain to Dear Sister, March 23, 1864, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers.

gotten up and being controlled by cotton traders, dividing with superior officers” wrote one commissary officer to Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon. Samuel Swain, frustrated with the situation, wrote, “I am bitter opposed to the trading of cotton where it requires soldiers to protect it, exposing their lives for the sake of speculators which there are legions.”⁷

The problems at Natchez came from the top down. The rapid succession of post commanders hindered the honorable men and rewarded the corrupt: it took the honorable men time to unweave the criminal relationships in the region, while the corrupt instinctively took to it, like hogs to slop. Chief among the corrupt, General James M. Tuttle held the post in April and May 1864, during which time, his “attention is...engrossed by efforts for personal gain” and “has operated to effect a destruction of discipline and order in the command...having enriched himself by collusion with an agent of the treasury department and by constant malfeasance in office.” A “crowd of sharpers who, swelling with professed patriotism, whilst managing to fill their own pockets by dishonest means” seemingly controlled the town during Tuttle’s reign. In the hierarchy of mammon, just below, or perhaps equal to the garrison commanders, the treasury agents carved out a niche all their own, as they controlled access to land and labor in the Mississippi Valley. When they colluded with corrupt officers and their cronies, tidy sums could change hands. General Napoleon Jackson Tecumseh Dana, appointed District Commander during the summer of 1864, diagnosed the problems of his command as “completely swayed by two external powers, to wit, money in the possession of cotton speculators and political adventurers, and beauty in possession of rebel females, once lovely and with delicate sensibilities, now cunning, crafty, traitorous, and dangerous.” Money and attractive women, in other words

⁷ *ORs*, Series IV, Vol. III, Serial 129, p. 282

“held complete command and control of the lines of the army” in his command through mid 1864. Things having gotten out of hand in Natchez, the army relieved Tuttle, assigning Col. Farrar to command the post until the army found someone of suitable rank to take over.⁸

In early 1863, Union General Mason Brayman found himself in the backwater of the war, cooling his heels at a post in Cairo, Illinois, watching the sands tick out on his career. Grant considered him useless, militarily speaking, going so far as to tell Abraham Lincoln that the former Illinois politician, while clever could not command the confidence of men in battle and could render the country no service. With no help forthcoming from the departmental commanders’ tent, Brayman cast about for a patron to help him secure another post, ultimately encountering some acquaintances of Gen. James McPherson who helped him secure the post of Natchez in July 1864.⁹

Brayman’s predecessors bequeathed him a fetid cesspool of corruption and self interest to clean up. Farrar, to his credit had attempted some reforms, but given his limited tenure and lower rank, he could not effect much change. According to him, prior to his elevation to command of the post, “everything connected with the proper administration of military affairs having been entirely neglected....A total lack of discipline among the troops, and an entire absence of that strict attention to orders and regulations” had rendered the troops of the post ineffective. Many troops lived in quarters in town, had little supervision, and roamed the streets at all hours of the night, resulting in “assaults, robberies, and incendiary fires.” Farrar claimed credit for bringing law and order to the town by removing

⁸ *The Ohio Democrat* (New Philadelphia), August 4, 1887; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial 78, p. 186, Series I, Vol. 52, Pt. I, Serial, 109, p. 654.

⁹ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 17, Pt. II, Serial 25, p. 522; Grant to Abraham Lincoln, February 9, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

all of the troops to Fort McPherson, instituting a system of passes, and redirecting his officers' attention to the performance of their military duties. Concluding his report, Farrar opined, "much yet remains to be done, I regret that it has been almost impossible to effect much more during the period of my holding command." In expressing regret, Farrar revealed a great deal more than he possibly intended, for he also regretted, as a fighting soldier, having to step down in favor of a political type who could not command the confidence of troops in battle. Moreover, rumor had it that his successor had acquired the position through political manipulations rather than merit, priming Farrar to believe the worst about his new commander.¹⁰

Concurrent with Farrar's report, and Brayman's arrival to command Natchez, General Dana inspected the post, revealing the unfortunate facts of what one year of Union occupation had wrought. The construction on Fort McPherson had turned out badly; they had made it too large for the number of men on hand (5,000), rendering it virtually indefensible with anything less than 10,000 men. Furthermore, to Dana it seemed that the garrison existed to serve the fort, and not vice versa; they should go out and kill Rebels, not work on a fort six days a week to protect themselves from another Fort Pillow. A smaller fort with a capacity of around 1500 men would suffice. Upon inspecting the troops, Dana found more deficiencies, especially among the 1,850 white troops and the Sixty-third and Sixty-fourth USCT regiments. The white troops had no excuse, but the Sixty-third and Sixty-fourth could claim something of an excuse; Superintendent of Freedmen, John Eaton, had recruited those two regiments from men too infirm or old for field service to serve as

¹⁰*ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial 78, p. 197; Brayman to Captain [presumably for Dana's eyes], October 7, 1864, Folder 112, Mason Brayman Papers, Chicago Historical Society (Hereinafter cited as *Brayman Papers*).

plantation and camp guards. Dana, unaware of Eaton's role in forming those regiments, and probably not caring, found them inexcusable, reporting, "Who is to be entitled to the credit of originating the idea of collecting broken-down and unserviceable negroes into a body and calling it an 'invalid corps' I do not know; but it appears to me that the Secretary of War could not have understood the character of the intended organization." His acid pen dripping, Dana also directed some criticism upward at Adjutant General Thomas over his son's, (Capt. Lorenzo Thomas, Jr.) appearance of impropriety with favorable properties, cushy jobs, and cavalier regard for government property.¹¹

General Tuttle left one more rotten egg for Brayman to deal with, a problem that a reasonably wise man could have quietly diffused; Brayman chose poorly and the stench ultimately wafted all the way to Washington. The rotten egg in question, lay wrapped up in an order Tuttle issued shortly after taking command in early April. Offended by the wrongheaded secessionist theology of certain preachers in the community, he issued an order for all ministers to pray for Abraham Lincoln during their worship services, which they promptly did—except for one. Henry Elder, the Catholic Bishop of Natchez, considered such an order a serious violation of his religious rights, notwithstanding his vocal opposition to the Union and frequent complaints to Union officers for the conditions in Natchez. In his mind all of the suffering caused by the war came not because of secession, but because of the Union army's unjust invasion of the South, and he made it crystal clear to any Union official who cared to ask him about it. That the matter of prayer remained unresolved, at least to Brayman's satisfaction when he took command, testified to the powerful connections Elder could tap into. In April, when Tuttle issued the order, Elder used his back channel

¹¹*ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial 78, p. 185; In April 1864, the army renamed all state units of African Descent as United States Colored Troops.

connections via the Catholic Church and Georgetown University in Washington D.C. to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Tuttle could not compete with that kind of influence, and likely not wanting to draw too much negative attention to himself and his nefarious activities in Natchez, let the matter drop until he heard from above (politically, not spiritually) advising him to let it go. Elder, to his credit, followed his superior's advice and sought to diffuse the situation quietly so as not to embarrass the Union officer. Stanton read the Bishop's letter, agreeing that the Army had no business dictating prayers, and promised to send word that very day to Tuttle to rescind the order. But before any documents could reach Natchez, General Dana relieved Tuttle and replaced him with Farrar. Since Elder had kept quiet about his opposition to the order, Farrar did not know about the letter to Washington and, therefore, decided to press the issue in June, arguing that since the other ministers submitted to the order, then justice required Elder should follow it. The priest asked Farrar for some time to compose a written justification of his position and permission to publish it in the newspaper. Farrar agreed to consider it, telling Elder that he would have an answer by 2 p.m. Anxious about the colonel's decision, Elder did not wait for a message but went to Farrar's office in person. He received mixed news. Farrar agreed to allow him to write the letter and that he would send it to his superior, Gen. Henry Slocum in Vicksburg, for review, but during the interim he expected the priest to pray for the president. Elder flatly refused and asked what consequences should he expect to endure, but Farrar backed down in the face of such resistance, saying he would wait for Slocum's opinion before pressing the issue any further. Over the following week Elder penned a twenty-page letter but when he went to deliver it, he found Brayman in command. ¹²

¹²Mason Braymon to B. G Farrar, June 18, 1864; Gerow, *Elder Diary*, 91.

Within a week of taking command of the post of Natchez, and facing a garrison rife with drunkenness, robbery, arson, low morale, corruption, prostitution, laziness, and unprepared troops, Brayman inexplicably chose to make the issue of praying for Lincoln his first major confrontation. Elder having already won that battle twice with Washington's backing had little motivation whatsoever to back down from Brayman. Having heard from both the Church and Edwin Stanton on the matter, Elder's communication to Farrar the previous month summed up his less than diplomatic stance on the subject: "Having this decision from higher authority it appears to me that the matter is not exactly open for discussion in Natchez." Ultimately it came down to personalities; Brayman's new role as reformer-commander only magnified his already healthy imperious self-righteous tendencies; Elder, stubborn as any Mississippi mule and a dyed in the wool Confederate at heart, held that Union authority only extended to the church doors. If his friends could not defeat the Yankees in the field, then he would defeat them in the church.¹³

The two collided on July 13 when Elder delivered his manifesto to the general's office. Having spent most of his life dealing with human nature, Elder must have learned to read people pretty well, for his first impression of Brayman accurately summed up the General's reign in Natchez: "He spoke civilly enough: but he seems to have an idea that everybody who opposes him in any thing must be a bitter rebel." Continuing, Brayman admitted that he did not "approve of men being compelled to read prayers against their conscience: but rather 'if he found that we were rebels' he would treat us as such.'" Setting the letter aside, the general promised to consider it. Matters escalated rather quickly after that. On the 16th Elder sent word to the general asking if he intended to interrupt tomorrow's

¹³ Edler to Brayman, [n.d], *Mason Brayman Papers*.

mass if he did not read the prayer. Brayman did not provide an immediate response to that question, but did return a missal Elder had loaned to him after the first meeting, accusing him of deception by providing him with the only missal that did not include a prayer for the president. As a legalistic martinet Brayman had requested, during the first meeting, a Catholic missal, hoping to use it as precedent to bend Elder to his will. Upon discovering no such prayer existed, he accused Elder of deception. Brayman was unwilling to admit defeat, and in this case defeat is an appropriate term to characterize how the general felt, for as Elder had so aptly deduced from his first impression, Brayman took the challenge personally;. By dinnertime Brayman had run out of patience, and having answered all of his questions to his own satisfaction regarding Elder's loyalty, he drew his line in the sand: "I have to advise you military orders are to be obeyed, not discussed." Reading the curt rude reply almost physically sickened the Bishop, but he regained his composure and opted to follow his conscience and leave the consequences in God's hands. But Brayman, unwilling to quit the fight for the day and having his ire aroused, continued penning messages to the Bishop. Laying out his position, he wrote, "But here is the point. If you are a patriotic and loyal man, attached to the government of the United States, and opposed to this rebellion, and desire your people to be of that mind, you will read the prayer for the pleasure, and have no difficulty in knowing how to do it." Steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the question of conscience, Brayman punctuated his note, "The actions you take will be accepted as a declaration on which side you choose to stand."¹⁴

Sunday passed with no prayer for the president and no action on Brayman's part. On Monday morning a number of prominent civilians, including treasury agent William Burnet,

¹⁴ Gerow, *Elder Diary* 92; Brayman to Bishop Elder, July 16, 1864, *Mason Brayman Papers*.

met with Elder in his study where he explained his position and read the letter. After lunch, he received a note from Brayman asking if he had read the prayer the previous morning, an unnecessary act on the general's part other than to keep stirring the pot, for he had enough informants in town to know what went on during mass at the cathedral. The following day Elder met with Gen. Dana, who had arrived in town on an inspection tour, but received little consolation. While Dana "regretted the occurrence" and thought "that Genl. Brayman regretted that the Order had been published...he was a strict disciplinarian and must be obeyed." Elder considered them all quite mindless in their adherence to military orders at this point, but Dana did offer some hope. He suggested that Elder should show Brayman his letter explaining his rationale for disobeying the order and to request a suspension of any penalties until they received official word from Washington. Dana went so far as to offer to speak to Brayman on the Bishop's behalf. While Dana outranked the post commander, going against Brayman in such a public battle that early in his tenure at Natchez would have undercut any reform efforts he attempted in the future. Like it or not, Brayman's inflexibility had painted them all into a corner.¹⁵

Elder heard nothing from Brayman until the 20th, when the general, still searching for a theological technicality to snare the bishop, sent a note asking which book he used for his Prayer for the Authorities—and then silence again. Four days later, on the 24th, Brayman played his trump card. Just before lunch, an officer delivered a copy of Order No. 11, banishing the bishop from Natchez, giving him 24 hours to go to Vidalia where he would remain until called upon. Elder spent the remainder of the day getting his and the church's affairs in order. The following morning as Elder prepared to board a ferry at Natchez Under the Hill, amidst a crowd of sobbing well wishers, members of his flock, Protestants, and

¹⁵ Gerow, *Elder Diary*, 96-98.

other supporters dropped to their knees seeking a parting blessing. Touched, he wrote in his diary, "God forgive me for not doing my duty better by such a people!"¹⁶

Upon disembarking at Vidalia, and after a bit of haggling over his room and board, Elder found lodging in the parlor of a local family, thought not without some turmoil. Brayman, petulant as ever, sent word to the senior officer in the village not to supply Elder with food or lodging. Under virtual house arrest, prohibited from leaving Vidalia, and unable to conduct any written communications without the provost marshal's permission, Elder potentially could have spent the remainder of the war in confinement but for the fortuitous arrival of Lorenzo Thomas in Natchez, who upon hearing the facts of the case convinced Brayman to release the bishop until word came from Washington. On August 12, Brayman issued a new order, permitting Elder to return to Natchez and pray according to his conscience. True to his nature, the general, when given an opportunity to act with grace and maturity, chose the low route. His order had all of the sincerity of a forced apology written by a sulking schoolboy.

"Military Authority having been, for the time vindicated, so much of Special Order No. 11, as requires Rev. William Henry Elder, Bishop of Natchez, to remain within the military lines of Vidalia, La. is suspended, and he may return to his home and duties until the pleasure of the War Department is known, in his case. And as all solemn appeals in the Supreme Being, not proceeding from honest hearts and willing minds, are necessarily offensive to Him, and subversive of sound morality so much of Special Order No. 31, June 14, 1864, as requires public prayer to be pronounced on behalf of the President of the United States and the Union, is suspended until further orders: leaving all persons conducting Divine Worship, at liberty to manifest such measure of hostility as they may feel against the Government and Union of these States, and their sympathy with the rebellion, by omitting such supplication, if so minded. By order of Brig. Gen. Brayman."

Brayman clearly issued the order against his will. ¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.

A few days prior to Elder's exile, and telling in regard to possible reasons why Brayman sent him to Vidalia, the Confederates attacked a forage train across the river. Farrar lit out in pursuit, proclaiming that he would follow the Rebels for days in order to have a fight with them. He caught up with them on the 22nd of July, suffering a few casualties and at least one man captured: Corporal Wilson Wood of the Sixth U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery. Hoping to get Wood back, Colonel Hubert A. McCaleb contacted his counterpart at the Rebel camp in Trinity, Louisiana, offering to exchange some of his prisoners for Wood, but the Confederates refused on the grounds that they did not recognize black combatants. They intended on returning him to his former master if the master resided within Confederate lines, and if that proved impossible, set him to work as a slave for the Confederate government. Of course Wood's superiors found such a prospect unacceptable, promising to do the same to any Confederates in their hands. As Wood's post commander, Brayman eventually got involved, and did what he did best, write florid letters:

"...when the Government of the United States made negroes soldiers it assumed towards them the same obligations as were due to any others who might wear its uniform and bear its flag. The honest patriotic negro, who though of an oppressed race and lowly condition, with few measures of past blessings to inspire him, gives his service and offers his life up in defense of good government is in the judgment of God and humanity, more than the peer of the man who while enjoying the protection of that government and crowned with its benefits, would destroy it. As the matter is understood by me, the Government will, for every black soldier reduced to slavery, put a rebel soldier in like condition and will, for every violation of the usages of war respecting these men, exact ample retaliation."

While, initially, Brayman and his subordinates did not follow through on their threat, in early September an escaped slave came into the lines at Vidalia, claiming to have overheard a Confederate officer ordering his master to murder two black Union prisoners. Enraged over Wood's supposed fate, Col. McCaleb sent a request to Natchez to supply him with a Confederate prisoner so that he could put him to hard labor with a ball and chain, then, once

¹⁷ *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, August 25, 1864.

he confirmed Wood's fate, execute the unfortunate Confederate. Dana, cooler than McCaleb and Brayman, refused on the grounds that they should not execute someone based on unconfirmed rumors. Ultimately, the consternation over Wood's demise proved premature when the corporal returned to his unit in June 1865 after Union forces found him alive and well in Natchitoches, Louisiana; none of the surviving records indicate whether the Confederates enslaved him or not.¹⁸

Other than the pursuit of the Confederate raiders in July, the only other Union offensive from Natchez that summer came in early August when Farrar led another foray against his favorite target, the rebel camp in Trinity. Using the pen name "Ego" an anonymous participant (likely Farrar himself) sent a grandiloquent account of the raid to the *Missouri Democrat*, the flagship newspaper in Farrar's home state. Unintentionally humorous, the account, even by Civil War standards, pushed the boundaries of hyperbole with such grandiose prose as "The gallant colonel immediately got his cavalry command in readiness and prepared to meet the enemy...Forward was the word and with such a leader they knew no such word as fail...Along the line of 'The Boys in Blue' rang the command 'Charge' and right gallantly they obeyed with Col. Farrar at their head they dashed upon the Rebel lines." For all of the fanfare, Farrar's foray cost the Confederates a total of fifteen casualties. Nevertheless, "Ego" saw the "gallant colonel" as an aggressive officer who took the fight to the enemy. Given U.S. Grant's opinion of Brayman as incapable of commanding the confidence of fighting troops, Brayman's own imperious manner, and Farrar's ego, it is little wonder that the two did not come to blows.¹⁹

¹⁸ Samuel Swain to Dear Bro. Geo., July 22, 1864, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers.

¹⁹ "Ego" to "Eds Mo. Democrat", August 8, 1864, B. G. Farrar Papers.

Within a month of his arrival, even apart from his feud with Elder, Brayman had managed to anger a significant number of people from just about every strata of Natchez society, including, but not confined to, his fellow officers, cotton speculators, treasury officials, prostitutes, society ladies, and local businessmen, that is to say, just about everyone he came in contact with. Farrar, still smarting over Brayman's succession as post commander, became the rallying point of the not-so-loyal opposition. Convinced that Brayman had weaseled his way into the command through less than ethical methods, and willing to believe just about any rumor about his superior, no matter how farfetched or sensational, the disgruntled colonel secretly began gathering testimony. That many of the disgruntled came from the ranks of those targeted by Brayman as corrupt did not seem to cause Farrar much concern. It should have; for Brayman had stirred up quite a hornets' nest of criminals during his first month in power.

Shortly after taking command, Brayman fingered treasury agent William Burnet as a significant figure in local corruption. Moreover, Brayman probably disliked him on a personal level, given the agent's support for Elder during the prayer controversy. But as the gatekeeper to land and labor around Natchez, Burnet controlled the spigot to fantastic wealth; if corruptible, speculators stood to make a lot of money with him in power. Given the small size of the town and proximity of all of the actors in the drama, Burnet, of course, got word of the investigation, and like any savvy defendant he went on the offense looking for skeletons in Brayman's closet, which annoyed the general tremendously. But what annoyed him more, came when Burnet let people know that he had struck pay dirt, that a member of Brayman's staff had taken a bribe in his presence. The general could not let that stand, and called Burnet's bluff, challenging him to prefer charges, or drop the matter. Burnet persisted,

and Brayman convened a court to try Capt. John H. Odlin of bribery, which ultimately ended in an acquittal. By the end of August, Brayman had enough evidence to move forward. He shut down Burnet's office, seized his paperwork, and sent the offending agent under guard to Vicksburg.²⁰

In the meantime, in league with every malcontent in Adams County, Mississippi, Farrar had prepared a case of his own against Brayman, accusing his superior of just about every vice known to mankind. On the first charge of "Conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline," Farrar accused Brayman of: partnering with civilians who would influence an officer...on his behalf in return for...privileges in securing cotton; persuading a couple named Childers...to coordinate an illegal shipment of cotton; shipping forty-five mules north in return for a bribe; allowing Eliza Wells (a prostitute) to use her "influence" to secure the release of a pair of horses he had confiscated; sending out a 700 man expedition of the 70th USCI...to pick up cotton for Eliza Wells. On the second charge of disobedience of orders, six specifications consisted of mundane accusations of issuing passes for citizens to go beyond the Union lines, but he intended on getting the court's attention with the seventh: "did issue or cause to be issued rations ...to one Mrs. Murray...a woman of notoriously bad character & to other persons resident of Natchez who were not entitled to said rations." The next charge of arbitrary and unlawful arrests listed the names of local citizens and the circumstances surrounding their difficulties with Brayman. Charges five and six, however, raised eyebrows. Earlier in the month one of Farrar's informants reported overhearing

²⁰ RG 393, U.S. Army Continental Commands, Succession of Commands No. 128. . 2. 2239. Letters received June-July 1864, Vol 39; Mason Brayman to "Major", August 20, 1864, *Mason Brayman Papers*, Folder 110; RG 393, U.S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 128. 2244. Special Orders and Correspondence relating to arrest of Special Agent Burnet of the Treasury Department Aug. 27-Sept 2, 1864. Vol 76A, M. Brayman issued Special order no. 45.

Brayman say, "Gentlemen, I have this day arrested eight big thieves, among them Judge Burnett and Judge Fields & if I only had two stars on my shoulders I would arrest Adjutant General Thomas who is the biggest thief of them all," resulting in a charge of "Disrespectful language against his superior officer." Farrar, with a flair for the dramatic, saved the most salacious for last, charging that Brayman had, within a nine day period in early September, had an "improper connection & intimate association with one Mrs. Eliza Wells so called, a woman of notoriously profligate character"; attempted "to take improper liberties with a Mrs. M. Graves while she...was in the office of the said Brig. Genl. Mason Brayman, on official business by placing his arm around her attempting to kiss her & other acts;" attempted "to take improper liberties with a Mrs. M. Augusta Fitzhugh while she, "was in his office "putting his arm around her and attempting to take liberties."²¹

The charges made for good gossip, but they lacked a great deal of veracity. In early October Brayman refuted each specification, point by point, occasionally stooping to belittle his accuser as in his statement on Mrs. Murray's morals, "I know nothing of her bad character, but accept Col. Farrar as good authority on that point." In each instance, he explained himself satisfactorily, making Farrar look like a jealous malcontent, except for charge five in which he stood accused of criticizing a superior officer. To that accusation, the general pled ignorant: "No such language used at any time or place, nor any words to that effect. It is not my custom to talk in that way." On that count he probably lied, for Brayman had no love for the Thomas clan, especially after Senior forced him to turn Elder loose. Not

²¹ Charges and Specifications against Brigadier General Mason Brayman United States Volunteers, September 1864, Folder 111, *Mason Brayman Papers* .

long after freeing Elder, Brayman had lobbied Dana to arrest Thomas, Jr., pointing out his southern roots and friendship with disloyal citizens in the region.²²

Farrar forwarded the charges to Gen. Dana in Vicksburg, and receiving no satisfaction there, forwarded them to Major-General Edward Canby's office. Canby booted them back down to Dana, who having had his fill of the issue, sent them back to Brayman to do as he saw fit, informing the post commander "Should it be his intention to prefer charges against Col. Farrar, and it be inexpedient to convene a Court Martial at Natchez, the charges can be forwarded to these Head Quarters." That concluded the open warfare between the two officers in Natchez. Farrar ended up looking foolish, for he allowed his hurt pride to color his judgment to the point that he did not see what everyone else in his chain of command saw in the charges and Brayman's rebuttal: that every single one of the "witnesses" and "victims" in the charges had an axe to grind against Brayman. He had either caught them attempting to trade illegally in cotton, or had somehow stymied their plans to break the law at a future date. In short, he stood between them and riches, and they used Farrar to try to get him out of the way.²³

While Brayman spied on Burnet, and Farrar spied on Brayman, the black troops in Natchez withered on the vine from ill use. They worked on Fort McPherson from sunrise to sunset five days a week, performing the same type of mindless labor as they did on the plantation, often without pay for months at a time. During the summer of 1864, while Ulysses S. Grant hammered Robert E. Lee on a daily basis, rolling up tens of thousands of casualties in a single morning, and Sherman, in Georgia, averaged about a mile a day in

²²Napoleon J. T. Dana to C. T. Christenson, September 9, 1864, Folder 111, *Mason Brayman Papers*.

²³Farrar to Lt. Col. W. S. Clark A.A.G. Dept of Tennessee, October 21, 1864, Folder 113, *Mason Brayman Papers*.

forward movement against the crafty Joe Johnson, and while the troops in Vicksburg engaged in almost weekly expeditions into the interior of Mississippi, the four to five thousand troops in Natchez inflicted less than 100 Confederate casualties.²⁴

Ironically, the Natchez garrison performed in the exact manner envisioned by early advocates of black enlistment. Black troops guarded local plantations, garrisoned the town, and freed up white troops for service at the front. But by 1864, the old paradigm no longer existed, for if the Union wanted to win the war, black troops had to play a more meaningful role than that of place holders in the rear of the Union advance. As an agent in the rise of the USCT as masters over the region, the garrison of Natchez serves as an object lesson in how the limited aims of early advocates could have derailed the USCT. Only by fighting could the men of the USCT take command of the region; unfortunately, in Natchez during the summer of 1864, the only significant fighting that took place occurred within the Union lines.

²⁴ Special Order No. 29, November 11, 1864, Folder 115, *Mason Brayman Papers*.

Chapter 7

If Natchez serves as an object lesson in the perils of poor leadership, inharmonious and weak, then the actions of the Vicksburg garrison demonstrated what the USCT could accomplish when black troops received the quality of leadership they deserved. Instead of groping about with vague notions of their place in the larger war effort, the military authorities in Vicksburg had well defined conceptions of what they wanted to accomplish. They sought to bring a reasonable amount of order to the chaos resulting from the collapse of slavery and contribute to the final Union victory, generic goals for sure, but devilish to execute. In the civilian realm, they supervised Christian and philanthropic relief efforts, moved the freedmen to camps and farms outside of the city limits, and established schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Militarily, they expected to see serious combat and prepared for it with diligent training. For the green junior officers, they demanded professionalism in dress, deportment, and knowledge. The real test, though, came during the summer when they put the training to action, marching out of Vicksburg on a series of expeditions with the goal of contributing to the defeat of the Confederacy. Although the USCT in Vicksburg experienced its share of setbacks during the latter half of 1864, the competence and vision of their leaders enabled the men to extend their mastership over the region by taking the war to the Rebels, as opposed to their comrades in Natchez who labored in slavery-like conditions on a useless fort.

With the departure of the remainder of the Army of the Tennessee in early 1864, Vicksburg underwent significant changes. The primary theaters of the war shifted east along with Sherman and Grant. The new strategy called for putting unrelenting pressure on all of

the Confederate field armies, giving them no time to breathe or aid one another. In Virginia, Grant and Benjamin Butler would march toward Richmond, David Hunter would move up the Shenandoah Valley, Sherman would target Joseph E. Johnson's army in Georgia, and a force would move on Mobile after General Nathaniel P. Banks completed his expedition up the Red River. As the army played a combination of musical chairs and chess, shifting corps from here to there and putting the right men in the right positions to make the most of the coming offensive, it left the District of Vicksburg without a commander. As in Brayman's case, but for completely different reasons, General Henry Slocum found himself without a command, but primarily due to personality conflicts with key generals rather than incompetence. Slocum was noted as an incorruptible and competent fighter, and Grant and the War Department hoped he would clean up the graft in Vicksburg and take the war to the Rebels. He did not disappoint them.¹

Between the embarkation of the Yazoo River expedition in February and Slocum's arrival in mid-April, the Forty-ninth USCT in conjunction with Charles Ellet's Mississippi Marine Brigade conducted a raid on Grand Gulf. Ostensibly organized to "establish a recruiting station...and give such assistance...to the agent of the Treasury Department at that place in collecting abandoned property as he may require," the raid netted very few recruits and a great deal of "abandoned property" which in the common terminology of the criminal types along the river, meant free cotton. Upon setting up camp it became very clear to the USCT officers that the expedition had no military purpose; the treasury agent needed the black troops to bring cotton in from the countryside and serve as stevedores for Ellet's little fleet. The Union army had scoured the region around Grand Gulf between Natchez and

¹ Brian Melton, "'Stay and Fight it Out' Henry Slocum and America's Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 2003), 199-203.

Vicksburg for black recruits in 1863; to think that it had somehow magically repopulated itself defies belief, but Colonel Charles Gilchrist fell for it. In twenty days at Grand Gulf he enlisted a total of twenty recruits. Afterwards Gilchrist angrily wrote, "To sum up, we marched 250 miles injured our transportation, exposed our lives, got but few recruits, and as far as ending the war is concerned we did just nothing at all; but, if anything, served to prolong it by assisting a lot of rebels and thieves to sell and get to market about 1,515 bales of...cotton, and a lot of speculators, whose loyalty I very much suspect, in making fortunes." Tragically, beyond his brother officers and their speculator minions having played him for a patsy, the Rebels captured one of his enlisted men and hanged him. The colonel told his "officers and men that we had made for the United States about \$200,000, but...I have come to the conclusion that we have not assisted in putting one cent into the U. S. Treasury." Without Slocum, Vicksburg could very well have gone the way of Natchez.²

Concurrent to Slocum's arrival in Vicksburg, another cotton stealing expedition had gone awry. General Stephen Hurlbut, Slocum's predecessor, ordered Colonel Hiram Scofield to take his brigade of black troops up the Yazoo. The expedition left on April 19, engaged elements of Wirt Adams's Confederate cavalry a day later and returned to its camps at Hayne's Bluff on the 30th. The raid probably would not have attracted much notice had it not lost the tinclad gunboat *Petrel* in the process. In conjunction with the raid, General John McArthur requested help from the navy, ultimately receiving the *Prairie Bird* and *Petrel*. On the 21st, Scofield found he could advance no farther, his way blocked by Wirt Adams at Liverpool Heights. Still hoping to continue the raid, Scofield asked the masters of the two boats to reconnoiter the fortifications around Yazoo City. The masters pushed the two steamers forward, running into an ambush near the town and becoming separated.

² *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 32, Pt. I. Serial 57, p. 396-400.

Scofield, blockaded at Liverpool Heights by Adams, could not come to their aid. The *Prairie Bird* escaped, but the Confederates captured the *Petrel*, taking her heavy guns and setting her afire. The Navy did not take kindly to losing one of its vessels in a suspected cotton stealing scheme. The navy brass hoped that Slocum “would purge this place of villainy,” but when he requested a naval contingent for a third foray toward Yazoo City a week later, they refused.³

True to his mandate, upon taking command, Slocum moved to make sure the garrison at Vicksburg made its weight felt in the larger war effort. Toward that end he coordinated his first expedition with events transpiring in Tennessee. William T. Sherman, generally, did not care much for the mounted branch of the service, (or at least the Union cavalry), but he did have a healthy respect for Nathan Bedford Forrest’s abilities to alter the course of the Atlanta Campaign if left unmolested. In 1862, Earl Van Dorn provided a primer on how to stall an entire Union army by attacking its supply depot at Holly Springs; Sherman did not want a repeat of that along the Western & Atlantic railroad in North Georgia, particularly at Tunnel Hill where an enterprising raider could close the supply spigot for quite some time. He decided not to wait on Forrest to come to him, but to keep Forrest in northern Mississippi or west Tennessee. If his cavalry could defeat Forrest, all the better, but with Union cavalry pouring out of Memphis on a steady schedule, Forrest would have to intercept them or concede the region. Sherman counted on Forrest choosing the latter. In conjunction with General Samuel D. Sturgis’s departure from Memphis, Slocum sent an expedition toward Yazoo City, with the ultimate goal of destroying the Mississippi Central Railroad bridge over the Big Black River near Vaughan’s Station, the destruction of which would have cut off a weakening Confederacy from even more supplies it could ill afford to do without.

³*ORs*, Series I, Vol. 32, Pt. I. Serial 57, p. 674; *Naval ORs*, Series I, Vol. 26, p. 246-59; *The Daily Dispatch*, April 25, 1864.

The Union force chosen for the expedition consisted of white infantry screened by the Third U.S. Colored Cavalry. A few days after the main body departed, as a minor diversion and to keep the Rebels from making a quick dash into Vicksburg from the east, a brigade of black troops pushed toward the Big Black River crossing near Bolton while the main body took the river road north of town toward Yazoo City. General Stephen D. Lee, the Confederate departmental commander, saw the Sturgis and McArthur raids for what they were, diversions “to draw off troops from our armies.” But given the paucity of Confederate forces to counter them, he had no choice but to dance to the tune Sherman played, sending Wirt Adams to contest McArthur’s advance while Forrest dealt with Sturgis. The main body of the Union force made it as far as Vaughan’s Station, fourteen miles north of Canton, before sending the Third USCC and Eleventh Illinois on an end around for a quick strike at the bridge over the Big Black. The little force damaged the railroad but the soupy mire paralleling the tracks leading to the bridge and strong Confederate works on the opposite side prevented them from harming the trestle in any permanent way. Nevertheless, the raid succeeded in keeping a brigade of Confederate cavalry away from Georgia, and in terms of the USCT the Third cavalry performed up to its usual high level of reliability.⁴

In late June, the bridge became an issue again when Sherman, lashing out in anger over his failed assault on Kennesaw Mountain the day before, sent Slocum a nasty letter: “I see by the Atlanta paper of the 25th that the railroad bridge at Jackson is being rebuilt. If you permit the enemy to regain the use of that bridge and of the Mississippi Central Railroad you need not expect military favors from Gen. Grant or myself.” Having worked himself into a lather Sherman continued, “There should be a weekly expedition from Natchez, Vicksburg, or Yazoo City...Vicksburg and its people are no use to us unless used offensively...That

⁴ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial No. 78, p. 20, Series I, Vol. 39, Part I, Serial No 77, p. 7, 10.

railroad bridge...is worth more than all the population of Vicksburg...there should be weekly expeditions to Brookhaven, to Jackson, and to the Black River bridge above Canton.” He saved his nastiest barb for last, for Sherman hated the idea of black troops and rarely passed up an opportunity to disparage them, and he did not in this communiqué, “I believe you have enough men, unless the negro troops have all disappeared.”⁵

Sherman need not have sent the telegram; Slocum had already made plans to destroy the bridge at Jackson. Since early June the shops in Vicksburg had engaged in repairing wagons and replacing unserviceable gear in preparation for a march on Jackson. Slocum put nearly 3,000 troops in motion on July 2, and took Jackson on the 5th after a short engagement. While the Union soldiers in Jackson destroyed the ramshackle bridge that concerned Sherman so much, the rebels moved around behind them, establishing a position between Jackson and Clinton, forcing Slocum to fight his way out, which he did after a two hour engagement. But that expedition consisted primarily of white troops and the Third USCC. Perhaps just as notable about the raid on Jackson, the army did not return with wagon loads of cotton, a fair indicator that Slocum had different motivations than his predecessors. Another expedition consisting mainly of black troops waited in Vicksburg for the orders to go on a roundabout march toward Port Gibson.⁶

Sherman could hardly believe the news that Forrest had defeated General Sturgis at Brice’s Crossroads. He thought that with 8,000 men against Forrest’s smaller force, Sturgis could have handled him. Undeterred in his single-minded desire to destroy Forrest, Sherman assigned General Andrew Jackson Smith to the task. Crusty and cantankerous, and as

⁵ *Ors*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial No. 78, p. 150-51.

⁶ Benjamin Mills to Dear Father, June 7, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. I, Serial 77, P. 243; *New Haven Daily Palladium*, Saturday, July 16, 1864.

sympathetic to black soldiers at Sherman, Smith proved formidable. Rather than embarking on a swift ride around northern Mississippi, his huge force moved slowly and deliberately into the heart of Forrest's backyard. Slocum's part in the campaign consisted of running more sorties out of Vicksburg to keep as many Confederates occupied as possible. Having already taken Jackson during the first week of July and tying up Wirt Adams's troopers, Slocum sought to sustain the effect by sending out another expedition as his first one returned to town.⁷

On July 10, an expedition consisting of six infantry regiments, (four black and two white), along with a battery of artillery and a multitude of horsemen, marched out of Vicksburg on the Jackson Road toward the Big Black, arriving at the brackish stream at around noon. From there the force backtracked the route Grant's army had taken during the Vicksburg campaign of the previous year, struggling through the midsummer heat across the old battlefield at Champion Hill the following day. Moving on to Raymond, the column turned south passing through the abandoned towns of Utica, Auburn, Cayuga, and Rocky Springs before reaching Port Gibson near the Mississippi. Just north of Port Gibson the force rendezvoused with the Mississippi Marine Brigade on the 16th, transferring their train and quartermaster stores to the boats. Up to that point the column had experienced nothing more significant than a few minor skirmishes on its flanks and rear as the Rebels, outnumbered and outgunned, like a pack of wolves tried to pick off the weak and aged of the herd. Observing the departure of the loaded transports, "the Rebs got it into their heads that our force had left, and nothing remained but the marines" and concluded to scoop them up the next morning. They could not have made a worse mistake, for when the 300 or 400 Confederate

⁷Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 217-246.

cavalrymen, who had nipped at the fringes of the force since it left Vicksburg, came flying in toward the Union pickets, five thousand awaited them. Quickly realizing their mistake, the Confederates broke off, leaving as quickly as they arrived, minus a score of men and horses. Slocum, who commanded the expedition in person, “felt hurt that such an insignificant force should cause him to have to form his whole command in line” but must have taken satisfaction in finally drawing the Confederates out, for the attack proved the utility of the expedition. After resting on their arms all day in the field, late that night the troops boarded the boats for real and steamed to Vicksburg, comforted by the fact that their march had in some small way contributed to the success of Gen. A. J. Smith’s expedition to defeat of Forrest and Stephen D. Lee in northern Mississippi. For the black troops, the raid proved they had the endurance and discipline to conduct long range operations in enemy territory, something that heartened Hawkins greatly, causing him to dream of greater accomplishments for the sable arm: “All that is wanted is to make an army of the colored troops and send them into the heart of rebel country.” He knew that in order to achieve true liberation, they would have to contribute as something more than stevedores, wood choppers, and menials; they would have to carry their fair share in combat too.⁸

In mid-July events in Georgia again echoed in Vicksburg when General James B. McPherson rode to his death into a hail of gunfire outside Atlanta. Grant and Sherman placed Oliver O. Howard in his spot as commander of the Army of the Tennessee, which infuriated the commander of the 20th corps, Joseph Hooker, to the point of resignation, which Sherman promptly accepted. Competent enough, Hooker had grated on Sherman’s nerves

⁸ John Matthews to Mrs. Vaughan, July 26, 1864, Captain Pickett to Colonel Peebles, August 13, 1864, John L. Matthews Letters; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial No 78, Page 179; Hawkins to Caleb Mills, July 22, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers.

too many times for him to trust him with the army he helped build. Slocum had ended up in Vicksburg to start with because of Hooker's mercurial personality, it seemed just that Slocum ended up replacing him at the head of the 20th. On July 30, Slocum received orders to report to Sherman when his replacement arrived, thus causing offensive operations from Vicksburg to cease until the new commander arrived. A week later, on August 7, the War Department appointed General Napoleon Jackson Tecumseh Dana to command the District of Vicksburg, a good choice given his familiarity with political and military landscape of the region.⁹

Never one to miss an opportunity to sharpen his troops, Hawkins used the interval between commanders to continue his training regimen. Like any good commander he set out to rectify any problems he observed on the march to Grand Gulf. Isaac Shepard likely became one of those problems to rectify after losing one of his regiments at Grand Gulf. During the skirmish with the Rebel cavalry, Shepard's brigade held the extreme right of the Union line, but somehow managed to lose track of the Forty-ninth USCT which ended up on the left for most of the day before Shepard found them and returned them to their proper place in the line. Moreover, having a white soldier whipped by black men the previous summer, no matter how just, did not endear him to many white officers in his chain of command. He left Vicksburg in early August. Some of his officers apparently blamed their poor performance on lack of drill time, to which Hawkins responded, "Officers of this command have very justly complained that they had no opportunity for drill and military instruction. An opportunity is now presented, and it is expected that all Officers will apply themselves with zeal to perfect their military knowledge and the drill and discipline of their commands." He did not miss a beat, issuing instructions left and right to his regimental commanders, particularly in the minutiae of drill and the proper method of processing

⁹ Melton, *Henry Slocum*, 210; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial 78, p. 211.

paperwork. He singled out the Forty-ninth USCT in particular for extra attention after Grand Gulf, telling the officers that they “must know what they are to be drilled at and they will be expected to know it thoroughly...Company commanders will be held responsible for the correct performance of their guides at Battalion drill...Officers will learn the formation of ‘to the left or right into line of battle.’” Of course not everyone thrived under Hawkins’s style of leadership. Benjamin Mills, even though his family had a close relationship with his commander, thought the general too hard. Writing to his father, Mills said his commander “issued an order if an Officer be caught out of camp with a linen coat or a straw hat on that he would be dismissed from the service immediately.” Mills, with a typical volunteer officer’s disdain for regular army rules and regulations, concluded, “So you see what kind of man these Regular Army men are.” But the USCT in Vicksburg needed that attention to detail from its leaders if Hawkins was to realize his ambition to “have a Division of troops composed of the best soldiers and officers in the service.”¹⁰

After a short interval the war came calling again in early September with rumors that a large Confederate force had set up camp between Clinton and the Big Black River. General Dana posted artillery all along the fortifications; the black heavy artillerymen manned their guns, and the Mississippi Marine Brigade took up their arms while a force of black and white troops cut down trees across the roads leading into town. Nothing happened, the phantom force moved on and Vicksburg returned to normal, but it did put the men on

¹⁰ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. II, Serial 78, p. 271; Captain Pickett to Colonel Peebles, August 13, 1864, John L. Matthews Letters; RG 393 U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110. E2023 Pt. 2, Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210, p 18-19 General Order No. 27, July 26, 1864. Vicksburg, Mississippi; Benjamin Mills to Dear Aunt, August 17, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers.

notice that while Grant and Sherman had made remarkable gains against the Confederacy that summer, there remained fighting to do, even in supposed backwaters like Vicksburg.¹¹

A masterpiece of coordination and planning, the next series of raids from Vicksburg combined the navy, infantry, and cavalry in a series of hopscotch moves designed to bring to bay a Confederate cavalry and artillery force that had fired on shipping between Natchez and New Orleans. The first raid consisted of a detachment of the Third USCC moving overland along Deer Creek toward Egg Point, while the Fifth Illinois Cavalry traveled via steamer, disembarking at Bolivar and moving south to unite with the Third. The combined cavalry force then swept south toward Rolling Fork picking up any horses, mules, and supplies it could find. Besides skirmishing with a small Rebel force along the way, the raiders ran into a Confederate commissary in charge of 300 cattle, but could not catch them all due to the dense canebrakes. The raiders returned to Vicksburg on the 26th with 27 horses, 32 mules, 200 cattle, and nine prisoners.¹²

The next raid headed south toward Port Gibson on September 29th. The cavalry element consisted of about 1,100 men of the Second Wisconsin, Fifth Illinois, and Third USCC, along with four guns and a signal corps detachment. The infantry force, composed of 525 men from the Forty-eighth and Fiftieth USCT, and Fifth USCHA along with two guns, boarded transports with the cavalry and steamed south. At Bruinsburg the cavalry debarked and moved on to Port Gibson while the infantry continued a few miles farther south to Rodney, where it disembarked. At Port Gibson, Colonel Osband, under orders from Dana,

¹¹ Benjamin Mills to Dear Father, September 3, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; Diary, September 10, 1864, Charles Henry Snedeker Civil War Diary, Auburn University Special Collections Department and Library, Auburn, Alabama.

¹² Main, *Story of the Marches*, 195, 199; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. I, Serial 77, p. 569.

arrested “13 of the most prominent wealthy citizens to be held as hostages.” A year earlier General Grant ordered a raiding party to snatch fifty young women as hostages from Port Gibson as collateral for the Confederates forcing a group of captured northern schoolteachers to wash and mend their clothes for them. On October 1, Osband moved south to Rodney where he transferred the hostages along with 125 cattle and 60 mules to the infantry detachment who promptly boarded transports back to Vicksburg the following day.¹³

Shed of the slow moving infantry, the cavalry sped toward Natchez, skirmishing with Confederates and foraging livestock along the way, netting 350 cattle, 125 sheep, 19 mules, and 3 horses. After putting every blacksmith shop in town to work on horseshoes, and shedding the column of sick and wounded, the command prepared to embark again, but with a change of plans. In planning the raids Dana asked General Michael Kelly Lawler, commander of Union forces at Morganza, Louisiana, (just south of Tunica Bend) to send an expedition to the west, thus drawing Confederate forces away from Dana’s intended route. The skirmishing between Rodney and Natchez, however, threw the cavalry behind schedule, forcing Dana to go to Natchez and take personal charge of the expedition. The new plan consisted of a three-pronged offensive, with Osband leading a cavalry force, bolstered to 1,200 men with the addition of the Fourth Illinois from Natchez, from the landing at Tunica Bend toward Woodville, Mississippi. The second part consisted of the Twenty-ninth Illinois Infantry, also from the Natchez garrison, landing at Tunica Bend and marching north to Fort Adams (a recently reoccupied earthen fortification built in 1799 as port of entry to the U.S.) where they waited for the cavalry. The final piece of the puzzle consisted of a strong column

¹³ Chester Hearn, *Ellet’s Brigade: The Strangest Outfit of All* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2006) 185; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. I, serial 77, p. 569.

of 1,000 men under the command of Farrar moving out from Natchez to Havard's Ferry on the Homochitto River, twenty-six miles south of Natchez. The raid went according to plan; Osband's men surprised a Confederate force at Woodville, killing 40, taking 41 prisoner, and capturing an artillery battery before devastating the Confederate commissary depot at Woodville and hauling the spoils to the transports waiting at Fort Adams. That should have ended the expedition, but the cavalymen returned to Woodville in the hope of a rematch against the survivors of the Confederate force they had hurt so badly the day previous. The Confederates did not show, and the Federals headed for the rendezvous with Farrar's infantry column north of the Homochitto. As for Farrar's movement, Dana noted "I believe there was nothing worthy of reporting in his operations, except that he received about 300 cattle."¹⁴

The Woodville raid extended the USCT's mastery over the region south of Natchez, an area long neglected by Brayman and Farrar. Moreover, the success of black men in a branch long held sacred as evidence of southern superiority (horsemanship), served to elevate the black cavalymen in the eyes of their peers and superiors. Meeting their former owners, as they literally did in the raid, as fellow horsemen and besting them, served to establish the Third USCC as one of the preeminent cavalry regiments in the western theater.¹⁵

The Third returned to Vicksburg in mid-October amid much celebration over their successful raid. On the 24th, they participated in a cavalry review, wheeling in "the various evolutions, with their gleaming sabers and gay banners" impressing the editor of the *Vicksburg Daily Herald* to state, "we all felt that they were a force to be trusted with the honor of the country in any emergency." But before the black cavalymen could claim total

¹⁴ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 39, Pt. I, serial 77, p. 571.

¹⁵ *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, October 13, 1864.

mastery over the region, they had to return to the scene of an earlier failure: the bridge over the Big Black at Vaughan's Station.¹⁶

After Sherman took Atlanta during the first week of September 1864, it looked as if Mississippi would become an even deeper backwater with the main scene of combat in the western theater moving farther and farther away as Sherman pushed toward the sea. General John Bell Hood, however, thought he could reset the chessboard in the west to 1861 positions with a daring, some say foolish, invasion of Kentucky. His route, taking him through northern Alabama into central Tennessee, suddenly made the bridge over the Big Black very important again, for the Mississippi Central Railroad carried supplies to his army. Thus, in mid-November 1864, the USCT in Vicksburg once again had an opportunity to affect the larger war in a positive way.

On the eve of the July raid on Jackson, just about everyone in Mississippi, including General Wirt Adams, knew the object of the raid, thus allowing the Confederates to concentrate their forces in time to harass the column. In November Dana sought to use the Confederates' eyes and ears to his advantage, making it abundantly clear that he planned to hit Jackson again along the same route as the previous summer. Adams heard about it, and as before concentrated his forces from northern and central Mississippi just west of Jackson. On November 23rd, the Union cavalry column, 2,200 strong and complete with artillery and pontoons for crossing the Big Black, rode out of Vicksburg. Upon reaching the river the column halted, made camp, and laid the pontoons. Early the next morning the Second Wisconsin and Third USCC crossed the pontoon bridge and made for the old battlefield of Champion Hill where they built a disproportionate number of conspicuous campfires within sight of Confederate scouts. After dark, however, the two regiments pulled back to the main

¹⁶ *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, October 25, 1864.

body west of the Big Black, leaving their campfires burning. The next morning at sunrise, only the artillery and pontoon bridge remained, the cavalry having disappeared in the wee hours of the night. In the meantime, Wirt Adams sat with a force of 3,000 men astride the Jackson Road, preparing for a Union force than never arrived. By the time he realized the ruse, the Union cavalry had long gone, making 73 miles in two days of hard riding to Mechanicsburg and Benton, before arriving in the vicinity of Deasonville, just a few miles from their objective. On the morning of the 27th they burned Vaughan's Station and cut the telegraph wires.¹⁷

Osband gave the Third the honor of taking the bridge, but they had to get to it first. The railroad bed passed through about a mile of swamp before reaching the river. The bridge was too narrow for a normal attacking column to manage, and men seeking to get to the bridge would have to advance only two or three abreast. The Confederates in the stockades guarding the bridge would find it too easy to pick them off. Cook used their confidence to his advantage. Unbeknownst to the defenders, he divided his force, placing them in the swampy undergrowth on each side of the tracks. Accompanied by a few brave men, he then baited the Confederates at long range, first advancing along the tracks, then retreating. Such teasing had the desired effect of drawing the Confederates out of their stockade and forming "along the bank of the river, seemingly enjoying the sport at shooting at Yankees." Their fun did not last long, for in focusing on Cook, they never saw the rest of his men slogging through the swamp setting up a crossfire. With the sound of a bugle the entire Third Colored Cavalry let loose a volley, momentarily stunning the Confederates. In the mayhem a storming party crossed the bridge, "the men jumping from tie to tie and from stringer to stringer" on their way to the stockade where they "swarmed through the sally ports, driving

¹⁷ORs, Series I, Vol. 45, Pt. I, serial 93, p. 779; Main, *Story of the Marches*, 200-205.

the rebels from their position.” Retreating into the woods, the fugitives “kept up a scattering fire” while Cook’s men set about firing the bridge with coal oil they had brought along in canteens.”¹⁸

Their objective met, the expedition headed back to Yazoo City, camping there on the 29th and 30th of November, before embarking on the most difficult part of the raid, getting back to their base in Vicksburg. The Confederates in the region, their pride damaged by the ruse at Champion Hill and enraged by the body blow inflicted on their cause at the railroad bridge determined to make the Federals pay for their cheekiness. Concentrating their force along the road to Vicksburg, the Rebels blocked the column’s route home. Without artillery and low on ammunition, the Federals decided to cross the Yazoo and march south to where the Sunflower River joined it to await transports from Vicksburg. Upon boarding the steamers the command faced a gauntlet unlike anything they had seen. For over a mile, the Confederates posted on the bluffs on the east side of the river raked the decks of the transports with artillery and rifle fire, but caused few casualties due to the Federals’ foresight in barricading the decks with wood, boxes, and anything else that would conceal them.¹⁹

Military telegraphs around the region ran hot with the news of the Third’s exploits. Two times the Union army had sent expeditions to destroy the bridge, and on the third attempt, a black regiment succeeded. Cook’s exploits on the trestle so impressed Dana that he recommended him for a promotion. “The charge over the railroad trestle-work and bridge

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 45, Pt. I, Serial 93, p. 780.

by dismounted cavalry, led by Maj. Cook, was one of the most dashing and heroic acts of the war.” Indeed, the expeditions conducted from the post of Vicksburg during 1864 materially effected the outcome of the war.²⁰

But the raids did not comprise the sum total of the black military experience in Vicksburg during 1864, many troops spent much of their time protecting family and friends on plantations and in freedmen’s camps. In March General Hawkins ordered two regiments of black troops and a battalion of cavalry to Goodrich Landing, Louisiana, for “the protection of the plantations interests of Milliken’s Bend, Goodrich’s Landing, Lake Providence, and Skipwith’s Landing” ominously warning his officer to see to it that their “troops are not permitted to straggle or small parties placed in positions where they can be successfully attacked by...guerillas or any scouting force.” Indeed, in some cases the troops loathed leaving their loved ones when military duty called. That same week in March, members of the Sixty-fourth USCT, when ordered to leave their “women & children and get on board the steamer...disliked very much to leave their families and thought we had cheated them.” The Union officer recording the scene also admitted, “They have been deceived it is true but I have not done it.” He did not say why, but the men likely feared for their family’s safety, for a month later, at Waterproof, Louisiana, Confederates killed two of their pickets. The men found them the next day, “with their ears cut off, and scalped and burned to a crisp.” Needless to say, a healthy debate raged in the region over the interests of the Treasury Department versus the lives of the men guarding outlying plantations.²¹

²⁰ *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 45, Pt. I, Serial 93, p. 779-93.

²¹ *OR*’s Series I, Vol. 32, Pt. III, Serial 59, p. 83; Diary, March 22, 1864, April 24, 1864, Samuel Denham Barnes Papers, Library of Congress.

In late June the Secretary of War tried to bring order to the situation along the river by specifying the army's role in protecting treasury interests. He specified that army detachments assigned to protect leased plantations "will be concentrated in strong positions...secure against assaults...able to hold out until re-inforced...that the protection of the leased plantations will be held subordinate to...offensive military operations" and that wood yards "will be established on islands not accessible to the enemy, or at points where the men can have the protection of troops." He further ordered that "As far as practicable" freedmen's camps "will be established at or so near the permanent military posts as to be under the protection of the garrisons of those posts" and for army officers and treasury agents to consult with Colonel John Eaton if they sought any changes to the system. Still, the reforms did not provide enough protection for the freedmen; in August guerillas struck camps on both sides of the river. At Tibbett's plantation, a vicious group of nearly 200 guerillas "killed two scouts after they had surrendered, carried away one white overseer, and a young man by the name of Webster, clerk for the same firm; both the overseer and Mr. Webster were murdered by them as soon as they reached Bayou Tensas." Since the guerillas operated in the area at the request of the local civilians, Colonel Watson Webber of the Fifty-first USCT ordered a battalion of the Third USCC to retaliate. Coldly efficient, Major Charles H. Chapin, carried out his duties, burning all but one home in the village of Pinhook and four fifths of Floyd, and killing every suspected Rebel he came across. His command did not bring any prisoners back with them. Likewise, just north of Vicksburg on the road to Haine's Bluff, a Rebel squad hit the freedman's camp and hospital, shooting one freedman, burning the quarters, and taking the assistant surgeon and steward prisoner. Several regiments in Vicksburg found a unusual solution to the problem of protecting their families.

While many of the soldiers' families lived in town, the squalid conditions, disease, and crime made life just as precarious inside the town as out. Herman Lieb's Fifth U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery decided to protect the soldiers' families by constructing a mini-colony consisting solely of soldiers' dependents next to their barracks. Such an arrangement allowed the soldiers to see their families regularly, allowed government officials to monitor the families more carefully, and it helped relieve overcrowding within Vicksburg. The *Vicksburg Daily Herald* wrote that the arrangement had worked so well that the Fortieth and Fifty-seventh USCT regiments had started similar colonies.²²

Life in the garrison towns along the Mississippi offered many of the soldiers a world they had not seen before, as well as temptations. On the plantations their masters controlled which pleasures they could experience, as well as vices. The army did likewise, but with less regimentation. Typically, so long as he obeyed the laws, a soldier's time off duty belonged to him alone. He could go where he pleased, consort with whomever he pleased, and drink or eat what he pleased, at least until it got out of hand, as in August when the provost marshal forbade late night meetings. He argued that "Nightly meetings at a late hour, either for religious or other purposes, too often makes a pretense for bad men and women to abase themselves from their proper duties and engage in revelrous and immoral practices. Hereafter no meetings will be permitted to be held later than tattoo." With a soldier's income, despite the infrequency of paydays, black men could achieve a certain level of independence, as well as mastery. He could use the money to pay to attend one of the many schools in Vicksburg, (beyond what his regiment required) he could buy books, or buy land. If civically inclined, soldiers could join the Union League, an organization claiming many

²² *ORs*, Series I. Vol. 48. pt. I, Serial No. 101, p. 441; *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, August 25, 1864; September 22, 1864.

members in Vicksburg, as well as join the Convention of Colored Citizens, which met in the Presbyterian Church in downtown Vicksburg, and elected delegates to attend national gatherings.²³

The black soldiers' daytime hours, however, belonged to Uncle Sam, but unlike Natchez where they toiled non-stop on Fort McPherson, soldiers in Vicksburg had a greater variety of tasks. Orders frequently came down for details to serve in the hospitals, guard warehouses, work in the government sawmill, unload boats, serve as headquarters guards, as well as sundry other tasks. Naturally, the soldiers did not always enjoy their labors. Benjamin Mills wrote his father about the drudgery of supervising black troops at unloading a lumber barge. "They are very hard to manage in that respect, unless you keep watching them they will slip off and lay down in the shade and that is the last of them unless you go and arouse them, until we start home, and then they are on the ground promptly. We punish them in such cases by not giving them any whiskey." John Matthews of the Forty-seventh USCT reveled in garrison life. "Colored troops are a fixed institution in Vicksburg and stand on an equal footing with any of the 'boys in blue.'" They can walk a beat in front of a Generals quarters as well as carry a box of hard tack or wheel dirt." His men probably did not enjoy it as much as he did. With a war on, not many in Vicksburg managed to escape laboring for their keep. Some young men, white and black, came into town for the sole purpose of avoiding labor or army service. With conscription going on in the northern states, a number of young white men of means found the occupied South quite compatible with their liberty. General Edward R. S. Canby put a stop to shirkers invading his military division in August, ordering all able bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45 into the militia. Dana

²³ *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, August 26, 1864; December 1, 1864; September 14, 1864; November 30, 1864.

enforced the matter vigorously, much to the annoyance of secessionists in town, who ended up drilling under the command of Union officers. Ultimately, the authorities found enough men in Vicksburg to form both black and white militia regiments.²⁴

Notwithstanding all of the demands on their time, enlisted men in Vicksburg found opportunities to get into trouble, ranging from reluctance to work, as in the case of Mills's men on the lumber barge, or to brutal murder. In September Benjamin Mills wrote to his father regarding the impending execution of a member of the Fifty-third USCT. "These cases will serve as examples and do a great deal of good towards bringing the Black Troops up to a high stage of military discipline. They had got an idea in their head that as they were free that they could do as they wished without fear of punishment but this idea is being driven out of their heads fast now." Sadly, executions took place on a regular basis, for murder, for mutiny, and for desertion.²⁵

The case Mills's referred to involved Private John Mitchell who deserted in November 1863 at Milliken's Bend. Recaptured in April aboard a steamer where he had found employment as a cabin boy, the army court martialled him in June 1864. During his trial, which must have taken all of thirty minutes, two officers testified that he did not appear at roll calls after November 22nd and that they found him working aboard a steamer in April. Mitchell testified, "I told the Captain previous to going away that I should leave his Company and go to some other if he continued to kick and cuff me about as he had been doing. I told him that I was willing to go into any other company in the Regiment." With

²⁴ RG 393 U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110, E2023 Pt. 2, Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210, p 217, "To Colonel Scofield comdg 2nd brig." May 30, 1864; Benjamin Mills to Father, June 7, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, August 4, 1864, Benjamin Mills to Sister, August 24, 1864; *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, December 24, 1864, December 9, 1864; October 7, 1864.

²⁵ Benjamin Mills to Father, September 3, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers.

that, the judge cleared the court for the board of officers to deliberate. They returned a verdict of guilty and the court sentenced him to forfeiture of pay and hard labor with a twelve pound ball and four foot chain under regimental guard for four months. Though the board of officers thought the punishment reasonable enough, Hawkins did not. Returning the sentence for reconsideration, Hawkins argued,

“The Prisoner was absent about five months and until arrested, and by his own statement he shows his desertion was premeditated. There is nothing in the evidence to palliate the guilt, and by comparity there should be no letting up on the extreme punishment prescribed by the Articles of War. Desertions have been too common in this command and they will become more frequent unless Soldiers are made to understand the severe punishment they must suffer for not being faithful to their oath of service to the Government. They know very well they should not desert. It is time they learned as well the just punishment due a deserter.”

Two days later the court met again, reopened deliberations, and sentenced Mitchell to death. The *Vicksburg Daily Herald* described him at the execution: “He was a fine looking youth, apparently not more than 17 or 18 years of age, and endured the parting with his friends and relatives, on leaving the jail to be carried to the place of execution with a remarkable degree of firmness.”²⁶

In another, equally tragic case, the army tried twenty-one members of the Forty-ninth USCT for mutiny. Around mid-June, a regimental surgeon noticed a foul odor coming from some of the men’s quarters, and mentioned it to their captain, who promptly investigated the matter. He found wooden boxes filled with “mutilated candles, spoiled meat, rotten bread, green apples, and some white gloves and stockings.” Since regulations prohibited the men from keeping any personal items that would not fit in their knapsacks, the officer removed the boxes, piled them up

²⁶ Court Martial of John Mitchell, Company B, 53rd United States Colored Infantry, LL2350, RG 113, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) Court-martial Case Files, 1808-1938, NARA, Washington, D.C. (Hereinafter cited as RG 153); *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, September 16, 1864.

and burned them. The next day, during noon roll call, the captain announced that he had broken open the boxes and destroyed them, and that in the future he would punish the owners of any boxes he found. After lunch, a squad of fifteen or sixteen men marched to the captain's tent, stacked arms and removed their accouterments. Their spokesman, private Washington Fountain stepped forward, saluted the captain and announced, "Captain we have stacked our arms and are not going to do any more duty until we can have the promise of better treatment from you." The captain went to his colonel and reported them for mutiny. He then marched them off to the guard house before picking up a few more men later in the day who did not participate in the demonstration but had prior knowledge. After a short trial, the court found seventeen men guilty of mutiny and sentenced them to hard labor for life. One received a term of hard labor for the duration of his enlistment, and one received an acquittal.

Washington Fountain, along with Giles Simms, who had agitated behind the scenes, received a sentence of death. Benjamin Mills thought the sentences "will have a good effect on the rest of the men it will show them that the Articles of War must and shall be obeyed." On Sunday, September the 25th, Fountain and Simms paid the supreme price. All of the black troops of the post had to attend, so as to ensure they experienced the "good effect" of seeing their comrades die. "The condemned men were seated upon their coffins in front of the firing squad, when the proceedings of the Court Martial were read to them and to the troops...A brief prayer was made by the chaplain, at the conclusion of which the bandages were placed upon the eyes of the condemned men, and the order to fire was given...One of the men was instantly killed, the other, however, had to be dispatched by a pistol, immediate death not

resulting from the wounds by the muskets.” The sad sight repeated itself throughout 1864 and 1865 as more black soldiers ran afoul of military justice. On June 25, 1864, Cornelius Thompson died by firing squad for murdering a freedwoman. His last words were, “It is right that I should die, I believe I am willing to die, but I am sorry to see you (meaning the firing squad) standing before me. Never do as I have done, but always look to God for grace. I have nothing more to say.” Emanuel Davis, standing at the gallows for stabbing a comrade in the heart, did not go as peacefully. Instead he was “very nearly overcome with the fear of his pending fate, and kept continually praying the Lord to have mercy upon his soul. He wished to be turned loose under the promise of never committing any wrong deed. With weeping and in a tremulous tone he entreated his comrades not to do as he had done.” Another witness said “that he appeared greatly alarmed when the time came and commenced calling upon God to come take him away.” The worst came last, when on May 5, 1865, nine men stood before empty nooses for murdering Mrs. Minerva Cook on her plantation outside of town. Benjamin Mills wrote, “After the caps had been pulled down over their faces they sung a hymn, everyone of them joining in and after that I did not hear [them] say anything more.” Even though Mills testified for the prosecution in the case of the mutineers, he told his father, “This was the first and I hope it will be the last execution we witnessed.” His ardor for a “good effect on the men” had diminished.²⁷

²⁷ RG 153, Giles Simms, Company F, 49th United States Colored Troops, LL2492; Benjamin Mills to Father, September 3, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, September 27, 1864; June 25, 1864; September 1, 1864; Benjamin Mills to Father, May 26, 1865.

The evidence suggests that the Vicksburg authorities dispensed justice unevenly. In September 1864 a white soldier in the Seventy-second Illinois Infantry, called his lieutenant a "s-- of a b----" telling him that "he would be even with him some of these days. I will shoot you the first chance I get. You will never live to get to Chicago." In keeping with his s.o.b. theme, he also called his lieutenant colonel "a dirty s-- of a b---" telling him to "Kiss my --- he would fix him." He further told his lieutenant "that he would not serve under Liet. Schank and that he would kill him in the first engagement." A board of officers sentenced him to prison at Alton, Illinois, for the remainder of his term, a much different sentence than that of Washington Fountain, who expressed his grievance, not in a vulgarity laced murderous rage, but with a salute and stacking of arms. George Boy, a black private, struck his sergeant with a shovel several times, and got twenty days hard labor and three months forfeiture of pay. Joseph Steele of the Forty-seventh USCT, when ordered to police the camp, told his commander, that "He would not do it, as it was not his turn." When placed in the guard house he told his captain, "Its your time but mine will come soon. I'll never go back to your Company." He got one month confinement and three months forfeiture of pay." John McMullen of the Fifty-first fell asleep at his post (the most common offense in Vicksburg) and got three months in a ball and chain while forfeiting his pay for six months. But not all cases ended badly for members of the USCT. Green Thompson of the Sixty-sixth stood charged of desertion but a court found him not guilty. Likewise, William Anderson of the Forty-sixth, on a charge of murder, and Eli Lewis of the Fifth Heavies, also received not-guilty judgments.²⁸

²⁸ RG 393, U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110, E2023 Pt. 2,

For lesser offenses, the officers in Vicksburg had a variety of punishments available to them, some of them detrimental to the good of the service. Private Benjamin Glass found himself in a lot of trouble, charged with using mutinous language after he objected to how his captain punished a man in his company. He told the officer, “If an officer was to use me the way that man is being used, I’ll be G-
- D--- if I wouldn’t shoot him.” He got three months confinement with a ball and chain for saying it. In some cases, though, the men had reason to complain, for some of the officers went well beyond established boundaries in punishing the black enlisted men. Benjamin Mills believed “It is useless being lenient with them for if you give them an inch they will take a mile. I discovered this when I first came here and also found out that they were trying to come it over me.” Lt. Walter Chapman of the Fifty-first USCT, at Goodrich Landing, wrote in July 1864 that “If a man does not obey me I am at liberty to punish him as severe as I may think fit & as they have used to very severe treatment why any light punishment is that of no account whatsoever.” Bragging about his power, he continued, “If a man refuses to obey my orders I buck him if he is still noisy or gives lip I gag him. And with the buck gag & thumb stretching I manage to hold them in hand.” Eventually such a cavalier attitude toward punishment reached Hawkins. On August 28, 1864, he issued general orders prohibiting everything in Chapman’s quiver. Within a week a young officer in the Forty-eighth USCT tested him, and found himself on trial for bucking and gagging,

Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210, p. 5, General Order No. 39, September 9, 1864; Vol. 210, p. 42, General Order No. 32, Vicksburg courtmartials, August 13, 1864; Vol. 210, p. 24, 25, General Order No. 31; Vol. 210, p. 29, General Order No. 31, Vicksburg.

and hitting an enlisted man with his sword. The court found him guilty and caused him to forfeit two month's pay.²⁹

The crimes in Vicksburg reveal a people coming to terms with their new status. As Marshall Mills stated, some perceived freedom as meaning that no one could tell them to do anything they did not want to do, and those types often came to a dire end when they ran afoul of the articles of war. But others developed a fairly mature concept of rights, even if they did not always apply it in the proper situation, such as Washington Fountain and Giles Simms. They clearly believed they had the right to private property, but registered their objections in a manner the army found worthy of death. In some of the cases the soldiers felt they had a right to better treatment, that as free men no one could physically or verbally abuse them. Ultimately, Hawkins proved them right by issuing orders prohibiting abusive and unnecessarily harsh punishments. Enlistment in the army, however, provided them with legal personhood that they did not have before, in that under the Articles of War they had rights. In the army courts martial, unfair and harsh as some of them may have seemed, the men had the right to testify in a court of law, even against white officers, as in the case of Samuel Lafoy. Moreover, and just as importantly, under martial law in the towns along the Mississippi River, black men and women had equal rights in the courtroom when facing their old masters, and in some cases more rights if the old master exhibited disloyalty.

²⁹RG 393, U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110, E2023 Pt. 2, Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210, p. 41, General Order No. 32, Vick courtmartial, August 14, 1864; Benjamin Mills to Father, September 3, 1864, Caleb Mills Papers; Walter Chapman to Parents, July 17, 1864, Walter A. Chapman Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; RG 393 U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110, E2023, Pt. 2, Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210, p. 48, General Order No. 36, Vicksburg, August 28, 1864; RG-153, Samuel LaFoy, 48th usct file, NN-987.

From Hawkins on down, the officers in Vicksburg stressed discipline as a means to success for the black troops and by extension success after the war ended. Punishing miscreants and abiding by the Articles of War, even when seemingly harsh, in their minds portended good performance on the battlefield, thus connecting the military advances of 1864 with the stability of the command while in their quarters in Vicksburg. When the call came for the USCT to march out of Vicksburg toward Jackson, Grand Gulf, Vaughan's Station, and Woodville, they succeeded, making the countryside in the region subject to the Vicksburg garrison rather than Wirt Adams, Sul Ross, and Forrest. In terms of mastership, every victory over their former masters, every town they brought under Union control, every slave they set free, brought them closer to mastership over the region. In affecting the larger war, Sherman's campaign in Georgia, and Hood's invasion of Tennessee, the USCT broke the mold set for them in 1863 as stevedores, ditch diggers, and place holders for the white armies. During 1864 Sherman fretted a great deal over the fate of Vicksburg, worried that his and Grant's hard-fought gains may slip back under Confederate control due to corruption and incompetence. By holding Vicksburg, and affecting the major campaigns in a positive way throughout 1864, black soldiers showed capabilities their top commanders had not previously suspected. When 1865 rolled in and the end of the rebellion came in sight those commanders had to consider, to whom should they entrust their victory. Who would make sure the South abided by the terms of the peace after the white enlistees of 1861 and 62 went home? If the men of the USCT continued their good work, then they could become the sole remaining master of the region after the Confederacy fe

Chapter 8

The final year of the war opened amid celebrations in the garrisons along the river. Two years earlier the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect and the end of the rebellion now seemed near. The freedmen of Vicksburg marched through the streets in a long procession to the outskirts of town where “they had a glorious old time” according to one onlooker. That afternoon the black troops marched downtown to the courthouse for an address by General Cadwallader C. Washburn, the district commander. Afterwards they returned to their barracks for a commemoration service led by their chaplain.¹

In Natchez, Brayman and Farrar settled into a frosty detente, with Brayman holding Natchez and Farrar in official exile at Vidalia. The previous November, Brayman’s wife hosted a ball and persuaded him to issue a pass to Farrar so he could attend. The general did so, and acted cordially enough at the party for her to believe she had achieved some kind of breakthrough between the two officers. Farrar thought so too, and a week later without apologizing for preferring charges against Brayman, wrote him a letter asking to let bygones be bygones and “hoping...that hereafter a more harmonious and cordial feeling may be extended to one another.” True to his nature, Brayman lashed out, “If such embarrassment has existed on your part, your own quick sensibility may suggest how naturally it might grow

¹ Benjamin Mills to Father, January 3, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers; “A Chaplain’s Diary,” January 1, 1865, George North Carruthers Papers, Library of Congress.

out of a consciousness of being in the wrong.” Clearly, too much had passed between the two men for them to conduct effective operations.²

Accordingly, the army replaced Brayman in early January with Brig. Gen. John W. Davidson, a native of Virginia, who in turn brought Farrar in from the cold, placing him in command of Fort McPherson. This move also signaled the army’s renewed interest in building the fort. Davidson wrote, “I find much to amend here, particularly with the troops. I shall spare no effort to make them effective, requiring all officers to make their homes and sphere of duties with their regiments.” Unfortunately, the new commander’s methods angered both officers and enlisted men; in the words of one, he was, “abusive and tyrannical to his subordinates.” Indicative of his reign, shortly after taking command he ordered all of the troops out of the fort except for the Sixth Heavies, on a rainy day, which made “it particularly severe on the colored troops who have never lived in anything but barracks, now they have nothing but dog tents.” Further depressing their morale, having judged the outer line of the fort as too large for the garrison to defend, Davidson had the men to tear it down and strengthen the inner line. It must have seemed like an exercise in futility for them to have worked so long on the line then have to expend as much labor tearing it down. Oftentimes the officers had a difficult time keeping the men interested in the work. In one instance, Lt. Samuel G. Swain, the engineer in charge of the fort spied a work detail having a massive dirt clod battle instead of working. In another instance he had difficulty getting an officer to supply details, and even then the officer had to threaten to withhold passes to get

² Mary Brayman to Ada, November 30, 1865, Bailhache-Brayman Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois; B. G. Farrar to Mason Brayman, December 3, 1864, Brayman to Farrar, December 9, 1864, Folder 116, Mason Brayman Papers; Michael E. Banasik, ed., *Reluctant Cannoneer: The Diary of Roert T. McMahan of the Twenty-Fifth Independent Ohio Light Artillery* (Iowa City: Press of the Camp Pope Bookshop, 2000), 282; Brayman’s superior, C. T. Christenson, Asst. Adjt. Genl., Military Division of West Mississippi, tried to mollify Brayman, telling that Davidson’s taking of command had nothing to do with his performance in Natchez. Folder 117, C. T. Christenson to Brayman, Mason Brayman Papers; Diary, January 7, 1865, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers.

the men to work faster. Through January and February, the typical work detail consisted of 500 men, but Davidson ordered the entire effective force of the post out to the works in late February, and seeing that the work still did not proceed fast enough, ordered Swain to work at nights with the mechanics to get the guns mounted. On March 11, he resumed the old schedule, with the Sixth Heavies supplying all of the fatigue details, for which they suffered in morale and military proficiency. Throughout the remainder of the spring and summer of 1865, even after Joseph Johnston and Robert E. Lee surrendered their armies, work continued on the fort until finally, in August 1865, the men completed Fort McPherson, a monument to inefficiency, bureaucracy, and army politics.³

In Vicksburg, the New Year's and emancipation celebrations past, the business of war resumed when Colonel Benjamin Grierson's cavalry expedition, which included the Third USCC, having rampaged through northern Mississippi destroying dozens of miles of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad, arrived in town with about "600 prisoners, 800 horses and mules...many of the prisoners were barefooted and nearly all were scantily clothed, and covered with mud from head to foot." Such wide ranging raids, which the Confederates appeared no longer capable of stopping, helped solidify the reputation of black troops in the Union army, as well as spreading dismay in the towns they passed through, for by the end of the war, very few sizeable towns in Mississippi had not seen black troops, either as occupiers, or raiders. The resulting psychological shock of seeing their former slaves as conquerors caused more than a little consternation among the civilian populace. Confederates

³ORs, Series I, Vol. 48, Pt. I, serial 101, p. 587; Samuel Swain to Brother Chester, January 4, 1866, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers; Marshall, T. B., *History of the Eighty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry: The Greyhound Regiment* (Cincinnati, The Eighty-Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry Association, 1912), 152; Swain to Mother, February 1, 1865; January 7, 1865; to Lieut. C. J. Allen, January 30, 1865; Swain Diary, April 10, 1865; Diary, February 20, 1865; February 25, 1865; Diary, March 6, 1865; Diary March 11, 1865; Diary March 25, 1865; Diary, August 8, 1865, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers.

could rationalize losses to white Union forces, but the social trauma of having black soldiers loot their homes seemed all the more humiliating.⁴

Grierson's men remained but a few days before moving on, leaving Vicksburg to return to as near a state of normalcy as anyone had a right to expect during the occupation. Overcrowding of freedmen continued to plague authorities, as it typically did during the winter when the river's annual rise forced them from their low lying camps on its banks and islands. The poorly ventilated, unsanitary cabins they crowded into proved ideal as incubators for disease, especially smallpox, which burned through the town that winter, forcing all of the soldiers to get vaccinations. But the officers and enlisted men persevered, seeking pleasant and sometimes unsavory diversions. Many of the USCT officers participated in a Lyceum in the Presbyterian church basement, where according to Swain, since "there are nothing but Colored Regiments in this garrison so there were nothing but 'N--- Officers' present." Some of the enlisted men took the downtime of winter to get married, often officially remarrying a wife whom they had betrothed on a plantation years earlier.⁵

Rumors and speculation of a major movement down the river circulated among the men in early January. Hawkins's strengthening of his regiments by adding new recruits probably did nothing to diminish such speculation, as well as a review of the black and white militias of the town on January 9. After all, why would the authorities want a militia if they expected the garrison to remain in town? Further bolstering the rumor mill, Hawkins ordered all of the men to cut their hair to less than an inch, possibly in preparation for field operations

⁴Snedeker Diary, January 5, 1865; Dimond E. Grey, *Letters from Forest Place: A Plantation Family's Correspondence, 1846-1881* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 328.

⁵ RG 393, U.S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 111, 2026, "HQ 2nd Brigade, 1st Div. USCT", Vicksburg, January 21, 1865, Hiram Scofield to A. L. Fisk, AAG; Benjamin Mills to Father, January 20, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers.

or maybe for reasons of sanitation, but certainly not out of a desire for adventure, which his officers found in implementing the order:

“Now of all things a Darkey prides himself on, it is to see how long his hair will grow and they will tie it up with strings and sometimes will not cut it for years, so when we commenced operations there was fire in the pan but we persevered and in the course of two hours had every mans hair the proper length.”

The rumors, however, proved prophetic, when near the end of the month some of the white regiments in the region received orders to move to New Orleans. The long awaited effort to take Mobile, Alabama, had begun.⁶

To people living along the river in February 1864 it must have looked like the Mississippi Valley had decided to disgorge itself of Federal soldiers, with all of the steamboat traffic. Vicksburg, on the verge of becoming a backwater of the war suddenly came alive again with the sights and sounds of an army preparing for war. The Forty-seventh, Forty-eighth, Fiftieth, and Fifty-first USCT had received orders to board transports for New Orleans. Men loaded transports, shod horses, dismantled camps, hauled equipage up and down the streets, and took care of personal business before boarding the boats. Women and children said goodbye to their husbands and fathers, wondering if they would ever see them again. Vicksburg had not seen such a sight since the spring of 1861 when its white sons mustered and shipped off to war in Virginia. Who in Vicksburg could have guessed that the town would have experienced a similar sight in 1865, but with their former

⁶ Benjamin Mills to Father, January 3, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers; Snedeker Diary, January 9, 1865; Mills to Father, January 20, 1865; Marshall, *Eighty-Third Ohio*.

slaves, black men and their families, and at the call of the Union Army; the world had indeed turned upside down in three years.⁷

Two black and one white regiment remained in town after the departure of Hawkins, but they did not lack for company, for within days, General A. J. Smith's 16th Corps, or "Gorillas" as they called themselves, arrived in town. So numerous that the town could not hold or support them, tens of thousands of men camped in the countryside along the railroad, taking a break from the long journey south to New Orleans. By the time Smith's horde deluged Vicksburg, Hawkins's command had already settled in to camps at Algiers, Louisiana, across the river from New Orleans which belonged to the white troops.⁸

Upon disembarking, Hawkins, never one to pass up a moment to train his men, began preparing them for their ultimate destination. Company officers conducted inspections, taking from the men anything not required for marching long distances, leaving everything behind that they could not carry in a knapsack. While the high command decided on how to apportion the black regiments from other commands into brigades in Hawkins's division, he continued working to perfect his troops. Leaving nothing to chance, he provided detailed instructions for just about every conceivable action, including, but not confined to instructing the musicians when to begin playing again after a halt. Up to this point, Milliken's Bend, Yazoo City, the raids on the railroad, had all served as preliminaries for this campaign; now his men would perform as part of a newly assembled army under Major General Edward Canby assigned to take Mobile.⁹

⁷ Benjamin Mills to Mother, February 18, 1865, Father and Mother, February 7, 1865 Caleb Mills Papers.

⁸ Ibid.; Mills to Father, February 18, 1865.

⁹ George F. Bailey to Dear Eliza, February 12, 1865, George E. Bailey Papers; Walter Chapman to Parents, February 14, 1865, Walter A. Chapman Papers; RG 393, U. S. Army Continental Commands,

After the short respite in Algiers Hawkins's command crossed the Mississippi and marched to Lake Pontchartrain where they boarded ships for the Gulf of Mexico, a first for many of the enlisted men, who subsequently found out that ocean travel did not agree with them. USCT officer, George Bailey, took a sadistic glee in his comrades' sufferings, "We had a jolly trip across the Gulf nearly every man was so sea sick that they all tried to throw their stomachs up...I was not so sick I had a bully time laughing at the rest." His pleasure cruise ended when the steamers halted at Barancas, Florida, his home for the next couple of weeks. Once disembarked, Hawkins put the men to work at drill and practicing siege-craft: digging trenches, building fascines, and weaving gabions in preparation to root out the Confederates dug in around Mobile. On March 19, Hawkins's men marched to Pensacola. Forging Bayou Grande along the way, the sun, beach, and water, all combined to present a scene that impressed Hawkins:

"I have always regretted not possessing a photograph of the event. The command marched by company fronts, the tide was low and the water reached about the middle of the men, a little more in places. Bayonets were fixed, haversacks and cartridge boxes were attached to the rifles and carried aloft to avoid wetting. The whole division was in full view as it moved, flags flying across the water. It was a grand sight, unequalled by anything of the kind I have ever seen or heard of."

At Pensacola Hawkins's command joined Major General Frederick Steele's column and moved north across the Florida panhandle into Alabama before turning west toward the Tensaw River which feeds into Mobile Bay. Nearing the river, the column turned south, to invest the northern approaches to Fort Blakeley, one of two remaining Confederate

strongholds east of Mobile. A few miles south of Blakely, Major General Edward R. S. Canby's force, consisting of two corps, laid siege to Spanish Fort.¹⁰

After a grueling hungry march through some of the most miserable country the men had ever trod, the column arrived at Blakeley on the evening of April 1. The following morning Rebel skirmishers pressed the Union cavalry pickets in front of Hawkins's line. In response the black troops formed a line of battle and advanced toward the skirmishers, driving them back into their fortifications. There, Hawkins's division entrenched and began siege operations, implementing all of the techniques they had practiced at Barancas, but this time under fire from Confederate soldiers and a gunboat. The division had made good progress by April 8th when they learned of the surrender of Spanish Fort; now only Blakeley lay between them and the conquest of Mobile.¹¹

On April 9, almost a thousand miles away in Wilmer McLean's parlor at Appomattox, Virginia, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant met to discuss the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia. But at Blakeley, a final act remained. That morning General Steele issued orders for Hawkins's and Gen. Christopher C. Andrews's divisions to advance at 5:30 to feel out the enemy, holding any ground they might gain. No one expected what came next, at least among the white officers. The men formed up in preparation to advance, skirmishers thrown out in front, but rather than wait for orders, the skirmishers began to advance; their officers could not contain them. With a USCT version of the Rebel yell, letting loose an otherworldly howl, the men of Hawkins's division charged on their own accord "their eyes glittered like serpents and with yells & howls like hungry wolves, they

¹⁰ George Bailey to Eliza, February 24, 1865, George E. Bailey Papers; Hawkins, *Memoranda*, 112; John L. Matthews to father, April 15, 1865, John L. Matthews Letters.

¹¹ George Bailey to Eliza, April 4, 1865, George E. Bailey Papers; Hawkins, *Memoranda 112*; *ORs Series I*, Vol. 49, Pt. I, Serial 103, p. 288.

rushed for the Rebel works.” Raising the cry of “Fort Pillow,” some five thousand black troops surged over the works toward the panicked Confederates. In the melee the USCT officers had difficulty controlling their men. One officer recalled “some trouble with our troops...but we had our men well in hand and soon obeyed our orders.” Another officer stretched the truth a bit with “the n-----s did not take a prisoner. They killed all they took to a man,” but he did gauge the sentiment of the black troops well enough. They finally had found themselves in a position to get payback for the Fort Pillow, Yazoo City, and Milliken’s Bend, to name a few, and they tried to take it. Fortunately for the Confederates, the USCT had better officers or more restraint than Forrest’s men at Fort Pillow. Hawkins reported capturing 229 men and 7 pieces of artillery. The following morning he ordered his division to assemble at 9 a.m. “when Thanksgiving will be offered to God for his favor to us in the capture of Blakely.”¹²

Given that Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia on the same day Steele’s forces took Blakely, some have legitimately questioned the military importance of the battle. In terms of social import it meant a great deal, for in the face of well trained black troops white southern males had fled in abject panic, something considered unthinkable in 1861. It also raised the level of Hawkins’s men to that of victorious conquerors rather than second-class garrison soldiers. The performance of his men made a deep impression on Walter A. Chapman, who transferred from a white regiment to the USCT for purely financial motives. Though never giving up the N-word in his correspondence, he gained a deep respect for his

¹²*ORs*, Series I, Vol. 49, Pt. II, Serial 104, p. 306; Walter Chapman to Parents, April 11, 1865, Walter A. Chapman Papers; *ORs*, Series 1, Pt I, Serial 103, p. 279; George E. Bailey Memoir, p. 20, George E. Bailey, to Dear Eliza, April [?], 1865, George E. Bailey Papers; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 49, Pt. II, Serial 104, p. 306; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 49, Pt. I, Serial 103, p. 289; RG 393, U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110. E2023, Pt. 2, Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210, p. 144, Circular No. 17, April 9, 65.

men, “In their struggle the n-----r has shown himself, on the battlefield, to be the equal of the best soldiers that ever stepped for soldiers...when we first took our company in I was feeling pretty dubious about them, they went in rather skeary, but after a while they...got perfectly reckless...I was delighted with them.”¹³

They got little time to savor their victory before moving on; southern Alabama lay before them, undefended and ripe for the taking. But before they left the environs of Mobile, they filled each regiment to maximum strength with new recruits, numbering around 3,000 by some estimates. Chapman wryly quipped, “Our old soldiers are well drilled perfect in discipline and know their duty thoroughly. If we only had some of them who could read and write, everything would be lovely.” As the region had never seen black troops before, or perhaps just as importantly, recruiters, the officers did a booming business. Regiments filled to the maximum, Hawkins’s men boarded steamers for Montgomery, the original capital of the Confederacy. The trip up the winding river system, made even slower due to obstructions placed in the river by Rebels earlier in the war, came to an unplanned stop at Selma when the little flotilla found its way blocked by the debris resulting from General James Wilson’s Union cavalymen who had defeated Nathan Bedford Forrest and disemboweled the Confederacy. Finally, on April 30th, the USCT arrived in Montgomery to similar scenes of destruction where Wilson’s men had spent more than a week dismantling Confederate war-making capabilities before moving on toward Columbus, Georgia. By that time word had gotten to Hawkins that the war had ended, and his men entered Mobile as occupiers and could not recruit the many freedmen who came to their camps, for with the end of the war, the focus changed from enlisting recruits to trying to get the white troops back to their homes as quickly as possible. Correspondingly, Lorenzo Thomas halted all recruiting

¹³ Walter Chapman to Parents, April 16, 1865; Walter A. Chapman Papers.

on April 29, 1865. After a week in the former capital, Hawkins's superiors ordered him to take his command back to Mobile where his men languished for a few weeks doing nothing but "flipping around at one thing or another busy most all of the time & doing nothing of any importance." On June 11, the command took a final voyage through the Gulf of Mexico back to New Orleans where Hawkins received orders to proceed to Pineville, Louisiana. There, the army dissolved his division, sending his men to serve in garrisons around the region. He must have found the orders bittersweet, for the division he had trained so diligently came to an end, but with its mission accomplished.¹⁴

While Hawkins's men besieged Blakely, the troops in the river garrisons experienced elation, celebration, and finally mourning as the joy accompanying the rapid-fire news of the fall of Richmond and surrender of Lee died with Lincoln. In Natchez, news of the assassination arrived, fatefully enough, aboard the doomed *Sultana*, and work immediately ceased as "universal gloom" spread over the town. Up and down the river from Natchez to Vicksburg, and the home farms and freedmen's colonies in between, black crepe and prayers went up while flags and spirits went to half mast; offices closed, orators spoke, and mourning processions shuffled up and down the dusty streets. A month later in Mobile, the men of Hawkins's division received a general order reminding them that "The U.S. colored troops, above all classes of men, must carry love and veneration of Mr. Lincoln's memory in their

¹⁴ Walter Chapman to Parents, April 16, 1865, Walter A. Chapman Papers; Snedeker Diary, May 1, 1865; RG 393, U. S. Army Continental Commands, Successions of Commands, No. 110, E2023, Pt. 2, Letters and Orders Relating to Details of Troops, Vol. 210. p. 144, Circular No. 18, April 17, 1865; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 49, Pt. 1, serial 103, p. 279; George E. Bailey Memoir, p.22; *OR's* Series I, Vol. 49, Pt. II, Serial no. 104, p. 513; *ibid.*, Series I, vol. 48, Pt. II, Serial 102, p. 859; George Bailey to Dear Mazey, May 30, 1865, George E. Bailey Papers; *ORs*, Series I. Vol. 48, Pt. II, Serial 104, p. 983; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 48, Pt. II, Serial 102, p. 899, 900, 1082.

hearts. They owe freedom, justice, consideration fame and every other blessing they and their kindred enjoy to him above all other men.”¹⁵

Many white southerners mourned, but for a different reason, the death of their rebellion. After the surrender of the principal Confederate armies, the men returned to their homes, sometimes for the first time in four years, and most did not like what they saw. Men who had no problem in stretching out their hands in friendship to General Grant’s and Sherman’s victorious troops after the surrender, found it infinitely more difficult to live under Union rule upon returning home. Those in Natchez and Vicksburg chafed under black rule from the very beginning. “Benjamin Mills found the returning Confederates insufferable: “The city of Vicksburg is full of Rebels now who walk around the streets as if they were the monarchs of all they surveyed in their old gray Confederate uniforms.” Further south in Natchez, Samuel Swain felt similar resentment:

“The country here is filling up with returning soldiers and the more I see of them and of their haughty defiant and unsubdued actions, the more I regret that Lee and Johnson were ever allowed to negotiate a surrender, but instead were crowded with the bayonet by Grant and Sherman until they begged for their lives to be spared. I think it would make their whipping more complete.”

Another account, written from a Confederate point of view, and possibly fictional, captured the essence of Confederate feeling toward black soldiers, “In going to town some three miles from our abode, I walked...and on my route had to pass the encampment of the “U.S.C.I.” (United States Colored Infantry) otherwise *n-----r* soldiers. It made my blood boil while passing these *n-----s*, to witness their airs of authority.” Benjamin Grubb Humphreys, a former Confederate general who became Mississippi’s first postwar governor until removed from office by Federal troops, could not contain his revulsion for black troops when

¹⁵ Samuel Swain to Dear Sister, April 30, 1865, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers; *ORs*, Series I, Vo. 48, Pt. II, Serial 102, p.117; *ORs*, Series I, Vol. 49, Pt. II, Serial No. 104, p. 834.

he journeyed to Jackson during the summer of 1865 to sign the Oath of Allegiance. As he sat on a low wall next to the capital building a USCT band came blaring up the street, rejoicing in his humiliation, or at least he felt that way.¹⁶

The exodus of white troops from the south and the army shortly after hostilities ceased left black troops as masters over the region as the enforcement arm of the U.S. government's early reconstruction efforts. As the protectors of U.S. government officials, freedmen, northern businessmen, and dissident white southerners, the black troops moved into the interior of Louisiana and Mississippi where they encountered white southerners who had not yet learned the meaning of surrender and refused to do so. Within four days of surrendering his forces at Citronelle, Alabama, in early May 1865, General Richard Taylor complained to General Canby about black troops garrisoning towns in southern Mississippi, to which Canby replied, "he was instructed to make this selection from the best disciplined of his troops, and place them under charge of intelligent and discreet officers." Samuel Swain offered his opinion on southern hostility toward blacks, "They are so exasperated by the success of the Yankees whom they thought they were going to whip so beautifully that they have not any way to vent their spleen but upon poor darkey." Samuel Denham Barnes, serving in a USCT unit stationed at Davis Bend, Mississippi, had a memorable conversation with a former Confederate captain who proclaimed that "he always had owned slaves and always would." Barnes wrote in his diary, "This seems to be quite a general opinion among the more ignorant or headstrong class."¹⁷

¹⁶Benjamin Mills to Father, May 6, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers; Samuel Swain to Dear Brother George, June 11, 1865, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers; *Southern Cultivator* (Augusta), February 1867; Benjamin Grubb Humphreys Memoir, Benjamin Grubb Humphreys Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

¹⁷OR's, Series I, Vol. 49, Pt. II, Serial No. 104, p. 673; Swain to Dear Brother Georgia; July 26, 1865; Samuel Denham Barnes Papers, Diary, July 4, 1865.

Perhaps just as disheartening, the newly restored Mississippi civil government began attacking the black troops. In Brookhaven, a USCT officer had his men forcibly remove a verbally abusive civilian from his office. The man, in turn, went to the local magistrate and swore out a warrant on the officer for assault and battery. The local sheriff along with a posse of militia (usually comprised of former Confederate soldiers) arrested the officer and put him jail. This infuriated the enlisted men of the Fifty-eighth USCT, who wanted to go break him out of jail immediately, but their officers restrained them long enough for General Peter Osterhaus to issue an order for them to lawfully release their captain from jail, which they did, replacing him in the cell with the offending sheriff. State officials condemned the army, shedding crocodile tears and bewailing the shredding of the constitution. Later that summer, Governor Humphreys called for the removal of the USCT, arguing that “No people can relish being kept in order by armed forces made up of their former bondmen...The fact is, they hate n-----r soldiers and freedmen’s bureaus...Everyone is afraid of the negro soldiers-- they crowd everybody off the sidewalks, and shoot and kill us, and protect the freedmen in their indolence and acts of crime.” A similar event occurred in Canton when civil authorities accused a black soldier of stealing cotton and arrested him. He could not post bail and faced the prospect of sitting in jail until his case went to trial. Upon hearing about his incarceration, his brother soldiers marched on the jail, demanding his release or “they would tear down the jail.” For people who had recently partaken in a bloody rebellion against the United States, the citizens of Canton screamed loudly over the “high-handed outrage on the majesty of the law.”¹⁸

¹⁸*New York Times*, February 24, 1866; Edwin L. Hobart, *Semi-history of a boy-veteran of the Twenty-eighth Regiment Illinois Infantry Volunteer, in a Black Regiment* (n. p. 1909), 28; *Canton Semi-Weekly Citizen*, November 5, 1865;

Civilian resistance to black occupation troops did not stop with civil actions. The reconstitution of the militia system shortly after the surrender had no other purpose than to intimidate black civilians and continue the war by other means against black troops. In the face of such armed hostility, black soldiers took their lives into their own hands by journeying out alone, or in small squads. In downtown Summit, Mississippi, in broad daylight, two white men halted a member of the Sixty-sixth USCT, “cut off his coat-buttons and the fastenings for shoulder-scales, and gave him an hour to leave town.” Private Judge Norman of the Fiftieth USCT met his end near Raymond, Mississippi, when a squad of militiamen stopped him and demanded “his authority for being away from his regiment.” He allegedly pulled out a pistol and said “This is my pass.” A militia officer then tried to arrest him, resulting in a gun battle in which they killed the black soldier. In January 1866, Samuel Swain noted, “Anyone who thinks that the war really ended should go through the country between the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers. The southern people are determined to drive northern people out of the country.”¹⁹

Swain saw the USCT as the solution to the militias and outlaw gangs roaming the region. “If ten or fifteen thousand black troops could be distributed through the state and kept upon them until they were so sick of military that they would be glad to keep order in the country themselves. I think it would be a lasting blessing to these people.” Freedmen in Mississippi certainly would have found it a blessing; the mere sight of black troops aboard transports brought raucous black crowds from their dwellings along the rivers, cheering so loudly that Benjamin Mills thought “some of them would burst their throats.” The soldiers

¹⁹George Bailey Memoir, p. 23, 24, George E. Bailey Papers; *Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction of the First Session Thirty-Ninth Congress, Arkansas - Georgia - Mississippi - Alabama*, (Government Printing Office, Washington, 1866) 146-147; *The Weekly Standard* (Port Gibson), January 6, 1866; Samuel Swain to Brother Chester, January 4, 1866, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers.

“returned it with interest.” But the shouting did not last long, for within a year, their three year enlistments concluded, most of the USCT regiments mustered out, leaving the state of Mississippi in the hands of small regular army detachments. Brazen, even with significant numbers of Federal troops in the region, resentful white southerners became even more contemptuous of the rule of law and freedmen’s rights after the USCT mustered out, ultimately ushering in the redeemers and the end of Reconstruction.²⁰

Near the end of their service, several white officers explained the satisfaction they gained from serving in black regiments. Swain wrote, “there is a duty to be performed by somebody for the benefit of the colored race.” Benjamin Mills told his father, “They will be among the best of citizens who will be prepared to maintain their rights both with the pen and sword.” George Bailey, still clinging to the N-word in his correspondence wrote, “I shall never be sorry for what I have done to make niger soldiers. I am proud to think that I can boast of being one among the few that has been engaged in the work.” Though written late 1863, when the USCT still remained a noble experiment, seeing into the future, General Hawkins told a friend:

"My dear friend you are a reading man and among other books you read history, won't you come down here where we are making history and see with your own eyes what the historian of fifty years hence, had he a chance, would cross the ocean to see. I will show you a new wonder and a new people, and perhaps the best colored troops in the United States."²¹

²⁰ *ibid.*; Swain to Dear Brother George, September 26, 1865, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers; Benjamin Mills to Father and Mother, June 4, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers.

²¹ Swain to Dear Sister, August 19, 1865, Samuel Glyde Swain Papers; Benjamin Mills to Dear Father, April 11, 1865, Caleb Mills Papers; George Bailey to Mazey, August 22, 1865, George E. Bailey Papers; John P. Hawkins to Caleb Mills, enclosure, December 11, 1863.

Perhaps he was bragging, perhaps a bit grandiloquent in his predictions, and perhaps a bit too glowing in his estimation of the troops. Hawkins may have gotten caught up in the emotion of the glorious task at hand: to show the rest of the nation that black troops could perform as well as white. But then again, maybe he was not bragging, waxing eloquent, or prematurely polishing bronze laurels, for in the span of their three years of service, the men who enlisted in the USCT went from mastered to masters.

Most came to the army as products of Mississippi Valley plantation slavery, a controlling institution. As opposed to a total institution, the plantation slavery of the Mississippi Valley was conducted by white masters who had limits to their control, some legal and most practical. Most slaves in the region, on all but the harshest of plantations, had a certain amount of free time they could call their own after completing a day or week's worth of work. In that spare time, they could socialize on the plantation, or journey into one of the local towns to engage in some commerce on a Sunday if their masters provided them with a pass. Their daily labors followed the growth cycle of cotton, with downtime in the winter months for less demanding chores and a certain amount of leisure. Most slave owners recognized that their livelihoods rested on the general welfare of their chattel, and rather than use them up and toss them aside like so many living, breathing, disposable tools, they treated them in such a manner as to maintain or increase the value of their investment. But no one should mistake the institution as benign. It destroyed families, moral fiber, and lives, crippling an entire race of people for generations, some claim even to the present. Slaves committing serious crimes often faced draconian consequences, particularly in the case of the Second Creek conspiracy in Natchez at the beginning of the Civil War, where the nabobs of Natchez exacted the ultimate penalty for what they considered the ultimate crime: mutiny.

Lesser crimes resulted in corporal punishment, from routine spankings for slave children, to the extreme case in which the Blount Steward, in a fit of blind rage, took a hammer to Daniel Timms's head.

Abraham Lincoln promised emancipation; the Union army made it reality, liberating thousands of slaves as well as providing a haven for the multitudes more, who running the swamps at night with children in their arms and friends in tow, eluded baying hounds to make their way to the occupied towns along the river. There they found not the freedom they envisioned, but chaos. The Union army had no experience in nation building, that is taking predemocratic people and helping them to establish their own democratic institutions, let alone providing the basic necessities of life: bread, water, and shelter. Ad hoc solutions had to suffice for the thousands of black men, women, and children, who by escaping slavery redefined themselves in the eyes of the law—no longer slaves, servants, or contrabands, became freedmen. Their first lesson in freedom was that it was not free, not metaphorically speaking in some grand definition for school children, but in a very practical sense when the United States government had no intention of giving away food, shelter, and water without some kind of accounting. Thus, the government intended that the freedmen earn their keep until the army could pacify the region enough for them to return to the fields, either as hands on a plantation or small yeoman farmers on their own land.

Many opted for the army, unwittingly exchanging one controlling institution for another. As envisioned by many of the Union generals, uniformed black men would operate in a support role, replacing white men in the mundane manual tasks that keep armies moving forward so that more white soldiers could shoulder a rifle in the field. Like the planters, the army demanded hard labor and obedience. Failure to provide either often resulted in

corporal and sometimes capital punishment. Although Hawkins tried to impose limits on the more humiliating forms of corporal punishment in his command, such as bucking and gagging, men who ran afoul of the regulations often received judicial punishments of several months of hard labor without pay, especially in Natchez where Fort McPherson consumed black labor at a rate comparable to that to any plantation in the region. Given the army's poor record at paying troops in the region in a timely manner, it must have seemed very much like slavery to the black men, except that when they were slaves, their old masters had not required them to lay down their lives on any given day. In regard to life, like the planters, the army too could require the ultimate penalty, such as in the case of the mutineers in Vicksburg, and the several murder cases that transpired during the occupation. Planters, however, likely would not have resorted to execution for the type of protest engaged in by the men of the Forty-ninth USCT.

Here, the comparison breaks down, for though the army and slavery share many similarities in regard to labor and punishment, they diverge in terms of impact on blacks in the region. Slavery was a negative controlling institution, intended to extract as much profit out of the labor of blacks as possible. The army was a positive controlling institution that served to elevate the freedmen who enlisted. As in the case of the Shepard court of inquiry, the army recognized black men and women in the eyes of the law, allowing them to testify against whites in a court of law, a right denied to them in the South. In doing this the army conferred legal personhood upon them, recognizing them as something more than mere property or contraband. Black soldiers could also testify on their on behalf in trials against white Union officers, with success. Legal avenues existed for the expression of grievances and for redress, something that did not exist on the plantations. Some years before the war,

in Natchez, the white murderers of a free black barber in Natchez escaped justice because the black witnesses could not testify in court.

In addition to conferring rights on black soldiers, the army also sought to uplift the entire black community through chaplains. Initially tasked to take care of the train of contrabands that seemed to trail every Union army that marched through the southern countryside, the chaplains quickly became the liaisons between northern philanthropic organizations and the army. These great unsung heroes of the Civil War coordinated relief shipments, personnel assignments, organized schools, and helped establish hospitals. Ultimately, and as many chaplains and higher ranking USCT officers believed, military service fostered a democratic spirit in the soldiers, preparing them for citizenship after the war.

Through the controlling institution of the army, the black soldiers emerged as masters over the region, though not in the actual master-servant sense, but in a generic manner as the primary enforcement arm of federal policy in the region. The rapid mustering out of white troops en masse left the USCT and a few white regiments as the sole enforcers of federal policy in the region. Since many black regiments organized in 1863 and 1864 with three year enlistments, they would have inherited the responsibility anyway by default, but with caveats. For as much as the ex-Confederates hated black troops, nothing could erase the accomplishments of the black soldiers, particularly Hawkins's men. They had faced the Confederates in three significant battles: Milliken's Bend, Yazoo City, and Fort Blakely, and defeated them in every case. When the Union absolutely needed the destruction of the railroad bridge at Vaughan's Station, the Third USCC delivered. In the countless skirmishes that took place in the countryside between Vicksburg and Natchez, the USCT gave a solid

accounting of themselves. As a result, when the war ended the Rebels could not point fingers at the black troops and call them unworthy representatives of federal authority, for on the field of battle the black men had proven themselves equal to, if not superior to, white southerners in bravery and skill.

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ABSTRACT

NEW MASTERS ON THE MISSISSIPPI: THE UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS OF THE MIDDLE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

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Historians have long debated the degree to which the Civil War transformed the lives of African-Americans. No African-Americans were more powerfully drawn into the vortex of the Civil War's rapidly changing circumstances than those former Mississippi slaves who became members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). This dissertation argues that the freedmen who joined USCT in the Middle Mississippi Valley cast aside their plantation masters for a new master in the form of the U.S. Army, but subsequently became masters themselves as they gained experience, only to lose their status after the war ended.

When General Ulysses S. Grant began his final campaign for Vicksburg, Mississippi, thousands of slaves fled their masters and attached themselves to his army. President Lincoln saw the Freedmen as a resource that could help turn the tide of the war, and dispatched Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas to the Mississippi Valley to recruit freedmen into the army.

For the former freedmen, military life was not much different from slavery, for they had exchanged one controlling institution for another, spending long hours drilling, foraging, and building fortifications. Furthermore, as on the plantations, they could suffer corporal

punishment, or even death, for misdeeds. Yet, as they gained experience and confidence, they emerged from their garrisons to conduct raids and patrols, and most importantly, win victories, thus exercising mastership over the Middle Mississippi Valley.

Their supremacy was short lived, for the conclusion of the war brought many former Confederates home. Defeated, but unbroken, ex-Confederates immediately began waging war, political and real, against the USCT. In the end, the men of the USCT mustered out and returned to work in the fields, returning mastery to their former owners.