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Black and on the Border

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THE CIVIL WAR is often understood in terms of stark opposites. It seems only natural to think of North and South, of Union and Confederacy, of freedom and slavery. But the habit of thinking in opposites often extends to other parts of the war where it serves us less well: battlefield and homefront, soldier and civilian, male and female, and black and white, as if these places, people, and experiences were not swept up in the same all-consuming war.

In an attempt to bring together aspects of the war that are often kept separate, this essay focuses on the region of the United States that is often ignored when explaining the onset of the Civil War: the border where the upper South met the lower North. This area—a third of the nation—went into the war with uncertainty but then gave itself over to the conflict, playing a crucial role start to finish as battlefield and supplier of soldiers, materiel, and leaders. Specifically, this essay looks at the border between Virginia and Pennsylvania, a region almost arbitrarily divided by the Mason-Dixon Line. People in this area had much in common—from their ethnic

heritage to the crops they grew—but were divided profoundly by slavery. This division made all the difference.

We start our story in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, whose southern border rests on the Mason-Dixon Line. Nearly eighteen hundred people identified in the census as black or of mixed race lived there in 1860. Indeed, Franklin held the fifth-highest number of black residents of any county in Pennsylvania. Black families had several reasons for living in the county. Eight out of ten had been born in Franklin. Slavery was well established in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century and had been especially strong in the southern part of the state, where farms differed little from those just across the Maryland border. Several hundred free blacks, moreover, had come from Maryland and Virginia in the decades since.

Most black families lived near one another in small communities and in large households. They gathered several generations under the same roof or nearby, seeking security in a threatening world. Many gathered in the southernmost parts of the county, with nearly four hundred in Mercersburg. The other largest group of African Americans in Franklin lived in the South Ward of Chambersburg. They were unwelcome just across Market Street in the next ward, where only a few people of color lived. Most black people in Franklin's largest town worked in the same jobs as other black people throughout the North—laborers, porters, waiters, shoeblacks, cooks, and servants—and had just as little to show for it.

When the Civil War came, the black population of Franklin had not been welcome to participate in the preparations. Like their counterparts across the North, African Americans in Franklin had been turned away from the recruiting tables until early 1863. At that time Massachusetts—tired of waiting for national action—acted on its own and received authorization from its governor to create black regiments officered by white abolitionists and recruited from across the North.

Then the Fifty-fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry formed in Boston. At its head stood Robert Gould Shaw, the

young son of a leading antislavery family in Boston and a veteran of another Massachusetts unit. Leaders of the abolitionist movement, black and white, raised over a hundred thousand dollars and began a vigorous recruitment campaign across the North from Massachusetts to Ohio. Everyone involved was determined to show that African American men were eager to fight for the Union and abolition, eager to put their lives on the line against a foe that decreed that any black man captured fighting against the South would be hanged for instigating insurrection. "The paper proclamation must now be made iron, lead, and fire," Frederick Douglass declared.¹

In March, Franklin's Democratic paper noted with relief that "in this neighborhood, there has, so far been no effort to procure negro recruits, that we have heard of, and it is currently said that such an effort, if made, will be useless. They will have to be drafted, if obtained at all." White men in Franklin County and throughout Pennsylvania, bribed with bounties, were already being drafted to fill the state and local quotas. Certainly black men would not be braver.² Only a week later the paper admitted that "a negro recruiting officer visited this place last week and of course was quite a 'lion' among the 'free Americans of African descent;' but, as far as we know, he did not obtain a single recruit," the *Valley Spirit* reported. Rather than joining in the fight, the paper laughed, "it is rumored that one of the 'sable brethren' retorted to the urgent appeals of the recruiting officer in favor of his cause: 'Nigger has nuffin to do with dis war. Two dogs fight over a bone—did you ever see de bone fight?'"³

The paper could not have been more wrong. Only four weeks later, in late April, the *Valley Spirit* ruefully noted that "some forty or fifty black recruits for the Massachusetts Regiments, left this [community] for Boston, on Monday morning last." The paper, clearly surprised, blustered that "we are only too glad to get rid of these worthless negroes." Always eager to find something wrong with anything black people did, the paper whined that "we scarcely like the idea of their being credited to Massachusetts, and thus

filling up her quota under the last draft, while Pennsylvania was compelled to fill her quota, under that same draft, with free white male citizens.”⁴

The black men of Franklin would not wait for Pennsylvania. They seized the first opportunity they found to join the fight. An African American abolitionist recruiter from the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts, perhaps based in Harrisburg or Philadelphia, decided that Franklin County offered a promising field in which to recruit free black men. The details of his decision have been lost. Maybe the large percentage of African Americans in southern Pennsylvania attracted his attention; or allies on the Underground Railroad passed on word of the active community there; or leading black abolitionist Martin Delaney, a Franklin native, led the campaign; or Frederick Douglass recalled his visit there three years earlier, where black men had helped John Brown. In any case, forty-five men living in Franklin County enlisted in the Fifty-fourth and another thirteen signed up in the Fifty-fifth, the regiment formed by the overflow from the first regiment. Another eleven men born in Franklin County whose residence was listed elsewhere also signed up with the Fifty-fourth. These numbers made Franklin County perhaps the greatest contributor to these early African American regiments, on a per capita basis, of any place in the United States. Overall, Pennsylvania produced more black soldiers than any other Northern state, including Massachusetts.⁵

Ten of Franklin's recruits came from Chambersburg, but ten came from Mercersburg, the small community in southern Franklin where a large portion of the free black population lived. The Burgess family contributed two brothers and a cousin; the Christy family, four brothers; the Demus family, three; the Krunkleton family, four; the Rideout family, two; and the Watson family, two. Almost all of these men were young, between eighteen and twenty-five. They owned almost nothing and they worked as laborers and farmers, by and large, though Joseph Burgess was a teacher, Thomas Burgess was a carpenter, and Joseph Christy was a wood cutter.⁶

About a third of Franklin's black recruits signed up on the same day—April 22, 1863, almost exactly two years after Fort Sumter. The recruiting officers offered them a fifty-dollar bounty, thirteen dollars a month in pay (the same as white soldiers received), and eight dollars a month for their families left behind. Others joined throughout May as the Fifty-fourth gathered in Massachusetts, about a hundred men a week arriving at the gray and muddy camp outside of Boston. After an especially rigorous physical examination to choose the most fit, the new recruits were immediately put to drill and training. Supporters saw to it that all equipment and food were first-rate. Visitors, male and female, came to view the novel sight of black soldiers drilling. Among the visitors were William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, whose son joined as sergeant major.

From Mercersburg, four Christy brothers—Samuel, William, Joseph, and Jacob—joined up with David Demus. The young Christy men lived with their father, Jacob, a widower of fifty-four who owned a small farm worth \$200, and their sister Mary Jane, a twenty-year-old domestic worker. Demus had grown up a quarter of a mile from the Christys. He worked as a farmhand and married Mary Jane Christy in 1860. All of the men, in their early twenties, worked as laborers and held no property. The census taker categorized the Christys as black and Demus as mulatto. All of them had learned the basics of writing and sent letters back to Mary Jane about their experiences as they headed to Boston for training.

Jacob wrote first that “i take my pen in hand to inform to you that I am well and all the rest of them are well we are very well pleas with soildieren.” He knew that “we wont have it so easy when we leave Boston we spect to leave about the first of June and it may be sooner for what we know for the rigiment is nearly fill out.” The Christys arrived first, but soon Demus and his brother George appeared and wrote, “we was all very glad to see them boys coming.” David sent word back to Mary Jane that “we didant no when we would get any money but i dont think it will be

very long." The young husband was eager to send his wife money from his first pay draw.⁷

The training was hard and punishment came quickly. "Two of the boys was made go and get there knacksack and they had to wear them to punish them for looking around wile thay was in ranks when we are in ranks we are not aloud to look around or spite or to raise our hand." The discipline was worth it, though, for "we also gut our arms this day they are springfield rifles wich we have they are aloud to kill a great disants." The Pennsylvania men "dont like the climent atoll for it is very cold out here now we heft to wear our over coats all day it that cold." They knew that when they finished their training and "we go down south it will be worm enough and wormer then we wish."⁸

David Demus shared some of the same opinions of Boston in early May. "It is very cold here it snow and rain on the day that we lander." But he proclaimed himself "very well satisfy" and "very well pleas." He was glad to see that "we got in the nix Camp that sam and them other boys is in that left mercersburg." Like all soldiers, Demus longed for letters from home. He asked Mary Jane to "rite as soon as you can and let me no how mother is and all the rest of the friends."⁹ Samuel wrote his sister the next day to let her know that "we expect to move soon to north carlina" because "the rigment ar ful now and we gut ar uniform and arms." Samuel planned to send a likeness "as soon as i can git it taken" and asked Mary Jane to "tel father that i will send sum monney home to pay Clark for my boots as soon as we git ar buntney that will be soon."¹⁰

At the end of May the troops gathered to hear the governor of Massachusetts address them in inspiring terms and then march before cheering crowds through Boston. They boarded steamships to head for the Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and the Carolinas. Whites had abandoned the islands, among the wealthiest plantation areas of the South. "We was on the sea seven days befor we gut to Camp," Samuel Christy wrote home, "and after we weas

thear one day we went out to put up ar tents." After filling their canteens and loading their haversacks, "we was March to the river and gut on the ship and went a but fifteen mils thear was thee guns bots with went be for us and at last we Came to a little town."¹¹

The little town was Darien, Georgia, up the river from the coast. The Fifty-fourth walked into the wealthy and nearly deserted town of about one hundred homes. At their officers' orders, they stripped it bare. The men got out "of the ship and went in to it and took every thing that was good," Samuel told Mary Jane. "We gut sum sheep and sum cattl and hogs and chickens and meny others things."¹² David Demus calculated that "the hole amont Was a boat a milion of dollars."¹³ Officers' tents were soon equipped with rich furniture, carpets, and mirrors.

After taking what they wanted, Samuel noted matter-of-factly, the soldiers "set the town on fier and burnt it down." A white officer, James Montgomery, told Colonel Robert Shaw, "with a sweet smile," that he wanted to destroy Darien because "Southerners must be made to feel that this was a real war." The white South was "to be swept away by the hand of God like the Jews of old." Montgomery had been an associate of John Brown's in Kansas and shared Brown's belief in vengeance. Montgomery argued that the Confederacy did not recognize the legitimacy of the black troops and so "we are outlawed, and therefore not bound by the rules of regular warfare." Montgomery lit the blaze in Darien himself. Driven by the wind, it soon destroyed everything but a church, a few homes, and a lumberworks owned by a Northerner.¹⁴

Shaw admitted in a letter home that "in theory it may seem all right to some; but when it comes to being made the instrument of the Lord's vengeance, I myself don't like it." He protested the burning to his superiors, fearing that it would reflect badly on the black soldiers under his command. He had no doubts about burning a town occupied by Rebels but the "wanton destruction" of Darien seemed "dirty business." As the weeks passed, however, he came to

admire Montgomery and adopt some of his ideas about conducting war.¹⁵

The men of the Fifty-fourth retired to camps on St. Simon's and St. Helena near Hilton Head. The camps were pleasant, cooled by the breezes off the Atlantic. The black soldiers continued to train and drill, awaiting orders for further movements. In the meantime, orders from Washington cut their pay cut from \$13 a month to \$10, below that of white soldiers in the Union army. They heard rumors that their rifles would be taken away and replaced with pikes. The political pressure against the black soldiers remained strong in the North. Many whites doubted the black men would fight when faced with enemy resistance.

While the Franklin County members of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts were down off the Atlantic Coast, ironically, Franklin County was being invaded. Franklin lay in the valley that runs from Pennsylvania all the way through Virginia. Accordingly, it had long been seen as one of the most vulnerable places in the North. When Robert E. Lee decided to take the war North in the summer of 1863 after the Confederates' stunning victory at Chancellorsville, he went up through Franklin, shielded from the east by the mountains.

There could be no doubt in late June that the Confederate invasion was a brilliant maneuver in every way. "Providence has abundantly blessed our movement, few casualties of any kind—and our success wonderful—we shall get nearly a million dollars worth of horses, supplies of all kinds &c from this county," Jed Hotchkiss wrote with satisfaction. Who could have imagined that invading the rich and powerful North would have been this easy? "The people are very submissive and comply, meekly, with the demands made on them—I think we shall be able to do a good deal towards bringing about an honorable peace."¹⁶

The Confederates did not live up to Northern fears. The demolition of a railroad bridge and roundhouse "were the only acts

of real destruction attempted,” Hoke acknowledged. “True, many horses, cattle, and other things were taken, but all was within the rules of war.”¹⁷

One great exception to the “rules of war” marked the Confederate behavior: “the carrying away of free negroes.” The Confederates’ actions toward black people proved to be even worse than the white residents of Franklin had anticipated. “One of the revolting features of this day was the scouring of the fields about the town and searching of houses in portions of the place for negroes,” Jacob Hoke lamented. “These poor creatures—those of them who had not fled upon the approach of the foe—sought concealment in the growing wheat fields around town. Into these the cavalymen rode in search of their prey, and many were caught—some after a desperate chase and being fired at.” Philip Schaff, down in Mercersburg, saw the capture of black people he knew “to have been born and raised on free soil.”¹⁸

Rachel Cormany anguished over the raids. The Confederates, on the second day of their occupation of Chambersburg, “were hunting up the contrabands & driving them off by droves. O! How it grated on our hearts to have to sit quietly & look at such brutal deeds—I saw no men among the contrabands—all women & children.” Like Hoke and Schaff, Rachel Cormany could see that “some of the colored people who were raised here were taken along.” She could do nothing, only watch “on the front step as they were driven by just like we would drive cattle. Some laughed & seemed not to care—but nearly all hung their heads. One woman was pleading wonderfully with her driver for her children—but all the sympathy she received from him was a rough ‘March along’ — at which she would quicken her pace again.” Rachel could not imagine what the Rebel soldiers “want with those little babies—whole families were taken.” She assumed that the black men “left thinking the women & children would not be disturbed. I cannot describe all the scenes.”¹⁹

The white people of Franklin did not always stand by and watch the kidnapping by the Confederates. Jacob Hoke interceded for two of his kidnapped neighbors and down in Greencastle “a few determined men, armed with revolvers, captured a squad which had in charge a number of these poor frightened creatures, and released them from the unhappy fate which threatened them.”²⁰ A prominent Reformed Church theologian, Benjamin S. Schneck, went directly to Confederate headquarters to testify on behalf of Esque Hall, a “well and favorably known colored man,” as well as for two repairmen on the Cumberland Valley Railroad.²¹

Jemima Cree took things in hand as well. She heard that the Rebels had been “scouting around, gathering up our Darkies, and that they had Mag down on the court house pavement. I got my ‘fixens’ on, and started down,” she wrote her husband. “There were about 25 women and children, with Mag and Fannie. I interceded for Mag, told them she was free born, etc. The man said he could do nothing, he was acting according to orders.” Fannie was indeed “contraband,” so Cree could have done nothing for her. In any case, the Confederates left before the Franklin woman could take her complaint higher up.

“They took up all they could find,” Cree wrote with terror and disgust, “even little children, whom they had to carry on horseback before them. All who could get there fled to the woods, and many who were wise are hid in the houses of their employers.” Despite such efforts by white patrons, the numbers and guns lay with the Confederates, who captured “about 250 people . . . into bondage,” Chambersburg merchant William Heyser estimated.²² Amos Stouffer sadly observed that Confederates “are scouring the country in every direction about Waynesboro, Greencastle, Mercersburg [and] Finkstown for horses and cattle and Negroes.”²³

Wagons left Chambersburg with thirty to forty black women and children, heading for Virginia under the control of a Confederate chaplain and four soldiers. A group of local whites—led by

the owner of a local inn—stopped the wagons, disarmed the soldiers, took them prisoner, and set the women and children free. The Greencastle residents decided that they risked the destruction of their town if they did not release the soldiers and so they did. But the chaplain demanded \$50,000 to pay for the loss of the people he claimed as his slaves. Though he lowered his demands by half, the townspeople still did not have that much money. After threatening to return and burn the town, the chaplain left. A local reporter met thirteen of the captured African Americans voluntarily returning to Greencastle after they had heard of the threatened burning. They were going to turn themselves over to prevent retaliation against their friends, but were delighted to hear that the man who claimed to own them had departed.²⁴ The Confederates occupied Franklin County for two more weeks, until the beginning of July 1863. Then, they turned their vast army to the east to meet the Union army at Gettysburg.

Meanwhile, the African American soldiers of Franklin were engaged in battles of their own. “I have saw more then i ever expected to see be for i left home,” William Christy wrote to Mary Jane Demus, after the Battle of Fort Wagner in July 1863. The charge, as he called it, up to Fort Wagner was a hard one. “We lost agrate meny men,” Christy reported and concluded that “the revls Was tow harde for us.” He also told his sister that their brother Jacob was wounded in the battle, that several friends from Franklin County were killed, and that her husband, David Demus, was also wounded. The charge at Fort Wagner, though, was not the only thing on Christy’s mind. He was especially worried about his family back home and whether the rumors he was hearing were true.

When Confederate troops moved into Franklin County in late June 1863 just before the Battle of Gettysburg, they captured black residents and sent them South into slavery. The word spread and eventually soldiers in the Fifty-fourth heard the stories. William Christy thought it confirmed what he had always maintained, that

“the rebels wood comin and take all the Coulerd poples that they cod get and take them.” David Demus wrote to his wife to ask how she had “got a long” during the raids. The rebel troops, he stated matter-of-factly, were something he saw “evrey Day mor or lest.” Demus told her that he had “sean so meney rebbel” that he hardly took notice when they start shelling his encampment, that he held little regard for them even though the shells hit “all a bote us and tha kill a man now an then.”²⁵

The Franklin County soldiers in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts wanted at these times to go home—to protect their families from marauding Confederates, to spend time with them, to see their wives and children, to talk with their friends, and to eat decent food. David Demus told his wife that the hard tack they were issued was so tough that even after soaking it in water for eight weeks and stomping on it, the dull white substance looked and felt no different. “All we want is to get home,” Demus wrote. The fleas were so miserable in camp that he could hardly stand it. He predicted that once he was home and alive it would take “all the Peape that is thear to hold me” to make him leave again. When Mary Jane Demus wrote to say that she was working hard in the fields husking corn, David Demus worried that his wife was doing too much hard labor and would hurt herself. “I doant Want to hear of you in the field,” he emphasized. He reassured her that he would be paid soon and said to use his name and his imminent return to Franklin, if necessary, to prevent her employer from hurting her. Demus, the Christy brothers, and other members of the family all wanted to send and receive photographs or “likenesses” and wrote often to request them. Demus was concerned that his head wound, suffered in the attack on Fort Wagner, had so swollen and disfigured his face that his wife might not recognize him. Later, he wrote to assure her that he was healthy and even fat, since he was detailed to work as the butcher because of his wounds. When he learned from a Franklin County friend that his wife was also getting fat, he wrote to cheer her on,

“how glad I Was to hear that you are getting a long so Well and is so fat . . . he told me that you Was that big and fat that you had to Com in the hose side Ways or you Wod fill up the dore he sead that he never saw eney boddy get so fat in a sort time in his life like you have got.”²⁶

The soldiers predicted that they would be home “before a great while.” The Demus and Christy families in the Fifty-fourth kept up closely with each other. Jacob Christy reported that they “like soldieren very well but we dont like the thing of duing without money so long.” With the weather pleasant and the hard campaigning of the summer behind them, the soldiers on Thanksgiving wished to be home and to have “sum turkey and chicken.” Christy looked ahead to that time when they might come home and remarked, “we can tell you of things that you never drem of for I have seen thing that I never drem of before.”²⁷

The Demus and Christy family members signed up in Franklin County with the Fifty-fourth and fought with it through the war. They saw their fellow black soldiers drill and organize with professionalism. They saw their fellow black soldiers lead the assault on Fort Wagner and fight with bravery and dignity. They lined up in formation and saw a fellow soldier blindfolded, carted to a field on a wagon, pulled out of the wagon, stripped of his coat and shirt, put into kneeling position, and shot for desertion. “It was a hard site to lok at,” David Demus wrote afterward. And they saw the death of one of their own. “We heave bean in a fite,” David Demus wrote to his wife about the Battle of Olustee in Florida, “but thank god all ar boys got out but William Christy.” Demus said that he saw his brother-in-law on the battlefield, saw him as he was shot, and saw him fall. “We lost him in a good [cause],” Demus told her, “he was a brave boy hear feared nothing.”²⁸

At home in Franklin County the black soldiers were given little respect despite the bravery they had shown in battle and the sacrifices they made for the cause. The Republican newspaper had supported black enlistment but in doing so pointed out that blacks

were just as effective at stopping Confederate bullets as whites. The paper reprinted a song widely circulated from a soldier in the New York Irish regiment:

In battle's wild commotion.
I shouldn't at all object
If Sambo's body should stop a ball
That was comin' for me direct,
And the prod of a Southern bagnet,
So liberal are we here,
I'll resign and let Sambo take it
On every day in the year!
On every day in the year, boys,
An' wid none of your nasty pride.
All my right in a Southern bagnet prod
Wid Sambo I'll divide.
The men who object to Sambo
Should take his place and fight:
And it's better to have a naygur's hue
Than a liber that's wake an' white;
Though Sambo's black as the ace of spades,
His finger a thrigger [sic] can pull,
And his eye runs straight on the barrel sights
From under his thatch of wool.
So hear me all, boys, darlings,
Don't think I'm tippin' you chaff,
The right to be kilt I'll divide wid him,
And give him the largest half!²⁹

After the bravery of the black soldiers at the Battle of Olustee, the Republican paper praised the regiment generally but gave credit to the white officers of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts. After Colonel Robert Gould Shaw's death at Fort Wagner, a similarly young and inspired colonel originally from Philadelphia led the regiment. The newspaper characterized the unit's behavior as "uniformly admirable." The Democratic press, however, could find no reason

to support black soldiers in the fight and, instead, lampooned the Fifty-fourth. The *Valley Spirit* reported the Battle of Olustee as a “disaster” and said it was “mainly due to the cowardice of the colored troops.” The paper predicted that “before the war is over the negro will not be found as brave, enduring, or efficient as the white.” For good measure, the editors scoffed that if the black soldier proved otherwise, then “all history [is] a fiction.” The Fifty-fourth and the other units of the United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.), they maintained, were the “colored pets of the administration” and the government was systematically covering up their poor performance on the battlefield.³⁰

There can be little doubt that the black soldiers in the Fifty-fourth heard these sentiments. Jacob Christy was not willing to let them go unchallenged. “We have been fighting as brave as ever [there] was any soldiers fought,” he wrote his sister. “I know if every regiment that are out and have been out would have dun as well as we have the war would be over.” Christy’s war was becoming, if it had not always been, a war of rights and power, a war of demonstrated black claims to them. “I du really think,” he wrote, “that its God[’s] will that this ware Shall not end till the Colord people get thier rights.” For white people who resisted what was happening and what was coming, Christy conceded that “it goes verry hard for the White people to think of it But by gods will and powr thay [colored people] will have thier rights.” The coming of a new era of rights and power was on Christy’s mind, and he admitted that some of those “that are liveing know may not live to see it.” The sacrifices were worth so much to Christy because they would be made in the service of future generations. Christy made clear his commitment. “I shall die a trying for our rights so that other that are born hereafter may live and enjoy a happy life.”³¹

A month later Christy’s and Demus’s hopeful sense of purpose and self-sacrifice turned partly to frustration. They had not been paid in months and both wrote home about the intolerable situation. Demus reported that the army might try to discharge both the

Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Massachusetts, send them home, and then offer the men reenlistment at half the monthly wages (from \$13 per month to \$7 per month). He thought that even with less pay, "a bout the one halfe will inlis a gan." Christy complained that even though "all colard troops fights well . . . they are getting nothing for it." The abuse was almost too much to take, especially since the black regiments had been put into battle to make near impossible charges, and Christy suggested that the black troops might refuse to "run ourselves in to placers were we well be slaughter up." With a tone of bitterness, Christy noted that the black troops had "dun enough of it to know how it gose."³²

While Christy and Demus and the soldiers in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts waited on Morris Island at Hilton Head in the summer of 1864, Confederate cavalry moved into Franklin County in retaliation for the Federal campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley earlier in the summer. Under the command of General Jubal A. Early, the Confederate forces demanded levies from Frederick, Maryland, and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, after they threatened Washington, D.C., in late July. When they did not receive the money, the Confederates burned the town of Chambersburg and raided the surrounding countryside. Confederate clerk and former newspaper editor Joseph Waddell in Staunton, Virginia, thought the reprisal burnings were sure to further enrage the Northern people and revive their "war spirit." "The Yankees," Waddell predicted, "will come back and burn a hundred for one." Waddell considered the Confederate raid bad policy because the Confederacy's only hope was that Northern public opinion would demand an end to the war. The raid, he thought, would only enflame public opinion. He also thought that "it would be far better to let their outrages stand out before the world— . . . to the disgust of even some of their own people."³³ Waddell's opinion on this matter hardened and he later called it "a miserable affair, . . . horribly stupid . . . a blunder." Though after the burning of Chambersburg, Waddell admitted feeling a certain degree of pleasure that "the

miserable Yankee nation, who have been burning and pillaging throughout our own country for so long, have now been made to suffer in their own homes.”³⁴

The black soldiers in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts heard about the raid and wrote home to make their feelings known. David Demus was pleased to find out that his family “got of safe,” and he wanted to convey how little he feared Confederate forces. “I am sorry that I ant thir,” he wrote to his wife, “fer i heave saw so meney that a rebbel is no mor then one of ar one men.” His brother-in-law was more direct and could hardly believe that the town men, white men, “let two hundred rebels come and burn the place.” It was sheer cowardice, he seemed to suggest. “For i am a soldier,” he explained, “and I know what fighting is.” Christy stated with confidence that his company of eighty soldiers “can Wipe the best 200 rebels that thay can fetch to us.” And another of Christy’s brothers in the Fifty-fourth wrote home that he was “not a fird of all the rebels that Ar in the South.”³⁵

After the Chambersburg burning, Federal troops moved through the upper Shenandoah Valley in the fall of 1864 to try to crush Early’s forces there. As they moved south into the valley, the Federal troops did not just burn Confederates’ barns and liberate Unionists from prisons—they freed many black people in slavery. While slaves were running away throughout the war, the pace picked up in 1864 in the Shenandoah Valley. Civilians took notice. The newspapers were reluctant to admit the hemorrhaging loss of black labor and the visible recruitment across the South of black troops into the Federal army. The most the *Staunton Vindicator* would allow was a veiled comment that “only white labor is available locally.”³⁶

Confederate civilians also took notice when the Union army began to use black troops in Virginia. Amanda Edmonds, a young white woman at home on a plantation in the valley, chastised General Ulysses S. Grant for bringing “the abominable wretches and negroes to the field.” Later in the summer when black soldiers

in the Ninth Corps led a forsaken charge into the crater at Petersburg and were slaughtered, some civilians in the valley expressed paternalistic pity. Mary Cochran thought the black soldiers were "poor wretches stimulated with whisky and induced to think they would meet with no resistance." She considered it laughably predictable of the Federal officers and a sad betrayal of simple black men, whose white masters presumably knew much better what they were good for.³⁷

When the Federal army came into an area, though, many African Americans took the opportunity to leave with it. In the Shenandoah Valley, Eva Honey Allen, a young white woman living near Fincastle, heard many rumors about the Federal troops. "Their doings are 'as thick as blackberries,'" Allen recorded. She was most troubled by the rumors that "the Negroes" on her plantation were relating, and called these "very alarming." One rumor spread that Hunter was coming with "a very large army, including 8,000 Negroes." Another story circulated that two or three hundred Negro men came from the Bedford area and joined the Federal army to make war on the Confederates. Still another report she heard from slaves ran that the Federal army "can't take the women off now, but will come back for them."³⁸ The Federal army impressed both free and enslaved African Americans in the Valley. In Staunton, Confederate clerk Joseph Waddell witnessed "a considerable number of Negroes" went off with the Federal army. The Federal officers apparently promised to take any African Americans willing to go with them to Washington, D.C., where "they could work for a living." Waddell, like Cochran, sneered at such a possibility and considered blacks too deluded or infantile to know what was good for them. Confederate civilians simply could not admit to themselves that slaves were disloyal to the Confederate cause or to their masters or that black soldiers might fight for rights and family and freedom.³⁹

Black soldiers saw with their eyes events that Confederate civilians and some of their fellow Northerners could not comprehend. John M. Christey fought in the Petersburg campaign at

Chaffin's Bluff. He thought the bullets whistling in the air might kill him during the battle, but instead he survived and helped his U.S.C.T. unit drive the Confederates back and "cut them all to peeces." The troops buried five or six wagonloads of dead Confederates that day, and Christey said that every day Confederates were deserting "as fast as tha can . . . by the hundreds . . . day and night." The Federal officers praised the U.S.C.T. units, and Christey was proud to report that "We fote the Best of eny new regment that ever tha sen com on the fild to fite tha could hardley get them to stop firing at the Johneys."⁴⁰ When Federal black troops were first deployed in Virginia in June, Confederate women expressed outrage in their diaries. One woman wondered whether the Confederates would "ever blot out such a foe," one that seemed to stop at nothing to win, one that used black troops to fight the war. Later in September after the black troops had won several engagements around Petersburg, her question changed. "Will kind Providence forsake us in this day of adversity? Will he permit one of the most beautiful countries in the world to become enslaved and subjugated?"⁴¹

The last months of the war impressed upon Confederates that the war itself and their perceptions of the war were in constant negotiation. The pastoral farms of many planters and yeoman were wrecked, barns burned, cattle driven off, and crops seized. Lee's army conscripted nearly every available man, while it lost battles, cohesion, and moral direction. Eva Allen's brother, Henry, who was on duty in the trenches at Petersburg, wrote home to tell of a strange story of a "Negro man belonging to old Capt. Breckinridge." The former slave fled the plantation and "went off with Hunter" in June 1864. According to Allen's brother, Henry, the man deserted from the Federal army and came over to the Confederate lines. He told them "he was 'sick of soldiering,' and said there were some other Botetourt Negroes in his Regt. all anxious to get back home." Henry was amazed at the strangeness of the report, not because a former slave in the Federal army had

deserted to the Confederate lines, but because slaves were actually fighting in the Federal army. "Who would have thought four years ago," he wondered, "that the time would come when we would be fighting our neighbor's Negroes?"⁴²

While Henry Allen expressed surprise at the presence of black Union troops, many of his fellow Confederates expressed deep animosity. The *Staunton Spectator* described the reaction in Winchester when a black regiment occupied the town during the spring of 1864. Seized by "indignation and disgust," some thirty local boys reportedly flocked to Confederate ranks, an occurrence that, the *Spectator* noted approvingly, "is more or less the case throughout the border wherever these black regiments have made their appearance."⁴³

Virginians and other Confederates were just as aware of the symbolism inherent in black enlistments as the soldiers themselves were. David Demus of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts believed that if it had not been for the black troops, the war would last another ten years. He also thought it "plane to see" that if the black soldiers had not fought, then black people would not be in a position to claim full citizenship. He considered "us Colard Men" the cause of "this ofel [awful] Rebelon."⁴⁴ From the Confederate perspective, any attempt to grant manhood to blacks was a threat to the Confederacy. Or, as the *Charleston Mercury* had argued when it was confronted by the men of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts in 1863, "our slaves are to be made our equals in our own country, fighting against us."⁴⁵ That was, of course, an unacceptable challenge to Confederate identity and honor.

But what would happen if slaves were to fight for the Confederates? Just as white Southerners understood the implications that enlistment had for black manhood and citizenship, so too did they recognize the manpower advantage that black troops conferred on the Union. As early as 1863, influenced by the presence of African Americans in the Union ranks, some Confederates had discussed the idea of formally arming and enlisting slaves. The sticking point

was always emancipation. How could slaves be asked to fight for Confederate freedom, without being granted it themselves? And to emancipate slaves, for any reason, was to call into question one of the very foundations of Confederate identity. But as the Confederacy faced mounting losses of territory and an associated plunge in morale during the winter of 1864 to 1865, debate over the proposal began in earnest. Backed by both Jefferson Davis and the Confederate cabinet and Robert E. Lee, the proposal to arm slaves forced Confederates to confront the question of what, exactly, they were fighting for.⁴⁶

On November 7, 1864, Jefferson Davis sent a message to the Confederate Congress in which he called for the employment of slaves in a variety of noncombatant positions, while leaving open the possibility that “should the alternative ever be presented of subjugation or of the employment of the slave as a soldier, there seems no reason to doubt what should then be our decision.” In so doing, Davis made explicit the great contradiction of slavery, since he acknowledged that slaves were not just property but people as well. As such, they could not be expected to work hard for a cause that would result in their permanent enslavement, and thus Davis also suggested that any slave employed in the army should be made eligible for a form of gradual, compensated emancipation.⁴⁷

Predictably, Davis’s suggestion was met with scornful, even angry, opposition. By suggesting that at some point in the future the Confederacy should think about turning to slave soldiers, Davis had brought to the surface simmering questions about the meaning of the Confederacy. Could a nation born out of the desire to defend slavery at any cost survive emancipation, even emancipation on its own terms? Davis and the other supporters of arming slaves argued that in fact they were protecting the “peculiar institution.” Emancipate a few slaves in order to win the war, they claimed, and preserve slavery intact for others. Let the Confederacy be destroyed, and slavery would be lost forever. As an added benefit, support for any level of emancipation demonstrated to

foreign nations and wavering yeomen that this was not a war exclusively to preserve the property of a wealthy few. Indeed, rumors still flew that this demonstration of Confederate determination to avoid "subjugation" would be just the thing to inspire British or French intervention.⁴⁸

Essentially, supporters of arming slaves were making a pragmatic argument. The Confederacy was dying of a manpower shortage, and slaves could fill it. For many Southerners, the meaning of their new nation had changed. Protection of slavery was no longer their paramount concern. But, to other Confederates, particularly those in the Deep South, such a suggestion was anathema, tantamount to an admission of defeat. The *Staunton Republican Vindicator* reported that the *Savannah (Ga.) News* refused to publish any letters about the possibility of placing slaves in the army, on the grounds that such a question was not proper for a "newspaper discussion." The *Charleston Mercury* warned ominously that "the freemen of the country are not dependent on slaves," and should they not work out their own "redemption," they would become "the slaves of their slaves."⁴⁹

Charleston's defiance seemed reckless closer to the border. Virginians felt their region had borne the brunt of war and were perhaps more willing to think creatively about strategies for achieving peace. Peace, however, had specific meanings—independence, not surrender—and the measures to win freedom might not be the same as those that would preserve slavery. In Staunton, Joseph Waddell confided in his diary that "I greatly prefer independence without slavery, to submission with it, and would be glad enough to get rid of it if I could see any way of disposing of the negroes without giving them up to barbarism or annihilation."⁵⁰ By February, with the Confederacy's military fortunes looking even more bleak, Waddell seemed less sanguine. Now he saw talk of enlisting slaves for what it was—"a concession of despair," rather than the "virtue of necessity" that Robert E. Lee would have had Confederates believe. For Waddell, however, the most problematic issue

was not the abolition of slavery per se, but the upheaval that would surely accompany emancipation. Already, he noted, Augusta's slaves had heard of the enlistment plan and were "greatly troubled," and he "shudder[ed] at the prospect" of wartime emancipation.⁵¹

Waddell's grim forecasts ran counter to another trend in Confederate opinion in early 1865. Following the failure of the peace mission in early February, and the attendant realization that there was no chance for a negotiated end to the war, the Confederacy actually enjoyed one last burst of martial spirit, one last gasp of the old bravado that had characterized the early years of the war. The *Richmond Enquirer* boldly declared that the enlistment of slaves would not only strengthen the armies "without doing the least injury to the institution of slavery," but would also increase discipline amongst white troops. The soldiers of the Fifty-sixth Virginia un-animously declared that "if the public exigencies required that any number of our male slaves be enlisted in the military service in order to the [sic] successful resistance to our enemies and the maintenance of the integrity of our government we are willing to make those concessions to their false and unenlightened notions of the blessings of liberty, and to offer to those, and those only who fight in our cause, perpetual freedom as a boon for fidelity of service and loyalty to the South." These Virginians subscribed to one of slavery's perennial misconceptions—that slaves did not know what was best for them, that they did not all want to be free. Somehow, Confederates wanted to believe that they still controlled the survival of slavery, that they could free some slaves to fight to keep others in bondage. In this, they demonstrated a willful ignorance of their slaves' inner lives.⁵²

The debate over enlisting and arming slaves went back and forth during the fall and winter of 1864 to 1865. Robert E. Lee had long supported the plan, but privately. He finally entered the public discourse over this issue in mid-February 1865 with a letter that

shifted public, and congressional, opinion squarely to the side of enlistments. In his letter to Congressman Barksdale, reprinted in newspapers throughout the Confederacy, Lee explained that the measure was “not only expedient but necessary.” He went on to answer another criticism, one familiar to Northern black soldiers as well—the question of whether blacks would make good soldiers. Lee felt that they would, explaining, “I think we could do at least as well with them as the enemy, and he attaches great importance to their assistance.” Lee cited the slaves’ physical strength and “habits of obedience” as reason to believe that they would serve well, especially if induced to service through the promise of freedom. He went even further, suggesting that a draft of slaves would be unnecessary and counterproductive, preferring instead to call for slave volunteers, a measure more likely to “bring out the best class.”⁵³

By this point, Lee and his ever-shrinking Army of Northern Virginia had become the focus of Confederate hopes, and his opinion bore more weight with the general public than anyone else’s. His letter was reprinted with approving comments, and inspired more serious, more public discussion of the future of Confederate slavery. Citizens of Augusta County, Virginia, held a mass meeting in late February at which they condemned “the course of the United States in proposing to tear away the last vestige of our rights as a condition of peace,” and expressed their support of arming slaves. They expressed their deep faith in Lee, concluding simply that “we shall not stop to discuss abstract questions, but will cheerfully give our servants, as we have our sons, to our country.” What was left unspoken, though one can hardly believe unthought, was that the lives of their slaves were not the Virginians to give.⁵⁴

Confederates’ last ditch effort to save their nation by weakening slavery came too late. Their slaves had taken matters into their own hands, and the Union army was helping them. As the war came to a close in April 1865, the black troops were still in the field

fighting Confederates, liberating slaves, and turning the war on the civilians. Marching out from Georgetown, South Carolina, in early April, Joseph Christy's Fifty-fourth Mass. went into the field "to hunt the Johnneys." Christy reported, "We found them too and kild a grate meney of them." They fought for six days, and according to Christy, the Fifty-fourth burned down houses, captured and burned railroads, and freed over a thousand slaves before they heard that peace was declared. Christy called the long line of freed peoples following the Fifty-fourth on the road back into Georgetown "one of the grates sits that i ever seen."⁵⁵

After the war was over, the men were slowly discharged and the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts disbanded. For the soldiers who had fought for over two years to define their freedom, to liberate others, and to defeat the Confederacy, the summer of 1865 was a time of reaping the harvest. Jacob Christy did not want his discharge until the Fifty-fourth was officially and completely disbanded. He wanted to stay with "the old Regiment As long as she is together." He wanted to be with it to the end, to demonstrate for the whole world what it meant and had accomplished. "I come away from Massachuettas with it," he declared, "and I want to go back with it to march through the city of Massachuettas agian." He wanted the people of Massachusetts to see the ripped, fraying, and bullet-riddled battle flag and to see with their own eyes what the regiment had done. "Just to look at it," he thought, "any body can tell what we have been dueing we fought hard a many A time for them."⁵⁶

As for the former Confederates in the summer of 1865, black soldiers gave them little room and extended no reconciliatory gestures. Not that Confederates would have been willing to accept them. On the streets of Charleston the men of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts asserted themselves in ways the former Confederates could hardly believe. "It goese verry hard with them," Jacob Christy said of the former Confederates. The black soldiers expected them to give way on the streets not the other way around, and when they did not, Christy reported, "we knock them out of

our way And if thay dont like that we take them up and put them in the Guard house." Christy and the men of the Fifty-fourth went further on some occasions to demonstrate how much the war had changed. They went into the streets of Charleston "just to get them [former Confederates] to say something out of the way so that we can get at them and beat them."⁵⁷