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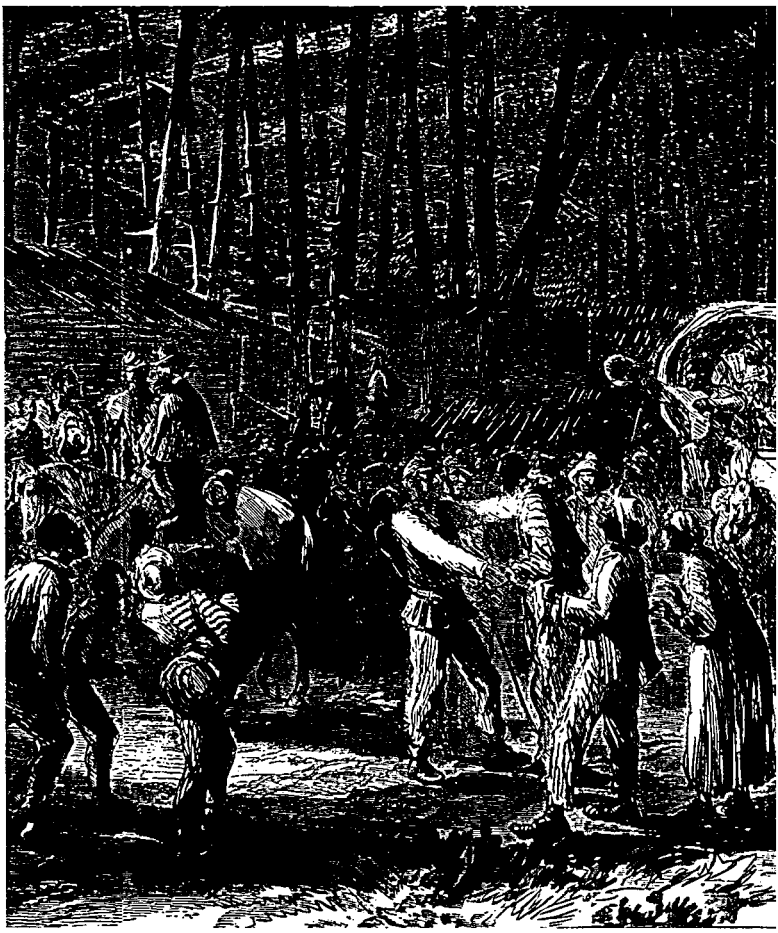
The Destruction of Slavery 1861–1865



THE BEGINNING of the Civil War marked the beginning of the end of slavery in the American South.[1] At first, most white Americans denied what would eventually seem self-evident. With President Abraham Lincoln in the fore, federal authorities insisted that the nascent conflict must be a war to restore the national union, and nothing more. Confederate leaders displayed a fuller comprehension of the importance of slavery, which Vice-President Alexander Stephens called the cornerstone of the Southern nation.[2] But if Stephens and others grasped slavery's significance, they assumed that the Confederate

[1] This essay, like the others in this volume, is based primarily upon documents published in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation* and other documents from the National Archives of the United States. In addition, numerous published sources have been relied upon throughout. Most significant are U.S., War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, 1880–1901); and U.S., Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. (Washington, 1894–1922). A convenient compendium of the public record of the period is Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America during the Great Rebellion*, 2nd ed. (Washington, 1865). General secondary works on slavery and emancipation during the Civil War include Herbert Aptheker, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York, 1938); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935); Robert F. Durden, *The Gray and the Black: The Confederate Debate on Emancipation* (Baton Rouge, La., 1972); John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, N.Y., 1963); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), chaps. 1–4; James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, N.J., 1964), and *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York, 1965); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953), and *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York, 1962); James L. Roark, *Masters without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1977), chaps. 1–3; Armstead L. Robinson, "Day of Jubilo: Civil War and the Demise of Slavery in the Mississippi Valley, 1861–1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1976); Bell I. Wiley, *Southern Negroes, 1861–1865* (New Haven, Conn., 1938). Useful reference works are Mark M. Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York, 1959); Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, 3 vols. (Des Moines, Iowa, 1908); E. B. Long with Barbara Long, *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861–1865* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971); Raphael P. Thian, comp., *Notes Illustrating the Military Geography of the United States* (Washington, 1881); Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge, La., 1964), and *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge, La., 1959).

[2] Henry Cleveland, *Alexander H. Stephens, in Public and Private; With Letters and Speeches* (Philadelphia, 1866), pp. 721–23.

struggle for independence would require no change in the nature of the institution. A Southern victory would transform the political status, not the social life, of the slave states; black people would remain in their familiar place. Despite a vigorous dissent from Northern abolitionists, most white people – North and South – saw no reason to involve slaves in their civil war.

Slaves had a different understanding of the sectional struggle. Unmoved by the public pronouncements and official policies of the federal government, they recognized their centrality to the dispute and knew that their future depended upon its outcome. With divisions among white Americans erupting into open warfare, slaves watched and waited, alert for ways to turn the military conflict to their own advantage, stubbornly refusing to leave its outcome to the two belligerents. Lacking political standing or public voice, forbidden access to the weapons of war, slaves nonetheless acted resolutely to place their freedom – and that of their posterity – on the wartime agenda. Steadily, as opportunities arose, they demonstrated their readiness to take risks for freedom and to put their loyalty, their labor, and their lives in the service of the federal government. In so doing, they gradually rendered untenable every Union policy short of universal emancipation and forced the Confederate government to adopt measures that severely compromised the sovereignty of the master. On both sides of the line of battle, Americans came to know that a war for the Union must be a war for freedom.

The change did not come easily or at once. At first, Northern political and military leaders freed slaves only hesitantly, under the pressure of military necessity. But, as the war dragged on, their reluctance gave way to an increased willingness and eventually to a firm determination to extirpate chattel bondage. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, and the enlistment of black soldiers into Union ranks in the following months signaled the adoption of emancipation as a fundamental Northern war aim, although that commitment availed little until vindicated by military victory. Even after the surrender of the Confederacy, slavery survived in two border states until the Thirteenth Amendment became part of the United States Constitution in December 1865.

Whereas Union policy shifted in favor of emancipation, Confederate leaders remained determined to perpetuate slavery. But the cornerstone of Southern nationality proved to be its weakest point. Slaves resisted attempts to mobilize them on behalf of the slaveholders' republic. Their sullen and sometimes violent opposition to the Confederate regime magnified divisions within Southern society, gnawing at the Confederacy from within. In trying to sustain slavery while fending off the Union army, Confederate leaders unwittingly compromised their own national aspirations and undermined the institution upon which Southern nationality was founded. In the end, the victors celebrated slavery's demise and claimed the title of emancipator. The vanquished understood full well how slavery had helped to seal their doom.[3]

The war provided the occasion for slaves to seize freedom, but three interrelated circumstances determined what opportunities lay open to them and influenced the form that the struggle for liberty assumed: first, the character of slave society; second, the course of the war itself; and third, the policies of the Union and Confederate governments. Although none of these operated independently of the others, each had its own dynamic. All three were shaped by the particularities of Southern geography and the chronology of the war. Together, they made the destruction of slavery a varying, uneven, and frequently tenuous process, whose complex history has been obscured by the apparent certitude and finality of the great documents that announced the end of chattel bondage. Once the evolution of emancipation replaces the absolutism of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment as the focus of study, the story of slavery's demise shifts from the presidential mansion and the halls of Congress to the farms and plantations that became wartime battlefields. And slaves – whose persistence forced federal soldiers, Union and Confederate pol-

[3] On slavery and the collapse of the Confederacy, see Robinson, "Day of Jubilo," especially chap. 8; Charles H. Wesley, *The Collapse of the Confederacy* (Washington, 1937); Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge, La., 1978), especially chap. 8; Wiley, *Southern Negroes*, pt. 1.

icy makers, and even their own masters onto terrain they never intended to occupy – become the prime movers in securing their own liberty.

On the eve of the Civil War, the South was a deeply divided society. Although slavery was central to the social order, most Southerners were white and owned no slaves. Apart from their common race and their nonslaveholding status, they lived in widely varying circumstances. A majority of this white majority were farmers, although some earned their livelihood as artisans and small proprietors and many – without property or skill – worked for wages. By residence, by nationality and religion, by education and wealth, by work routine and experience, they differed from each other. A shared desire to live and work on their own drew them together, and most sought an independent social standing by separating themselves ideologically and geographically from the slaveholders' world.[4] A minority, however, struggled to enter the ranks of the masters; aspiration, if not wealth and status, aligned these men and women with the slaveholders. At the margins, some people slid in and out of slave ownership. But even among slaveholders of long standing, the mass stood apart from the grandees – those planters who owned large numbers of slaves, produced staple crops for an international market, and dominated Southern politics and society. Although the great planters differed among themselves, their common concern for their own dominance engendered a strong sense of unity; and their

4 Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, La., 1949); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), chap. 9; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York, 1983), chaps. 1–3; Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860* (New York, 1988); Harry L. Watson, "Conflict and Collaboration: Yeomen, Slaveholders, and Politics in the Antebellum South," *Social History* 10 (Oct. 1985): 273–98; Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum American South," *American Historical Review* 88 (Dec. 1983): 1175–1200.

political, economic, and social power extended that unity over the South as a whole.[5]

The lives of black Southerners were no more at one than those of white Southerners. Life in bondage assumed distinctive forms as a result of the pattern of the slave trade, the demographic balance of slave and free, the size of slaveholdings, and the labor requirements of particular crops, among other circumstances. Many of the nearly four million slaves resided on large plantations among a black majority and answered only to black drivers or white overseers. Those on the largest estates hardly knew their owners. Other slaves lived on small farmsteads, worked alongside their owners, and ate from the same pot, if rarely at the same table. Within the bounds of a single plantation or farm, a handful of slaves occupied special status as drivers, artisans, or house servants and were able to use their positions to gain a variety of prerogatives and a measure of independence; the vast majority never escaped the drudgery of agricultural labor. Differences could also be found among the mass of field hands. Some worked in gangs, some by the task, and others by a combination of the two. Work patterns shaped black life in slavery as they would in freedom.[6]

Some black Southerners – a quarter of a million by 1860 – had already achieved free status. Although they labored under constraints that deprived them of citizenship and severely circumscribed their

[5] Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1965), and *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York, 1969); Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital*, chaps. 1–2; James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York, 1982); Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988).

[6] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York 1979); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* New York, 1976); Nathan I. Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery* (New York, 1977); Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*. The spatial diversity and temporal development of slavery in the United States are captured in Willie Lee Rose, ed., *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York, 1976).

liberty, free-black men and women collected their own wages, governed their own family life, and created their own institutions. Just as they stood apart from slaves, free blacks also differed among themselves. Most lived in abject poverty, but some of them climbed off the floor of Southern society, gained an education, and accumulated modest wealth. A handful became slaveholders themselves.[7] These diverse experiences guaranteed that wartime developments would affect different groups of black people differently.

In the various theaters of the war, events seldom followed the same course. Military developments multiplied the channels through which slaves might escape bondage.[8] The prospects for freedom emerged in different ways when a sudden Union invasion forced slaveholders to abandon their slaves, when continual skirmishing gave slaves opportunities to flee to the Union army, when a slowly developing line of battle spurred masters to remove their slaves to the interior, and when the confusion attending removal allowed slaves to flee in the opposite direction from their owners. While some slaves remained on their native ground when their masters turned fugitive, others left family and friends to become fugitives themselves. The establishment of secure federal enclaves on the fringes of the Confederacy created havens from which successful runaways might return to their former homes to guide enslaved loved ones out of slavery. Many such fugitives joined federal forces as guides, laborers, and eventually soldiers, helping to expand the Union's domain. In other parts of the Confederacy, contested territory and shifting military fortunes made escape more uncertain and precarious. Fugitive slaves in these areas followed Union soldiers and lived off the land or the meager charity of Northern philanthropists and Union authorities. Eventually, however, the march of federal armies announced the end of slavery throughout the war zone.

7 Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974).

8 For the pattern of military developments in different regions, see Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, 3 vols. (New York, 1958–74); Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana, Ill., 1983); James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988).

Slaves distant from the conflict, with little chance of escape, did not simply wait for freedom to come to them. As news of the war spread – often by recaptured runaways, by slaves impressed for Confederate military labor, or by slaves removed to the interior from areas threatened by Union advances – resistance to slavery stiffened. Confederate slaveholders far from the fighting found that their most trusted servants had turned against them, requiring them to concede new privileges and redefining the relationship between master and slave. The same was true in the border states, whose loyalty to the Union exempted them from military emancipation measures. There, too, slaves seized upon opportunities offered by the war to free themselves, forcing their masters into coercive rearguard actions that steadily undermined their standing in the Union and ultimately required them to accept emancipation.[9] Throughout the South, the character of the war helped determine who would be free, how they would become free, and what freedom would mean.

Amid the diverse responses of slaves to wartime opportunities, both Union and Confederate leaders debated the employment of black men and women as military laborers, the recruitment of black men as soldiers, and, in the Union's case, their transformation from slaves into citizens. Decisions in Washington and Richmond, as well as on the field of battle, rested only partly on military exigencies. Political leaders, North and South, formulated policy in response to the demands of diverse constituencies, as well as considerations of world opinion. Merchants and manufacturers in the North and slaveholding planters in the South stood atop their respective societies, but other white men – including farmers, artisans, and unskilled laborers – exercised significant political power in these constitutional democracies and filled the ranks of both armies. Abolitionists in the North and

[9] On the border states, see *Destruction of Slavery*, chaps. 6–8; Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 1985); Victor B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky: Emancipation and Freedom, 1862–1884* (Lexington, Ky., 1983); William E. Parrish, *Turbulent Partnership: Missouri and the Union, 1861–1865* (Columbia, Mo., 1963); Charles L. Wagandt, *The Mighty Revolution: Negro Emancipation in Maryland, 1862–1864* (Baltimore, 1964).

proslavery apologists in the South – propelled by religious zeal and moral righteousness – determined to remake their respective societies. They lobbied those in power and sometimes moved into positions of authority themselves. A complex internal politics developed within both the Union and the Confederate chains of command, creating shifting alliances among state and national officials, members of the executive and legislative branches of government, and civilian authorities and military commanders. The demands of office, the needs of particular constituents, notions of the general good, and the prejudices and ambitions of individuals also helped determine the course of slavery's demise.[10]

Slavery in the American South rested upon an unequal and uneasy balance of power between master and slave. In principle, the slaveholder's authority went almost unchallenged; in practice, it was limited by a variety of constraints. Refusing to be reduced to a mere extension of their owners' will, slaves did not willingly defer or freely relinquish their labor. Although slaveholders rarely hesitated to apply force in exacting deference and extorting labor, they found it both easier and more profitable to achieve these ends by conceding to the slaves some control over their own daily lives. Such hard-won concessions helped mute the conflict inherent in slavery and permitted masters to maintain their dominant place in Southern society.

[10] On the Union, see Herman Belz, *Reconstructing the Union: Theory and Policy during the Civil War* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1969); Leonard P. Curry, *Blueprint for Modern America: Nonmilitary Legislation of the First Civil War Congress* (Nashville, 1968); David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1967); Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union*, 4 vols. (New York, 1959–71); Phillip Shaw Paludan, *"A People's Contest": The Union and Civil War, 1861–1865* (New York, 1988). On the Confederacy, see Curtis A. Amlund, *Federalism in the Southern Confederacy* (Washington, 1966); Thomas L. Connelly and Archer Jones, *The Politics of Command: Factions and Ideas in Confederate Strategy* (Baton Rouge, La., 1973); Escott, *After Secession*; Frank L. Owsley, *State Rights in the Confederacy* (Chicago, 1925); May S. Ringold, *The Role of the State Legislatures in the Confederacy* (Athens, Ga., 1966); Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861–1865* (New York, 1979). For a comparative view, see Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (Cambridge, U.K., 1990), chap. 3.

Slaves also gained from these concessions. Within the tight social space they wrested from their owners, slave men and women created a distinctive culture and a variety of institutions of their own. Slaveholders continually challenged this limited independence, and slaves maintained it only by constant struggle, often at great cost and sometimes not at all. But whatever the slaves' success in maintaining or expanding their independent realm, it stopped far short of freedom. Ultimately, they accepted their status only because of the superior power of their owners. Despite its seeming flexibility, slavery was a brittle institution. Any change threatened it.[11]

Even before sectional discord erupted into war, the debate over slavery was disturbing the delicate balance between master and slave. Slaveholders had long feared that abolitionists or their emissaries would stir bloody insurrection by awakening the slaves to the possibility of liberty. Although a few such emissaries carried the abolitionist message directly to the plantation gate, most slaves learned about the deepening sectional dispute from their owners' denunciation of the North and of the Republican party and its champions, the most threatening of whom was Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, the slaveholders' indiscriminate condemnations exaggerated the antislavery commitment of white Northerners, "Black Republicans," and Lincoln himself. Masters with no doubts about the abolitionist intentions of the North inadvertently persuaded their slaves of the ascendancy and pervasiveness of antislavery sentiment in the free states. The general politicization of Southern society thus reached deep into the slave community, imparting momentous significance to Lincoln's election, Southern secession, and military mobilization.

Yet the slaves did not immediately accept their owners' assumptions about the intentions of the North. Suspicious of all white people, many slaves doubted that any of them – of whatever provenance – would act in their behalf. Slaveholders fueled this well-founded distrust. Their

[11] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; Blassingame, *Slave Community*; Gutman, *Black Family*; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); Thomas L. Webber, *Deep like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831–1865* (New York, 1978).