

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era

David Williams

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## I Freed Myself

### *African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era*

For a century and a half, Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation has been the dominant narrative of African American freedom in the Civil War era. However, David Williams suggests that this portrayal marginalizes the role that African American slaves played in freeing themselves. At the Civil War's outset, Lincoln made clear his intent was to save the Union rather than free slaves – despite his personal distaste for slavery, he claimed no authority to interfere with the institution. By the second year of the war, though, when the Union army was in desperate need of black support, former slaves who escaped to Union lines struck a bargain: they would fight for the Union only if they were granted their freedom. Williams importantly demonstrates that freedom was not simply the absence of slavery but rather a dynamic process enacted by self-emancipated African American refugees, which compelled Lincoln to modify his war aims and place black freedom at the center of his wartime policies.

David Williams is professor of history at Valdosta State University in Georgia, where he specializes in the Civil War era and the antebellum South. He is the author of ten books, including *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* and *A People's History of the Civil War*.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era  
David Williams  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era

David Williams

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# I Freed Myself

*African American Self-Emancipation  
in the Civil War Era*

DAVID WILLIAMS

*Valdosta State University*



Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era  
David Williams  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107602496](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107602496)

© David Williams 2014

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2014

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Williams, David, 1959–

I freed myself : African American self-emancipation in the Civil War era / David Williams, Valdosta State University, Georgia.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-01649-1 (hardback)

1. United States – History – Civil War, 1861–1865 – African Americans.
2. United States – History – Civil War, 1861–1865 – Participation, African American.
3. Slaves – Emancipation – United States.
4. African Americans – History – 19th century.
5. African American soldiers – History – 19th century.
6. Lincoln, Abraham, 1809–1865 – Views on slavery.

E540.N3W55 2014

973.7'415–dc23 2013044583

ISBN 978-1-107-01649-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-60249-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era

David Williams

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*For Duncan Winslow  
and so many others,  
who suffered so much,  
and struggled so long,  
in so many ways,  
to free themselves.*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era

David Williams

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

If there is no struggle there is no progress. . . . This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

– *Frederick Douglass*

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction: Following the Footsteps of the Slaves	i
<i>They Are Freeing Themselves</i>	i
<i>A Story Too Long in the Shadows</i>	10
I “Yes, We All Shall be Free”: Pressing the Nation Toward Freedom	18
<i>Slavery Without Submission</i>	21
<i>Contesting Northern Slavery</i>	31
<i>Preparing to Meet the Crisis</i>	40
<i>More Cases of Insubordination than Ever</i>	48
<i>Insurrection and the Knell of Slavery</i>	56
2 “Shedding the First Blood”: Forcing a War for Freedom	64
<i>The Enemy at Home</i>	64
<i>Blind, Unreasoning Prejudice</i>	68
<i>Impossible to Keep Them Outside Our Lines</i>	73
<i>They Say They Are Free</i>	81
<i>What Shall We Do with the Contrabands?</i>	91
<i>A New Departure for the President</i>	97
<i>A Half-Way Measure</i>	106
3 “Ready to Die for Liberty”: Expanding the Boundaries of Freedom	114
<i>They Know Everything that Happens</i>	114
<i>Unoffending Negroes Brutally Assailed</i>	119
<i>We Will Fight for Our Rights and Liberty</i>	123
<i>Entering the Army by Hundreds and Thousands</i>	128
<i>We Did Our Duty as Men</i>	136
<i>They Treat the Men like Dogs</i>	145
<i>Little Aid from the Government</i>	154
4 “Full Equality Before the Law”: Claiming the Rights of Freedom	161
<i>The “Faithful Slave” Is about Played Out</i>	161
<i>Ready to Help Anybody Opposed to the Rebels</i>	169
<i>We Has a Right to the Land</i>	179
<i>Southern Negroes Must Stay Where They Are</i>	190
<i>It Is Enough to Free Them</i>	196
<i>A Partial Emancipation Unworthy of the Name</i>	203
5 “All We Ask Is Justice”: Continuing Struggles for Freedom	208
<i>Demanding Absolute Legal Equality</i>	208
<i>The Old Slave Laws Remain Unrepealed</i>	213
<i>Every Man Who Voted Was Watched</i>	222
<i>Rebel Rule Is Now Nearly Complete</i>	229
<i>But I Kept On</i>	236
<i>Index</i>	245

Illustrations

I.1. Duncan Winslow	page 2
1.1. Harriet Tubman	22
1.2. Frederick Douglass attacked	33
1.3. Repelling slaveholders	43
1.4. Nat Turner’s Rebellion	49
2.1. Nicholas Biddle	69
2.2. Virginia “contrabands”	74
2.3. Robert Smalls and the <i>Planter</i>	83
2.4. Beating a slaveholder	89
2.5. Lincoln asks for help	103
2.6. John Rock	112
3.1. Refugees defend themselves	118
3.2. Lynching William Jones	122
3.3. Attacking Confederates at Petersburg	139
3.4. Soldier and family	146
4.1. Assisting anti-Confederates	170
4.2. Freedpeople in South Carolina	181
4.3. Laborers in Virginia	189
4.4. Sojourner Truth	195
4.5. Frederick Douglass	207
5.1. Henry Highland Garnet	209
5.2. Wading a creek to vote	223
5.3. “A White Man’s Government”	229
5.4. Susie King Taylor	234



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era

David Williams

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Acknowledgments

No work of scholarship is a singular effort. Never has that been more true than in this case. Those who contributed in some way to my efforts over the years are far too numerous to list and I thank them all, but a few deserve special recognition for their support of this project.

At Cambridge University Press, Deborah Gershenowitz, senior editor, and Dana Bricken, editorial assistant, offered especially helpful advice and encouragement, as did Eric Crahan, former senior editor. Others associated with the Press who contributed mightily to the project include Sumitha Nithyanandan, Kristine Tobin, Annie Woy, and Shari Chappell.

Also much appreciated is the input of scholars and friends, among them Paul D. Escott of Wake Forest University; Lee W. Formwalt, former director of the Organization of American Historians; Victoria E. Bynum, professor emeritus at Texas State University; Mark D. Hersey of Mississippi State University; Jennifer Hildebrand of the State University of New York at Fredonia; David Carlson of Troy State University; Dixie Ray Haggard of Valdosta State University; and Christopher C. Meyers of Valdosta State University.

A good deal of logistical support came at Valdosta State University, especially from Denise Montgomery, Ramona Ice, Meghan Donathan, and David Funk of Interlibrary Loan; Alan Bernstein, university librarian and dean of the Master of Library and Information Science Program; Deborah Davis and Stacey Wright of Archives and Special Collections; and Rex Devane of the Media Center. Further direct support in the way of both time and funding came with help from Paul Riggs, head of the Department of History; Jay Rickman, chair of the department's scheduling committee; Connie Richards, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; Alfred Fuciarelli, former assistant vice president for research and dean of the Graduate School;

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01649-1 - I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era

David Williams

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

x

*Acknowledgments*

James LaPlant, assistant vice president for research and dean of the Graduate School; and the VSU Graduate Faculty Scholarship Fund.

A very special thanks goes to Leonard L. Winslow, who graciously provided a photograph of his great-grandfather, Duncan Winslow, along with other information and documents dealing with the family's "American journey," as Leonard so aptly put it.

Finally, I would like to extend my most affectionate gratitude to my wife, Teresa Crisp Williams, who read early versions of the manuscript and has been a constant pillar of support throughout.