

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-316-51475-7 — Southern Black Women and Their Struggle for Freedom
during the Civil War and Reconstruction
Karen Cook Bell
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Introduction

Black Women during the Civil War and Reconstruction

Karen Cook Bell

In February 1868, Emily Surall filed a complaint with the Freedmen's Bureau in Savannah, Georgia, against William Murphy. Murphy held Emily's three children as "bound laborers" against their will and without the consent of Emily in violation of the Thirteenth Amendment.¹ Murphy's actions along with Emily's protest and her complaint to the Freedmen's Bureau illustrate the complex environment of slavery's after-life. Freedom was a contested process that created new relationships to state power and implied equity during and after emancipation. Black women and the labor of their children were central to the southern economy and southern households. Black women sought to redefine their relationship to the southern economy and the South by asserting their right to equality while contending with gendered and racialized violence. Freedom meant the right to marry and have self-sustaining homes; the right to secure property and acquire land through one's labor; the right to receive an education by attending school; the right to bodily autonomy for themselves and their children; and all of the benefits of citizenship. *Southern Black Women and Their Struggle for Freedom during the Civil War and Reconstruction* examines the ways in which Black women, from diverse regions of the American South, employed various forms of resistance and survival strategies to navigate one of the most tumultuous times in American history. This work highlights the complexity of Black women's wartime and postwar experiences, and provides important insight into the contested spaces they occupied.

The chapters in this volume represent an important contribution in the process of understanding how the Civil War and Reconstruction affected Black women in the US South. The recent culture wars on the role of

slavery and race in our nation's historical discourse underscore how vital it is to understand what Eric Foner refers to as the "Second Founding" and its impact on newly emancipated women.² During slavery, southern Black women were valued for their productive and reproductive labor and faced sexual exploitation on a daily basis. Black women were also central to the slave family and the slave community as wives, mothers, caregivers, midwives, and in numerous other roles. Emancipation began the process of changing the legal status of Black women; and their labor, gender roles, and experience with gender violence were also transformed. In fact, they experienced conflicting notions of linear, seasonal, and "Revolutionary" time where emancipation did not bring the experience of one event leading to another logically. Their sense of space and geography were disrupted, and their homes were transformed.³ As Black women began the process of emancipating themselves during the Civil War, they told themselves and others what was happening in disparate regions of the South and thus formulated stories of the war and freedom, which reflected race and gender.⁴ At the same time, participants in the war and observers of the war advanced their perspectives of the changing landscape and the harsh realities of war, which sometimes included, but often excluded, the on-ground acts of Black women.⁵ As Thavolia Glymph makes clear, "enslaved women waged war against individual slaveholders and the Confederate state in myriad ways. They fought as combatants and noncombatants, civilians and partisans."⁶ When the war ended, Black women moved emancipation and freedom forward by disrupting the plantation regimen, taking former slave owners to court for unpaid wages, fighting for military pensions for their families, leading the movement for reparations for slavery, becoming landowners, and advancing themselves and their children through education. They did all of this in the midst of a second war being waged against them during Reconstruction and in the Jim Crow South.⁷

The central arguments presented in this collection are twofold. First, time and place shaped freedom and the lived experience of southern Black women. During the Civil War, Black women experienced emancipation differently from men as they struggled against sexual violence, re-enslavement, and the tensions inherent in the contests over the realization of freedom. Second, freedom's boundaries after the war were often contested and fluid as Black women's lived experience was characterized by ambiguity, the persistence of "unfreedoms," persisting racial and gender violence, and unequal citizenship. The essays in this collection, working from varied perspectives, help us to understand the complexity

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of Black women's struggle. Collectively, the chapters demonstrate how Black women defined and claimed the freedom promised after the official end of slavery and demanded rights as citizens in the Civil War and postwar period.

This volume builds on scholarship that has envisioned emancipation within the context of a long freedom movement in which Black women played a central role. This study goes further with individual narratives and case studies of women in war and freedom that show the ways in which Black women recognized that they would have to make their own freedom and how that influenced their postwar political, social and economic lives. It critically examines Black women and children as self-liberators, as contributors to the family economy during the war, and as widows who relied on kinship and community solidarity. *Southern Black Women* thereby both expands and deepens our understanding of the various ways Black women seized wartime opportunities and made powerful claims on citizenship. It captures the variability of that struggle through an examination of diverse geographical locations.

Two themes have emerged in the historiography of Black women and slave emancipation. The first centers on how Black women negotiated the transition to freedom under a variety of competing influences. The second centers on the violence that Black women experienced in their transition to freedom. Although numerous studies have been devoted to examining the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on former slaves, very few provide a comparative regional perspective of Black women's experiences. Thavolia Glymph's *The Women's Fight: The Civil War Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (2020) is the most recent study to provide an analysis of what the war meant for Black and White women in the North and South. As with previous wars such as the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the Civil War forced many women from their homes and beyond the confines of the domestic sphere. Black women took to the roads fleeing armies or enslavers, made their way to battlefields as nurses and, in the case of Harriet Tubman, served as spy and scout and led soldiers in a campaign to liberate slaves. Black women also labored in army camps as seamstresses and laundresses. Glymph's work is part of a larger historiography that has attempted to move gender to the forefront of our understanding of the Civil War and Reconstruction period. Amy Murrell Taylor's *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (2020) also exemplifies this trajectory. Studies by Kidada Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me* (2014) and *I Saw Death Coming: A History of Terror and Survival in the War*

against Reconstruction (2023), and Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom* (2009), which examine gender and violence, have demonstrated that freedwomen laid claim to full and equal citizenship, to their own conceptions of womanhood, and to access to public spaces that had previously been denied them.⁸ More recently, Carole Emberton's study of Priscilla Joyner's long emancipation underscores the paradigm of freedom as a process in which women navigated the boundaries of coercion in a new economic, political, and ideological moment.⁹ *Southern Black Women* demonstrates how different geographical contexts can together underscore common experiences of struggle over feminine roles, war and postwar violence, family formation, household labor practices, and participation in the public sphere.

The contributors to this volume illuminate broad geographical contexts and categories. Part I, "Emancipation and Black Women's Labor," considers how emancipation impacted the labor of formerly enslaved women. Katherine Chilton's chapter explores the unique experience of women in the District of Columbia and argues that Black women drew on women's strong position in the urban economy to choose work that allowed them to help support their families and demand respect and reciprocal obligations from their husbands. The strategies practiced by African American women during and after emancipation reveal the continuities between the pre- and post-Civil War periods that made urban freedom in the District of Columbia different and distinct. Despite the dislocations of the Civil War and the Reconstruction and the attempts of agents of the Union Army and the Freedmen's Bureau to impose Republican ideals on Black women, emancipation ultimately served to reinforce prewar patterns of gendered behavior in former slave households. While Black men experienced great demand for their labor during the war, the resumption of a peacetime employment market meant that the majority of Black women would have to work in freedom.

Arlisha R. Norwood examines a special category of women, those who temporarily or permanently could be classified as "single" in Virginia. This chapter argues that this population which includes unmarried, divorced, widowed, abandoned, and separated women were the most economically vulnerable group during and after the war. Despite the unique obstacles they faced, single Black women asserted their needs, worked together to prevent destitution, and challenged the agendas of governmental agencies and private organizations whose well-meaning intentions often clashed with their own expectations. Their petitions for support and compensation altered the roles and responsibilities of federal

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and local agencies and made these women prominent characters in defining freedom, welfare, citizenship, and womanhood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Felicia Jamison analyzes Black women in the Georgia Low Country during the Civil War who used the personal time afforded them after laboring on rice plantations to acquire property and pass on goods to their children. Using the testimonies of women in the records of the Southern Claims Commission, Jamison demonstrates how Black women secured property before the war, lost their valuable property as Union soldiers traversed the region and commandeered their goods, and petitioned the Commission for restitution to provide for themselves and their families after the war. Using the “politics of acquisition” as a framework, Jamison argues that women in Liberty County, Georgia, used property to enhance their lives and secure their freedom. She demonstrates that the loss of personal goods such as clothing, livestock, and bushels of agricultural products severely hampered Black women and their family’s transition into freedom.

Part II, “War, Gender Violence, and the Courts,” provides important context to the legal and violent dimensions of emancipation for Black women. Karen Cook Bell interrogates how Black women in Louisiana and Georgia used Freedmen’s Bureau courts and their knowledge of the landscape “to make their own freedom.” In both regions, low wages and legal battles placed formerly enslaved women at a disadvantage; however, their labor aided their families and communities. Through the “contract labor system” in Louisiana and access to abandoned lands in Georgia, these women were able to improve their conditions in the short term. While some freedpeople derived marginal economic benefits from wage labor in the immediate aftermath of the war, in Louisiana these newly emancipated women were persistent in their demands for full and fair compensation from the Bureau of Free Labor, which adjudicated a significant number of cases in their favor.

Crystal Feimster examines the Black soldiers of the 4th Regiment of the Native Guard (also known as the Corps d’Afrique) stationed at Fort Jackson, Louisiana, and the laundresses who served them and their White officers. Both Black soldiers and laundresses were formerly enslaved people who had seized their freedom by joining and aiding the Union cause. Over the course of six weeks, in December 1863 and January 1864, they engaged in open mutiny to protest racial and sexual violence inflicted by White Union officers. In so doing they made visible the violent terms of interracial interaction that informed the meaning of wartime freedom

and Black labor (terms that were still very much rooted in the prisms and discourses of enslavement). More importantly, as free labor Black women began to negotiate a deeply abusive racial and sexual terrain.

Kaisha Esty demonstrates that during the American Civil War, laboring African American women and girls in Union-occupied territory embarked on their own war over the use of their bodies. As fugitives, “contraband,” and refugees, displaced Black women and girls of liminal status confronted gender violence in conditions that often resembled the systemic sexual violence of slavery. As this chapter argues, central to this gender violence was the assumption that Black women were always willing to negotiate sex as part of their (nonsexual) labor. The introduction of wartime legislation protecting women from sexual assault was pivotal. In race-neutral terms, such legislation created a powerful avenue for refugee Black women and girls not only to seek sexual justice but also to challenge and redefine existing cultural and legal understandings of sexual consent. Analysis of testimonies to wartime sexual violence in Tennessee and South Carolina uncovers how formerly enslaved African American women and girls located their violation in relation to their sense of virtue, respectability, and sexual sovereignty. These testimonies mark a significant period of Black women’s vocalization as liminal and stateless actors, prompting a reframing of histories of dissemblance, respectability, labor, and gender violence.

“Emancipation, the Black Family, and Education” composes Part III. Family and education were the sinew of the Black community. Kelly Houston Jones explores this dimension of emancipation, illuminating the intersection of several processes in wartime and the postwar decades such as Black women’s social and family networks and their struggle to claim their rights in connection to the service of their men. Using the records connected to the 54th United States Colored Infantry (the *other* 54th – not the 54th Massachusetts of “Glory” fame), Jones reconstructs the geography of USCT women’s family, work, and society in the post-Civil War years, paying closest attention to the twenty-five years after the war. Emphasizing Black women’s political placemaking during and after the war’s refugee crisis, Jones argues that Black women provided support for their soldiers and the US Army presence overall, but they also constituted part of the occupation force of Arkansas’s capital. They formed the backbone of Unionist Little Rock and forged alliances with White progressive allies. They fought for rootedness, gaining unprecedented control over their domestic lives, and claimed privileges via their association with Black soldiers.

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Brandi Clay Brimmer follows the story of Fanny Whitney, an enslaved woman, who belonged to a community of men and women that was bound together by extended ties of kinship and other connections in Union-occupied areas of eastern North Carolina. Brimmer's essay pieces together the historical trajectory of widowhood for Black women in post-Civil War America. Using the case files of Fanny Whitney and other southern Black women who applied for survivors' benefits after 1866, the year the federal government recognized "slave marriage" in pension law, this chapter asks what happened to the women and children Black soldiers depended on, left behind in freedmen's camps, and reunited with after the war. Black women who were widows, she contends, pieced together their existence on a daily basis. Evidence from the pension files of Black Union widows in eastern North Carolina deepens our understanding of Black women's lives and labors and sheds light on the ways they struggled to define widowhood for themselves. Brimmer expands the discourse regarding widowed Black women who used community and kinship networks to shape freedom.

Black women have been central to efforts to educate African Americans. Hilary Green examines this aspect of freedom by considering Emerson Normal School and institution building in the postwar era and the important role of education in the lives of formerly enslaved women in Mobile, Alabama. Green posits that Emerson Normal was instrumental in permitting former slaves as well as the children born after the end of slavery to become teachers, administrators, and, most important, leaders within their communities. Emerson Normal represented the expansion and refinement of the educational partnership between Black Mobilians and the American Missionary Association after the creation of state-funded public schools. This partnership played a critical role in creating the corps of teachers required for the new public school system. Outside the classroom, graduates employed their preparation for middle-class leadership by actively participating in racial uplift organizations and campaigns. Never viewing their service as limited to the classroom, Emerson Normal graduates became an essential asset for Black Mobilians and their slow, arduous struggle for African American public education and racial equality in Mobile.

Southern Black Women and Their Struggle for Freedom during the Civil War and Reconstruction demonstrates that only through case studies can we witness the ways in which Black women directed definitions of freedom to meet specific demands. Through this wide lens, national patterns in realizing emancipation become visible. The essays herein, though diverse, ultimately

offer a broad though not exhaustive survey of emancipation's meanings and an examination of the challenges of and the contests over the realization of freedom. Ultimately, Black women fashioned a distinct worldview that aided them as they negotiated their new lives during and after the Civil War. They confronted the power structures with the tools available to them and did so with both measured and phenomenal success. In order to understand the influence of race, gender, and class, historians must be willing to rethink important questions of the Civil War and Reconstruction era: how did Black women live their daily lives? How did they view themselves and their role in the Black community? What did they believe and what was their worldview? What liberation strategies did they embrace and why? The pages that follow bring Black women's voices into the core of analysis in answering these questions.

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PART I

EMANCIPATION AND BLACK
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I

“The Proceeds of My Own Labor”

*Black Working Women in the District of Columbia
during the Civil War*

Katherine Chilton

As the home of the “first freed,” the nearly 3,000 enslaved men, women, and children liberated by Congress April 1862 in the District of Columbia represented a unique site for women struggling for emancipation during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Eight and a half months before the Emancipation Proclamation, the District of Columbia Emancipation Act freed Black women in the District of Columbia and paid compensation to the White men and women who claimed them as property. As the Civil War progressed, these women were quickly outnumbered by run-away enslaved men and women entering the city and the Union camps that formed a protective barrier around the capital. This influx forced the Union Army, and later the Freedmen’s Bureau, to determine how to define dependency when it came to Black women and for a time transformed the city into a “laboratory of social policy.”¹ Although willing to utilize the benefits and programs provided by the government when it helped them, Black women in the District of Columbia understood that they could also look to the city’s existing free community of color for guidance. Like other southern cities, the urban economy in Washington had long offered opportunities to women. Freedwomen, both those who gained their freedom in the city and those who arrived during and after the war, turned to existing resources in the form of strategies long practiced by free women of color as well as asserting their right to the new resources of the Union Army and Freedmen’s Bureau as they made their transition to freedom.

Black women’s experiences in the District of Columbia suggest the need to take a more expansive view of the struggle for freedom that also includes the free community of color. The recognition that freedpeople’s