

**SLAVERY,
RESISTANCE,**
Freedom



EDITED BY
GABOR BORITT
AND SCOTT HANCOCK

*Slavery,
Resistance,
Freedom*

Gettysburg Civil War Institute Books

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Edited by Gabor Boritt

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and Other Quotations from Abraham Lincoln*

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Slavery, Resistance, Freedom

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To Tom Kemp and Ed Johnson

*By late June it is usually warm,
Even hot in Gettysburg.
In the night at our farm,
The fireflies glow in the dark,
Fleeting specks illuminating the woods and
Turning Marsh Creek into a pageant.
In the daytime along the side of the road,
Orange tiger lilies proclaim their eternal message.
My heart overflows;
It is time to see old friends again,
Time to make new ones.
It is time for the Gettysburg Civil War Institute.*

GABOR BORITT

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Acknowledgments

ALL KNEW,” Lincoln said in the spring of 1865, that slavery “was, somehow, the cause of the war.”¹ That war, the only one in the history of the United States in which all participants were Americans, cost more than six hundred twenty thousand dead, and a million and a half in total casualties. In a like war today, in a nation with a population of three hundred million people, those numbers would grow, proportionally, to five and a half million dead, and more than thirteen million in total casualties.

Those soul-shattering figures point to one of the costs of American slavery. Of course Lincoln was wrong in saying that “all” knew. Neither then nor now do all know, though in our time most professional historians, at least, have come to accept the centrality of slavery to the Civil War. Indeed scholars have gone further, taking the words of Lincoln’s second inaugural address to their logical conclusion by picturing the institution of slavery as crucial to all of U.S. history. However uncomfortable that thought still is in this twenty-first century, we can take comfort in knowing that Americans are trying to face up to the issues spawned by this, the most dominant flaw of a truly remarkable history.

At Gettysburg, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College by devoting a weeklong session to African American history. Some of

the finest experts came together to speak and debate the subject in its Civil War context. Also, on each November 19 we remember the Gettysburg Address as an academic institution should, by inviting a leading scholar of the Civil War era to give a lecture. The visiting historians often focus on slavery. This book brings together many of these lectures to form a volume that sheds important light on slavery, resistance, and freedom. The fact that the book's progression leads toward freedom testifies to American history. To quote the introduction written by my colleague Scott Hancock, "Though perspectives on how much freedom has been realized differ, and though desire for freedom is far from being uniquely American, striving for freedom has shaped much of what it means to be an American. The ideal has made a difference."

And now to thank people who helped bring this book to life. The Civil War Institute (CWI) continues to be a happy, very hard-working place, and my first thanks go to the fine staff led by Tina Grim, aided by Diane Brennan, Pam Dalrymple, and my personal assistant Susan Oyler—all outstanding people in their own ways. Susan deserves special thanks for helping to see the manuscript through publication.

The CWI sessions attract wonderful, interesting people from as far away as Alaska and Australia, ranging in age from the teens to nearly ninety. What a pleasure it is to learn with them and to share their company. We also present scholarships to both rising high-school seniors and teachers. Their work is supervised and enriched by Pete Vermilyea and Bill Hanna. Better helpers and friends one need not hope for.

Student assistants, all Gettysburg College undergraduates, play an important part in the life of the CWI, make it great fun, and it is a pleasure to thank them all. At the session devoted to African American history, the assistants included Gerrit L. Blauvelt, Cora R. Chandler, Eric Esser, Ian P. Harkness, Nancy Moll, Theresa L. Obyle, Timothy S. Parry II, Jason E. Patton, Jared E. Peatman, Kathryn S. Porch, and Heidi Schuster.

Many of these students also assisted my work over the years, some paid and some as volunteers, providing so much help that I can barely conceive of my life without their hard work and blithe spirits. Their troop also includes Andrew Douglas, Emily Hummel, and Craig Schneider. Thank you.

Next I thank my family. Liz, my wife, only grows as my source of strength. Our boys, though now living far away, remain an integral part of our family. Norse and his wife, Mimi, always take time from their hectic lives in the theater in the Big Apple for happy times together. Jake, a fine young documentary filmmaker also based in New York, roams the globe, but ever remains a friend and a liberating intellectual companion. Dan, the youngest, at the Bird Department of the National Zoo in Washington, adds spice to our lives—even when he is on a Smithsonian expedition to Antarctica, as he is now. Together they help make life and so the creating of books meaningful.

One of the great pleasures of being a professor is to see talented younger colleagues coming along. I'm delighted to have a companion in bringing this book before the reading public. Scott Hancock joined the Gettysburg History Department in 2001, quickly making himself into a fine, helpful colleague. As a teacher of African American history, he brings special sensibilities to our work. His introduction to the book follows.

Autumn 2006
Farm by the Ford
Gettysburg

Gabor Boritt

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Introduction

Whenever I teach survey classes in American History, I inevitably ask students what it means to them to be an American. The answers are deceptively brief. Though limited to a sentence or two, they betray a deep consciousness of American history. Unsurprisingly, students of diverse backgrounds—young and old, white and black, male and female, American citizens and other nationalities—typically describe American identity as being centered on freedom: of speech, of worship, of pursuit of opportunity. It is a response with an illusory, ubiquitous, yet profound simplicity. Though perspectives on how much freedom has been realized differ and though desire for freedom is far from being uniquely American, striving for freedom has shaped much of what it means to be an American. The ideal has made a difference.

These chapters, to adapt a title by a recent work of Edward Ayers and William Thomas, tell stories of the difference that freedom—and slavery—have made.¹ They tell the stories of that difference as the nation struggled to resolve how it could live with these polar opposites, and how Americans have dealt with the memory of that struggle.

The chapters especially focus on the difference that slavery and freedom made to African Americans, and how African Americans resisted slavery and responded when it crumbled. It is not simply a

story of triumph or defeat. In 1867, William Wells Brown, an African American writer, speaker, and fiery leader who had escaped slavery himself, published *The Negro in the American Rebellion*. At the conclusion of his chapter on Nat Turner's ill-fated slave rebellion in 1831, he told the story of Jim, a slave to one of the leaders who pursued Nat Turner and his band of rebels. This slave owner owed his life to Jim, for Jim had given him sufficient warning that Turner's band was coming. The slave owner took Jim with him to help hunt down Nat Turner's men. But Jim drew a line. "I cannot help you hunt down these men," he said, for "they, like myself, want to be free." Jim had reached his breaking point. Handing his gun to his master, he told him to "please give me my freedom, or shoot me on the spot." Jim was probably trying to read his master, but also likely meant exactly what he said. For him, life without freedom was not a life worth living. Thousands of other black men and women reached that point and attempted to escape North. Far more did not run away but, like Jim, contested slavery on some level. Some lost their lives. Jim did not survive his personal contest. Despite having saved his master's life, his own life was not saved.² A few slaves did gain freedom; most continued to struggle to moderate their circumstances in order to make life tolerable. Black women and men's struggles against slavery ultimately contributed to their emancipation—though the struggle did not end there.

The impact of African Americans' struggle with slavery and their efforts to make a place for themselves in the post-Civil War United States shaped the nation then, and persists in doing so today. Ira Berlin's chapter begins at the dawn of the twenty-first century. He demonstrates that slavery continues to play a vital role in the public discourse of both popular culture and politics in the United States. Over one hundred thirty-five years after slavery's legal demise, Americans' reactions to it range from curious to willfully ignorant, passionate to purposefully disinterested, bitter to hopeful. Berlin pursues the question of why slavery has re-

mained rooted not only in the consciousness of people prone to gloss over unsightly blemishes in our nation's past, but also why it continues to provoke strong responses. He suggests that slavery has become a surrogate for Americans' often frustrating public and private discourses on race. But historians' study of slavery has only begun to explore adequately the totality of hundreds of years of experience. If slavery has become a way of talking about race, then the history of slavery is crucial. In other words, how we remember slavery heavily influences how we discuss race. But, as Berlin points out, memory and history, while inextricably linked, are far from identical. In this chapter, Berlin provides insight for understanding the relationship between memory and history, and how scholars might more accurately inform the memory of slavery's history.

Recently, there has been a growing public interest in one area that shapes our understanding of slavery and African Americans' responses: the stories of runaway slaves. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger demonstrate the complexity of the deceptively simple term "runaway slave." Though historians have long known that black men, women, and children did not always escape in order to get North of the Mason-Dixon line, there have been few studies that condense their multiple motives and actions into one accessible chapter. By fitting together pieces of stories, the authors recreate the landscape that absconding slaves had to live on and off of. Franklin and Schweninger also illuminate the topography of tension that these men and women built up over decades. They suggest that while runaway slaves did prompt fears of insurrection, they more commonly heightened white anxiety regarding the difficulty of ensuring the institution's stability and persistence. The role of runaway slaves as a part of the mounting stresses that eventually exploded in 1861 has not been fully appreciated. Here Franklin and Schweninger point to what their larger work, the Lincoln Prize-winning *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, makes plain: that slaves' persistence in pushing for temporary or

permanent forms of freedom strained slave owners, the South, and the nation.³

Free black Northerners also contributed to the strains pushing the country toward disunion. Black leaders in the North, many of whom had Southern roots and would influence postwar leadership in the South, began pushing the country to fulfill the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights early on. As a part of that protest, black leaders helped define what it meant to be African American. It meant not only incorporating the ideal of freedom, but also an obligation to fight for individual and corporate freedom. My chapter points out that black leaders' construction of a black identity rested in large part on creating a cohesive memory of African Americans' past. I explore how memory is shaped, and how black leaders wrestled with weaving themselves into the same American fabric that shrouded many of their black brothers and sisters in slavery while maintaining the commitment they had made to shred it.⁴

In "Black on the Border," Edward Ayers, Anne Rubin, and William Thomas examine two counties' experiences in the war that finally ended slavery. They describe the wartime experiences of the residents and inform us not just about the past but also how future research might be expanded. The authors created the outstanding Valley of the Shadow Web site, which contains a bounty of primary source material that reveals the past in Franklin and Augusta counties. Their essay relies almost entirely on this Web site for sources. This chapter is not as heavily imbued with secondary sources as some of the other chapters in this volume, and therefore illuminates intriguing future possibilities for historiography as top-notch Web sites and other well-designed technology make primary sources far more accessible to seasoned scholars, graduate students, and lay people.⁵

Ayers, Thomas, and Rubin also remind us that the boundary between North and South was simultaneously fluid and fixed and that African Americans played a central role in this paradox. The

two counties shared a great deal culturally and geographically, and Confederate and Union ventures across the border were not restricted to Lee's advance prior to the Gettysburg campaign. Yet the legal status of black people could not have been more diametrically opposed. In many respects, African Americans were the fulcrum upon which these two counties teetered and were the difference that divided. On the Northern side, whites supported the cause of black freedom or disparaged it, and black men pushed the issue by enlisting at the first opportunity. On the Southern side of the border, the voices of slaves are not present as the voices of free blacks in Franklin are. But the authors make the black presence clear. Slaves' desire for freedom pushed white Southerners in the county to consider the consequences of enlisting them before war broke out. This chapter puts the black residents of the border area in the center of the military and ideological struggle during the Civil War.

For many African American men, freedom represented the opportunity to risk their lives in the fight for greater freedom. In recent years, black troops that served in the Civil War have received increased attention from popular and academic historians. Bridging the gap between these two groups, Noah Andre Trudeau tracks the uneven fortunes of one group of soldiers that was unique among all black troops. The Third Division of the Ninth Corps operated as a part of "the elite white club known as the Army of the Potomac" and was the only black division incorporated into a major Union army. This integrationist "experiment," as Trudeau labels it, did not last and had a mixed record of military accomplishment. The Third Division played a key role in the Crater fiasco in which almost a third of the black troops were killed or wounded. But the division also eventually demonstrated to both white and black Americans that they knew how to perform effectively as a fighting unit.

Trudeau's chapter provides an essential balance for a book that explores the social, mental, and political worlds of African Americans in this momentous age of transition. The war became

the driving force that moved them from slavery to freedom. And the sacrifices made by African Americans, especially as military participants, demands a weighty role in any examination of what freedom meant.

After the war, freedom presented real opportunities for African Americans to gain significant political power. Eric Foner has done more than any other historian to correct lingering Reconstruction-era images of freed black people as incompetent and ignorant public servants. Here he provides a glimpse of an impressive array of biographical portraits compiled in his larger work, *Freedom's Lawmakers*. These portraits help ensure that disturbingly persistent images of freed people are "irrevocably laid to rest." African Americans held hundreds of offices across the South, serving as everything from justices of the peace to United States senators. Many had substantial education; others came from more humble backgrounds. They overwhelmingly demonstrated that they were capable of both governing in and maneuvering through the political realm.⁶

Though a disproportionate number of Reconstruction African American leaders were free before national emancipation, they still represented, for a time, the fruition of a popular American ideology: that people from all walks of life could aspire to high office. They demonstrated that the nation's leaders could fully represent its people by being a government by the people, for the people, and truly of the people. Until now, black leaders of that era have not been sufficiently understood as epitomizing the American ideal, but Foner's introduction to these leaders and their tenure in office begins to correct persistent but antiquated misperceptions.

Together the chapters here point to the rich diversity of African Americans' experiences with and responses to freedom and slavery in the Civil War era. We know that black people, both slave and free, resisted all kinds of exploitation and degradation. How they did so, and what that has meant for them and for the nation, defined the struggle from slavery to freedom.