



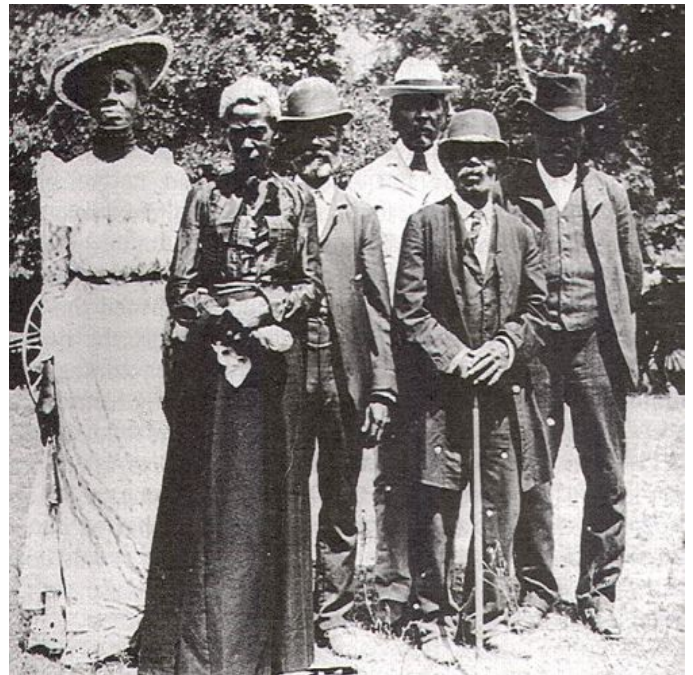
## The U.S. Navy and Emancipation during the Civil War

On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas and issued General Order Number 3, declaring that the Emancipation Proclamation applied to Texas and that the 250,000 enslaved people in the state were free. Black Texans in Galveston rejoiced when they received the news. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, was the official U.S. policy toward slavery in the Confederate states. Two and a half years passed before the military was able to emancipate enslaved people in Texas. Eventually, freed Black Texans referred to that day as “Juneteenth,” a combination of the words “June” and “nineteenth,” and held annual celebrations commemorating that event, and these celebrations continue to this day. Juneteenth remains an important moment in the history of emancipation and continues to gain more national recognition. As many historians have noted, emancipation was a long and complicated process that varied across time and space during the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Understanding that broader process offers an opportunity to explore the U.S. Navy’s role in emancipation along with the courage and skill of Black Americans who escaped from slavery during the Civil War.

Throughout the war, the constant movement of the U.S. Army and Navy in the South offered opportunities for enslaved people to escape to Union lines. Even in the early months of the war, those who resided near the coast or inland waterways sought refuge on U.S. Navy ships. In July 1861, William Mervine, the commander of the Gulf Blockading Squadron, reported that the *Huntsville*, one of his ships stationed at Mobile Bay, received “three negroes on his vessel, who escaped from the shore in a canoe of their own construction.” Mervine asked the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, what to do with these refugees and what actions he should take in “future similar cases.”<sup>2</sup> Welles instructed Mervine to “let them remain on board and employ them as usefully as possible,” but he cautioned Mervine by also stating that “it is not the



A band at Emancipation Day festivities in Austin, Texas, June 19, 1900. (Austin History Center, Austin Public Library)



Black Texans attend Emancipation Day celebration in Austin, Texas, June 19, 1900. (Austin History Center, Austin Public Library).

policy of the Government to invite or encourage this class of desertions.”<sup>3</sup> Welles’s response was indicative of the U.S. government’s disjointed policies towards enslaved people during the Civil War, especially in the war’s early stages. Despite the centrality of slavery to the war, many policy-makers hoped to postpone resolving questions about the future of slavery and enslaved people’s status until after defeating the Confederacy. As the events on the *Huntsville* demonstrated, Black Southerners had other plans and through their actions, forced the U.S. government to reevaluate its policies. U.S. military personnel were among the first to confront the reality that Black Southerners refused to remain on the sidelines of the conflict.

As the U.S. government began adopting more concrete policies toward combating slavery in the rebelling states and word spread among enslaved communities, thousands escaped to and were emancipated by the U.S. Navy. From blockade squadrons stationed on the Southern coast to gunboats steaming along inland waterways, naval officers recorded their interactions with Black refugees who reached their vessels. As the gunboat *Carondelet* steamed south on the Mississippi River, Commander Henry Walke noted, “The negroes were very numerous, standing under the banks of the river and making signals to us at night, asking to be taken away.”<sup>4</sup> Another Navy officer off the coast of North Carolina wrote that “Nineteen fugitive slaves—men, women, and children—were picked up, much exhausted at 7 a.m. in a small boat by the *Ceres* and brought on board at 10 a.m. They made their escape from Middletown, N.C. the previous night. They reported that others were coming.”<sup>5</sup> These smaller groups quickly grew into larger groups that needed military protection. In October 1862, for example, a Navy officer serving on the *Vermont* with the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron stated that the Navy’s expedition on the St. Johns River in South Carolina resulted in “upward of 2,000 negroes,” seeking the protection of U.S. ships.<sup>6</sup>

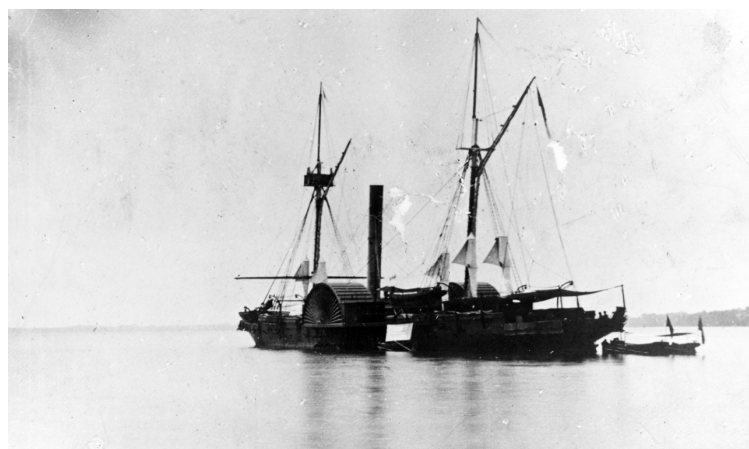
Years after the Civil War, formerly enslaved people vividly recalled the details of their flights from slavery to U.S. Navy ships. During an



An illustration in *Harper's Weekly* of enslaved people fleeing to Union lines in North Carolina demonstrates the effects of the Emancipation Proclamation in some parts of the South, February 21, 1863. (Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-112158)

interview with a writer from the Works Progress Administration in 1936, Richard Slaughter recounted how he and his family fled Hampton, Virginia to a fleet of U.S. gunboats operating on the James River in June 1862. Although Slaughter was 87 years old, the story of his family’s escape and the Navy’s role in freeing enslaved people in Virginia remained fresh in his mind:

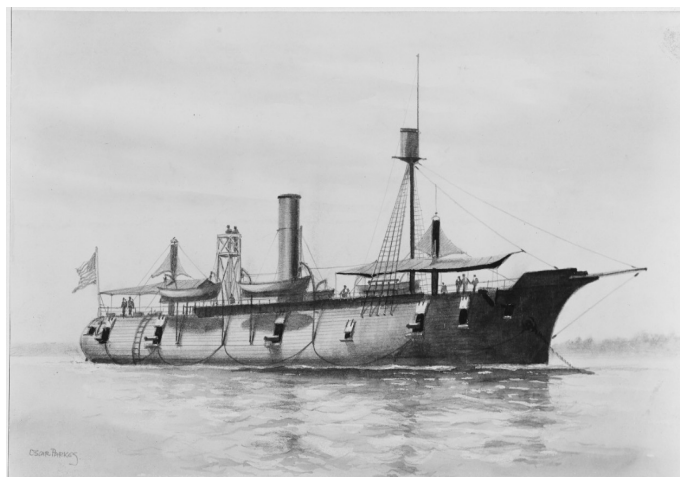
My father and mother and cousins went aboard the [*Maritanza*] with me. You see my father and three or four men left in the darkness first and got aboard. The gun boats would fire on the towns and plantations and run the white folks off. After that they would carry all the colored folks back down here to old Point and put 'em behind the Union lines.



The *Maritanza*, the ship that picked up Richard Slaughter and his family during their escape, circa 1862-1865. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 46629)

Slaughter fondly remembered the names of all the gunboats that steamed up the James River. “There was the *Galena*, we called her the old cheese box, the *Delaware*, the *Yankee*, the [*Mahaska*], and the [*Maritanza*], which was the ship I was board of.”<sup>7</sup> In a separate interview, Marie Hervey shared the story of how her recently deceased husband, Aaron, along with several others, spent a night hiding in a swamp from dogs and slave patrols before crossing the Mississippi River on a makeshift raft to Helena, Arkansas to meet a U.S. gunboat.<sup>8</sup>

African Americans had as much to offer to the Navy as they stood to gain from it. The escape of Richard Slaughter, Aaron Hervey, and thousands of others like them required courage, but their experiences with seamanship and knowledge of local waterways certainly aided them in their quests. Black Southerners who lived on the coast or near major waterways had experience with navigation, fishing, laboring on boats, and even serving as ship pilots.<sup>9</sup> Formerly enslaved people’s familiarity with navigation of local waterways, the location of enemy torpedoes, Confederate troop positions, and fortifications, aided them in their escape, but that knowledge also translated into valuable naval intelligence.<sup>10</sup>



A watercolor depicting the *Galena*, the “old cheese box,” operating on the James River in 1862. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 59541)

While Robert Smalls’ heroic deed is more well-known, U.S. naval records reveal that many other lesser-known Black Southerners served as guides and ship pilots for U.S. forces operating on Southern waterways. One Navy officer credited an “old negro” with piloting a Navy expedition to a Confederate encampment up the Altamaha River in Georgia, leading to capture of Confederate combatants and supplies along with the liberation of seven enslaved people held at the camp.<sup>12</sup> Senior officers sometimes recognized Black guides and ship pilots’ contributions. Rear Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont, the commander of the South Atlantic Blockade Squadron, ordered a subordinate commander to retain the services of Nelson Anderson and Thomas Mendigo, two formerly enslaved pilots, because of their familiarity with navigating Bull’s Bay on the South Carolina coast.<sup>13</sup> Some of these experienced mariners eventually enlisted in the U.S. Navy.<sup>14</sup>

Escaping to U.S. ships and aiding the Navy’s war effort did not mark the end of Black Southerners’ hardships. Whether in Union labor camps or in the naval service, Black refugees frequently confronted racist government officials, and Black Americans’ permanent status in the United States remained unclear.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, military emancipation, which depended on the physical presence of U.S. forces that were willing and capable of liberating enslaved people, did not free everyone. Even after Confederate armies began surrendering in the spring of 1865, large parts of the Confederacy remained unoccupied, and most Black Southerners remained in bondage. Texas, for example, was mostly untouched by the forces that dealt serious blows to the institution of slavery in other parts of the South. In fact, the state became a haven for slaveholders who forcibly relocated enslaved people to ensure that the U.S. Army and Navy could not liberate them.<sup>16</sup> Even after Major General Granger arrived and declared an end to slavery in Texas, the U.S. Army had to move deeper into the state’s interior to compel white southerners to free enslaved people who they continued to hold in bondage.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment completed the abolition of slavery in the United States.

The unevenness of military emancipation is reflected in some of the distinct Emancipation Day traditions and ceremonies that developed in different parts of the United States and continue today. Juneteenth

has garnered greater national recognition in recent years, but for quite some time, this commemoration was largely concentrated in Texas. Richmond, Virginia observes Emancipation Day on April 3 in memory of the day U.S. troops first seized control of the Confederacy's capital in April of 1865. At least one celebration in Eastern Mississippi, known locally as the Eight O' May, commemorates the arrival of U.S. troops in that part of the state on May 8, 1865 and the effective end of slavery that followed.<sup>18</sup> Recently, Floridians advocated for establishing a more localized commemoration of Emancipation Day on May 20, the day in 1865 that U.S. troops arrived in Tallahassee, Florida and declared that the Emancipation Proclamation applied to the state.<sup>19</sup> Despite the distinctions in these traditions, they all illustrate how the courage and contributions of Black Americans along with the U.S. military's efforts paved the way for the United States to begin addressing long-standing questions about race, slavery, citizenship, and civil rights.



Emancipation Day celebration in Richmond, Virginia, 1905. (Library of Congress, LC-D4-18421)

## Endnotes

- [1] *Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation*, ed. Jim Downs and David W. Blight (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2017); Joseph P. Reidy, *Illusions of Emancipation: the Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).
- [2] Report of William Mervine to Gideon Welles, July 11, 1861, United States, Naval War Records Office, 1894-1922, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, ser1; v. 16, 580; Cited hereafter as ORN with series and volume number.
- [3] Order from Gideon Welles to William Mervine, July 22, 1861, ORN, ser1; v. 16, 593.
- [4] Report of Commander Walke, commanding U.S.S. *Carondelet*, July 30, 1862, ORN, ser1; v.23, 272.
- [5] Henry Van Brunt, "Rough notes of the naval expedition to Roanoke Island, etc.," February 3, 1862, ORN, Ser. 1: v.6, 586.
- [6] Report of Lieutenant S.W. Preston, October 11, 1862, ORN, Ser. 1:v.13, 378-379.
- [7] Author added italics in quote to emphasize ship names. Richard Slaughter interview, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938, Vol. 17 (Virginia)*, 46, Works Progress Administration, Washington D.C.
- [8] Marie E. Hervey Interview, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part III*, 232-233, Works Progress Administration, Washington D.C.
- [9] W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thomas Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). *Is' Escape from Slavery to Union Hero*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017.
- [10] Barbara Brooks Tomlin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).
- [11] Cate Lineberry, *Be Free or Die: the Amazing Story of Robert Smalls' Escape from Slavery to Union Hero*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017.

- [12] Enclosure Acting Master I.A. Pennell December 22, 1864, ORN, Ser. 1: v.16, 135-136.
- [13] Order of Rear Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont, June 2, 1863, ORN, Ser. 1: v.14, 228.
- [14] Tomlin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands*; Michael J. Bennett, *Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 155-181.
- [15] Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War*, (Vintage Books: New York, 2016); Amy Murrell Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journey through the Civil War's Slave Camps*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).
- [16] W. Caleb McDaniel, *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2019), 146-148.
- [17] William Richter, *The Army in Texas during Reconstruction, 1865-1870*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987); Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- [18] James Fallows, "Emancipation Day Commemoration in Eastern Mississippi," *The Atlantic*, May 8, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/05/emancipation-day-commemoration-from-columbus-mississippi/361971/>.
- [19] Kayla McKinney, "'Created Equal' Highlights Florida Emancipation Day on First Year as Holiday in Leon County," *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/2021/05/19/florida-emancipation-day-recognized-holiday-during-created-equal-may-20-leon-county-tallahassee/5150688001/>.