

## Emancipation Moments

By Matthew Pinsker

Late in December 1936, a ninety-two-year-old woman from Washington, D.C. walked a couple miles from her residence on T Street to the Soldiers' Home, a federal retirement facility for combat veterans. Anna Harrison Chase made that long, cold walk because she regarded the site as the birthplace of emancipation. "Mother" Chase, as she was known in the local black community, remembered the Soldiers' Home from when she had just been a young "contraband" or runaway slave in the District, staying at one of the nearby contraband camps. Chase had always heard that President Abraham Lincoln had written the first drafts of the proclamation during the summer of 1862 while residing in a cottage on the grounds of the Home. Now, she wanted to see the sacred place before she died. The unexpected visit by a former slave caused a small stir and soon the *Washington Post* sent a reporter over for an interview. "I used to see Mr. Lincoln almost every day riding out to the Soldiers' Home that summer," she recalled proudly. "Of course, we did not know what he was doing, but he was such a great man. And I can remember how we laughed and cried when he set the slaves free."<sup>1</sup>

When eighteen-year-old Anna Harrison "laughed and cried" on January 1, 1863, she was experiencing emancipation on its most human terms. Mother Chase's abiding memory illustrates the visceral power of that emancipation moment and suggests the need for anniversary celebrations of the policy to take personal testimony of its impact more seriously. How did people—especially slaves and masters—actually experience emancipation during the war itself?

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<sup>1</sup> "Contraband Remembers Summer of Emancipation," Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project at Dickinson College, <http://goo.gl/K0keu> James J. Cullinane, "Mrs. Thomas Chase Visits House Where Lincoln Wrote Act," *Washington Post*, December 27, 1936, p. M5.

Answering that question also helps explain several of the nuances that complicate –and humanize-- the grand story of slavery’s destruction.

First, as Anna Harrison’s recollections suggest, there was emancipation before Emancipation. She and her family escaped from Caroline County, Virginia in early summer 1862, as the chaos of war descended on their master’s household. “Our old master and missus were dead, and we heard that our young master had been killed in the war,” she told the reporter. “So we hitched up the ox carts and I led my family away to the Free State.” Like thousands of other freedom-seeking slaves during that first year of the conflict, Harrison and her family sought refuge behind Union lines (“the Free State”) by taking their master’s ox carts across the Rappahannock River and then traveling by train from Fredericksburg. In August 1862, photographer Timothy O’Sullivan captured a now-famous image of escaping slaves, called “Fugitive African Americans Forging the Rappahannock,” that depicts what the Harrisons must have experienced as they made their way toward the District.<sup>2</sup>

Contrabands were not simply fugitive slaves. By invoking international laws of warfare, anti-slavery Union generals such as Benjamin Butler, John Fremont, and David Hunter were building serious legal arguments that helped pave the way to emancipate these human “contraband of war.” Although Lincoln curtailed some of these early emancipatory actions, both the War Department and Congress took several steps in 1861 and 1862 –with the president’s approval-- that protected contraband freedom. Most notably, Congress passed two “confiscation” acts (August 6, 1861 and July 17, 1862) that promised to punish rebels by seizing and explicitly freeing their slaves. The Congress also adopted an Article of War on March 13,

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<sup>2</sup> *Washington Post*, December 27, 1936. Mathew Pinsker, *Lincoln’s Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 66. “African Americans Forging the Rappahannock Photograph, August 1862,” Virginia Memory, Library of Virginia, <http://goo.gl/x9XlJ>

1862 that forbade the Union Army from returning fugitives. Local courts could still attempt to enforce fugitive slave laws on behalf of loyal masters, but such efforts became increasingly futile.

Nobody knows exactly how many slaves achieved freedom under these conditions, but the numbers were astounding –and sometimes infuriating-- for those who lived through it. James Rumley was a North Carolina slaveholder who experienced Union occupation along the Outer Banks. “Slaves are now deserting in scores from all parts of the country,” he confided to his diary in May 1862, “and our worst fears on this subject are likely to be realized.” Rumley particularly condemned the March 13th Article of War, claiming that it “enables these fanatics to make their quarters perfect harbors of runaway negroes,” while also noting, “The soldiers go, without hesitation, into the kitchens among the negroes and encourage them to leave their owners.” By June, Rumley was complaining that “the mask” of Union occupation, which had “concealed at first the hideous features of fanaticism,” was now entirely “thrown off.”<sup>3</sup> Slavery around Beaufort, North Carolina was essentially dead. Rumley’s account matters because it illustrates a point made by historian John Hope Franklin in his classic book, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (1963). Regardless of widespread concerns about cultivating loyal slaveholders, according to Franklin, “when Union forces won control of an area[,] slavery merely ceased to exist.”<sup>4</sup>

Franklin did not mean that all slaves achieved freedom right away, but that slavery *as an institution* collapsed soon after masters such as Rumley lost their monopoly of force and law. This new reality was most evident by 1862 along the coastal regions of the Carolinas and

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<sup>3</sup> Diary entries, May 1862 and June 7, 1862, “North Carolina Slaveholder Comments on Emancipation,” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project at Dickinson College, <http://goo.gl/F5SMU>. See also Judkin Browning, *The Southern Mind Under Union Rule: The Diary of James Rumley, Beaufort, North Carolina, 1862-1865* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 36-9.

<sup>4</sup> John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 115.

Georgia, especially in South Carolina, where Federal occupiers created a “rehearsal for reconstruction” as historian Willie Lee Rose once put it, by turning over abandoned plantations on the Sea Islands to ex-slaves and by inviting abolitionists to organize freedmen’s schools.<sup>5</sup> The federal army in the Department of the South also commandeered part of a cotton plantation owned by John Joyner Smith in Port Royal and began experimenting with training black soldiers.

Prince Rivers, a former slave from Beaufort, South Carolina, rushed to join the fight. Rivers had been a coachman for Henry M. Stuart, a prominent Beaufort planter, and like Anna Harrison, he took advantage of the war’s chaos to “borrow” his master’s horse and flee toward Union lines. The nearly forty-year-old ex-slave was also literate and quickly earned an appointment as a sergeant in what eventually became the First South Carolina Volunteers of African Descent. On August 1, 1862, General David Hunter provided Rivers and hundreds of other men in the regiment (which was being temporarily disbanded) with what might be termed their own private emancipation proclamations:

The bearer, Prince Rivers, a sergeant in First Regiment S.C. Volunteers, late claimed as a slave, having been employed in hostility to the United States, is hereby agreeably to the [First Confiscation] law of 6th of August, 1861, declared free for ever. His wife and children are also free.<sup>6</sup>

Hunter’s action came as much out of pique as principle. The fiercely anti-slavery general was angry because his efforts against slaveholders were being undermined by civilians back in Washington. President Lincoln himself had rescinded Hunter’s most sweeping emancipation

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<sup>5</sup> Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (orig. pub. 1964; Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, August 30, 1862. August 1<sup>st</sup> was often celebrated by American blacks as “Emancipation Day,” to commemorate the abolition of slavery in the British Empire (August 1, 1834). Hunter’s choice of date was no coincidence.

edict in May and now the War Department was refusing to pay the black men in “Hunter’s Regiment” because he had never been authorized to enlist them.<sup>7</sup> Though the administration would shortly reverse its decision and endorse Hunter’s experiment with black troops, it was a difficult period for unionists, filled with bad news from the war and increasing signs of political division over the slavery issue. There was no consistency in the implementation of military policies regarding slavery, and no clear sense that either the president or the Congress was in charge (or even in agreement) over the emancipation issue.

During this summer of northern discontent, which culminated with a very tense public exchange between *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley and President Lincoln, abolitionists invoked Prince Rivers as a model for what freedom could accomplish.<sup>8</sup> During an extended visit to Port Royal, Pennsylvania abolitionist James Miller McKim had asked Rivers if blacks would “fight” when “they had a chance.” “Yes, sah,” Rivers apparently replied, “Only let ‘em know for sure –*for sure* mine you—dat de white people means right; let ‘em know for sure dat dey’s fighting for demselves, and I *know* dey will fight.”<sup>9</sup> McKim then arranged to bring both General Hunter and Sergeant Rivers to the North for a few weeks of lobbying on behalf of emancipation in cities such as Philadelphia and New York.

The lingering uncertainty helps explain why President Lincoln’s emancipation announcement on September 22 represented such a political thunderbolt. Lincoln’s

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel W. Crofts, “Runaway Masters” in “Disunion,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2012, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/runaway-masters/>.

<sup>8</sup> Horace Greeley, “The Prayer of the Twenty Millions,” *New York Tribune*, August 19, 1862. Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, Washington, DC, August 22, 1862. This was the exchange that produced Lincoln’s famously slippery line: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the union and is not either to slave or to destroy slavery” even though he had already decided a month earlier to destroy slavery. For one of the best accounts of the Greeley-Lincoln exchange, see Chapter Six, “Public Opinion,” in Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 143-61.

<sup>9</sup> “The Freed Blacks of South Carolina,” *The Liberator*, August 8, 1862; see “General Hunter ‘Confiscates’ Prince Rivers,” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project, <http://goo.gl/XjECu>.

proclamation, issued following the Union victory at Antietam, specified that all previous congressional measures against slavery were to be fully enforced and that the commander-in-chief would go well beyond those measures starting on January 1, 1863 by emancipating all slaves throughout the rebel areas. The clarity and scope of the new policy was stunning. White House aide John Hay reported in his diary that when some cabinet members gathered after the announcement at the residence of Secretary of Treasury Salmon P. Chase, they seemed almost giddy. The 24-year-old Hay observed that “the old fogies ... gleefully and merrily called each other and themselves abolitionists,” noting they now “breathed freer” because, as he put it wisely, “the Pres[idential] Proc[lamatio]n. had freed them as well as the slaves.”<sup>10</sup>

From his perch on the Outer Banks, slaveholder James Rumley felt anything but free. He hated the proclamation and dreaded its consequences. On January 1st, however, Rumley appeared almost baffled, admitting that the proclamation “has taken effect today ... without producing a ripple on the face of the waters.” He had expected the September announcement to produce bloody slave insurrections, like the ones at St. Domingo or Haiti in the 1790s. Instead, all was quiet. “That the shackles should suddenly fall from the hands of thousands of slaves,” he noted in his diary, “as silently as snowflakes fall upon the earth ... was not to be believed.” Rumley attributed the relative peace to the occupation of the Federal Army, which “by their conduct towards the slaves, anticipated the Proclamation and virtually set them free.” He also observed with shrewd insight that “the slaves may not be entirely certain that their freedom is permanent, and may have some secret dread of the approach of Confederate power.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Diary entry, September 24, 1862 in Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Diary entry, January 1, 1863, “North Carolina Slaveholder Comments on Emancipation,” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project at Dickinson College, <http://goo.gl/F5SMU>. See also Browning, 49-50.

The great value of Rumley's foreboding emancipation account is how it demolishes a common misunderstanding about the proclamation. Lincoln's executive order did free some slaves *immediately*, with the stroke of a pen --"thousands" of them in the Outer Banks and tens of thousands more in Union-occupied areas along the Atlantic Coast and across the Mississippi Valley in places such as Corinth, Mississippi. Yes, there were some notable exceptions to the policy carved out in the January 1st decree --such as certain parishes in Louisiana, "forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia" and parts of the Union-occupied peninsula in Virginia-- but Rumley and many other slaveholders did not benefit from those limitations. While praying that the proclamation with its "diabolical purpose" and "astounding stretch of power" would never break the "wall of southern bayonets" still guarding the rest of the Confederacy, the professional clerk also acknowledged that, "Here [in Beaufort, North Carolina] this paper has, for the present, all the force of a constitutional legislative act."<sup>12</sup> It is tempting to brush aside those thousands of emancipation moments in places such as the Outer Banks while millions more still remained in bondage elsewhere, but that single day on January 1, 1863 witnessed more individual acts of freedom than any other date in American history.

If there had been a center of gravity that day for emancipation, it might have been at Port Royal, South Carolina, not Washington, DC. While President Lincoln was inside his White House office trying to steady his hand before signing the final proclamation at around 2 p.m., a remarkable ceremony on the site of Smith's former cotton plantation was just then drawing to a close --the largest single gathering in the South of people actually being freed. At what they now called Camp Saxton, the Federal army had organized an official ceremony and celebratory feast for several hundred men of the First South Carolina Volunteers and hundreds more of their

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<sup>12</sup> Diary entry, January 1, 1863, "North Carolina Slaveholder Comments on Emancipation," Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project at Dickinson College, <http://goo.gl/F5SMU>. See also Browning, 54.

contraband guests from around the Sea Islands. The black men stood at attention in specially designed uniforms that included standard-issue blue frock coats and bright scarlet pants. The visitors gathered in a beautiful live-oak grove with just “a glimpse of the blue river” visible, according to Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a writer and former ally of John Brown who now sat on the speaker’s platform and served as commanding officer of the regiment.<sup>13</sup>

The three-hour ceremony included a few too many speeches and presentations, but it was stirring nonetheless. William H. Brisbane, a former South Carolina planter-turned-abolitionist, read Lincoln’s September proclamation since the final version was not yet available –“a South-Carolinian addressing South-Carolinians,” as the Massachusetts-born Higginson framed it. The cheers were loud. But the excitement reached a crescendo following presentation of new regimental colors, which included a beautiful hand-sewn silken U.S. flag containing the phrase, “The Year of Jubilee has come!” Yet before Higginson could formally accept the colors, a lone voice rose from the crowd of freed people, singing, “America” (1832), and soon many of them joined in this patriotic hymn:

My country, ‘tis of thee,  
Sweet Land of Liberty...

“I never saw anything so electric,” Higginson exclaimed afterwards. The regimental surgeon reported, “Nothing could have been more unexpected or more inspiring.” Another observer

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<sup>13</sup> For the fullest account of the day’s events, see Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 13-30. For an abbreviated selection from nearly a dozen different eye-witness accounts of the ceremony, see “Emancipation Among Black Troops in South Carolina,” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project, <http://goo.gl/U7Dq0>.



noted that when some of the whites around the platform began to correct the lyrics, Higginson remarked quietly, “Leave it to them.”<sup>14</sup>

Higginson finally addressed the assembly, received the colors, and called Sergeant Prince Rivers from Company A to his side. He warned Rivers that as color sergeant he was now “chained” to this flag and must be willing to defend it to his death. “Do you understand?” the colonel barked. “Yas, Sar,” the sergeant replied. Higginson then presented a second bunting flag to Corporal Robert Sutton, and, in a scene brilliantly captured by a sketch artist from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, the two black men offered inspiring remarks while holding aloft their colors. Rivers said “he would die before surrendering [the flag] and that he wanted to show it to all the old masters.” Sutton went even further, stating that “he could not rest satisfied while so many of their kindred were left in chains,” vowing that they would one day “*show their flag to Jefferson Davis in Richmond.*” The correspondent from the *New York Tribune* described both men as “natural orators.” Later in the war, Higginson claimed that Rivers had “more administrative ability” than any white officer in the regiment, adding, “if there should ever be a black monarchy in South Carolina, he will be its king.”<sup>15</sup>

Without doubt, that ceremony at Port Royal was the grandest emancipation moment of the Civil War, but it was by no means the last. For most of the next three years, the Federal army spread word of the proclamation state by state, sometimes plantation by plantation, as it struggled to restore the union. Eye-witness testimony is harder to come by for these more

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<sup>14</sup> Comments from Higginson, Dr. Seth Rogers, and observer Harriet Ware are available at “Emancipation Among Black Troops in South Carolina,” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project, <http://goo.gl/U7Dq0>.

<sup>15</sup> For image and reporting, see *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, January 24, 1863 and *New York Tribune*, January 14, 1863, p. 8:2-3. For quotations, see entries from Mansfield French and Harriet Ware, “Emancipation Among Black Troops in South Carolina,” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project, <http://goo.gl/U7Dq0>. For Higginson’s assessment of Rivers, see “General Hunter ‘Confiscates’ Prince Rivers,” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project, <http://goo.gl/XjECu>.

isolated moments, but it does exist. There was, for example, a remarkable diary kept by James T. Ayers, who served as a recruiting agent for black soldiers in the Tennessee Valley. The 57-year-old lay Methodist preacher from Illinois had a number of dramatic “adventures” as he spread the “good news” of emancipation.<sup>16</sup> Ayers recorded one encounter in May 1864 at the John M. Eldridge plantation near Huntsville, Alabama that offers as vivid a window as any into the process of Civil War-style liberation.

Ayers described riding along, encountering a “black patch in a cornfield” and determining from the field hands that he was on the Eldridge plantation. Then he asked, “Are you all his slaves.” “Yes, massa,” came the answer. “Is he good to you?” Ayers wondered. “Not mighty good, massa.” Then Ayers asked if Eldridge was a “Union man or secessionist.” The answer, even with the dialect, was clear: “Oh Godamighty! Master, him cusses de yankees all de time [and] says day come here to kill us all and carry us away and sell us all and dat massa Lincum gwiin send us all Clean off.” Ayers then showed the Eldridge slaves a broadside which many recruiting agents carried that depicted an image of “Freedom to the Slave” on one side and an abridged, two-sentence version of the Emancipation Proclamation on the other. They were curious, but unmoved.<sup>17</sup>

So Ayers directed them to gather their things and follow him to the plantation house where he was going to confront the master. By the time Ayers arrived, however, John Eldridge knew all about him. The 54-year-old planter was a native Virginian and descendant of Pocahontas who had about 25 slaves, ranging in ages from 4 to 76, according to the 1860 census

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<sup>16</sup> John Hope Franklin, ed., *Civil War Diary of James T. Ayers* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1947). Historian James Oakes has helped rediscover the value of Ayers’ depiction of emancipation in action and his book offers the most penetrating account of Union emancipation policy. See James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> For excerpts from the Ayers diary, see “Union Recruiting Agent Spreads the ‘Good News,’” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project, <http://goo.gl/3YAYb>.

and was absolutely determined to keep them. “My niggers say you Come into the field and set them all free,” Eldridge snarled. “Yes, sir,” Ayers replied coolly. “Well I would like to know how you got the authority to do so, sir,” said Eldridge. “By the War Department, sir, I get my Authority,” Ayers replied, adding wryly, “the very best of Authority, aint it?” Ayers continued to argue with Eldridge and one of his bolder daughters before he finally drew a revolver and closed the debate.<sup>18</sup>

Ayers departed Huntsville with four new recruits for the Union army and several other newly freed people following along, but not all of the slaves he encountered at the Eldridge plantation ended up leaving. James Rumley had predicted the sad truth a year earlier. Many slaves were just not “entirely certain” that their “freedom” was “permanent” and dared not risk their families’ lives on the word of men like Ayers, Higginson, Rivers or even Abraham Lincoln. The best recollected accounts of emancipation, such as Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901), highlighted the deep anxiety that freedom often unleashed. “Was it any wonder,” Washington wrote, “that within a few hours the wild rejoicing [following emancipation] ceased and a feeling of deep gloom seemed to pervade the slave quarters?”<sup>19</sup>

Freedom did prove hard –for both ex-masters and ex-slaves-- but most adjusted to the new realities. James Ayers became disenchanted with his recruiting work, and tried to reinvent himself as an army chaplain before dying from disease not long after the war ended. James Rumley regained his government job but never his “property” and lived until 1881. Prince Rivers mustered out of the Union army as a hero and became a politician in Reconstruction-era South

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<sup>18</sup> “Union Recruiting Agent Spreads the ‘Good News,’” Emancipation Digital Classroom, House Divided Project, <http://goo.gl/3YAYb>.

<sup>19</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1901), 19-20, <http://www.bartleby.com/1004/1.html>.

Carolina. He was dragged into the Hamburg Massacre of 1876, one of the period's worst acts of terror against blacks. Denied a chance to secure justice and then driven out of politics altogether, Rivers was finally forced to find work –once again-- as a coachman before he died in 1887.

And Mother Chase died two years after making her pilgrimage to the Soldiers' Home, at the age of 94. She was buried next to her husband, Thomas W. Chase, who had also once been enslaved. The two had met and fallen in love during the Civil War, in “the Free State.”