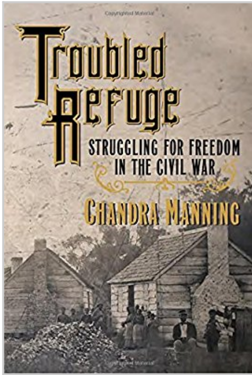

Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War

By Chandra Manning

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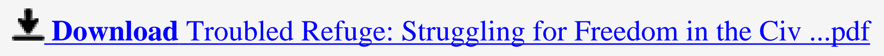
Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War By Chandra Manning

From the author of *What This Cruel War Was Over,* a vivid portrait of the Union army's escaped-slave refugee camps and how they shaped the course of emancipation and citizenship in the United States.

Even before shots were fired at Fort Sumter, slaves recognized that their bondage was at the root of the war they knew was coming, and they began running to the Union army. By the war's end, nearly half a million had taken refuge behind Union lines in improvised "contraband camps." These were crowded and dangerous places, with conditions approaching those of a humanitarian crisis. Yet families and individuals—some 12 to 15 percent of the Confederacy's slave population—took unimaginable risks to reach them, and they became the first places where many Northerners would come to know former slaves en masse, with reverberating consequences for emancipation, its progress, and the Reconstruction that followed.

Drawing on records of the Union and Confederate armies, the letters and diaries of soldiers, transcribed testimonies of former slaves, and more, Chandra Manning allows us to accompany the black men, women, and children who sought out the Union army in hopes of achieving autonomy for themselves and their communities. Ranging from the stories of individuals to those of armies on the move to debates in the halls of Congress, *Troubled Refuge* probes the particular and deeply significant reality of the contraband camps: what they were really like and how former slaves and Union soldiers warily united there, forging a dramatically new but highly imperfect alliance between the government and African Americans. That alliance, which would outlast the war, helped destroy slavery and warded off the very acute and surprisingly tenacious danger of re-enslavement. It also raised, for the first time, humanitarian questions about refugees in wartime and legal questions about civil and military authority with which we still wrestle, as well as redefined American citizenship, to the benefit but also to the lasting cost of African Americans.

Integrating a wealth of new findings, Manning casts in wholly original light what it was like to escape slavery, how emancipation happened, and how citizenship in the United States was transformed. This reshaping of hard structures of power would matter not only for slaves turned citizens, but for all Americans.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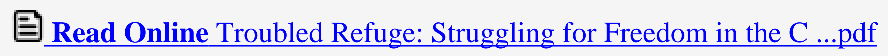
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Editorial Review

Review

“Striking…Manning’s highly engaging narrative tells a sobering yet uplifting story of the journey toward freedom. In her superb telling we learn something invaluable about the fragile and chaotic nature of the coming of freedom and the enduring dignity and courage of the people who secured it.”
–Mark Smith, *The Wall Street Journal*

“A vitally important book [that] settles the long-standing issue of the freedmen’s own role in exiting slavery…Manning’s emphasis on the camps is novel….and [her] research is extraordinary…An essential contribution to the history of the Civil War and its aftermath.”
–*Booklist* (starred review)

“Manning offers a vivid, compelling view of the struggles undertaken by escaped slaves during the Civil War [and] conveys in gritty detail the fraught alliance between refugees and their military protectors”
–*Kirkus* (starred review)

“Excellent…[A] refreshing work…in great detail, the author successfully proves that the road from slavery to freedom was both complex and personal.”
–*Library Journal*

“The end of slavery came through an unplanned alliance between the Union army and black refugees from slavery who came within the army's lines during the Civil War. Digging deeply into a wealth of sources, Chandra Manning has provided a powerful new account of how emancipation actually proceeded on the ground and how former slaves and the army forged a new order of freedom and black citizenship.”
–James M. McPherson

About the Author

CHANDRA MANNING graduated summa cum laude from Mount Holyoke College in 1993 and received the M.Phil from the National University of Ireland, Galway, in 1995. She took her Ph.D. at Harvard in 2002. She has taught history at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, and was Associate Professor of History at Georgetown University. Currently, she serves as Special Advisor to the Dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. She lives in Braintree, Massachusetts, with her husband and children.

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Prelude

As the story goes, Old Point Comfort at the tip of the peninsula formed by the James and York Rivers, about midway down the Atlantic coast of North America, got its name from weary, grateful travelers who had spent months at sea in a seventeenth-century ship guaranteed to make any landfall look like a refuge. To judge by first appearances, the spot is in fact beautiful, girded by the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay, with sandy beaches and rocky outcroppings, and the breeze that blows on a summer day brings cool relief. The oysters that once littered its shores even added a touch of luxury. Certainly compared with a reeking, disease-ridden seventeenth-century ship, Old Point Comfort must have seemed a haven or even a paradise . . . until sojourners noticed that it had, in the pithy quip of Benjamin Butler, “plenty of oysters, but no water,” no matter how deep they dug. In the 1860s, U.S. soldiers set out to drill a well; they dug nine

hundred feet into the ground without finding a drop, realized the futility, and gave up. Without massive human intervention, the refuge Fort Monroe could provide was neither healthful nor permanent, for in the absence of freshwater no place can sustain human life for long.

So, too, was the case with Civil War contraband camps, the first one of which took root at a U.S. Army installation at Old Point Comfort called Fort Monroe. Fort Monroe was the first of many contraband camps, for camps spread wherever the Union army went throughout the occupied South. They were the specific places in which emancipation began for nearly half a million former slaves. In contraband camps, black men, women, and children sought refuge from slavery. They found it in the basic sense of escaping their owners' grasps, but the environments, both natural and man-made, they encountered in the camps made for troubled refuge.

When the Commonwealth of Virginia left the Union on April 17, 1861, Fort Monroe remained in the hands of the U.S. Army, and it was to that army that three enslaved men ran on May 23, 1861, thereby making themselves the business of General Benjamin Butler, the officer in command at Fort Monroe. There was more to the story of Butler and his "contraband decision," and to the lives of the three men, than meets the eye, and we will look at both more closely later, but the brief outline goes like this: Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend had been put to work building Confederate fortifications when they learned that their owner, the Confederate colonel Charles Mallory, planned to remove them farther south to labor for the Confederate army, separating them from their families. They decided to try their luck at Fort Monroe. The colonel sent an agent to demand their return, in compliance with the federal Fugitive Slave Law. Butler refused on the grounds that Colonel Mallory had used the men to build fortifications that would aid a force in armed rebellion against the United States, and so the rules of war conferred authority to confiscate the three slaves as contraband property. In a stroke, Butler used slaveholders' own insistence that slaves were legal property to release slaves from owners' grasps and illustrated how war could create possibilities unavailable in peacetime. The phenomenon of the Civil War contraband camp was born.

Contraband camps followed and affected the course of the war, beginning in the eastern theater. The first camps formed in locations that never left Union hands, such as the northern tier and eastern coast of Virginia, followed soon by northwestern Virginia when Union forces took control in June 1861, and Washington, D.C., itself, especially once Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia in April 1862. Coastal regions farther south became the sites of camps almost as soon as Union forces captured them, from North Carolina's shoreline in the summer of 1861, to the South Carolina Sea Islands in November 1861, to coastal Georgia and Florida shortly thereafter. Once a camp formed in the eastern theater, it generally remained for the duration of the war, and many fleeing slaves seeking refuge there tended to stay for the duration, too. To go to a contraband camp required a huge leap of faith, but once a man, woman, or child had taken that step in the East, he or she was likely to stay put for the rest of the war; that relative stability made life in eastern camps different from life in western camps.

Camps in the West followed rivers and railroads and then fanned out from there, just as Union forces did. Control of the transportation, communication, and commercial artery of the West, the Mississippi River and its fertile valley, was a Union war aim from the start, and the army worked from all directions to obtain it. First successes came along the Mississippi's tributaries and their feeders. As Nashville fell to the Union in the winter of 1862, a camp took shape there, and others soon tracked Union progress along the Ohio and Cumberland Rivers at places like Clarksville and Gallatin, Tennessee; Smithland, Paducah, and Louisville, Kentucky; and Huntsville, Alabama. More camps came later in northern Alabama as the Union presence thickened there. Meanwhile, following the capture of the Mississippi's southern outlet at New Orleans in the spring and Memphis in the early summer of 1862, camps first blossomed in and around New Orleans and Memphis and then sprouted at Natchez, Davis Bend, and Helena on the river and from there deeper into Arkansas. Camps also tracked the railroad, following the army to Grand Junction, Bolivar, La Grange, and Jackson, Tennessee, and Corinth, Mississippi, as the Union carried out a long campaign to take and hold Vicksburg, the city holding the key to the whole river valley. The Union approached Vicksburg from the

other end of the river simultaneously, consolidating forces at the key river and rail junction at Cairo in the southern tip of Illinois in June 1861 and proceeding doggedly down from there. Fugitive slaves followed. Thousands remained in and around Cairo for the duration of the war, while others were resettled in Northern communities by the U.S. government. Tens of thousands more were relocated to other camps along the Mississippi such as Mound City, Columbus, New Madrid, and Island Number Ten. Once Vicksburg came into Union hands, camps burgeoned there and at nearby Lake Providence, Paw Paw Island, Young's Point, and Milliken's Bend. Camps even sprang up in the interior portions of the border states of Missouri and Kentucky, although fugitives who ran to them faced danger of recapture by loyal Unionist slave- holders as well as by Confederate guerrillas, making life in those states extraordinarily precarious. In the West, both camps themselves and the people in them were constantly on the move.

Everywhere the Union army went, refugees from slavery retraced and broadened the path first cut by Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend at Fort Monroe. One was Solomon Bradley, whose wife and two children had been sold away years before the war came, but that loss did not inoculate him from continuing to witness intoler- able cruelty. As an enslaved railroad worker, he worked on tracks from Charleston to Savannah. One morning, the track passed by a plantation where a woman lay with her face flat against the ground, hands and feet tied to stakes, as her owner dripped melting wax into the gashes opened by the beating he had just given her. He then used a riding whip to flick off the hardened wax once it cooled and gave the woman a solid kick in the mouth whenever she cried out too loudly. "The sight of this thing made me wild almost that day," Bradley reported, and as soon as he caught sight of Union gunboats in Port Royal Sound, he made his way to Union forces in South Carolina's Lowcountry. He worked as a cook on the steamer Cosmopolitan, which ferried army personnel and Northern missionaries among the Sea Islands, until he joined the Third South Carolina Volunteers later in the war.

Whether propelled by hope of freedom or hatred of slavery, whether motivated by belief in a better future or loathing of the people who had sold, beaten, and used their loved ones for profit, refugees from slavery made their way to the Union military. One woman decided to run off with the army because she "knew they could not take me anywhere where the Lord was not."4 Perhaps most, like her, simply pressed for- ward on sheer faith that defies human power to explain. Once news of the Emancipation Proclamation got out in September 1862, even greater numbers of slaves anticipated the proclamation's implemen- tation in January 1863 by running to the Union army wherever they could find it. By war's end, well over 400,000—somewhere between 12 and 15 percent of the entire U.S. slave population according to the 1860 census—had taken refuge behind Union lines, most of them in con- traband camps.5 With the smallest housing hundreds of refugees from slavery and the largest sheltering upwards of ten thousand, contraband camps brought greater numbers of slaves into contact with each other in a single place than had ever happened anywhere in the United States before.

Women and children made up a disproportionate share of contra-band camp populations. As soon as slave owners suspected that Union troops might infiltrate, many who possessed the financial means sent their most valuable slaves, especially men of prime laboring age, deeper into Confederate territory. For families in the Mississippi valley, that usually meant heading west of the Mississippi River. Virginians and North Carolinians typically headed for the Appalachian Mountains, where the density of the slave population grew appreciably during the war. Wherever slave owners tried to evacuate themselves and their slaves, the goal was to keep the workers who carried the most capital value and the Yankees away from each other. Not every slave owner could afford the expense or manage the logistics of transporting slaves, and others simply chose not to, so at first men of all ages were present in contraband camps. Sometimes, in the very early days of the war, they even outnumbered women and children. Sex ratios skewed dramatically and irrevocably once the Union army began to enlist black men of military age into its ranks. Contraband camps functioned as instant recruiting stations, and it was not long before the bulk of eligible men had traded (sometimes voluntarily, sometimes not) life in the camps for a suit of Union blue, leaving camps full of women, children, the old, and the sick.

Danger was present in every camp. Deadly disease flourished in crowded conditions. Hostile whites threatened camps, especially in areas where the Union's hold on the territory remained vulnerable to Confederate attack or even recapture. Danger could also emanate from the segment of the Union army that saw slaves as the scapegoats to be blamed for the cursed war.

Certain ideas influenced life in contraband camps everywhere. Chief among them were ideas about dependence and independence, which had been tangled and fraught among first colonists and then Americans since the American Revolution. Before the eighteenth century in Europe or its colonies, "dependency" described an economic relationship that included almost everyone because it meant "to gain one's livelihood by working for someone else." It connoted a particular rung on a social ladder, below aristocratic landowners who were free from the need to labor and who owned sufficient property to qualify for political rights, but it did not carry moral stigma. "Independence" among anyone else indicated a lack of regard for proper social relations, and it fomented social disorder. A confluence of intellectual and economic forces, especially the rise of particular forms of Protestantism like Puritanism and Quakerism, the spread of Enlightenment ideas, and the ongoing development of capitalism, converged in the eighteenth century to redefine the individual, recharacterize independence as the ability to support a household economically, valorize it among (white) men as well as the political entities that comprised them, and stigmatize the once-ordinary condition of dependence as a state fit only for those rendered inferior by race, age, gender, or personal moral failing and as a disqualifier for political rights enjoyed by the growing ranks of the independent. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon put it in their intellectual history of the concept, "Dependency was deemed antithetical to citizenship." These ideas had particular resonance for Civil War–era white Americans, because their nation had gained its political independence amid the froth churned up by them, and so they seemed to be at the foundation of the United States, whose existence was now on the line.

Ideas about dependence and independence could prove confounding in contraband camps, where the enormous fact of immediate material need among sick, starving, and vulnerable refugees from slavery demanded redress. Ungenerous or racist members of the Union army obviously begrudged any aid, but even well-meaning soldiers or aid workers worried that providing direct relief would undermine principled attempts to convince members of the Northern public that former slaves were worthy, upstanding, and deserving of rights, rather than indolent paupers who would drain precious resources. "Proving" that black people were perfectly capable of fending for themselves cut at cross-purposes with supplying rations to the starving or distributing coats to shivering refugees waiting on a dock in a fierce winter wind. Consequently, benevolent workers wrestled with dilemmas of con- science, official policy reflected confusion at best and heartlessness at worst, and black men, women, and children suffered from unmet needs.

Importantly, all contraband camps brought formerly enslaved human beings and the U.S. government into direct contact with each other. Whereas before the war, the federal government bore an obligation to protect the property of a slave's owner, the idea that the U.S. government would treat with an enslaved person directly as a person and not indirectly as the possession of a white property owner simply made no sense. Yet here were hundreds, and then thousands, and then tens of thousands, and finally hundreds of thousands of exactly such people, right in the lap of the Union army, the most obvious embodiment of the U.S. government outside the White House and the Capitol. Lawyers could argue over whether black people ought to be able to sue in federal courts or carry U.S. passports, but in the urgency of war the army and refugees from slavery had to deal directly with each other right then and there. Manifestations of that new, direct contact between the U.S. government and formerly enslaved people abounded, including the creation of whole new entities, like the AFIC and the Freedmen's Bureau.

All camps were a mix of improvisation, sanctuary, and humanitarian crisis, but the exact ratio of refuge to misery varied mightily from place to place, depending on the interplay of a number of concrete factors. One was camp location. Wherever freed people were, the availability of local resources for building shelter, and of land and tools for cultivating gardens to supplement or replace dreary army food rations, quite literally

affected the environment in which they began the passage from slavery to freedom. Most camps appeared where soldiers encamped, which was often in large, open areas, but not always. For the many formerly enslaved men, women, and children who encountered the Union army in cities like Alexandria, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and St. Louis, the urban environment shaped and characterized the particular transition out of slavery in ways quite different from how former slaves outside urban locations experienced that transition.

Proximity to a clean river, creek, or stream was always important, for nothing mattered more than access to freshwater. Drainage also mattered, because it directly influenced the disease environment. Poor drainage led to dismal sanitary conditions, which fostered cholera, dysentery, and intestinal diseases. Faulty drainage also resulted in standing water, which provides an ideal environment for reproduction among certain species of disease-bearing mosquitoes.

People carry diseases, too, especially when they come together in crowded conditions and are sick and starving upon arrival, as under- nourished slaves who undertook long and risky journeys to flee bondage generally were. From an epidemiological perspective, camps functioned much like instant and overcrowded cities, in which people exposed to or infected with measles, typhus, smallpox, or other diseases found themselves cheek by jowl with those who lacked immunity and whose weakened conditions left them with little resistance. Almost every camp, as a result, functioned like an epidemiological incubator to a greater or lesser degree, but the exact diseases that ravaged camps varied from place to place, and a camp with cholera differed from one with smallpox.

Political and strategic considerations differed from camp to camp. Whether a camp was located in a Union-occupied part of the Confederacy, where wartime federal policy on slavery prevailed, or in a border slave state, where slavery remained under the jurisdiction of state law, mattered. So did the military progress of the war because, to state the obvious, if the Union army left or lost control of an area, there went the contraband camp. Even in camps that never left Union control, the quality of life often depended on what happened on nearby battlefields, because the army's chief business was to win the war, and if military necessity came into conflict with the needs and interests of freedpeople, military necessity invariably got priority. If the army determined it needed all hands—black and white—on deck, then black men and women could find themselves digging trenches or throwing up earth- works, regardless of whether their gardens needed sowing or harvesting at the same time.

Camps were also populated by different people, black and white, each of whom brought unique experiences, ideas, priorities, and prejudices that influenced the atmosphere in camp, just as the physical environment and the iron demands of the war did. Blacks often brought well-founded mistrust of whites, but they also calculated that anyone fighting against slaveholders had at least one common interest with them. Whites typically brought preconceived notions about black people, ranging from blind and bitter hatred to the so-called environmental view that former slaves lagged behind whites in ability and attainment not because of innate difference but because of the poisonous effects of slavery, for which white benevolence and careful instruction were the only proper antidotes.

Because the army disproportionately wielded hard power, the attitudes of Union army personnel in each location exerted unmistakable influence. Some officers assigned to serve as superintendents of contrabands viewed the camps as nothing more than distasteful and inconvenient encumbrances that only the orders of their superiors could have induced them to accept. Others welcomed the assignments. Still others approved of the idea in theory but quailed at the overwhelming scale of need in the camps. As for the rank and file of the Union army, it consisted of roughly two million men and therefore roughly two million individual opinions about black people. While the war convinced most enlisted soldiers of the necessity of emancipation in fairly short order, and while many did find themselves forced to look hard at hitherto-unexamined racial prejudice, wide variety still prevailed among soldiers' attitudes toward individual black people, and treatment accordingly ran the gamut from vicious and cruel to principled justice to simple human

kindness.

Aid workers and missionaries, black and white, who came from the North also brought a range of attitudes with them. Beyond simply opposing slavery, they felt a calling to care for those who had been enslaved: some with insufferable condescension, many with naïveté, and nearly all with earnestness. Sometimes, the experience of war changed benevolent workers, just as it did soldiers. Joanna Moore, for example, attended an Emancipation Eve celebration in Illinois on December 31, 1862, and felt a calling so strong that she abandoned her final year of study at Rockford Female Seminary and with it the opportunity to graduate. Instead of studying poetry, she set sail down the Mississippi River to work with refugees from slavery, confident that "woman's hand and heart must supply their needs." There was no doubting her sincerity when she disembarked on Island Number Ten, nor was there any doubting her initial shock when she was immediately sent to break up a fight between two freedwomen who "laughed at my earnestness" until the humiliated Moore ran to her bunk and "cried myself to sleep." Yet from that experience and "many another," Moore realized that at first she "only pitied those women," which was why she "did them but little good," for "I have learned since that you never can help any one till you love them a little after the way that Jesus loved." The ability to move from pity to love was unevenly distributed among all aid workers and made for another variable affecting life in the camps.

Wherever the Union army went, tens of thousands of enslaved men, women, and children made their way to its blue lines, braving almost unimaginable risks to get there. They gambled against dogs, heavily armed search parties, jittery Confederate or Union pickets who might shoot at the very sound of an unexpected footstep. They defied the dire threats of their masters, such as the Virginia master who swore that if his slaves ran to the Yankees, he would hunt them down, stone them, and sell their children. Still they came. Still they found work where they could. Still they aided the Union army when and where they were able. And they began the long journey from slavery to freedom.

The particulars of the journey varied widely from place to place, and the particulars mattered to the sojourners, for they undertook the journey with no way of knowing its ultimate destination, no sense of unifying themes, no foreknowledge of the coming twists and turns in the road. Refugees fleeing slavery had no real way of knowing anything for certain except for the particulars as they heard and saw and smelled and felt and tasted them, day after day, on the road out of bondage. Exiting slavery to the crash of the surf at Fort Monroe sounded different from exiting slavery to the whine and roar of trains rushing along tracks to Corinth. Exiting slavery looked different to a worker who raised his eyes from a burlap sack to see rows and rows of white cot- ton bolls than it did to a worker peering down at the burlap sacks she methodically stitched for the Quartermaster Department of the Union army. Exiting slavery smelled different to a man digging graves behind a smallpox hospital than it did to a man piloting a boat through tricky Atlantic inlets. Exiting slavery felt different to a child who crawled into the lap of a welcoming aid worker than it did to a child who had to be pried from the stiffening arms of a dead parent, tattered clothing plastered to cold limbs by mud and frost and blood. Exiting slavery tasted different to a woman gnawing on an unyielding square of Union army hardtack than it did to a woman sipping ginger tea. Contraband camps everywhere provided troubled refuge to the enslaved people who gathered in them, but the version of freedom each refugee from slavery found depended in some ways on exactly where he or she found it.

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