

The 13th Annual Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition International Conference at Yale University

Beyond Freedom: New Directions in the Study of Emancipation

November 11-12, 2011
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Will Work for Citizenship

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Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/emancipation/manning.pdf>
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Scholars have habitually located the story of citizenship's expansion in Reconstruction politics, southern paramilitary activity, and recently black Union Army enlistment. To these crucial aspects must be added the interactions of slave refugees, men and women, with Union Army personnel in wartime contraband camps. By bringing formerly enslaved individuals and the U.S. government into direct contact in new and unprecedented ways, contraband camps created spaces where former slaves made direct claims on the U.S. government on the basis of service rendered to the Union cause. The claims were not always honored, but the logic of war made them impossible to ignore. By making themselves useful to the Union military effort, black men and women in contraband camps exploded white Northerners' preconceived notions about eligibility for U.S. citizenship and they changed the answer to "Who could be a U.S. citizen?" At the same time, the material suffering they endured illustrated the limits of what citizenship

actually meant in the 19th c. United States, and challenges us to re-evaluate the relationship between citizenship and freedom for Civil War Americans, white and black.

In Civil War contraband camps, black women as well as men directly aided the Union war effort through their labor, knowledge, and resourcefulness; they were, quite literally, working for citizenship, and they were doing so in conditions almost unimaginably difficult, unhealthy, and dangerous. The point is not that everybody who worked got fair treatment, for quite clearly they did not. The point, rather, is twofold: first, those who did elicit service or protection from the Army generally did so because they had provided useful labor that Army officials recognized as beneficial for the Union war effort. Second, those former slaves who succeeded in securing aid and protection from Union forces often did so in contest with white Southerners whose claims on the government would never have lost out to claims made by black slaves if not for the peculiar circumstances created by war. Over and over, Army personnel found themselves weighing white Southerners' claims to the protection of the U.S. government against black refugees' claims made on the basis of their usefulness to the Union. In such instances, ordinary white Northerners who, by filling the ranks of the Union Army became literal embodiments of the U.S. government, found themselves deciding between competing claims to the rights of citizenship. And many times, the claims advanced by black women won out over the claims advanced by white slaveholding men. [Bring long article draft so I have specific examples if anyone wants 'em in roundtable discussion time] The white men in the Union Army who made those spur-of-the-moment, on the fly decisions in favor of black women over white men simply could not have imagined doing so before the war began. Civil War contraband camps made unprecedentedly direct relationships between the United States government and black men, women, and children unavoidable, because in camps, members of the Union Army found

themselves face to face not with abstractions, but with living, breathing people whose sheer presence could help or hinder the aims of the government.

Not so fast, say many here. Conditions in camps were horrendous. All they were about is suffering. They had nothing to do with citizenship. To which I say, the camps WERE sites of humanitarian crisis and they WERE places where the very meaning of citizenship got rewritten both at the same time. By being both of those things at once, contraband camps not only tell us where our notion of national citizenship was born, they also tell us exactly what citizenship meant in the 19th century, including what its limitations were. Citizenship meant the rights that could be secured by the central state: equal access to functions of the state like schools and courts, and safeguards for the specific individual rights of freedom of mobility and equal compensation for labor.

Citizenship was a goal of the men and women in contraband camps, an important goal even, but it did not comprise the sum total of their hopes for and visions of freedom. What I have come to believe is that there was no such thing as agreement about what freedom meant. And so the problem with freedom is not that it is too limited or narrow or confined a concept to be useful to us anymore. The problem is that we are unlikely to agree about what it meant, because the Americans who lived through the Civil War did not agree on what it meant. But they did agree that it mattered. And so freedom, however unknowable, should matter still to us.