

ENSLAVING THE FREE: THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN



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One of the things that makes the Gettysburg campaign memorable, besides leading to the biggest battle of the war, is that it was without a doubt the largest incursion of Confederate forces into a state that had been free soil before the Civil War. Specifically, of course, they invaded Pennsylvania, which was home to a small but noteworthy black population (nearly 57,000 in 1860). Southern Pennsylvania had long been an enticing destination for Eastern slaves seeking to escape bondage, as it was the first free state north of the Mason-Dixon Line. But with Maryland to its south and other slave states nearby slave catchers did not have far to come in search of fugitives. The state became such a magnet for “manstealers” that the legislature in 1826 passed a law trying to keep them out, which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional in 1842.

By 1863, with federal armies having repeatedly crisscrossed Virginia and other southern states, and given refuge to thousands of slaves, the rebel soldiers of Robert E. Lee's army were in the mood for revenge. And one of the ways the Confederates got that vengeance was to carry off into slavery black Pennsylvanians unfortunate enough to fall into their hands.

Author David G. Smith sees the seizure of black Pennsylvanians as part of broader foraging activities of the rebels during their 1863 invasion, carrying off anything that might be potentially valuable to their army and the Confederacy more generally. But he also believes that blacks not only were seized as a military asset, but also in revenge for the depredations of federal forces south of the Potomac River. Smith writes:

The Pennsylvania slave raids were not an aberration, but an extension of Confederate warfare in the bitterly contested Virginia-Maryland-Pennsylvania theater. They were just a part of the efforts of a resolute army that was retaliating against a determined foe, repudiating the Emancipation Proclamation, capturing a labor force, and fighting to preserve a way of life based on mastery over African Americans.

While there is no doubt much truth to David G. Smith's assessment, it does not capture the shock and outrage of white Pennsylvanians when they saw their black neighbors carried away by the rebels. James M. Paradis has collected a number of heart-rendering accounts of Confederates capturing and sending south African Americans, some of whom had been born free, into slavery. Paradis writes:

Terror spread through the black communities in southern Pennsylvania when they heard of the approaching Confederate army. Whether freeborn or formerly enslaved, African Americans had much to fear. Jacob Hoke described the actions of the invading army around Chambersburg:

"One of the more revolting features of this day was the scouring of the fields about the town and searching of houses in portions of the place for negroes. The poor creatures—those of them who had not fled upon the approach of the foe—sought concealment in the growing wheat fields around the town. Into these the cavalymen rode in search of their prey, and many were caught—some after a desperate chase and being fired at. In two cases, through the intercession of a friend who had influence with [Confederate General] Jenkins, I succeeded in effecting the release of the captured persons."

Many other witnesses recorded this practice. The Reverend Dr. Philip Schaff observed, "The town was occupied by an independent guerrilla band of cavalry, who steal horses, cattle, sheep, store-goods, Negroes, and whatever else they can make use of without ceremony and in evident violations of Lee's proclamation read yesterday." He continued,

"On Friday this guerilla band came to town on a regular slave-hunt, which presented the worst spectacle I ever saw in this war. They proclaimed, first, that they would burn down every house which harbored a fugitive slave, and did not deliver him up within twenty minutes. And then commenced the search upon all the houses which suspicion rested. It was a rainy afternoon. They succeeded in capturing several contrabands, among them a woman with two children. A most pitiful sight, sufficient to settle the slavery question for every humane mind."

The next day, June 27, Schaff reported that rebel troops drove:

"twenty one negroes through the town and towards Greencastle or Hagerstown. It was a sight as sad and as mournful as the slave-hunt yesterday. They claimed all these Negroes were Virginia slaves, but I was positively assured that two or three were born and raised in this neighborhood. One, Sam Brooks, split many a cord of wood for me. There were among them

women and small children, sitting with sad countenances on Store-boxes. I asked one of the riders guarding the wagons, "Do you not feel bad and mean in such an occupation?" He boldly replied that "he felt very comfortable. Comfortable. They were only reclaiming their property which we had stolen and harbored."

Rachel Cormany watched the Confederates:

"hunting up the contrabands & driving them off by droves. O! How it grated on our hearts to have to sit quietly & look at such brutal deeds—I saw no men among the contrabands—all women & children. Some of the colored people who were raised here were taken along—I sat on the front step as they were driven by just like we would drive cattle. Some laughed & seemed not to care—but nearly all hung their heads. One woman was pleading wonderfully with the driver for her children—but all the sympathy she received from him was a rough "March along"—at which she would quicken her pace again. It is a query what they wanted with those little babies—whole families were taken. Of course when the mother was taken she would take her children."

The Reverend Thomas Creigh recorded in his diary for Friday, June 26, "A terrible day. The guerillas passing and repassing, one of the saddest sights, several of our colored persons with them, to be sold into slavery, John Philkill and Findlay Cuff." The Rebels announced that they intended "to search all houses for contrabands and fire arms and that wherever they discovered either they will set fire to the house in which they may be found." The next day he reported the soldiers left, "taking with them about a dozen colored persons, mostly contrabands, women and children."

The raiders carried many of the "contraband" away in wagons. "Some of the men were bound with ropes, and the children were mounted in front or behind the rebels on their horses." Another citizen observed, "They took all they could find, even little children, whom they had to carry on horseback before them." William Heyser recorded in his diary on June 18, "The Rebels have left Chambersburg taking with them about 250 colored people again into bondage."

If the Confederates took disproportionate numbers of women and children it was because most of the men had no doubt fled, along with anyone else capable of leaving. Women with small children would have had trouble fleeing the rebel advance, and so fell into Confederate hands.

It will never be certain how many black Pennsylvanians were carried away by the Confederates during the Gettysburg Campaign. The number is at least in the several hundreds. That more African Americans were not kidnapped by Lee's Army is because those that could prudently fled before their arrival, following the precedent of slaves liberated by Union Army who retreated with it when the fortunes of war shifted to avoid re-enslavement. Fortunately, such moments of African Americans fleeing to remain free were rare during the Civil War, but they did happen, such as during the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania in June 1863. It was a pity all black Pennsylvanians could not get away from invading rebels, but thankfully their period of bondage would be relatively short (if they lived) compared to the past generations that had been born, lived, and died as slaves.