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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Glenn David Brasher. *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom.* Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 288 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3544-9.

Ronald S. Coddington. *African American Faces of the Civil War: An Album.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Illustrations. xliii + 338 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-0625-1; $29.95 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-4214-0723-4.

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Published on H-CivWar (June, 2014)

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The Black Military Experience

The soldier has long served as the focal point of the black military experience in the Civil War. From the earliest histories, such as George Washington Williamsâs pioneering work to mid-twentieth-century studies that sought to raise the profile of African American history to late twentieth-century offerings that explored new archival and manuscript sources, the experience of the black soldier was central to understanding the destruction of slavery and slave emancipation.[1] Ronald S. Coddingtonâs collection of photographs of black soldiers, *African American Faces of the Civil War*, fits squarely into this traditional framework for understanding the black Civil War experience. By contrast, Glenn David Brasherâs book, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom*, is indicative of a new generation of scholarship, one in which the black soldier is not the primary focus but also one that more fully integrates the African American experience into traditional military narratives. Indeed, Brasherâs book has no black soldiers (even if it does include instances of black men fighting), but black men and women, he argues, were central to the tactics and strategy of the competing armies as well as debates in legislative chambers over the future of slavery and the role of free black people.

African American Faces of the Civil War is an album of seventy-seven photographs and profiles of black men who participated in the Civil War. This is Coddingtonâs third book of Civil War photographs. The previous two focused on Union soldiers and Confederate soldiers, respectively, but both books included only white men. Coddington confesses that he was unable to find any images of black soldiers for his first book on Union soldiers, but

with renewed effort and extensive Internet searches he was able to find enough photographs–*cartes de visite*, tintypes, and ambrotypes–to fill out the volume. And so, this book is in many ways a supplement to his *Faces of the Civil War: An Album of Union Soldiers and Their Stories* (2004), since all but one of the black men profiled in *African American Faces* aligned with the Union.

The photographs and profiles are preceded by a foreword written by J. Matthew Gallman that places the disparate parts within a narrative context. ÂGallman notes that the photos highlight the growing importance of black people in American society. Unlike their white counterparts in the Union army, black soldiers were not organized by state regiments but almost always by the federal government under the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT). They had, in other words, a unique claim on the nation and one that shaped subsequent debates on citizenship and freedom. The mere existence of black soldiers, Gallman contends, made it âmore possible to envision a world of expanded political roles and even black manhood suffrageâ (p. xvi). The other narrative thread in the book is the increasing availability of commercial photography. A *carte de visite* was a print photograph from a special camera that produced eight images on one glass plate. The photographer then cut out the images, which were 2 1/8 by 3 1/2 inches and then glued them to card stock, measuring 2 1/2 inches by 4 inches. Millions of these *cartes de visite* were sold in the United States and England, and it became common for Americans to compile albums to display their *cartes de visite*. Indeed, ten of the photographs come from an album compiled by First Lt. Theodore Wright, a white officer in the 108th U.S. Colored Infantry. The spread of *cartes de visite* as well as the presence of black soldiers as both symbols and advocates for equal citizenship signaled a cultural shift toward democratization.

The photos are representative of the experience of black soldiers, but the real value of the book is in the intricate details in the pictures and the unique stories of the profiled men. The soldiers from the 108th were a typical of other USCT regiments. They were ex-slaves, primarily from Kentucky, who garrisoned forts and worked as prison guards during the war. The most well-known black regiment, however, was the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, and perhaps for this reason more photos come from this regiment than any other. Unlike the typical enlisted black soldier, these men were mostly free before the war, from the Northern states, and saw considerable action. One of the youngest members of the 54th was Henry Monroe, who was born free in Massachusetts, joined the regiment at the tender age of thirteen, and took the position of drummer in Company C. His blank stare and the fact that his small frame was nearly dwarfed by his drum suggest that he was ill-placed and ill-prepared for war. Yet he survived and went on to a distinguished career as a teacher at a Freedmenâs Bureau school, an inspector of customs at the port of Baltimore, and later as a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

While the Civil War marked a major transformation in the relationship of African Americans to the nation, the transformations were also personal and far-reaching for many soldiers. Take, for example, Octavius McFarland, whose image graces the cover of the book. He was born enslaved in St. Louis and joined the First Missouri Colored Infantry at the end of 1863. While in camp, McFarland learned to read and write, won a regimental essay competition, and contributed money to the establishment of a school in Missouri that later became Lincoln University. Other former soldiers went on to have careers in the army, become politicians and ministers, and take on new professions after the war.

But for all of these postwar accomplishments, the profiles also show the costs of war. Some were killed or mortally wounded in battle, while many others succumbed to disease, often within weeks of their photographic sitting. And some, such as Jacob Johns, remind us of how little we know about these men. Coddington was able to confirm that Johns was from Maryland, joined the 19th U.S. Colored Infantry, and was mustered out of service in Texas, five days before his death. Except for the *carte de visite* of this young corporal, sitting erect with a determined look and showing off the hilt of his sabre and a medal pinned to his army sack coat, we know nothing more about him.

A few of the photos in *African American Faces* are iconic. There is Martin Delany, the writer, physician, and political activist, and Robert Smalls, who famously escaped slavery by stealing a ship from Charleston harbor and later became a South Carolina legislator and a U.S. congressman. The before-and-after photographs of Hubbard Pryor are also well known, largely because *Harperâs Weekly* published engravings based on the original *cartes de visite*. His transformation from slave to soldier is highlighted by the contrasting images of him first dressed as a slave in tattered clothes and then as a new soldier in the Forty-Fourth U.S. Colored Infantry. Another iconic photograph in the collection is of Silas Chandler and his master. It is the only image of a black man who was not a part of the Union army, and it is

an image that neo-Confederates point to in support of the erroneous claim that black men voluntarily served as soldiers in the Confederate army. Chandler was one of a handful of servants in the volume, although he is the only slave. Yet all of the attendants to soldiers are men–all except one, Emily Spotts Saunders, who joined her husband, Jeremiah Saunders of the 124th, in a tintype photograph. Since Coddington chose to include male servants and other laborers who supported the soldiers, it is striking that he excluded female laborers in this volume. Adding, for example, the iconic photograph of Susie King Taylor dressed in her nurseâs uniform would have highlighted the extensive labors that women provided the Union army.

The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation is a very different book and not just because it is a scholarly monograph that reaches deep into the archives. It is a book that integrates the black experience during the Civil War with traditional military history. By placing black people at the center of the Peninsula campaign, Brasher shows the value of blending military historiography with emancipation historiography. Going beyond the now familiar story of slaves escaping to Union lines, Brasher argues that slaves and free blacks shaped the military campaign through intelligence gathering and the building of fortifications. Additionally, African Americans, behind both Confederate and Union lines, shaped debates in Congress on emancipation.

The book traces military developments on the Virginia Peninsula from the outset of war to the debate in Congress over the Second Confiscation Act. But before exploring the interactions of runaway slaves and Union soldiers at Fort Monroe on the tip of the peninsula, Brasher goes back to earlier conflicts, to the battles of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 that took place on the same ground. Slaves in all of these conflicts viewed war as an opportunity to secure their freedom. Fifty and eighty years before the Civil War, slaves worked for the competing armies, sometimes fighting with them, while others sought protection from the invading British armies. Some were freed. Some were re-enslaved. War, in other words, did not lead automatically to emancipation, and it was impossible to know in 1861 and the first half of 1862 if it would this time. And so slaves faced an array of options as the main Union and Confederate armies collided near their homes.

The one distinct advantage that black residents of the peninsula shared was that both armies needed their labor. Brasher argues that they were âan âinvaluable allyâ to both armiesâ (p. 189). As the Union army tentatively expanded its lines beyond Fort Monroe, it became increasingly dependent on the military intelligence provided by escaped slaves. For the Confederates, they desperately needed the labor of slaves to build the defenses to repel the Yankee invaders. Confederate soldiers were reluctant laborers and complained vociferously of having to dig trenches, mostly because they thought that the labor was beneath their white status. As a result, Confederate generals increasingly impressed slaves to perform this labor. They sent out âscouting partiesâ to convince white slaveholders to loan their slaves to the army and also to âround upâ the slaves who were abandoned by masters who had fled the federal troops (p. 44). It was rare for a slaveholder to voluntarily hand over his slaves to the army, not just because they would lose their own labor supply but because slaves on the front lines often escaped to the federal side. To alleviate this labor shortage, Virginia lawmakers responded by passing a law that compelled free black men between the ages of eighteen and fifty to register with local officials. This way, military commanders could more effectively impress these black men. Not surprisingly, Union officials reported an increase in free black men seeking protection after February 1862.

Slaves not only worked for the Confederate army but in some instances also were compelled to fight with it. Numerous reports from Union soldiers asserted that black men were in the ranks and even that black sharpshooters were picking off white Federals on picket duty. These stories were widely disseminated in Northern newspapers. Brasher deftly assesses the complicated and contradictory evidence of black men fighting with the Confederates and explains how these stories were used by abolitionists and radical Republicans to push Congress to embrace a more aggressive emancipation policy.

More recently, these stories have been used by neo-Confederates to argue that black men (both slave and free) voluntarily enlisted in the Confederate army and that white supremacy and slavery were not the animating features of the Confederate nation. Bruce Levine demolished the black Confederate myth a few years back.[2] And Brasher carefully undermines it as well. He pays close attention to Union soldiersâ reports, many of which were exaggerated. He recounts the stories of slaves, like John Parker, who were forced to work Confederate batteries while Confederate pistols were aimed at their backs. But Brasher also rightly points out that some slaves may have concluded that loyalty to their master, especially in the case of body servants, would

more likely lead to a better future, especially at a time when the Union had yet to fully commit to emancipation as one of its primary war objectives. The black men who took up arms were not soldiers, they undoubtedly had complicated motivations, and they were also an aberration. Nearly all the slaves and free blacks on the peninsula were compelled to help Confederate authorities.

Taken together, the labor of black people as well as their information on troop movements and fortifications had a decisive impact on the Peninsula campaign. Union military officials had wanted to attack Richmond overland from Washington, but runaway slaves reported that the defenses were too formidable. As a result, General George McClellan proposed an attack from the south up the Virginia Peninsula. As the federal army marched up the peninsula, recently escaped slaves kept Union officers apprised of Confederate troop concentrations and defense works. They learned that they could not attack Richmond from the south along the James River because the defense works constructed by impressed slaves proved to be too daunting. Over time, the Union army and escaped slaves grew to trust the other. Even though many black people behind Union lines suffered from ill-treatment at the hands of racist Union soldiers, word spread within slave neighborhoods that Union troops generally would receive them favorably. When Robert E. Lee launched his counterattack in the Seven Days Battles, it was slave intelligence that warned of a surprise attack and black labor that helped to quickly evacuate the federal armyâs supplies.

The Peninsula campaign was a failure, but the defeat, ironically, helped advance the Second Confiscation Act. Moderates and conservatives had stalled the bill in Congress because many hoped that McClellan would be able to end the war, but successful Confederate resistance prompted many in the North to demand more radical measures. They noticed how Union soldiers had become worn down by having to build defensive fortifications and fight off Leeâs army and all the while in the stifling heat of Virginia. By contrast, Confederate soldiers rested and recuperated while slaves dug their ditches. The dependence of the Confederate military on slave labor combined with the beneficial assistance provided by escaped slaves to Union forces led to a public shift in favor of the Confiscation Act. Public meetings in New York City, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Chicago endorsed the new legislation and called for the Confederacy to be stripped of slavery. Speaking to a cheering crowd in Philadelphia, a retired navy commodore proclaimed, âWe must carry Africa into the warâ (p. 211).

Ironically, Brasher concludes, it was Confederate slaves–those who were forced to work for the Rebel army–that âstruck a blow for freedomâ (p. 226). They revealed to federal soldiers, congressional lawmakers, and the Northern public that slavery was indeed central to the Confederacyâs existence, and thus to end the rebellion would involve ending slavery. The Second Confiscation Act, as James Oakes makes clear, was really an emancipation act and it opened the door for a presidential proclamation on the matter.[3] In this sense, African Americans, whether laboring for Confederate authorities or increasingly assisting Union forces, achieved a âdecisive victoryâ in the Peninsula campaign (p. 228).

Black soldiers, as Coddington reminds us, were vital to the triumph of Union forces, and yet the full story of the black military experience, as Brasher contends, must encompass a broader canvass. Many more African Americans than just soldiers shaped the development of emancipation policy and altered the contours of the war. While the role of black soldiers has been ably documented, we still need more studies like Brasherâs that integrate the participation of slaves and free black people into the military campaigns and the policy debates.

Notes

[1]. George Washington Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953); Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1956); James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965); Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990); and Ira Berlin, Joseph Patrick Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[2]. Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[3]. James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 224-255.

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Citation: Justin Behrend. Review of Brasher, Glenn David, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* and Coddington, Ronald S., *African American Faces of the Civil War: An Album.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

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