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Review Essay
African Americans Fight Their Civil War

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

Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, $29.95). Pp. 264. ISBN 978 0 19 975872 2.

Kevin M. Levin, *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012, $35.00). Pp. 184. ISBN 970 0 8131 3610 3.

Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012, $30.00). Pp. 251. ISBN 978 0 8078 3554 8.

History rarely provides a simple, linear narrative. In early May 1861, just before white Virginians voted to ratify their state's ordinance of secession, William, a bondman who resided on the Peninsula plantation of Richard Eppes, unexpectedly disappeared. Eppes had agreed to allow his slaves help construct Confederate fortification, but William assured one bondwoman that rather than do so, he intended to flee and hide in the woods until Union troops reached the area, and then join the army. With that, William vanished from history, and although the United States was not yet recruiting African Americans in the months just after the fighting at Sumter, the government would be doing so by the July 1864 Battle of the Crater. If William survived the fighting, he perhaps became the subject of one of the innumerable postwar advertisements that sought lost loved ones, such as the one freedman John Walker placed with the Philadelphia *Christian Recorder* in 1869, seeking his sons William, Samuel, and Miles. Perhaps instead William was one of the many African Americans who perished, not killed in battle but instead victims of yellow fever, smallpox, cholera, dysentery, or malnutrition.

These stories, which do not actually intersect but might well have, appear in these four slim but important volumes. Collectively, they follow black Americans from the

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first months of the war into emancipation and finally into military service. They chronicle the thousands of former slaves who died from noncombat maladies during and shortly after the war, as well as the efforts of thousands more to discover the fate of family members separated in the years prior to the conflict. Each is carefully researched and elegantly written, and all four stand alone as significant scholarly contributions. Yet read back-to-back, their sum becomes greater than their parts. Appearing at nearly the same moment as Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln*, which takes place completely within the confines of Washington and emphasizes the role played by the President and a handful of white Republicans in abolishing slavery, these four books serve as an important corrective by returning the story to the countryside and by emphasizing black agency. Spielberg was directing a film biography rather than a documentary about African Americans during the Civil War era, but for readers who wished to discover more about the black soldiers who debated political rights with the President at the opening of the film, these four books are an excellent place to start.

The saga began in the spring of 1861. Historians have long engaged in the debate over who freed the slaves. Was it the President, as Spielberg and his biographers would have it, or was it progressive Republicans in Congress? Or did slaves themselves, as truants and refugees, force the hands of policymakers in Washington? To that well-worn discussion, Glenn David Brasher adds an important new consideration. By playing a critical role in the Peninsula Campaign, blacks influenced the tactics and strategies of both sides and forced northern whites to confront the necessity of emancipation. Brasher is quick to note that his findings should not be read as an endorsement of neo-Confederate fantasies of black military participation. Instead, as Confederate leaders and Virginia masters forced or cajoled their bondmen into driving wagons and constructing fortifications, black manpower threatened to sustain the Confederacy. That in turn led northern moderates to endorse Confiscation Acts that chipped away at slavery and weakened the South's ability to wage a protracted war. Seen in this way, the "self-emancipation" theory advanced by scholars such as Barbara Fields and Vincent Harding is adjusted considerably, so that African Americans, together with Union officers, Washington politicians, abolitionist actors, and even high-ranking Confederates – who of course intended just the opposite – played a role in advancing the cause of anti-slavery in the months leading up to Antietam. In Brasher's sure-handed explanation, Union officers and reluctant Republicans crafted a contraband policy that provided blacks with a goal. But if in the end "no one individual, group, or historical force freed the slaves," it was "the actions of slaves [that] made the military necessity argument more persuasive" (7).

Northern newspapers, Brasher observes, emphasized the fact that Confederate entrenchments from the Peninsula to Manassas were being constructed by coerced slaves. Newspapers also reported, inaccurately, that black southerners sometimes picked up a rifle and fought beside their masters. Although untrue, the stories helped to prod reluctant statesmen into embracing the position taken by abolitionists since the first moment of the conflict. The Chicago *Tribune* unleashed a series of editorials on the folly of "trying to put down the slaveholders' rebellion and save slavery for the rebels at the same time" (56). Since northern Democrats typically denounced any shift in war aims toward black liberation, such editorials provided political cover for those prepared to vote for the Confiscation Acts. Congressmen who voted against Confiscation, the *Tribune*'s editor charged, were unpatriotic cowards who preferred to "have the soldiers of the Union mowed down by batteries planted and fortified by slaves working under the lash" (56).

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Ironically, General George B. McClellan, the officer most hostile to transforming the army into a weapon of liberation, was not above making use of information supplied by runaways. Alan Pinkerton gathered a good deal of data from Virginia fugitives, and McClellan's few successes during the Peninsula Campaign came when he listened to African Americans who explained which entrenchments were the most lightly defended. When an enslaved domestic from the 12th Georgia escaped into Union lines with the news that Thomas J. Jackson intended to assault his right flank and rear, McClellan crossed to the north side of the Chickahominy River to organize a defense. Typically, however, the slave's news also helped to solidify McClellan in his erroneous belief that he was badly outnumbered, since he could not imagine Jackson attacking otherwise. Had McClellan proved successful in his campaign against Richmond, of course, any momentum in Washington for emancipation would have all but dissipated.

Modern studies of the Emancipation Proclamation invariably connect the preliminary document with Antietam, as President Abraham Lincoln held his proclamation back until McClellan's army gave him something approximating a victory. Yet in terms of creating "a broad spectrum" of northerners prepared to accept that step, Brasher emphasizes, the failed Peninsula Campaign was the deciding factor. Northern politicians came to understand that enslaved labor was "invaluable to the Southern army," as slave-constructed fortification hindered the Union assault and allowed Lee to counterattack (213). For those who believed the unreliable accounts of blacks fighting beside their owners, the fear that the Confederacy might embrace black combatants eroded much hostility to emancipation, as did reports that runaways and free blacks provided accurate information to Union scouts. McClellan's failure, northern war weariness, and Lincoln's evolving views on black liberation and potential service, Brasher concludes, permitted "a disparate cast of thousands" to advance a more progressive policy regarding emancipation. Lee might have believed that he had won the day, but for African Americans, Brasher remarks, the "Peninsula Campaign proved to be a decisive victory" (228).

There Brasher's story ends, but Kevin M. Levin picks up the thread in his account of the Battle of the Crater. Despite the difficulties of researching black soldiers whose units included high rates of illiteracy and whose deeds were but erratically reported by hostile northern journalists, Levin does a marvelous job in restoring to life the social, military, and political world of the African American men who fought and died in the attempt to break the siege at Petersburg. As his study includes the historical memory of the event, complicated by allegations of Confederate atrocities and Lost Cause mythology, Levin does far more than merely sift through the complicated, contradictory evidence; at times, those competing memories and racist newspaper accounts become integral parts of a monograph that stretches into 2010. No sooner was the battle over before disgruntled white federals charged that black cowardice cost them a victory. Such criticisms, Levin remarks, "suggest that serious racial prejudice still existed among the troops, notwithstanding the growing acceptance that the abolition of slavery was necessary to maintain the Union" (25).

Some of the black soldiers marched into battle vowing revenge for earlier Confederate atrocities at Fort Pillow. Tragically, the widely reported shouts of "No quarter" only served to inspire victorious Confederates to new heights of violence. In the aftermath, the *Richmond Enquirer* not only admitted that the execution of captured soldiers had taken place but advocated that solution for all African American men taken in blue. "Make every salient you are called upon to defend, a Fort Pillow,"

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the editor swore, "butcher every negro that Grant sends against your brave troops, and permit them not to soil their hands with the capture of a single hero" (31).

Although Levin's handling of the battle itself is clear and concise, he quickly shifts to a fascinating discussion of how each side, both races, and a number of individuals used the battle in later years to advance various causes, disparage others, or promote their political careers. Chief among the last was William Mahone, the so-called "Hero of the Crater." Mahone launched the countercharge that helped to turn the tide of battle, a victory he leveraged first into promotion to major general and later into the governor's chair. Yet Mahone's fame, Levin suggests, rose and fell due to the ever-changing context of state and southern politics. John Edler's dramatic 1869 painting of the battle, for example, was completed in response to black political gains in the former capital of the Confederacy. By then Mahone was president of three railroads, and to advance his business prospects the onetime symbol of white resistance courted moderate Republicans and Governor Gilbert C. Walker. In recent years, artist Don Troiana produced a response of sorts, *Mahone's Counterattack*, in which black soldiers appear prominently, one courageously holding the Stars and Stripes while white Confederates take aim. (Troiana's marvelous painting, in fact, fills most of the cover of this volume.)

Levin, the writer of a respected blog, Civil War Memory, knows this topic thoroughly, but once removed from the immediate era, his scholarship grows a bit less secure. When discussing prewar slave rebelliousness, Levin misdates both the Gabriel and Denmark Vesey conspiracies and then gives Gabriel the surname of his owner, which no contemporary document ever did. He also suggests that it "was no coincidence" that Nat Turner's 1831 revolt erupted shortly after the first edition of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* appeared, although most specialists – unlike most antebellum southern whites – believe it was just that (26). The black body count of two hundred souls either "publicly tortured or executed" in the wake of Turner's rebellion is probably too high by half (29).

Nearly nine hundred American soldiers lost their lives at the Crater, with the number of wounded and missing at least four times that. Tragically, as Jim Downs documents, a far greater number of African American civilians perished from starvation and disease during the final years of the war and well into Reconstruction. Although the precise figure defies quantification, Downs diligently waded through the records of the Medical Division of the Freedmen's Bureau and concluded that "tens of thousands of slaves became sick and died" due to the chaos of war and the massive dislocation brought on by the conflict and, ironically, emancipation (7). Decades ago, as Downs concedes, William A. Dunning depicted freedpeople as growing ill after liberation, and because Dunning and his students used widespread sickness to indict the policies of northern Republicans, specialists in the war years have generally steered clear of the topic. But Leon Litwack reopened the debate in the late 1970s, and while Downs clearly has no desire to revive Dunning's criticisms, he is admittedly interested in "how free labor ideology and federal policies contributed to the spread of disease" during the years after 1862 (181).

The federal government, of course, was never united behind a single policy. Freedmen's Bureau chief Oliver O. Howard estimated that the doctors under his command treated at least forty-five thousand black Americans before the bureau was disbanded. But following Lincoln's death, Andrew Johnson was as anxious to limit federal assistance on the grounds that medical aid only made blacks dependent on Washington. "While Johnson's plan to rebuild the South has been judged an abysmal

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failure" by most scholars, Downs observes, "his policies are even a greater failure when judged by their fatal health consequences for the freedpeople" (71). Despite the best efforts of the Republicans to limit the President's damage, bureau hospitals essentially remained nineteenth-century emergency rooms, institutions designed to provide temporary care rather than bestow comprehensive health treatment.

Compounding the problem was the fact that most bureau doctors were stationed in urban areas rather than across the southern countryside. Despite the growing problem of disease, by the late fall of 1865 only eighty doctors staffed but a dozen hospitals in what had been the Confederacy, home to four million freedpeople. Despite being understaffed and underfinanced, some of these hospitals posted impressive records. In Washington, bureau doctors were not only committed to saving lives; they were also dedicated to training black doctors. Previously, African Americans had to travel abroad to receive certification, or face hostile attitudes from racist administrators at American universities. Working with the new Howard University, the capital's freedmen's hospital began to admit students as early as 1868, and by 1907 the school had graduated more than three thousand black doctors.

Downs's story is a grim one, and a saga that has not previously been investigated to this extent. As an indictment of federal free-labor ideology, however, *Sick from Freedom* sometimes fails to make its case. Smallpox first arrived in cold, muddy Washington as early as January 1862, at which time federal officials were still trying to devise a coherent policy for runaways and contraband, and at a juncture when a northern victory was far from certain. Yet Downs charges that the Lincoln administration was slow to respond to the crisis on the grounds that it preferred to blame the outbreak on the "racial background" of the former slaves rather than on "dislocation and abject poverty." Historians have long chronicled the flaws inherent in free-labor ideology, but Downs has only a few anecdotal voices to support his theory that federal inaction was based on the widespread "notion that, when freed, black people would go extinct" (113).

For those black Americans who survived the war and the first difficult years of freedom, the next painful step was the long and usually unsuccessful search for lost family members. Fortunately, no sooner had the Confederacy collapsed than black newspapers appeared in virtually every southern town and city; in New Orleans, at least two black-run papers emerged even before the war's end. Freedmen such as John Walker placed advertisements looking for children and spouses sold away during the antebellum years. In Walker's case, he desired information not only of his three sons, but also of his two wives, Peggie and Cornelia, the latter taken as a spouse after a Nashville master sold Peggie and his children. Although freedpeople routinely concluded these advertisements by begging ministers to read them to their congregations, the search was rarely easy. In Walker's case, his 1869 announcement indicated that Peggie had been sold away nineteen years before, while Cornelia had been the property of a professional slave-trader. Walker had himself wandered out to Sacramento in search of a new life.

Some former slaves, Heather Andrea Williams discovered, appealed to old masters for assistance. Most such missives, Williams writes, "straddled the line between deference and assertiveness" (130). Freedpeople invariably began their letters with promises of loyalty and fond remembrance, hoping that appeals to humanity might bring out the paternalistic self-image of southern whites. In at least one case, the strategy worked. The wife of slave William Murdock escaped with her children and made it to Canada, from where she wrote to her old mistress. The former owner never

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responded, but in Arkansas Murdock overheard the mistress discussing the letter with her daughters. Murdock finally prevailed upon them to tell him what they knew, and after liberation he journeyed north in search of his family, finally locating them in Hamilton, Ontario.

For freedpeople, Williams argues, "the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families that had been dispersed by slavery were reunited" (146). As one bureau agent discovered, former slaves often wished to return to the plantation of their birth, not out of any desire to see their old masters, but from a longing to reconnect with places they regarded as home and with people they thought of as kin. To assist in this process, the Louisiana branch of the bureau created a vast registry of names and locations of displaced African Americans, together with the names of black veterans who lost track of their families during the final year of the conflict. The task was rendered harder by the fact that many freedpeople took surnames for the first time, or dropped a disliked slave name. On occasion, luck won out. When a black minister in Houston read an advertisement placed by former Alabama bondwoman Charity Thompson, one congregant, a Mrs. Dibble, cried out, "That is my sister and I have not seen her for thirty three years" (168). The reunion did not take place until 1877, however, which suggested that Thompson had placed such advertisements for twelve long years.

Williams's research is excellent, as is her eye for a fascinating story, such as that of Mississippi planter Terry Leak, who kept copious notes in his journal about the weddings he officiated on his estate. Leak conducted the services as minister, carefully inserting himself into lines in the ceremony normally reserved for God. "Do you agree, before me & these witnesses to take Pal as your wife?" Leak asked the groom (66). Williams also uncovered so many revealing, heartbreaking advertisements that she simply inserted twelve pages of postings as a sort of internal appendix in her final chapter. On occasion, however, she writes as if she was confronting the historiography of 1912 rather than 2012. *Help Me Find My People* opens with a lengthy discussion of Ulrich B. Phillips, Stanley Elkins, Kenneth Stampp, and their views on the slave family, although only the latter is read today even by graduate students. If the point of this study was to survey an old, discredited body of racist scholarship, then devoting pages to the so-called Dunning school might have some virtue. But early on Williams implies that these are scholarly battles not yet won, as she insists that the stories told in this book "contradict the analyses of historians who thought these people were either satisfied with their condition or incapable of emotional depth" (23). Unwary students and lay readers might suspect that some historians still adhere to this hoary view, but since Williams is unable to identify any modern scholar who does – and Phillips died in 1934 – this digression appears totally unnecessary and detracts from the important saga that follows.

Taken together, these four important studies restore balance to the complicated story of emancipation and Reconstruction, or at least remind us of just how complex and often tragic this saga was. Progressive Republicans in Washington eventually established a goal that black runaways could reach for, but only after thousands of black Americans, most of them far less famous than those in the White House or Capitol Hill, pushed and prodded and ran away and marched into battle.

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