

ABSTRACT

“‘WE SHOWED OUR NATURAL MANHOOD’: THE CIVIL WAR, BLACK MASCULINITY, BLACK NATIONALISM, AND A BLACK MALE EPISTOLARY TRADITION”

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This research examines selected letters from African American soldiers who served in the American Civil War. The letters chosen for this study cover the span of the American Civil War from 1861, the year before African American soldiers were allowed to enlist, to the conclusion of the War in 1865. My assertion is that these letters are more than a mere means of social communication; these letters are an assertion of identity and black masculinity— notions African American men were stripped of during slavery. More specifically, I argue that these letters prefigure an early black nationalist ideology.

While there are varying iterations of Black Nationalism, the foundation of such ideology is grounded in David Walker’s *Appeal in Four Articles: An Address to the Slaves of the United States*. Published in 1829, Walker inquires if his brethren are indeed men, and if so they must fight for the rights granted to them by God. Walker’s *Appeal*

calls for the reclamation not only of manhood but also of citizenship—two notions that challenge the stereotyped images of nineteenth-century African American men, including the Uncle Tom, the Sambo, and the black brute. Such stereotypes have been the major focus of social, historical, and literary analysis. This project uses that historical framework to examine how African Americans countered these images through epistolary representation. Improved access to education, coupled with increased interaction and deepened camaraderie between Northern freemen and Southern freedmen within the military ranks, allowed for a rise in letters written by black men. In these letters, black soldiers craft a black masculine identity that demands recognition for full personhood and citizenship. These letters are worthy of attention, then, because in them readers witness that evolving sense of identity. Black men become protectors and liberators. Within letters that are addressed to family, former owners, newspaper editors, military personnel, and even the President of the United States, black men become protectors, liberators, and activists. Finally, this project recognizes these letters as literary works that constitute a distinct epistolary genre that should be included within the American literary canon.

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Dedicated to Pvt. Jefferson Michie for giving our family the freedom to dream.
To Caleb and Gabriel for continuing that legacy.

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Introduction

Overview of the Project

Scholarly engagement with Civil War letters has most commonly appeared in historical studies. While robust in number, such studies have often excluded letters by black soldiers. Largely ignored and vastly undervalued in the broader body of Civil War historiography, black Civil War soldiers' letters have been ushered into scholarly discourse comparatively recently by military historians and, more recently, genealogical enthusiasts and researchers. This conversation has primarily been rooted in the implications the letters have on a richer understanding of the familial relationships, military experience, education, and literacy in the African American community. The study proposed here, “‘We Showed Our Natural Manhood’: The Civil War, Black Masculinity, Black Nationalism, and a Black Male Epistolary Tradition,” explores the ways in which early black nationalist ideology and the emerging notion of black masculinity influenced letters written by African American soldiers in the Civil War. “We Showed Our Natural Manhood” also reveals how this influence created an epistolary tradition that was both distinctly black and distinctly male that is worthy of close study and inclusion in the American literary canon. Using letters found in the National Archives, the *Freedmen and Southern Society Project*, Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and other archival and literary resources, this project reveals and describes a matrix of gender, race, and war that establishes an epistolary tradition.

“We Showed Our Natural Manhood” makes the assertion that, in the larger context of the African American epistolary tradition, there exists a sub-category that is

composed of a distinctly black male voice. The art of letter writing in the black community existed beneath the radar of a governing body that wished to keep African Americans in a state of illiteracy, and the mere existence of letters in both private and public spheres highlights the value placed on the written word as a mode of expression and a symbol of freedom. According to notions of American citizenship and black American history and discourse, to be a man is to be a citizen, and to be a citizen is to be an acknowledged entity of the sociopolitical construct. For the black person, whether enslaved or free, there rests an empowering concept of writing oneself into history and inserting one's views into the national debate. One's words become validated by the actions that are the offspring of such expression. The Civil War provides the ultimate platform for study in the rapidly shifting social, political, and psychological landscape of black life in America. These newly literate slaves' letters not only adopted the epistolary form most commonly recognized and accepted in the larger hegemonic masculine and public sphere, but they also are heavily laden with nascent black nationalist rhetoric and ideology that is both rooted in the experience of slavery and steeped in the mythos of American Revolutionary philosophy.

This dissertation moves these missives from historical artifacts to part of an epistolary canon and asserts that they are more than a mere means of social communication. They are an important assertion of identity and black masculinity, sociological concepts stripped from African American men during slavery. More succinctly put, these letters expose an early black nationalist ideology. Working from the premise that contemporary scholarship needs to broaden its lens to include the ways in which epistolary writing serves as a vehicle for change and a means of creating and

promoting a unified identity specific to gender and race, this dissertation catalyzes such a conversation and lays a foundation to discuss letters by African American Civil War soldiers. The content within and context of the letters reveals a black male epistolary tradition firmly rooted in a black masculine and black nationalist identity.

In *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* (2007), Jennifer C. James argues for a distinct genre of African American war literature as “an identifiable and recognizable tradition within the larger body of African American letters” (7). James notes that in the genre of African American war literature, war narration allowed for the idealized creation and representation of black masculinity. “War,” James asserts, “promised to be one ground upon which black manhood could be created” (12). Branching off from African American war literature, the black masculinist war novel becomes a sub-genre in the portrayal of black men at war—a fictionalized work that, by using the backdrop of war, seeks to create “idealized representations of black masculinity” (20). Such fictionalized works are the offspring of black men’s actual experiences during war; however, scholarship can extend the conversation through use of personal communication, testimony, and reminiscences of those who served. The black masculinist war novel creates the trope of the courageous and patriotic black soldier that stands in contrast to the more stereotyped notions of a black manhood that included the lazy, meek, and childlike Sambo, and moves readers more closely to an understanding of black masculinity. First-hand accounts in the form of black soldiers’ private letters transpose the literary trope of the black soldier for the human experience of actual black

servicemen. This becomes important in humanizing both the black text and the black male body.

Scholars have found that letters can offer invaluable insight into the African American experience. Despite this knowledge, as Pamela Newkirk notes in *Letters from Black America: Intimate Portraits of the African American Experience* (2011), “the letters of African Americans—like so much of Black history—have historically been undervalued or ignored,” and excluded from the larger American epistolary tradition (xvii). Scholars have wrongly treated African Americans’ missives as anomalies even though there is definitive proof that they are not. As the 1926 publication of Carter G. Woodson’s *The Mind of the Negro: As Reflected in Letters During the Crisis, 1800-1860* demonstrates, the body of letters by African Americans was no anomaly at all. In fact, such letters are an untapped wellspring of information on the black experience from slavery through freedom. *The Mind of the Negro* catalyzed general interest in black letters; however, analysis of the letters was non-existent. John W. Blassingame further expounds upon how little scholarly attention has been given to these missives. In *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (1977), Blassingame notes how letters written by African Americans have rarely born the scrutiny of analysis and criticism even though they provide the best examples of epistolary purity in terms of perceived truth and accuracy in the discussion of slavery and black life in America. He asserts that letters written by African Americans to family members with no intention of publication provide the most accurate source of slave testimony. They write of love, longing, loss, and sadness of being separated from loved ones. Additionally, such letters not only “contain a faithful and simple reporting of facts

and conditions,” but also in their very private nature, “can be accepted as literally true” (4). Devoid of a need for feigned modesty or to flatter a white audience, according to Blassingame, letters written by blacks to their loved ones lack the “conscious efforts to deceive” on the part of the author and bypass the “faulty memory of the autobiographers or the biases of editors and interviewers” (lxiv). They reveal private feelings that close the gap between the sterility of history and the actual human experience.

While letters are certainly still crafted narratives, Blassingame makes the distinction between the “unselfconsciousness” found in the personal and familial letters of black Americans and the careful restraint directing those letters written with the intention or expectation of publication (5).¹ Those authors who desired to see their letters become published and/or archival missives used political and social events and ideas as the backdrop for personal and collective notions of freedom and subsequent philosophical movements for equality and liberation. The act of letter-writing among black Civil War soldiers, especially by those individuals whose letters would reach the public’s eye through print, followed the pamphleteering protest tradition—a tradition that dates back to the late 1700s—that first provided a platform for public expression of black nationalist identity. Such pamphlets moved the personal experience of enslavement and inequality into a public forum. Within these early writings, expressions of racial pride, unity, solidarity, and the call for many acts of resistance made both enslaved and free blacks

¹ Blassingame acknowledges that “letters vary considerably in credibility,” and it is in the familial letters that a “high degree of credibility” can be found “because of the element of the unconsciousness in them.” In contrast, those letters that were written with the intent of publication “often lack the unselfconsciousness of the familial letters.” Blassingame attributes this to the primary objectives and motives imbedded in those letters that reach public eye (4-5).

cognizant of the changing political landscape and nascent radical ideological shifts in the black community that came to serve as the foundation for black nationalism.

While varying iterations of black nationalism exist, the foundation of the ideology is grounded in David Walker's *Appeal in Four Articles*. Originally published in 1829 and republished with Henry Highland Garnet's *An Address to the Slaves of the United States* in 1843, Walker inquires if his brethren are indeed men, and argues that if so, then they must fight for the rights granted to them by God. Walker's *Appeal* calls for the reclamation not only of manhood but also of citizenship. Garnet builds on Walker's literary tocsin and rallies for a unified black identity by reminding freed blacks that they must not forget their enslaved brothers and sisters, and that they must be ready to resist collectively if they are to secure freedom for all black people. In the works of Walker and Garnet, we see writing as a means both to enter the American political discourse and to create a racial and political solidarity that prefigures black nationalism as we know it today. Because this classical period of Black Nationalist philosophy was born out of the experience of slavery, it viewed resistance to slavery as a fundamental act. Resistance to enslavement on a large scale was viewed as a specifically masculine act. Thus, the spheres of black nationalism intersect with those of the black masculine ideal. Within the United States, (white) manhood was traditionally linked to resistance, freedom, and citizenship. The same rhetoric of community, unity, and masculine identity affirmed in foundational national documents surfaced in the early black protest pamphlets and later in the letters of black soldiers. Whether in pamphlets, narratives, or letters, the message of protest and nationalism remains consistent. In the letters of black Civil War soldiers, the concept or *idea* of black nationalism morphs into an *ideology* more consistently embraced

and expressed, making the Civil War the first war where black manhood and citizenship could not be ignored.

“We Showed Our Natural Manhood” examines how the rapidly changing social, political, and historical landscape directly shaped and impacted black male self-perception as represented in the letters of black Civil War soldiers. More specifically as articulated within the letters, it reveals how war ignited an interest in a black nationalist philosophy and how this ideology subsequently influenced black male representation and the concept of black manhood. The letters, written between 1861 and 1865, are not solely letters to family members. There are several written correspondences from black soldiers to military personnel and politicians. These letters evidence that, not only did black men petition to enter the ranks of the military to preserve the Union and abolish slavery, but they also wrote government figures to petition for equal pay, fair treatment, and the ability to ascend the ranks once in service. They wrote letters requesting educational services for their regiments, protection and retribution from war crimes, and adequate rations and supplies for their respective regiments. Many black soldiers also served as newspaper correspondents and sent weekly letters describing their experiences on and off the battlefield, calling attention to racism at the hands of both fellow (white) Union soldiers and their Confederate foes. They argued for citizenship and Negro suffrage. In letter-writing campaigns that were ultimately reprinted and published, black Union troops moved their experiences and concerns from the private discourse to the public forum. In so doing, they shaped a distinct black male identity.

The black soldiers’ letters written between 1861 and 1865 allow entry into the personal and private feelings of men whose masculinity and humanity had long been

denied. Many of the writers had experienced life under the master's whip and lived an existence in which their manhood was not to infringe upon or challenge white manhood. Thus, the white ruling body emasculated the black male body—figuratively and oft times literally—while crafting an identity that worked in tandem with the racial justifications for slavery and for white male dominance. For black men—whether freedman or bondsman—the Civil War was an opportunity through military service to show their manhood to the nation. The magnitude of this reality is both beautifully and passionately reflected in the letters.

“We Showed Our Natural Manhood” thus explores the black male epistolary tradition born out of protest, concepts of masculinity, and a nascent black nationalism, focusing specifically on letters written by black Civil War soldiers. An epistolary tradition takes shape on the pages of each missive, exposing how an emergent Black Nationalist philosophy intersects with evolving notions of black masculinity to change the political landscape. This project argues that black masculine and nationalist identities developed as responses to slavery; that rebellion and protest functioned as the roots of that nascent black masculine nationalist ideology; and that such a radical and revolutionary nationalist identity—shaped specifically by the virtues of the northern, black middle class—surfaces in the black Civil War soldier's letters. This study uses these war letters as the springboard for considering new conceptions of black masculinity, political ideology, and epistolary identity.

Chapter One examines the private letters of soldiers through the lenses of black masculinity and benevolent patriarchy. These letters were written with no intention of publication and reveal the black soldier's desire to be seen as a man in both the private

and public spheres. The second chapter analyzes letters—both personal and published—that reveal the development of nascent black nationalist ideologies. While these selected letters speak to racial pride and unity as the most basic premises of black nationalism, a selected few reveal the philosophical crossroads between black colonization resettlement and the opportunity to gain freedom, citizenship, and equality in America. The third chapter explores a sampling of letters that extends the tradition of black protest and protest writing. In these letters, soldiers are demanding fair pay and equal treatment while lambasting the poor conditions in which they are forced to serve. The authors of these letters want equal rights on and off the battlefield. Additionally, due to the theoretical overlap between black manhood, black nationalism, and black protest, there too are letters analyzed in this dissertation that display this thematic intersection.

In the ultimate form of protest—war—this body of letters captured the spirit of black male resistance, and in so doing, leaves us with a more complete picture of the African American experience from slavery *through* freedom. The letters reveal the role of the black man in claiming his freedom and the freedom of his people. They are part of the indelible mark black men made on American history. “We Showed Our Natural Manhood,” however, is not only about black men writing themselves into history. This study is also about how, by inserting their stories into the American narrative, black soldiers left us with a rich body of personally documented experiences that can broaden our awareness of black male epistolarity and deepen our understanding of the power of the written word in reshaping and redirecting American history.

Need and Timeliness

The current social, political, and literary climates are perfectly aligned to recognize a body of nineteenth-century works that speak to black masculinity in America. With the current school-to-prison pipeline, the prison-industrial complex, and, most recently, the shooting deaths of unarmed black men and boys by the police and the subsequent civil unrest arising from these deaths, many see an assault on African American men. Deeply entwined in the fabric of our country's history is the thread of racism that relegated the black man either to an "Uncle Tom"—docile, obedient, accommodating—or to a "Black Brute"—murderous, lecherous, and deviant. Such stereotypes of African American men have directly shaped public policies as they pertain to both black men and the overall black community. These paradigmatic and dichotomous stereotypes of black manhood create two images that validate the treatment of black men within the white system of oppression. Subsequently, such stereotypes further stripped black men of the dignity of having both their humanity and masculinity acknowledged. In essence, the Tom or the Brute are viewed with both disdain and disgust—two black masculine stereotypes that are neither respected nor accepted as part of a masculine identity. Additionally, such stereotypes continue to dictate the manner in which black men are viewed in American society. This can be seen most clearly and most recently in the national conversation on racism in America and how media portrayal of black men contributes to apathy concerning black lives.

"We Showed Our Natural Manhood" also comes at a time when there is renewed scholarly interest in the African American epistolary tradition, most specifically, those letters from the antebellum period. Recent works by Pamela Newkirk and Christopher

Hager make the assertion that black people were part of the broader epistolary tradition, and the existence of such letters speaks to a larger black literary community than had previously been estimated. Thus, the most current scholarly research has moved beyond basic acknowledgement that African Americans wrote letters to examine the meaning behind the act of writing and what participation in such an act reveals about the lives of African Americans during slavery through the acquisition of freedom. Scholarly research has also noted the disproportionate numbers of recovered letters written by men, supporting the importance of analyzing and scrutinizing the black Civil War soldiers' letters. Resistance, revolution, and protest have been historically viewed as male acts. Thus, the black man's desire to participate in the act of letter writing—a largely male act that moved his experiences and beliefs into very public and very political spheres—provides critical insight into the black male psyche in a rapidly changing social and political landscape. To expand this nascent conversation, “We Showed Our Natural Manhood” analyzes how black Civil War soldiers' participation in the act of letter writing grounds an epistolary tradition laced with themes specific to the experiences of black soldiers in America's first civil war.

“We Showed Our Natural Manhood” also comes on the heels of the recently discovered African American Civil War poems published in the *Anglo-African* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* between 1863 and 1864. In “‘Will not these days be by thy poets sung:’ Poems of the *Anglo-African* and *National Anti-Slavery Standard*,” 1863-1864” (2013), Elizabeth Lorang and R. J. Weir unveil obscure works by black poets that were published in two anti-slavery newspapers. Lorang and Weir's findings alter the conversation about African American poetry during the Civil War. Not only were poems

being written, but they were also being published on a relatively consistent basis. In the case of the *Anglo-African*, which was a significant source of information for the African American community during the Civil War, both poems and letters were a staple feature in each paper. It was an expectation that the *Anglo-African* reader would find soldier correspondence detailing the black military experience in one section of the newspaper and poems about these experiences in another. Details from the battlefield became the inspiration for poems highlighting the bravery and heroism of the black soldier. This pairing is significant in its implications about the various ways in which African Americans entered the public forum and debated about unfolding political events. It also gives current scholars an organic overlap between the (more) factual letter and the fictional verse in the study of African American war literature.

There exists a great need to give scholarly attention to a genre often relegated to the sidelines of literary discourse. Letters humanize the dead and the unknown by allowing their voices an immortal existence, that which their bodies are denied. Including letters in the larger academic discourse is important when discussing such a pivotal moment in America's history in light of how historical and literary texts have often reduced the roles black soldiers played in securing their own freedom to anomalous and aberrant participation that was of little to no consequence to the war's outcome. The Civil War's sable soldiers tell a very different story. To see that print media of the time found great value in presenting the voice of the soldier for public consumption gives the contemporary scholar a starting point for deeper review. The letter was a form of communicative print that allowed the black male to move from being merely a topic of national and political conversation to become an active participant in that conversation.

This is critically important to understand how new articulations of black manhood spread and become relevant to the American trajectory and literary history. Soldiers showed their “natural” sense of manhood with both bayonet and pen.

Delimitation

“We Showed Our Natural Manhood” looks at letters written by black soldiers during the Civil War. Included in this dissertation is written correspondence from black soldiers to family members and owners of family members, and those addressed to military officials, editors of newspapers, and even President Lincoln. Many of the letters have found their place in historical anthologies or have been reprinted in larger autobiographical and biographical works. The letters selected for this dissertation represent as balanced a sampling as possible of both free and slave soldiers, as both sets of voices/experiences aided in the construction of this epistolary tradition. To move beyond a one-dimensional analysis of the letters, when available, this study provides biographical information about the soldier-author. The period chosen begins in 1861, when black Americans could not yet enlist. Many of these letters speak to the black man’s desire to fight to maintain the Union and to free the enslaved. Many of the letters of 1861 and 1862 reveal how black men dared to see themselves as both men and citizens.

This dissertation only covers those men who actively enlisted and served and those letters written during active service. While there are many letters from men and women during this period that discuss the Civil War and the broader implications of the Emancipation Proclamation, “We Showed Our Natural Manhood” does not discuss those letters, even those written by African Americans who only served as recruiters (e.g.

Frederick Douglass). The purpose is to allow the unique perspective and authentic voice of the black Civil War soldier to guide the scholarly discussion. One of the goals of this dissertation is to magnify the voice of the unknown and obscure black Civil War soldier. Through their voices, we are better able to understand this critical social and political shift while observing how such a special epistolary tradition manifests. This dissertation does not look at the letters of black laymen or those white men who commanded regiments of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). In this dissertation, the black soldier's voice in the black epistolary tradition will remain the focus. Inserting accounts of white commanders could potentially muffle that voice and dictate the manner in which the black epistolary tradition is represented.

Furthermore, this dissertation only examines letters by black soldiers who fought for the Union. This limitation is not due to disinterest in the voices of black men who may have been part of the Confederate Army. Instead, there exists no confirmation that any of the letters found thus far were written by black Confederate laborers and body servants. Additionally, only within the last twenty years has scholarly debate confirmed the participation of black Americans among the ranks of the Confederacy. Such scholarly consensus may increase the likelihood of locating letters from black Confederate body servants or those white-passing black Confederates whose personal accounts and experiences have been ignored by the white historical community and erased from the Civil War narrative in the black community. Finding such letters would be a profound addition to the growing body of African American war literature.

“We Showed Our Natural Manhood” also narrows the scope of letters to those that directly engage both a black masculine ideal and notions that pre-figure a larger

black nationalist ideology to maintain its focus on the African American male epistolary tradition as it speaks to the larger body of protest writings that were typically written by men and that spoke to equality, freedom, citizenship, and racial pride. These letters crafted an image of the black man that countered the stereotypes of black masculinity circulated by the white majority.

Beyond the scope of this dissertation are those letters that are currently housed at the African American Civil War Museum and Monument because they are undergoing the transcription process and are not yet available for public viewing. Citizens wrote the bulk of these recovered letters about the black troops, the larger war effort, and its impact on the lives of everyday individuals. Study of these letters will allow an expansion of this project when they become available.

This study does not purport itself to be an exhaustive study of all African American letters; rather, this study is a snapshot of letters that are part of a much larger epistolary tradition in African American letters that provides a lens for the study of letters as they relate to a black, male, personal and political identity on the horizon of freedom. There are many letters still waiting to be “discovered;” thus, this dissertation can provide a critical framework and analytical map for the future discovery and analysis of unearthed letters from African American soldiers during the Civil War. The hope is that this project sparks further critical study of these letters in the larger study of Civil War missives and African American cultural and literary studies.

Critical Framework and Methodology

The methodological framing of this dissertation is grounded in traditional epistolary scholarship as it relates to the epistolary structure and the socio-cultural role of

letters. The letters selected for this study are categorized as either personal (familiar), official, or public. Each letter is then analyzed to identify the prescribed epistolary conventions for the particular letter-writing style. In the context of the black soldiers' letters, this epistolary scholarship reveals how a black male epistolary tradition is shaped by the larger American epistolary tradition. By identifying the social implications of nineteenth-century letter writing, this dissertation analyzes how these social overtones aid in defining the parameters and characteristics of a black male epistolary tradition.

While many of the letters selected for this study have already been archived and anthologized in military research and some scholarly works on African American history, some letters, though available online, are in the process of becoming part of a larger archival database and were found in more obscure locations like auction house websites. This dissertation also includes an extremely rare collection of twenty-one letters written by one black soldier to his mother. This collection, purchased in 1937 by Duke University, is housed in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Manuscript and Book Library and had yet to be transcribed. I transcribed the collection of letters for this dissertation, and these transcriptions are now placed alongside the original hand-written collection. Research for this dissertation also includes the use of service records and pension files that rendered a more full depiction of the individual writer. Service records provide not only the physical description of the enlistee, including his age, height, weight, hair color, eye color, but these military records also reveal the hometown and occupation or trade of the soldier upon his enlistment. Some letters are included in a soldier's file. Oftentimes, these letters failed to reach their intended destination during wartime. In some instances, however, these letters were written after a soldier's service often requesting pension or

additional services. Also archived in the black troops' service records are pension files that provide the name of the last known spouse and the age of the black veteran at his time of death. Additionally, many files hold manumission information, marriage certificates, and, in rare occasions, photographs. In those instances where photographs are available, I have included them in this dissertation to connect the words and story with a face. To fill in any gaps in the soldiers' biographical information, this research also relies on genealogical resources, Census Bureau records, and in one rare case, a slave interview conducted by the Federal Writers Project during the 1930s. By utilizing these sources, it is my hope to create an identity and story that frame the letters and broaden our understanding of this epistolary tradition.

The methodology used in "We Showed Our Natural Manhood" also includes document analysis paired with the critical approaches of black masculinity and nascent principles of black nationalism. Thus, the lens of this study focuses on black masculinity and black nationhood, two major ideologies that have not received much exploration and analysis in the larger context of the most recent discoveries and scholarship on black soldiers' letters. The critical approaches used offer entry points to understanding the letters and to identifying the broader epistolary tradition that emerges. This study highlights the recurring themes of black nationalist ideologies embraced by these soldiers and how those ideas shape and communicate a black masculine identity that, in turn, creates a distinct African American male epistolary tradition.

Framing the epistolary tradition within black nationhood, I examine how the content of the black soldiers' letters align with a nascent black nationalist identity that comprises the restoration of racial pride, the establishment of a black community, and the

concept of racial unity. Because the golden age of black nationalism is noted to extend from the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to the 1920s, this study places the selected letters against the backdrop of the major notions that fueled black nationalism at that time. Additionally, this study also uses the critical framing of the black masculine ideal to analyze the content of the selected letters. By asking the question of what it means to be a black man in America, this study examines how notions of black masculinity and the concept of a soldier's duty as an extension of black manhood are woven throughout each missive. The letters selected for this study are viewed under the dual lenses of black masculinity and black nationalism because of the natural overlap that exists between the two ideas and identities. How do black soldiers perceive black manhood? How is that related to and supported by nascent black nationalist ideas? How do these notions create a thematic backdrop for the black Civil War soldier's letters? And how do the themes of black nationalism and black masculinity create a specific and well-defined African American male epistolary tradition? Each letter selected for review is examined using these critical frameworks.

Review of Literature

“We Showed Our Natural Manhood” covers multiple fields in its study of the black Civil War soldier's letters. Consequently, this Review of Literature is divided into three categories: African American Historical Criticism as it relates to an early black nationalist ideology, Masculinity Studies, and Epistolary Scholarship.

African American Historical Criticism—Black Nationalism

While the emergence of politicized black masculinity undergirds the argument in this dissertation, nascent black nationalism and its preoccupation with nationhood and citizenship are also of importance as cornerstones of this work. The letters under study here reveal how both developing early black nationalist ideologies and the spirit of protest influenced how the soldiers conceptualized and subsequently represented themselves in their letters. As noted in critical works of masculinity scholarship, concepts of the masculine ideal often work to maintain the patriarchal standard of nationhood. This overlap between the spheres of masculinity and nationalism becomes ever more apparent when analyzing these war letters.

In historically grounding these letters in the larger context of black protest and rebellion, this research considers how black Civil War soldiers viewed their service as a fight for collective freedom and American citizenship. While earlier attempts at freedom erupted in the form of small-scale rebellions, often-thwarted insurrections, and individual escape attempts, these acts alone could not secure freedom for all enslaved. Eugene D. Genovese's *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts and the Making of the Modern World* (1979) most clearly and succinctly outlines the transition from individual acts of slave rebellion to collective protest and resistance. Genovese notes that “[b]y the end of the eighteenth century, the historical content of the slave revolts shifted decisively from attempts to secure freedom from slavery to attempts to overthrow slavery as a social system” (3). A revolution to overthrow slavery required organization and resources that had historically been honed and acquired by the northern black bourgeoisie. What this merging of revolution, the black protest tradition, and the

resources of northern blacks creates, according to Genovese, is “a bourgeoisie movement for freedom, equality, and democracy,” that, while radical in its very nature, “had not yet lost its bourgeoisie moorings” (2). The northern black bourgeoisie’s influence is most apparent in the systematic and organized manner in which black soldiers engage in their letter-writing campaign and frames this study when analyzing the selected letters written by the USCT. While participation in the war serves as a justifiable act of revolution for black soldiers, they were working from a black nationalist radical standing: to end slavery and restore a sense of humanity and dignity to black American identity.

To say that the northern black bourgeoisie was responsible for shaping and politicizing a nationalist ideology is not to say that black nationalist goals excluded the desires of black Southerners or poorer blacks. However, northern, middle-class blacks were better able to assemble, mobilize, and participate in organized protest. In “Black Theodicy: African Americans and Nationalism in the Antebellum North” (2000), Patrick Rael notes how “resistance—militant resistance based on a political identity—sprung first from middle class black nationalism” (12). Rael makes the assertion that northern, middle-class blacks instilled in the larger black community their beliefs in the protest tradition, a tradition heavily influenced by, but not born solely of, American Revolutionary ideals. By using the tropes of American nationalism, the northern black bourgeoisie was able to fashion a form of nationalism with an ideological premise which would be easily identifiable by the white majority, but which would also speak to the needs of black Americans. Thus, the historical tradition of black nationalism is “a nationalism constructed by elites and spread to the masses” (2). Rael points to pamphleteers such as David Walker and leaders such as Henry Highland Garnet and

Martin Delany as those middle-class black leaders who worked to spread their message.

The message that Walker, Garnet, and Delany disseminated not only laid the foundation for a nascent black nationalist identity but also served as the inspiration to propel black men to enlist and fight for the Union while demanding fair treatment and equality.

Within this study, the letters examined reveal how much of an influence this ideology had in crafting an identity for the black Civil War soldier that was rooted in the historical foundation of black revolution and protest.

While a unified political and social message of protest was of utmost importance in the years leading up to the Civil War, so, too, was the mode in which this message was relayed. Black protest not only experienced a philosophical shift in the late eighteenth century, but it also witnessed the rise of a new manner of protest: writing. In the introduction to *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* (2001), Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapansky observe how “African American writing became a prominent part of black protest culture and American public life” from the late eighteenth century to the year preceding the Civil War (1). As one of the “technologies of power,” black printed material had the power to legitimize the black experience and to organize the black masses into a form of political and philosophical solidarity. The anthology specifically examines the importance of black pamphleteering and the ways that it not only created a space for black protest, but also established a tradition of written protest that would play an integral and influential role in pre-Civil War protest. As the text reveals, in the years leading up to the Civil War, “pamphlets serve as a critical means of examining an increasingly vocal debate among antebellum black reformers over the tactics required to achieve meaningful

equality” (12).² In this way, the pamphlets generated intra-communal discourse and encouraged a specific course of action in changing the conditions of black existence in America. Pairing the rise of the letter-writing tradition with the pamphleteering tradition allowed black activists to share and disseminate ideas to the larger black communities in the North and South. By focusing on this intra-communal discourse, this study shows how the black community’s employment of both print traditions came to serve as a call for action to black soldiers who felt their service was both a directive from God and the only way to change the state of black existence in America.

Historical and military scholarship has documented the history of black service from the American Revolution through every major American conflict to the present. In detailing the chronology of that service, scholars have uncovered lost epistolary archives. The National Archives houses the most extensive collection of extant documentary evidence of the black Civil War experience. The online *Freedmen and Southern Society Project* also contains a large sampling of letters, affidavits, petitions, and testimonies from black soldiers. Scholars publishing on the black military experience have been forced to pare down the numbers selected for their works, and in so doing have provided only a sampling of available letters. The publication of these works renewed interest in black military service and also sparked curiosity in black military letters.

² “For all generations of pre-Civil War activists, the struggle was to attain the natural rights promised by the Revolution. From the early national to the antebellum period, though, the pamphlet tradition changed as black activists expanded the range of tactics considered to attain that end. Whereas black activists in the first decades of the nineteenth century often followed the deferential tone suggested by the gradual emancipationists of a more genteel political climate, those of ensuing years increasingly embraced the radical temper of an expanded public sphere, its new era of mass politics, and its aggressive assertions of group interest” (Newman, Rael, Lapsansky 12).

Ira Berlin's *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (1998) provides information critical to this dissertation's framing and analysis. His assessment on the impact of regiments composed of both northern and southern blacks on forms of protest provides a theoretical and philosophical premise for this study. Berlin notes the historical tradition of protest long upheld by northern free blacks. The tradition of written protest was passed to formerly enslaved soldiers who, as former chattel, had been systematically excluded from both literary and political spheres. Despite this, as Berlin notes, "regiments composed of newly liberated slaves petitioned and protested with all of the skill and tenacity of those whose members were freeborn" (40). What Berlin highlights that becomes an important part of the black soldier's burgeoning black epistolary tradition is how the free northern black soldier influences the black bondsman soldier's perception of the importance of the written word over physical protest. Not only are newly freed and literate slaves dictating their familial correspondence to their black northern comrades, but their letters also embrace the philosophical tenets of the nascent black nationalist ideology to which many black northern soldiers had been exposed.

To identify and to analyze fully the various black nationalist philosophical tenets in the letters, a more complete understanding of the history and complexities of black nationalism as it existed and evolved in response to cultural and political environments is critical. Black Nationalism began as a direct response to slavery and stands in ideological opposition to white racism and oppression. Wilson Jeremiah Moses chronicles the history of black nationalist philosophy in America and examines how societal attitudes, public policies, and laws dictated the shape and purpose of this political ideology. In *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (1978), Moses not only

highlights black nationalism's emergence in the eighteenth century, but he also examines how the ideology changed over time to respond to the attitudes of whites and the ways that African Americans reacted to such attitudes. As Moses asserts, black nationalism is an "adaptation to social environments" in that it "assumes the shape of its social container and undergoes transformations in accordance with the changing intellectual fashions in the white world" (10). Understanding these ideological shifts is critical to identifying black nationalist references embedded in the black soldiers' letters.

In *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (1998), Tunde Adeleke notes that despite early attempts at creating a black nationalist identity, "[a]s an ideology and movement, nationalism did not become a contentious force in black American history until the second half of the nineteenth century" (4). The separatist black nationalist identity that called for a separate nation-state, with their eyes on Africa, West Indies, and Central and South America, had seen very little success in gathering significant numbers of potential emigrants. As emigrationism floundered, a groundswell emerged from the African American community that "insisted on a domestic conception of nationality and [was] determined to work harder in pursuit of it" (38). This shift coincided with political movements that would serve as catalysts for civil war. According to Adeleke, the emergent political and ideological construct of black nationalism combined with the rise in black publication and print also created fertile ground for an epistolary tradition that is as equally relevant from a literary standpoint as it is from an historical one. Working from this premise, this dissertation connects the dots between the ripened social, political, and cultural climate

and the atmosphere that allows for the birth of an emerging black male epistolary tradition.

In *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (1996), Moses describes black nationalism as developing through phases defined by periods of intensity and waning interest. Particularly useful for this dissertation are Moses's insights into important shifts in black nationalist thought that occurred in the era of the Civil War. The impact of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 on the black community was undeniable. Moses notes that "[a]lthough the Fugitive Slave Act stimulated much talk of emigration, even the most fervent nationalists insisted that they were entitled to the rights of American citizenship" (24). Once black men were permitted to enlist, black leadership saw and seized an opportunity to gain freedom and request the rights entitled to white Americans. With race leaders such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany arguing for the enlistment of black soldiers and the appointment of black commanding officers, this period alters the face and the trajectory of black nationalism. If black nationalist ideology was born out of the slave experience and the desire to form a racial and political identity that stood in opposition to white racism, what Douglass and Delany did in their recruitment and service efforts framed duty and service as the ultimate and final opposition to the eradication of slavery. Such a conclusion is pertinent to this study because the recurring theme of fighting for freedom and the rights to American citizenship is present in many of the black soldiers' letters.

The decision and charge to join the military ranks and fight was not aberrant in terms of historical black resistance. In *Pre-Civil War Black Nationalism* (1983), Bill McAdoo outlines the black nationalist traditions that existed prior to the Civil War,

categorizing them into two identities: revolutionary and reactionary. He notes: “[w]hat appears to be a multiplicity of black nationalist philosophical and political tendencies boils down to a variation (or eclectic combination) of either the revolutionary or reactionary theme” (1). While McAdoo examines both of these black nationalist ideologies, he focuses more heavily on revolutionary black nationalism. Modeled after the rhetoric of the American Revolution and guided by the philosophical claims in the Declaration of Independence, revolutionary nationalism functioned from the premise “that ‘liberty or death’ was just as valid for the black man as for the whites” (36). Such a belief surfaces in the historical footprint of both Walker—who can be viewed as the progenitor of black nationalist ideology—and Garnet. Another point of relevance in McAdoo’s book is his examination of northern, black, middle-class involvement in the efforts to disseminate black nationalist agendas among the black masses. Just as northern, white, middle-class men shaped the American nationalist identity, so did the northern, black elite mold the black nationalist ideal. Through conventions, civic organizations, and literary publications, northern middle-class blacks served as the mouthpiece of African Americans and crafted a form of black nationalist identity that sought to dignify and unify the race. This proves to be important in the examination and analysis of the letters selected for this study because the notion of bringing dignity to and unity within the black race is a recurring theme in the burgeoning epistolary tradition. The texts in this literature review, while old in terms of dates of publication, are still pertinent to this study as they offer more critical analysis of nineteenth-century black nationalism. More recent works have given more scholarly attention to the twentieth-century Black Nationalist Movement.

Masculinity Studies

A national masculine identity is historically grounded in the notion that political and public spheres were a man's place. In the second edition of *Masculinities* (2005), R. W. Connell traces the history of Western ideas of manhood and connects that history to the "construction of nationalism and national identities" (xvi). The social construct of masculinity has heavily influenced an American national culture and identity that is built upon the framings of white masculinity. As masculinity theorists note, the white masculine ideal is narrow in its parameters because its conceptual model is based upon a white, middle class, heterosexual identity, or "hegemonic masculinity." To tighten the lens further, masculinity theorist Anthony Rotundo examines how northern, middle-class white America is the true mold for hegemonic masculinity. In *American Manhood: Transformations in American Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993), Rotundo not only examines the three phases of American manhood—communal, self-made, and passionate—but also asserts that northern, white, middle class men were influential in creating this national masculine ideal that can be viewed as both a "cultural invention" and an invention that is "shaped and reshaped by the human imagination" (1). As Rotundo notes, the northern, white, middle class men "used their vast economic and cultural power to imprint their values on the nation" (2). In so doing, American manhood intrinsically includes some men (white and heterosexual) and excludes others. Traditionally excluded from this masculine ideal was the black man. Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1992) describes this masculine othering as a strategy "to preserve masculinity by exclusion" (332). Such exclusion forced marginalized groups to create masculine identities that were shaped by the hegemonic

masculine ideal but were also grounded in the non-white, hetero, male experience in America.

The creation of alternate masculine identities supports Kimmel's assertion that "the history of an American manhood is many histories at once" (8). One's geographic location, class, age, and race shape the definition of an American individual's "manhood." Thus, because concepts of American masculinity reflect shifts in the cultural and political landscapes, the definition of manhood is subject to influences of each historical period. Consequently, a rather fluid and symbiotic relationship exists between the notions of masculinity and the social, cultural, and political bases from which such identities grow. Acknowledging the existence of the relationship between masculinity and the platform from which it emerges is important to understanding how black masculinity evolves and what black manhood looks like in the years leading to the Civil War. In *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Manhood in Victorian America* (1990), Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffin also analyze how manhood is both born of and reconfigured by societal shifts and changes. Carnes and Griffin note how "changing conceptions of masculinity influenced broader social, economic, and political processes" (7). As these processes influence conceptualizations of masculinity, they too are shaped and impacted by contemporary standards of masculinity. Thus, notions of masculinity and manhood and their varied forms cannot be separated from the American narrative that is patriarchal in its very nature.

The larger masculine narrative involves "proving" or showcasing one's manhood, and in the case of a "civilized" society, sanctioned violence via military combat is one primary way of exhibiting a boy's ascent into manhood. In *Handbook of Studies on Men*

and Masculinities (2005), Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell point to the “constructions of masculinity and the ‘gendered’ nature of political and military institutions” (9). Such institutions are essentially public spaces for men to prove their manhood in an organized and socially sanctioned manner. Using the masculine narrative of participation in military institutions, this dissertation examines how the black Civil War soldier sought to prove his manhood through service that had traditionally been seen as a hallmark for ascension to white manhood. In “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations” (1998), Joane Nagel explores the connection between manhood and nationalism and the gendered spaces crafted for men to express their national allegiance. Nagel asserts that notions of “state power, citizenship, nationalism, militarism, revolution, political violence, dictatorship, and democracy are all best understood as masculinist projects, involving masculine institutions, masculine processes and masculine activities” (243). In such institutions, processes, and activities, men have opportunities to embody this larger national ideal.

Such an ideal posits itself as a national masculine identity, which Dana Nelson defines as a “national manhood” in *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (1998). As Nelson outlines, the ideology of national manhood is deeply rooted in the seeds of the American Revolution and seeks to “link a fraternal articulation of white manhood to civic identity” (xii). This civic identity is one granted by Constitutional law, and it operates from the premise of who is *not* a part of the civic and national group. There exists the model of national manhood, or as Nelson observes, the “bribe of national manhood” that constructs a “manhood claimed through patriotic incorporation (or subordination)” (34). National manhood is, thus, an identity

created by the white ruling masculine majority that dictates both who is a man and a citizen and who is not. In ascribing manhood to certain groups of men, there lies the illusion that national manhood erases the barriers that social class or status creates. This illusion says that to be white, male, and heterosexual is to epitomize national manhood, and thus to be a part of an extended brotherhood—a collective white brotherhood. As Nelson acknowledges, this fraternal construct creates “the reassuring grant of brotherly equality, the fraternal ‘sameness’ of the white, male citizen” because national manhood is also grounded in the ideas of race and gender performativity—most specifically masculine performativity that works for the political and economic interests of the nation—those who must find alternate ways of masculine performance are excluded from the larger masculine, fraternal sphere (183). The black male had historically been excluded from this fraternal sphere because of race and the lack of class and status as both a freedman and a citizen. Black military service in a war that sought to maintain national union and black freedom thrust the black soldier into the fraternal sameness that Nelson describes. Thus, the letters selected for this study show the black soldiers’ realization of the racial and cultural significance of their service and how such service provided an entry point into the masculine, fraternal sphere.

For the black soldier, fighting alongside the Union gave some legitimacy to black masculinity, thereby challenging notions of hegemonic masculinity. In *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* (1997), Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel dissect how certain black masculine performances reveal even deeper cultural forces at play. The essays in the collection work from the premise that “racial masculinities are dynamic modes of cultural practice” and are indicative of the intersection between history and

culture (9). Additionally, the essays emphasize how masculine identities and the socio-political power structures within which they are created are deeply bound to existing ideals of racial and gender performance. They argue that white masculine performance serves as the model from which black manhood derives. However, they also note that white manhood as a construct continues to exist because of white notions of black manhood. The notion of white manhood and its influence on the assertion of black manhood is critical to this study because it grounds the cultural concept of white masculinity and its impact on how the black soldier engaged in masculine performance and protest through military service.

White ideas of manhood influenced white perceptions of black masculine performance; however, black masculinity in motion challenged notions of racial equality. In “As Thoroughly Black as the Most Faithful Philanthropist Could Desire: Erotics of Race in Higginson’s *Army Life in a Black Regiment*” (1997), Christopher Looby also notes how American manhood is deeply rooted in ideas of race, gender, and sexuality. He asserts, however, that the Civil War challenged notions of both white and black masculinity. The enlistment of blacks in Union forces showed how “normative white manhood is dependent upon a complex doubleness of attitude toward black manhood” (71). In allowing black enlistment, white stereotypes of black men as either a childish, lazy, neutered Tom or a hedonistic, violent rapist were challenged. Serving alongside black troops and seeing them in action on and off the battlefield forced white soldiers to see a black masculine identity that paralleled white manhood. Placing this observation in concert with the fraternal concept of national manhood is critical to the theoretical framework of this dissertation because such an observation outlines the metamorphosis of

a distinct black masculine epistolary identity that is both the *result* of historical and cultural forces and an *agent* in historical and cultural shifts. American masculinity is a reflection of the shifting cultural and political landscapes. Thus, a deeper understanding of these shifts allows one to identify the nuanced ways in which black masculinity sought to exist in concert with hegemonic white masculinity without infringing upon it in the years leading up to and through the Civil War. For the African American male, freedom and participation in securing that freedom allowed him to lay claim to an American masculine ideal that functioned as a *prerequisite* to citizenship. Thus, the African American male who participates in political and military institutions that were formed by white men as public spheres of white masculinity creates his own masculine identity.

This collective black masculine identity is clearly evidenced in the letters from the Civil War's black soldiers. In a battle that benefited the enslaved, the freedman, and the nation at large, a conversation about the formation of black masculinity is incomplete without a discussion of the Civil War. In *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U. S. Black Men's History and Masculinity, Vol. I, 1750-1870* (1999), Darlene Clark Hines and Earnestine Jenkins analyze how the formation of a black American masculine ideal was the result of *resistant masculinity*, a type of black masculine performance that developed in response to American slavery and oppression. In addition to slave escapes, slave rebellions, and slave conspiracies, military service presents itself as another model of resistant masculinity that influenced a black masculine identity. Hines and Jenkins argue that "military service in American wars actually freed more black men during the slave era than all the plots, insurrections, and slave flight put together" (10). Historically, service often specifically promised the reward of freedom, and in so doing allowed the

freedman a platform to demand citizenship rights. Thus, assert the authors, “the meaning of black manhood in America became inseparable from freedom and equality” (46). To be a free black man was to possess the status that gave voice to the cry for citizenship. Status as a freedman moved the black body from property to political entity, adding a very distinct black masculine ideal to the nation’s body politic.

The politicization of the African American soldier’s service in the Civil War was critical in defining a black resistant masculinity as it served the larger interests of the nation. White soldiers, both Union and Confederate, witnessed black resistant masculinity in action and not stereotypical theory. This witness becomes critically imperative in challenging preconceived notions of black manhood. In *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (2002), Wallace argues that the image of the black soldier challenged other prevailing representations of black manhood, and ultimately created a black public persona of nationhood, citizenship, and masculinity. Analyzing a portrait of Martin Delany posed in his military uniform with a bayonet in one hand and a sword in the other, Wallace asserts this one pictorial representation carved “black masculine ambition into a single image and helped to shape a specific form of black masculine identity” (75). The impact of the Civil War and the very public persona of the black soldier, coupled with the “model of military masculinism,” reconfigured or rebranded a resistant masculine ideal (104). As Wallace notes, that model would go on to influence the representation of black masculinity in black literature, letters, and culture for many years to come.

This resistant and militarized black masculine ideal was important in its position as the strong counterpoint to two major stereotypes of the black man that had been

propagandized during slavery: the Uncle Tom and the Brute Negro. In *Black Masculinity and the U. S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gansta* (2007), Riche Richardson examines how “[b]oth the Uncle Tom and the black rapist link the South to some of the earliest national ideological scripts of black masculinity in the United States” (4). The pathology of these two stereotypes sprang from the somewhat paradoxical ethos of paternalization and fear, and created a script for both white manhood and white *notions* of black manhood. If the Tom was childish in nature, he needed the guidance of the white man. If the black rapist stood as a threat to white (female) safety and security, white society needed the protection of the white man. White masculinity existed because, in the tropes of Tom and Brute, black masculinity did not. As Richardson observes, there exists a “consistent imaging of black masculinity in the South as cowardly, counterrevolutionary, infantile, and emasculated” (6). Thus, black masculinity is structured by the absence of masculine qualifiers, and thus, does not pose a threat to white manhood. When black masculinity is hypermasculinized in the form of the black rapist, such carnal lust and primitive violence moves the masculine ideal to a nonhuman one. The black man is no longer a human, but a beast, and as such, becomes a threat to white existence, thereby allowing white manhood to posit itself as the sole masculine ideal.

The construct of “soldier” stands in stark opposition to both images of the black man as Tom or Brute. In this new black masculine construct, the ethos of the black masculine ideal appropriates some of the foundational components of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. bell hooks’s *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) draws attention to the influence of patriarchal masculinity on the black masculine construct. She argues that freedom creates a bridge

from black emasculation to patriarchal masculinity, but in so doing also creates a rigid masculine identity. hooks observes how the autobiographical writings of black men expressed reverence for freedom as a “change in status that would enable them to fulfill the role of chivalric benevolent patriarch” (3). The role of the benevolent patriarch was that of protector and, as importantly, provider. As hooks asserts, “by seeking to attain the freedom to provide for black women,” the black man, free and enslaved, could ascend to and assert himself as a benevolent patriarch (3). The black man’s embrace of the benevolent patriarch was very much both a reflection of and a response to white patriarchal masculinity. Despite hooks’s emphasis on how such a gender construct blocks true liberation, black men saw this form of patriarchal identity and authority as gendered requirements for freedom. Thus, the black soldier engaged in masculinized performativity (sanctioned violence and aggression) to gain freedom and the privileges assigned to it under terms of a white hegemonic patriarchal society.

However, not all such early notions of black masculine performativity were bound primarily to acts of aggression and violence, as are often required of a soldier in battle. In *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U. S. History and Literature, 1820-1945* (2011), as other scholars before them, Timothy Buckner and Peter Caster “demonstrate how history and literature operate dynamically in the formation and revision of national imaginations of black masculinity” (13). The essays in this collection examine how geography and the qualities of manhood that are embraced by a region are responsible for the fluid conceptual nature of black masculinity in America. While the authors agree that the institution of slavery “proved the most significant cultural force shaping black masculinity in the first century of the United States,” they also note that

black masculinity is not solely confined to the experience of slavery and acts of resistance (5). Instead, as the title suggests, black men revised masculine performance in myriad ways to reflect individual circumstances and stations in life. Buckner and Caster do explore the significance of the black soldier, but their treatment of the soldier is contextualized within a discussion of other black masculine performatives. Black masculinity was neither an aberration nor a monolith. Placing the soldier as but one black masculine identity along the spectrum of black masculine identities is significant to this dissertation's major premise because doing so allows for a fuller understanding of the types of black masculinities available and why asserting black masculinity in the form of the soldier was critical during this moment in the nineteenth century.

Moving from the chains of slavery through the gates of freedom, the nineteenth century provides the historical and sociological crossroads for black masculinity in America. In *"I Will Wear No Chain!": A Social History of African American Males* (2000), Christopher Booker explores the historical and social conditions that shaped black manhood and uses that information to address contemporary issues impacting America's black men. Booker examines how slavery and antebellum ideals of white masculinity had a direct impact on black masculine performance and identity. While earlier attempts at black masculine performance included a focus on work, economic achievement, and family life, by the 1850s, "[b]oldness, assertiveness, and direct action became more valued as attributes of black masculinity than previously" (59). Such attributes would be necessary for the fight for freedom and equality. Booker notes how many black Civil War soldiers felt their black manhood could not be ignored as they had been showcased on the battlefield for the nation to see. He asserts that as the black troops

“demobilized and returned to civilian life, thousands of black soldiers shared a desire to maintain this status and carve out a stable, prosperous existence as free workers in a democratic society” (83). This desire to maintain this status motivated black soldiers to continue their service as leaders in their community who advocate for black male suffrage and to embrace their unencumbered role as family patriarchs who provide and protect. Booker’s scholarship on the sociological implications of nineteenth-century black masculine identity are critical to this study because they explore the varying iterations of black manhood up to and through the Civil War. Because he traces the transformation of black masculinity in the nineteenth century, his work aids in the analysis of each author’s expression of black masculinity and how black manhood is revealed and discussed in both private and public letters.

Taken together, these sources offer a theoretical framework for this dissertation’s exploration and analysis of the letters selected for this study. The critical lens of black masculinity highlights how and for what causes black soldiers discuss their own notions of masculinity in the letters. Consequently, this discussion also argues for the acknowledgment of an epistolary genre that can be viewed as specific to the experiences of black Civil War soldiers.

Epistolary Scholarship

The cultural significance of the epistolary tradition within the larger society grounds this study in its attempts to articulate and define the African American male epistolary tradition. In *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (1978), Wilson Jeremiah Moses asserts that early black nationalism was a “genteel tradition in English

letters” (11). Because the nascent ideology of black nationalism was concerned with the concept of black civilization and African uplift, black ascent into the realms of literacy was seen as a trait of civility. Such civility was seen in a fondness for literacy, language, and literature. Moses notes that in the decade before the Civil War “literate blacks became interested in such activities as the art of letter writing and neoclassical poetry” (26). Because much of early black nationalist identity was concerned with a white recognition of black civility, the epistolary form, along with other forms of writing, was viewed as a means of showcasing moral and intellectual equality. If the epistolary form was one means of expression traditionally used by “civilized” white men and women, then the black soldiers’ letters add a distinct voice and perspective to the larger epistolary tradition. However, studies on a black male epistolary tradition for the most part are nonexistent. Scholarship about gender and epistolary practice generally focuses on women—both black and white—and all but ignores the vast contributions and significance of letters written by black men. According to Sharon Harris in *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States, 1760-1860* (2016), letter writing, as “a genre [,] is worthy of study, emulation, and practice” (2). The epistolary scholarship used in this study hones in on the social, political, and cultural functions of black Civil War soldiers’ letters and frames an epistolary tradition as an expression in the quest for black manhood, freedom, and equality.

In the Introduction of *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (2000), David Barton and Nigel Hall explore the cultural and social implications of the epistolary tradition. Barton and Hall assert that as “one of the most pervasive literate activities in human societies, . . . [letter writing] gains its meaning and significance from being situated in

cultural beliefs, values, and practices” (1). While the socio-cultural significance attached to letter writing speaks to the individual society, it also speaks to the individual as writer. Because letter writers “assert their identities in the letters they write,” scholars can recognize and analyze how individual writers self-identify within a given society (5). Thus, even as the writer struggles to put words on paper or is a novice to the practice of letter writing, the individual’s very attempt reveals the importance of expression, communication, connection, and self-identification assigned to this social practice. These ideas are most evidenced in the black soldiers’ continuing participation in the act of letter writing.

Within the American epistolary tradition, two types of letters serve as the standards of written correspondence: the familiar letter and the official (or polite) letter. In “The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750-1800” (2000), Konstantin Dierks defines the familiar letter as written correspondence “devoted to the expression of affection and duty among kin, family and friends” (31). Familiar letters were part of familial practice and tradition whereby written exchange was encouraged among kith and kin. Dierks examines the social conditions that fostered the encouragement of the familiar letter, connects the popularity of this epistolary form to eighteenth-century middle-class notions of “social refinement and upward mobility,” and details how even the most inexperienced letter writer was cognizant of and adhered to the rules regarding composition of the familiar letter (31). While the familiar letter was more relaxed in style—expressing concern for and devotion to family and friends or detailing the occurrences of the day—there were certain expectations of form in terms of the opening, greeting, and closing. A writer’s adherence to these epistolary stylistic

conventions signified one's mastery of this communicative form and their social status. As Dierks argues, "every single letter, no matter how seemingly trivial, would serve to construct and symbolize a person's social status" (38). If, as Dierks asserts, the familiar letter represents notions of one's status and refinement, the African American epistolary tradition comprises black soldiers' familiar letters that articulate what black masculinity looks like in the nineteenth century and establishes how it is valued and expressed in private correspondence.

The African American epistolary tradition for which this project argues, however, extends beyond private letters and also relies on the study and analysis of public and polite/official letters. In "In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America" (2009), Dierks examines how the notion of letters as agents of power led to an increase in the publication of letter writing manuals that set forth the parameters for proper epistolary correspondence in terms of stylistic, dialogic, and ideological conventions in both familiar and polite letters. According to Dierks, these manuals not only "formulated prescriptions for proper letter writing, [but] they also articulated images of society and classifications of people" (148). As Dierks explains, the ideas most closely associated with an adherence to epistolary etiquette are those of middle-class refinement and class. She further explores the distinguishing features between the familiar and polite letter, noting that while "the most important feature of familiar letters was a set of stylistic conventions affirming sincerity, the correlating feature of polite letters was a set of formal rules affirming deference" (151). While the probability of the black soldiers in the study having been exposed to these letter-writing manuals is slim at best, for the purpose of this study, Dierks's work allows me to define further the

characteristics of a black male letter-writing tradition. Thus, this study argues that the ability to navigate between both epistolary forms is critical in representing both a personal and group masculine identity for black soldiers. The letters work as narratives of black masculine refinement and discipline, blurring the lines of class, gender, and race, enabling each black soldier power and autonomy over self-representation.

In *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (2013), Christopher Hager examines the political, cultural, and literary implications of African American letters as “narrative(s) of emancipation” and argues how “emancipation and the ability to write were somehow connected” (10). As blacks were an oppressed group for whom literacy was withheld as a means of further marginalization and oppression, the ability to read and write had long been a symbol of mental freedom and tangible evidence of intellectual power. Hager argues that those African Americans engaging in the act of writing did not have to be physically free to experience the power that writing possessed. Hager notes how on a smaller scale, the enslaved person saw the power in writing in his or her everyday life. From travel passes to free papers, writing marked degrees of freedom for the enslaved. For the black Union soldier, writing worked as a form of protest against enslavement. Yet, what Hager briefly addresses but fails to expand upon fully is how the black Civil War soldiers’ letters not only have larger political and cultural meanings but also reveal intimations of gender proscriptions, more specifically black masculinity. As Hager acknowledges, “[s]ending a letter to a white official on a matter of business—producing the kind of text most likely to be preserved in an archive—was widely considered, regardless of race, the task of a man” (7). Black soldiers’ engagement in writing—especially writing to political figures—serves as a

compelling form of masculine protest during the Civil War. In the letters analyzed in this dissertation, literacy and the physical act of writing become synonymous with the masculine ability to acquire freedom while making the narrative of a national communal identity more complete and inclusive.

While the inclusion of a black masculine ideal broadens our understanding in terms of national identity, such an inclusion also deepens our understanding of black masculinity as personal narrative. In *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), Janet Gurkin Attman examines the use of the epistle as narrative. Attman argues that the letter is not only unique in that it creates a bridge between writer and reader, but it is also unparalleled in that it makes “the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator)” (88). In short, the person to whom the letter is addressed is just as important in the construction of the letter as the author and the message. Thus, detailed analysis of letters must take into account not only the author but also the recipient of the missive. In the physical act of writing, the author of the epistle participates in the reflexive act of self-portrayal and aids in the “revelation and discovery” on the part of the reader (92). The author comes to paper and pen with the idea of a conceptualized self-portrayal, a portrayal that is captured in the writing of the letter and that aids in revelation and discovery on the part of both writer and reader. In the creation and execution of the letter, the author gives the reader an opportunity to participate in a moment of reflection and self-discovery, or as Attman puts it “the classical moment of recognition (Aristotle’s *anagnorisis*)” (92). Each letter by individual black soldiers allows for its intended audience to reflect on the notions of what it means to be a man, to assert that manhood, and to participate in the larger political conversation.

Through this process, voices that had once been marginalized and ignored become harder to ignore. As the black soldiers' letters increase in number and become more visible through newspaper publication, these epistles challenge white perceptions of black masculinity. Those letters written with the intent of publication also seek to bring together the black population at large by conceptualizing ideas of freedom, citizenship, and equality as common bonds of black existence in America. If, as Attman argues, written discourse is equally as important to both the writer and the reader, then the letters selected for this study that were written for publication show how the black soldier as a letter writer impacted the perceptions white readers had about black men as part of the American narrative.

In the act of writing and by participating in an accepted form of written discourse, those black Civil War soldiers whose letters were published inadvertently also inserted themselves into the political narrative of the country. The soldier's participation in letter writing represents a transformation not only black protest but also of the notion of whom is allowed access to published print discourse. In *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1990), Mark Warner examines how individual written discourse directly impacts political discourse. Warner argues that writing in early America becomes synonymous with "practical knowledge and authority" (12). If, he argues, reading becomes a distinguishing mark of white society, then writing simultaneously becomes a symbol of one's ability to assert personal intellect and authority. Thus, to write is to align oneself with the notions of authority and high culture. *The Letters of the Republic* also examines how eighteenth-century white Americans thought of themselves as "inhabiting the pure language of writing" while

relegating blacks to “inhabiting a dialect” (13). In the act of writing letters that were set for weekly publication, blacks moved themselves into this “pure language” and established their voice as part of the narrative of American civic liberty. Warner further argues how letters become paramount in “republican rhetoric [. . . and] are never disengaged from the active and public dimensions of personhood” (127). If, as Warner argues, early letters in America serve as a roadmap in the history of emancipation, then the black American’s letters now allow him to insert his experience in the emancipatory narrative of the nation’s history. Thus, the black soldier’s letters both impact and are impacted by the changing political environment and also become tangible symbols of black personhood, symbols that move from a private realm into the spotlight of public purview via print publication.

In moving private discourse to a more public forum by means of published letters, the black soldier’s letters are both a reflection of and a reaction to a changing political and cultural environment. In *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (1998), Merrill Decker examines the “cultural transformations that [letter writing] manifests” (4). Yet, in manifesting such cultural transformations, the letter, Decker argues, blurs the lines between public and private discourse. The public letter was once part of more private correspondence. In its ability to move from the private to the public sphere, the letter also becomes “a species of historical documentation” (117). Using the example of David Walker’s *Appeal* (1829), Decker notes how publication via newspaper or pamphlet becomes a vehicle in which private ideas reach a larger audience. However, as Decker notes, the letter is more than a means of crossing private and public spheres. In this spherical shift, the letter gives voice to

one's identity and becomes an instrument of personal authority, autonomy, and power. The letter becomes tangible proof of "a self-satisfied class identity" in its ability to exert a "power that may or may not achieve effective social form" (14). There is power in ideas that transition from private thought to public voice, whereby both the message and the messenger point to a learned and intelligent social class. Within this social class, the letter acts as a powerful form of historical documentation. As Decker notes, "the letter is ever a locus of class markers: masteries of protocol, refinements of taste, levels of cultivation, grades of literacy" (14). Decker highlights how the power of this genre influences more individuals to participate in this epistolary tradition, especially during the Civil War. The sheer numbers of "surviving Civil War correspondence" reflect how ordinary Americans used the letter as a means of idea dissemination and a means of familial communication (60). Decker's assertions are important to the premise of this dissertation. As the black Civil War soldier writes letters to friends, relations, and the powers that be, he inserts his perspectives into the larger body of historical documentation, and in thus doing, moves his experiences and his plight into the public eye. Through written discourse, the black soldier brings to the forefront issues of black male existence that had once been ignored.

Black soldiers' letters often incorporated the language of power and the social form of authority associated with the epistolary tradition. Through his letters, the enslaved and oppressed black male moves from the shadows of marginalization and, through the manly acts of writing and protesting, demands to be acknowledged as an equal among white men and a citizen in the American body politic. This assertion is supported in Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven's *Epistolary Histories: Letters*,

Fiction, Culture (2000). Gilroy and Verhoeven examine the cultural-historical significance of the epistolary form and argue that “the epistolary genre can destabilize and defamiliarize” the borders of both gender and class (17). When persons who fall outside of the white, privileged class utilize the epistolary form, they remove its perceived exclusivity. Of even greater significance, according to Gilroy and Verhoeven, is that the epistolary form reflects the cultural and historical environment. Gilroy and Verhoeven ground their argument in the belief that epistolary history exists as a “narrative of historically specific cultural connections and disconnections” (20). While racism and slavery in America worked through perceived cultural and intellectual differences between blacks and whites, the letters of black soldiers disprove this. The letters depict a more unified and cohesive political body that is composed of *men*—black and white—working for the greater good of the nation. Additionally, they provide a snapshot of the black soldier’s thought process as the nation stands on the precipice of a major political and social transformation. Gilroy and Verhoeven acknowledge how the “power dynamics of colonization” have overlooked epistolary study of black American letters despite the critical importance of these missives to understanding the rapidly changing socio-political environment (20). The absence of these letters from epistolary study creates a less accurate representation of American epistolary writing. More than enough letters by black soldiers exist to warrant their study, analysis, and inclusion in the larger conversation about the American epistolary tradition.

In *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early England* (2005), Gary Schneider asserts that individual letters indeed have larger cultural implications. As Schneider notes, “letters contain references to their own ‘epistolarity’”

because they speak to outside factors and influences that bear weight on the writing of the epistle. What societal forces initiate letter writing, and what value is placed on the letter as object? How does the structure and language of the letter reveal social relationships and interaction? Because, as Schneider argues, letters serve as “crucial material bearers of social connection, instruments by which social ties [are] initiated, negotiated, and consolidated,” epistolary study and analysis must ask what social forces factor into the writing of the letter and the message it entails (27). Observing the societal forces that initiate black Civil War soldiers’ letters, we see the mythos and ethos of the letters in their attempts to initiate and negotiate a commonality between America’s black population and its white population in terms of the masculine performatives of patriotism and service. Two potential results for asserting a sense of manhood by participating in sanctioned violence for love country are bloodshed and death. Death becomes the great equalizer. The black soldier asks for the same rights and respect not merely through his masterful use of weaponry and his willingness to die on the battlefield but also through the intellectual weaponry of epistolary form.

Used together, these sources guide this dissertation’s examination of black Civil War soldiers’ letters and argue how they point to a larger and more distinct black male epistolary tradition. This epistolary tradition not only underscores evidence of black literacy during the antebellum period, but it also highlights the rich history of black protest writing. The letters work on both interpersonal and sociopolitical planes, closing the gap in epistolary scholarship by exposing how incomplete American epistolary history is without the inclusion of the letters from black Americans—most specifically black Civil War soldiers. Using the epistolary form not only diminished the (perceived)

intellectual divide between black and white Americans, but, by engaging in the act of letter writing, black soldiers articulated their conceptions of identity and freedom to the world. The black soldiers' letters reshape our notions of black involvement in the Civil War and highlight how critical the black epistolary form was in altering the nation's political and social trajectory.

Chapter Descriptions

This dissertation is rooted in the notion that literacy and written communication were tropes of freedom and masculinity. Under the constraints of slavery, verbal or written self-expression could prove to be deadly, but they were also empowering. Because of this, many Union camps found thousands of new enlistees hungry to pick up not only a gun and bayonet, but also a speller and pen. Slave soldiers who were barely literate understood the importance of communication and came to view it as a tool of power. Some soldiers found a way to express themselves beyond the boundaries of their levels of literacy by dictating letters to more literate soldiers. Thus, this introduction provides the historical framework of a black masculine identity as it grows out of the experience of slavery. Additionally, the introduction explores how the northern black bourgeoisie influenced the nineteenth-century black masculine ideal and how writing worked as an example of masculine performativity. Finally, the introduction examines how black manhood served as the philosophical springboard of black protest and an emerging black nationalist identity.

Chapter One, "I am a Soldier Now," examines black masculine identity in black soldiers' personal correspondence. This chapter analyzes soldiers' letters that were

written without the intention of publication against the backdrop of a redefined black maleness, a black masculine identity that was now defined by military service. Analysis of these private communications reveals the soldier's need to present himself as a part of the American masculine community with rights to the benefits of patriarchal American society. These rights require and entitle him to act as a protector of his family, community, and nation. The understanding of masculinity expressed in these epistles is detailed in the soldier's desire to protect loved ones, to reunite with family, and to vindicate the African American community through honor and bravery. The soldier's more intimate letters function as a promise of sorts. These letters have the potential to be the most authentic in voice and content because they were written without the influence or expectation of public review and scrutiny.

Despite the more recent discoveries of many of these published or archived letters, uncovering the personal and private letters of black Civil War soldiers has been a more difficult and elusive goal. What I discovered, however, redefines our notions of how black masculinity was channeled through and defined as the role of soldier. I argue that the need to express a black masculine identity functions as one of the three primary characteristics of what I term the black male epistolary tradition. These letters center not only on the black soldier's need to connect with loved ones to overcome the sadness of separation, but also on his desire to express a masculine identity flourishing in the bosom of freedom. In the letters from Tillman Valentine, Spottswood Rice, and Alonzo Reed, we find the clear distinction between the reserve of publication and the freedom of private correspondence. This chapter argues that the notion of black masculinity is evidenced in outright claims of the manly duties of soldier and the hetero-patriarchal

domestic concerns for family and friends. The letters expose how freely black men represented themselves as fighters for the people and as protectors of the family. While the letters are not necessarily shocking in their content, they are remarkable in how they reveal a male identity influenced by the power of literacy and freedom.

Chapter Two, “We are the Blackest and the Bravest Race,” explores the published and private letters of soldiers through the lens of an emerging black nationalist identity that embraced racial pride and unity in the cause for liberation. As with the letters analyzed in the first chapter, the authors of these letters vary in their degrees of literacy; however, each letter clearly reveals how a black nationalist philosophy strengthened the soldiers’ resolve, and in some ways, created a more tightly knit black fraternal and communal identity. As the chapter title implies, within the selected missives, the black soldier expresses a deep and abounding love for his race as well as a sense of duty and honor in his role as a soldier in the fight for freedom.

The letters in chapter two illustrate the powerful philosophical transformation in the black man’s perception of self as he transitions from slave to soldier, while also depicting a unified racial identity that existed long before black men took up arms. Pre-Civil War black nationalism focused on colonization efforts, despite the black community’s lukewarm reception of this idea. This attitude of indifference also sprang from the black community’s belief that America was unwilling to dismantle the slave institution and recognize blacks as equals and as citizens. The Civil War and the possibility of black men being able to fight redefined the black nationalist message and renewed faith in the hope for long-denied freedom.

Chapter two's letters specifically demonstrate how black soldiers' notions of masculinity were grounded in black nationalist identity. Many of the letters detail masculine acts of bravery on the battlefield and how these actions are not just illustrations of black masculinity, but also of black pride. Because a large number of these letters were written with the intention of publication, the public image of the black soldier was carefully crafted to counter white stereotypical notions of black manhood in a way that legitimized black claims to citizenship and equality. Many of these letters were published in newspapers that were widely circulated in the free black communities, giving them a better likelihood of reaching a larger black population while also becoming part of an archival body. In these letters chronicling acts of bravery and heroism, we see disciplined, orderly, domesticated, and organized black soldiers who come to the Union's aid. Thus, the letters from William H. Johnson, an anonymous self-described "Colored Man," and Charles Singer in this chapter focus on a black pride that extends from the individual to their respective Colored regiments and then to the larger African American community. Also apparent in these letters was the belief that a new day for African Americans would begin with a new public—and historical—concept of black masculinity, with the black soldier standing as a national example.

Chapter Three, "Give This a Moment's Attention," examines black soldiers' letters through the lens of the black masculine tradition of protest and protest writing. The letters in this chapter speak to the impact of northern, literate black soldiers on their southern and often illiterate comrades in the larger context of forms of protest. While soldiers engaged in physical protest on the battlefield, they also waged a paper war for equal pay, fair treatment, and the opportunity to serve in commissioned positions.

Offended by the government's reduced pay for black regiments, soldiers of the USCT began a letter and petition campaign that eventually led to retroactive equal pay. Finding power in their epistolary voice and their positions as saviors of sorts to the Union effort, black soldiers also began petitioning for suffrage and citizenship rights. This chapter argues, however, that at the core of this protest was a black masculine identity that demanded those rights as acknowledgment and affirmation of a manhood that stood on par with the American hegemonic masculine (white) ideal. Thus, the letters in chapter three present a snapshot of an epistolary protest tradition that captures a pivotal moment in both a black masculine epistolary tradition and the nation's history.

The letters in chapter three uniquely illustrate how the black soldier moves regional and racial issues to a national forum, thus altering the trajectory of black existence in America. These missives represent the rebellious thoughts and expressions of soldiers whose levels of literacy vary greatly. Many of them evince humble attempts by the authors to present such expressions in the culturally acceptable epistolary form. Taking cues from the white, middle-class male, the writers of these letters appeal to the notions of civility, intellect, and dignity connected to the formal epistle. This effort is most apparent in both the formal address and closing of each letter. This chapter argues that the use of certain epistolary formalities indicates the black soldier's ability to maneuver through the very public and masculine sphere of white America and present himself as a citizen. The soldier makes the statement that it is only his skin color, and perhaps his level of literacy, that may separate him from a white hegemonic concept of manhood and nationhood.

The letters in this final chapter reveal the ideological transformations in the black soldier's paper protest. The subjects of these letters range from the desire to take up arms for the Union, to requests to serve in commissioned officer positions, to demands for the full citizenship and suffrage, and most clearly illustrate the merging of two ideals of rebellion: physical and epistolary. While much epistolary scholarship concerning the USCT has focused on the protest efforts of the 54th Massachusetts Colored regiment—made most famous by the 1989 film *Glory*—such protest efforts extended across all of the Union's African American regiments. Using the letters of Garland White, Robert Hamilton Isabelle, and members from Company D of the 55th Massachusetts Infantry, this chapter examines the intersection between a protest tradition and a black masculine identity and argues how such a protest tradition used the myths of American history and the logos of the nation's governing documents to gain citizenship and argue for suffrage rights.

The letters from black soldiers who served in the bloodiest war in American history not only stand as archival documents of American history but also exist as evidence of a larger black epistolary tradition that has long been overlooked. While some of the letters selected for this dissertation speak to the most tender of affections between loved ones and others speak to the most basic of human and national rights, all of these letters reflect the empowering legacy of literacy and epistolarity in the African American community. These first-hand accounts not only document history but also extend our knowledge of literacy, discourse, and masculine identity in the black community. This knowledge has a critical impact on our understanding of black male identity during the nineteenth century. We see the black man as a thinking, feeling, loving, fighting, and

rebellious being—a man communicating his desires and sharing his truths. We find men and soldiers moving from the shadows of slavery to the light of democracy. These letters help to dispel the single narrative written *about* black men and instead provide us with a narrative written *by* black men. This desire to express a black masculine identity shapes a very notable black male letter-writing tradition. Within this epistolary tradition, black masculine identity thrives and blossoms in the brotherhood of military service to both a nation and a people, and in so doing, explores the possibilities of a black national manhood that can exist in concert with hegemonic national manhood and change the national narrative. Thus, the black Civil War soldier's letters—in their timeless appeal—provide a glimpse of black masculinity in transition. On a much larger scale, they also reveal a nation in transition.

Chapter One: “I am a Soldier Now”

Black Masculinity in Personal Correspondence

“. . . this war has caused me to think in terly [entirely] different from what i did i feal my self a man and is if i ought to be a man and as if i ought to act as a man. . .” - Tillman Valentine to his wife, April 25, 1864

Emblazoned on the 127th United States Colored Infantry Regiment flag (figure 1) is an image of a black Union soldier with a bayonet rifle in his right hand. Waving the American flag, Lady Liberty follows closely behind this soldier, who, with his left hand, ushers her to follow *him* to freedom. Inscribed atop the coat of arms is the 127th USCT’s motto: *We Will Prove Ourselves Men*.



Figure 1: 127th United States Colored Troops Regimental flag

In the months leading up to the first mustering of the USCT into service, notions of manhood, specifically black manhood, were of utmost concern to the ongoing war efforts.³ The association of manhood with service had played heavily on the recruitment

³ More than two years after the start of the Civil War, the United States Bureau of Colored Troops was established on May 22, 1863 to manage the recruitment and enlistment of the growing numbers of new black soldiers. On June 30, 1863, the 1st USCT infantry regiment was mustered into service.

process with posters appealing to black men's sense of manhood through duty. As Jim Cullen notes in "I's a Man Now: Gender and African American Men," between "newspaper articles, government affidavits, and letters to officials, families, and each other, manhood surfaces again and again as an aspiration, a concern, or a fact of life" within the black community (490). The extant textual and visual archives speak to a population indeed eager to prove themselves as men. The Civil War provides a grounding point in this dissertation to discuss the thematic and historical notions of nineteenth-century black masculinity and how such ideas are evidenced in the black soldier's private correspondence.

The Civil War was a critical moment in terms of U.S. notions of black masculinity, black literacy, and black epistolarity because it created an environment ripe for the three primary components of letter writing to exist: access, ability, necessity. The soldier needed access to education (or in some cases, a fellow comrade) to facilitate writing, implements to engage in writing, and an unrestricted postal system to transmit letters. Additionally, the soldier needed to possess the ability to transmit those thoughts and feelings into written word. Finally, he needed to have a reason—created by prolonged distance—to write and send letters. From this, however, what allowed the black male epistolary tradition to emerge was the volume of letters brought about by the large numbers of enlisted black men.⁴ As black men rapidly enlisted and settled into military and camp life, they requested some form of educational service be made

⁴ Between 1861 and 1865, roughly half a million slaves escaped to nearby Union camps, whereby self-emancipating (Booker 77). According to Ira Berlin, by the war's end, approximately 179,000 men had served in the Union army, while an estimated 18,000 served in the navy. Thus, almost two hundred thousand men had served in the Union army and navy (*Freedom's Soldiers* 20).

available for each USCT regiment. As Ira Berlin notes, when those services were not readily made available, “black soldiers joined together to build schools, hire teachers, and form literary and debating societies” (40). Literacy was not only a means to excel as a soldier and possibly move up the ranks; it was also a skill that would prove instrumental in life as a freedman. According to Darlene Hines and Earnestine Jenkins, “every USCT regiment operated a schoolhouse [and] could boast that when many of its regiments were mustered out of the service, the majority of former slaves could read, and many could write fairly well” (53). Thus, while enlistment served as a direct pathway to physical liberation for those formerly enslaved, it also provided a pathway to intellectual freedom.

Yet, the individual intellectual freedom that literacy provided also had larger implications. In *“When I Can Read My Title Clear”: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (1991), Janet Duitsman Cornelius points to the communal impact of literacy practices and traditions. She notes how “[s]cholars of literacy have charted the impact a few literate people can make in a culture of illiterates; they serve as mediators and translators into a wider world for those who do not read” (3). One literate person can create more literate persons within the group. Thus, the individual notions of literacy as beneficial to a communal group similarly shape epistolary practices. Those soldiers who were not literate often depended on those who could read and write to help them compose their letters or assist them in honing individual reading and writing skills. In this dictation of letters, the merging of oral culture and epistolary tradition merges and is critical to the discussion of literacy and epistolary practices within the black community. As Hager notes, the most poignant example of this overlap could be observed when “[a] freedman in the army asks a comrade how to spell a word he wishes to write” (20). Thus,

the literacy and epistolary tradition within the black community, more specifically among black soldiers, was a communal act grounded in oral culture.

The ability to participate in literacy practices and traditions was seen as a form of intellectual and moral elevation and was a cherished act brought from the plantation to the battlefield. Those who were illiterate or semi-literate were encouraged by their relatives and peers to improve themselves. Scholars point to the ways in which familial bonds and familial activities shaped perceptions of literacy traditions within both the enslaved and freed black communities. In *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century* (2004), Phyllis M. Belt-Beyan argues that “the African American family was important to the development of their literacy traditions, the underlying motivations for reading and writing, and the nature of their literacy traditions themselves” (68). Reading and writing activities that could be enjoyed by the entire family were important in maintaining a sense of closeness and togetherness. However, it was not merely the reading of the letter that was a collective activity. Because letter writing was an activity that, depending on a soldier’s level of literacy required more than one participant, familial *and* fraternal bonds shaped the epistolary tradition.

Maintaining those bonds with family and community was also an indication of the soldier’s responsibility as a man. Traditionally, letter writing was seen as an elite white male practice.⁵ While the soldier’s engagement in letter writing established him as an

⁵ As Dierks recognizes, prior to the nineteenth century, elite white men “were encouraged to write as a supposedly natural facet of their masculinity” (33). However, by the nineteenth century this epistolary tradition becomes more closely associated with social refinement and class. Thus, “[o]nce a social practice that reinforced traditional gender boundaries between male and female, letter writing was redefined to fortify emerging class boundaries between the middling sort—

intellectual rival to his white counterpart, this epistolary act also provided a venue for each writer to relay his thoughts and feelings. Shaped by antebellum models of masculinity, Christopher Booker recognizes how familial and communal roles were critical in their impact on the culture of black manhood. He asserts that “[p]ractically all of the significant actions of African American males during slavery occurred within the social context of the family, the extended family, and the slave community” (32). Black men sought to protect and provide for their families within the restrictions of the slave system. They sought as best they could to act as the decision-maker for what familial unit they could manage to keep together as chattel slaves. When distance did not allow for in-person reassurance of these responsibilities, black soldiers penned those comforting words to their loved ones. The letters in this chapter reveal—in both subtle and candid ways—what masculine values the soldier’s family, friends, and community held in high esteem. These soldiers, however, did not merely engage in the “manly” act of writing. What is of significance is how the private letters in this chapter contextualize notions of black manhood in terms of familial and communal connections. The themes of black manhood and the responsibilities on both the battlefield and the home front recur in the letters in this chapter and allow us to pinpoint a clear black male epistolary tradition. Tacit references to black masculinity in these private letters are rooted in the definitive historical themes of black masculinity that, according to Hines and Clark, include:

recognition of pre-existing notions about masculinity among the first Africans; the concept of gendered resistance and its influence on

those who aspired to refinement—and the lower sort—those who were deemed vulgar” (33). The black man—bondsman and freedman alike—would be assigned the latter category.

masculine behavior; the evolving role of American wars and the military as an important means of achieving freedom specific to black men; black men's complicated relationship to work and not owning their own labor; [and], the impact of family and community on black male survival. (2)

Thus, the flux of black masculine identity exists as a thematic undercurrent in the private letters in this chapter. Pairing these themes of black masculinity with the soldier's own words and feelings, we can piece together an idea of how the terms "man" and "manhood" were defined at this moment in history. As Cullen recognizes, "[s]ince many of these men were semi-literate—or had to depend on others to write for them—they were not inclined to elaborate on their terminology [and] those who were quite literate did not bother to explain what they assumed their readers would understand" (490). Yet what goes without an explanation is how these letters reveal how manhood is directly and consistently linked to home, community, and country. Additionally, as Cullen asserts, the black soldiers' letters also give a clear indication of "a widely shared sense that the Civil War did indeed mark a watershed for black manhood" (490). That manhood is represented in recruitment posters, and regimental flags, and ultimately scribes itself in private correspondence, sowing the seeds for the birth of this epistolary tradition.

The black soldier's tender, familiar, and personal letters reveal how the black male epistolary tradition is rooted in the familial and communal literacy tradition. These familiar letters are significant as the springboard for discussing the more formal and published letters. As Dierks recognizes, "familiar letters [were] a preliminary exercise for men to practice their writing style before embarking on serious business letters" ("The Familiar Letter" 32). For clarity in the analysis and discussion of the letters in this

chapter—and ultimately the chapters to follow—one or more of the following ten attributes characterizes the letters in this epistolary tradition: declarations of manhood; hetero-patriarchal concerns for family (money, food, shelter, safety); promises of reunion in life or death; descriptions of battle and camp life; professions of pride in the black race; assurances of freedom for enslaved loved ones; biblical allusions to freedom and liberation⁶; demands for equality/explanations for wage protest; appeal to the logos and mythos of fighting, freedom, and the American Revolution; and allusions to the rights detailed in the Constitution. The black soldiers' personal correspondence essentially recognized, celebrated, and revered a black masculine identity they believed would determine the future for the black family, and ultimately the entire black community.

From the pen of Alonzo Reed, Tillman Valentine, and Spottswood Rice, readers have access to intimate reflections and revelations of black masculine identity and how it is deeply rooted in and driven by something much larger than the self. Soldiers detail moments of black masculine performance and psychological transformation that are critical in naming and defining a distinct narrative and epistolary agency.

⁶ In *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism 1850-1925*, Moses highlights this Judeo-Christian influence on a black nationalist approach to history. Rooted in the Old Testament book of Psalms 68:31-32, it speaks to enslavement and liberation. "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." Globally within the slave communities, this biblical passage was cultivated and interpreted to mean that peoples of African descent would free themselves from bondage. This was God's promise. This biblical allusion is repeatedly seen in the black soldier's personal and published correspondence.

I. Letters from Pvt. Alonzo Reed to Francis Reed (mother)

On January 14, 1864, eighteen-year-old Alonzo Reed enlisted in the Michigan 102nd United States Colored Infantry.⁷ Born in St. Louis, Missouri about 1845,⁸ Reed was residing in Detroit, Michigan most likely with his older brother John around January 6, 1864 (McRae 114). Enlistment records describe Reed as standing five feet eight inches tall, with dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark complexion. His previous occupation was listed as boat hand. From 1864 until 1866, Pvt. Reed wrote his mother a series of letters, twenty-one of which survive today. Until this study, Pvt. Reed's letters remained untouched, sitting in the Rubenstein Library on the campus of Duke University since 1937. The collection of letters was encoded in 2014 when they were then made available to the public. Within this collection, Reed details camp life, various raids conducted by his company, his concerns for his family and friends back home, his worries about when he will receive pay to send home, the regiment's encounters with Confederate Rebels, the black soldier's reception in the South, how black men in the South are exercising their voting rights, and his transformation from a boy to a man. He writes of raids in which "contrabands" are taken and plantation cotton is destroyed. He recounts the brutal beating and dragging of a fellow soldier at the hands of their company commander. Reed's letters are exceptional in the social commentary they provide about black life in the military and in the South. His letters exemplify the various ways in which black masculinity writes itself into a new epistolary tradition while allowing readers to see what

⁷ Compiled service record, Alonzo Reed, Pvt., Company E, 102nd USCT Infantry; Carded Records Showing Military Service of Soldiers Who Fought in Volunteer Organizations During the American Civil War, compiled 1890-1912, documenting the period 1861-1866, Record Group 94; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁸ Compiled military service record, Alonzo Reed Pvt., Company E, USCT Infantry; Civil War, RG 94; NA-Washington.

black manhood looked like to an eighteen-year-old departing for the battlefield. Deeper analysis of both the epistolary conventions and linguistic choices in Reed's familial letters reveals the significance in the role of the dutiful son to ideas of black masculinity.

When Alonzo Reed arrived in Detroit, Michigan sometime before 1864, he left behind in St. Louis a mother (Francis), sister (Angeline), aunt (Jane), and younger brother (James).⁹ We may never know the circumstances of his departure from his family and friends; however, we do know that at the time he writes his first letter to his mother, he is still in Detroit, and training at Camp Ward as his regiment does not depart Detroit until March 28, 1863.¹⁰ While waiting for the orders to march, Reed most likely had an opportunity to reflect on the impact military enlistment already had on his way of living and seeing himself. According to *African American Registry*, the troops who trained at Camp Ward, "received ten dollars per month [and] one ration per day."¹¹ Financial stability and access to money to provide for a family were but two ways African Americans could maintain physical and psychological freedom. Additionally, for young Reed, the social and cultural conceptions of war and masculinity may have been part of Reed's notions of coming-of-age. In *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (1993), Reid Mitchell explains how the notions of "masculinity, maturation, and military service" were deeply ingrained in masculine American cultural identity (3). Mitchell points to the changes in environment, experience, and age that attribute to such

⁹ From the collection of Reed's letters, he repeatedly inquires about his Aunt Jane, his younger brother James, and his older sister Angeline and her children. We also gather from his letters that he was residing in Detroit where his older brother John also lived.

¹⁰ According to *African American Registry*, Camp Ward was established on July 24, 1863. Located on a farm on Detroit's lower east side, Camp Ward was the training facility for black troops in the First Michigan Colored Regiment that eventually changed its designation to the 102nd United States Colored Troops.

¹¹ "Three dollars of monthly pay was deducted for clothing."

inextricable ideas, noting that “with a great number of American youth—defined roughly as those still living within a parental household—joining the army, those who lived through the war arrived at the age traditionally associated with full manhood” (4). At roughly twenty years of age at the end of his service, society would have recognized such a legal transformation to adulthood.

In Reed’s first letter to his mother dated March 8, 1864, he is a homesick adolescent who is most likely enduring the physical and emotional rigors of military training. He writes: “[I] hope you will send me some money to come home.” In *Manhood in America: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993), E. Anthony Rotundo briefly discusses the recurrence of homesickness as a topic in the writings of nineteenth century, noting how “[t]he painful difficulties of the break from home were evident in young men’s letters and diaries” (57).¹² By January 11, 1865, however, Reed has undergone some sort of transformation. When inquiring about his Aunt Jane, he notes how she “would not know me now.” Reed does not expand on this statement or provide any type of clarity; however, his use of the words “know” and “now” implies something beyond physical recognition and could very well be a referent to a personal or mental metamorphosis ignited in his ascension into manhood.

Reed’s letters represent a masculine ideal assigned to and embraced by those men who were neither husbands nor fathers. As young boys marched off to become men in mental, physical, and social form, they represented the American masculine ideal of “the

¹² According to Rotundo, the word “homesick” became a part of the English language in the late eighteenth century, but does not appear in American text until 1806. “Then, within a few years, comments like ‘I begin to feel homesick’ and ‘I am a little homesick’ became commonplace” (57).

dutiful son.” According to Long Bao Bui in *The World of the Civil War: A Daily Life Encyclopedia* (2015), “. . . the sober, responsible, dutiful son or husband was . . . held up as the ideal model of manly conduct” (“Northern, Manhood” 249). While maintaining familial bonds and accepting those responsibilities to family and country, young men were displaying their usefulness to the greater socioeconomic system. This act was indeed more critical to African American men who were fleeing the emasculating impact of white ownership of the black body. The image of the dutiful son was also imperative in the reshaping of ideas about the black family in America and the distinct roles and responsibilities that were often blurred and/or erased under the narrative of slavery and black life in the nineteenth-century.

Reed’s letters portray a very powerful and cohesive image of the black family and, when analyzed deeper, give insight into the ways in which literacy and epistolary traditions are nurtured by and critical to family and community unity. In both the content and structure of the letters, Reed impresses upon his readers the importance of literacy and epistolarity to the black family and community. From the beginning of Reed’s service until he mustered out, he wrote, often in direct response, to his mother an average of two letters each month with most of the letters following a very similar formulaic pattern. Following the salutation, Reed begins each letter inquiring about his mother’s health and giving the status of his own. In varying iterations for each of the letters, Reed writes, “i tak my pen in hand to let you know i am well and hop the few line to find you injoy the same helt” (March 8, 1864). In ““Heaving This Importunity’: The Survival of Opening Formulas in Letters in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century” (2004), Frances Austen notes how this formulaic “bridge between the salutation and the main content

[functions as] the epistolary equivalent of openings in conversations when two people meet” (par. 3).¹³ What Austen also highlights is how the use of these formulaic sentences and phrases and the degree of “politeness” in terms of linguistic choice “varies in accordance [to] the respective social standing of the writer and recipient” (par 3). Thus, what at first glance may be seen as an unassuming sentence can actually be read as Reed’s perceived social status as a soldier and a man. There is evident pride in his knowledge of and ability to showcase his budding epistolary skills to his mother with the use of a rather sophisticated writing style.

While Reed’s formulaic bridge denotes a more refined politeness, his closings express the tender affection and obligation of “the dutiful son.” Starting with his ninth letter dated December 29, 1865, Reed begins to employ more personal and affectionate closings, and uses the phrases “I remain your dear son,” “your affectionate Son,” “I remain your affectionate son,” and “Remain Affectionat Son untill Death” in his letters. In *American Manhood* (1993), Rotundo highlights how the importance of duty as a positive masculine attribute was evident in the linguistic choices, noting how “[e]ven grown men signed letters to their parents, ‘Your dutiful son’” (12). The variations of this closing are referents to Reed’s sense of affectionate duty to his mother. Although these tender closings appear later in the collection, they are consistently written in each of the remaining missives. This suggests Reed’s expanding literacy skills and *increased* knowledge of epistolary convention.

¹³ According to Austen, the four main components of this formulaic bridge are the writer’s reason for writing, a “wish [...or] prayer” that the recipient is in good health, a statement regarding the writer’s health “at the time of writing,” and a referent to God for granting said good health.

Reed's knowledge and effectual use of these standard epistolary conventions and more formulaic sentences and phrases also indicate a familiarity with the written word that existed prior to Reed's enlistment. Belt-Beyan notes that black families in the nineteenth-century found various opportunities—both formal and informal—for their “children to acquire and practice rudimentary literacy skills and strategies” (107). According to his military service records, Reed was a free man sometime on or before April 19, 1861 (7). What can be gleaned from his letters supports the notion that prior to 1864, Reed perhaps began some form of schooling. On March 8, 1864 he writes, “tel ticher Gary [Teacher Gray] i send my love to her and i wont you to writ to me and tel me wher to writ and read.” Reed mentions Mrs. Gray in eight of the twenty-one letters.¹⁴ His request to know where he should direct his letters *and* what he should read while away encapsulates the notion of continued mental uplift. By January 4, 1865, his request to his mother becomes more specific when he writes: “I Should like to Have you to Send me the Republican paper [.]”¹⁵ We can infer that his request is indeed granted. On July 9, 1865, six months after his specific request, Reed writes: “I received them news papers that you sent me + i was glad to get them.”

The requests for and receipt of reading—and letter-writing—materials says much about how literacy traditions—and for the purpose of this study, epistolary traditions—were fostered and nurtured within the black family and community. Belt-Beyan notes how within the black community, literacy becomes a “family trait” in that

¹⁴ The last reference to Teacher Gray is found in the sixteenth letter. This is significant as the seventeenth letter is written partially in Reed's own hand. He writes all the remaining letters. This could suggest that he is now writing to Mrs. Gray himself.

¹⁵ Reed may be referencing *The St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican, 1854-1869*, a local circular that “described the national and local effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction in Missouri.”

“[p]arents or extended family members fueled and supported literacy learning and functions” (42). Reed alludes to an ongoing epistolary exchange with his mother, writing in some variation “i received your kind letter and was glad to hear from you” (September 2, 1864). Consistent use of the formula “I take my pen in hand to write you a few lines” and “I received your kind letter” allows two lenses from which to view the epistolary tradition in which he engaged with his mother. Austen notes this formula was “much more widespread in literate letters . . . and became increasingly associated with business letters.” Reed knows *how* a letter should be constructed and is aware of *what* each missive should contain to adhere to the common epistolary standards of the time. Use of this formula also denotes that even in the nonrestrictive space of personal correspondence, Reed desires to show his mother how much he has grown in his knowledge of “proper” letter writing.

These epistolary exchanges are opportunities for Reed to create a familial literacy tradition. Such traditions, according to Belt-Beyan, “functioned . . . to . . . actively engage family members in rituals intended for the maintenance, well-being, and continuation of the family as a viable social unit” (16). Reed’s letters keep his mother abreast of his brother John’s whereabouts. His letters also pass messages to their family friend, Mrs. Thompson, about her son John. Through Reed’s letters, he is able to send and receive money, pictures, stamps, stationary, and newspapers. He is able to inquire about the social and political climate in St. Louis while relaying the sights and events occurring hundreds of miles away. For Reed, this epistolary call and response is dependent upon the participation of his mother, and later, his younger brother James. At

the core, the practice and honing of the letter-writing tradition becomes a cooperative effort.

This cooperative effort extends beyond the family to the soldiers' camps and is one in which Reed actively participates. Because of the variations in penmanship and spelling, it is apparent that Reed initially dictates his thoughts to several different comrades to scribe physically. Recorded in many letters, diaries, and books written during this time are scenes that describe the literacy exchange between black soldiers.¹⁶ Belt-Beyan notes "soldiers created for themselves a collaborative, risk-free environment in which they struggled to learn" (103). Such an environment casts black men as teachers and learners in the fight for mental and intellectual freedom, while also functioning as the conduit for communication. The frequency with which Reed wrote to his mother was literally made possible by the willing hands of his fellow comrades, revealing the significance of black fraternal masculine bonds to the establishment of a nineteenth-century epistolary tradition.

Yet, the hands that helped Reed to communicate with his mother via missive may have also been the hands that moved Reed from the periphery of literacy and epistolary into the center of a lasting letter-writing tradition. At the bottom of the fourth letter dated September 19, 1864, Reed makes four separate attempts to sign his name.

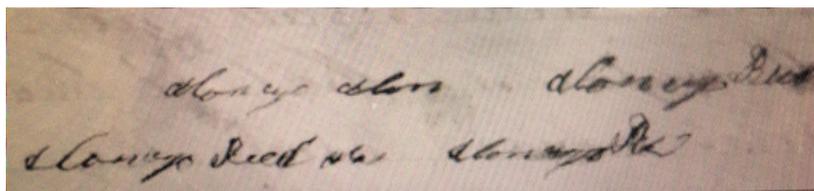


Figure 2: Alonzo Reed's signatures

¹⁶ Thomas Wentworth Higginson recorded several scenes of this sorts of "camp schools" in *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870).

We do not see any other attempts at his signature or writing at all until the seventeenth letter in the collection dated July 9, 1865 when the following postscript is written:

[illegible] tell my ant tat i send my love to her and sister and mrs gray and
 mr gray tel my brother tat I wand him to rite to as soon as reche home¹⁷
 and i wont some posstam and a paper i feshe [finish] my letter to a clos
 it is my hand riter . . . from you son Alonzo Reed to Francis Reed

Almost a year to the date when Reed attempted his signature, he makes what appears to be his first attempt at writing to his mother. Reed wants there to be no mistake that he has completed his letter. It is his handwriting. From Reed's declarative sentences, he affirms his mental elevation, and in so doing, has taken one more step to a masculine identity that relied on the psychological and financial independence of black men as leaders in their families and communities.

From Reed's letters, we can infer that his sense of masculine identity also centered on his ability to ease his mother's financial burdens by regularly sending money home. On September 2, 1864, Reed writes,

“the reason i did not send you that money was because i could not get to any place where there was any post office and i was afraid to trust it with any person and that is the reason why i did not send it i had the money done up in an envelope and the captain of our company told me that it wouldnt be save [safe] to send it untill we got to some place where there was a post office.”

¹⁷ In several exchanges, it becomes apparent that Reed's mother is attempting to get information about John's whereabouts. Reed relays that his brother was last seen in Chicago. A later letter in the collection notes his pleasure in knowing John has returned home.

It appears that Reed is responding to his mother's inquiry concerning money being sent home to the family. Such a request would not have been unfounded at this time. Black families—enslaved and free—were reliant on the financial support of their enlisted male family members. Not only were black soldiers paid less than their white counterparts, but there were also often large gaps between soldier's pay causing great hardship for families back home.¹⁸ Berlin notes in *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (1998), that such a difference in pay “was the difference between subsistence and starvation for many black families” (43). One could argue that such a marked distinction in pay and the inconsistency in payment could also be the difference between true psychological freedom and bondage for those families.

Reed's letters imply his awareness of his financial duties to his family. On October 24, 1864, he writes, “you may Expect Some money By the next mail we will Be Paid of [up?] By that time.” Here, Reed sets up the expectation that money will be sent, possibly allaying any worries his mother felt. Surely enough, in the following letter, dated November 1, 1864, Reed writes, “there is ten for you and the Rest for Aunt to Put Away.” Reed sends money again sometime before December 29, 1864; however, after that, as indicated by his letters, he goes long stretches without pay and attempts to explain to his mother the delay in sending money to her and the family. On May 15, 1865, Reed writes, “God knows when we will get payed we have got 8 months pay coming me.” Reed's sense of family duty and obligation is challenged by the military's notion of pay equity and the seemingly oblivious nature in which they comprehend how the black family's security and freedom hung in the balance. Yet, as a testament to Reed's

¹⁸ Black troops were paid \$7 per month, while white soldiers were paid \$13 (Berlin 34; 114).

blossoming notion of a black masculine identity that functioned as the head of one's household, he grows deeply concerned about how his inability to provide for his family will impact their lives and possibly alter their perceptions of him. He implores his mother to "not think hard of me" and promises "the next time i get my pay i will send you some of it" (July 9, 1865).

Reed's letters depict a masculine identity that rests on the ability to do, to be, and to provide. Through an adopted masculine identity, Reed seeks to provide for his mother. He also wants to position himself as a role model for his younger brother Jim. In his letter written January 11, 1865, Reed directs his mother to tell Jim that life as a soldier is "not as Easy Down Hear as it is working in the shop." Reed inquires if "they are Drafting in St Louis now" and asks if Jim is doing any better, implying that perhaps Jim had been in a bit of trouble. He continues, "If He Is not Doing Enny Betters Sends Him out Solding [soldiering] It will tame most Enny man." Implicit in Reed's statement is how the rigors of military life have the ability to bring about a masculinity that one may not receive, say, working in a shop as Jim does. Mitchell notes that "[p]art of masculinity was achieving a self-discipline within the institutional discipline of the army" (7). Reed sees that Jim is in need of soldiering if he wishes to move beyond boyhood mischief.

Far removed from boyhood antics, Pvt. Reed writes in great detail about his daily routine and the many heroic actions in which he participates. While camped roughly twenty miles from Jacksonville, Reed recounts an expedition in which he and his comrades "marched one hundred and fifty miles in five days at the rate of fives miles an hour . . . in mud and water up to our waste." Physical stamina, however, was not the only masculine performance. In a letter written August 14, 1864, he proudly describes his

regiment's encounters with Confederate troops, noting how in the city of Chester, North Carolina, his men were forced to "fier and kill tow men . . . and some of the men in present [prison]." While Reed does not boast about the deaths of the two men, there is a sense of pride in defeating, capturing, and imprisoning their foes. For Reed, physical prowess and tactical skill are markers of masculinity that are worth noting and celebrating with his mother and other family members.

Reed is equally proud of himself and his comrades, and those overt examples of dignity are most evident in the descriptions his letters provide about how black civilians viewed and received the members of the USCT. Reed observes how the white citizens of Chester, North Carolina "dont like to see a negrow soldier" but "the Color people is glad to see us" (August 14, 1864). The manner in which Reed juxtaposes the reception of black soldiers by white and black citizens is telling. Reed paints a picture of black soldiers being viewed as heroes to the black community and victors of slavery, but it is indeed a picture firmly rooted in fact.¹⁹ On March 21, 1865, he writes, "Savanah Georga is a nice place and there are a great many color people here and seem to enjoy the help very well since the colord soldiers have been hear." Reed attributes the well-being of Savannah's black citizens to the presence and assistance of black soldiers. The premise of the reception of this image of black masculinity is mentioned in subsequent letters. While briefly camped in Chester, South Carolina, Reed writes, "the rebel dont like to see the

¹⁹ Just three days prior to Reed penning this letter, the 102nd had their first battle with their Confederate foes. In "Raising a Black Regiment in Michigan" (1999), Michael Smith notes that "[o]n 11 August it [102nd] was suddenly attacked by Confederate cavalry [and,] [a]fter a brief skirmish . . .easily repulsed the enemy" (512). This first win for the 102nd most assuredly would have been a welcome affirmation for a boost of morale to Reed and his comrades. A swift defeat of the Confederates indeed warranted a hero's reception among the black folks in Chester.

nigger soldier²⁰ we dont cerabout²¹ them al” (August 9, 1865). The dismissive and almost haughty manner in which Reed references the Rebel soldiers’ view of him and his fellow brothers in the 102nd speaks to a powerful black masculinity that seems unaffected by racial slurs from the cowardly white masculine example set by the Confederate opposition. Despite the Confederate soldiers’ attempts to degrade the black regiments in Chester, Reed gives the impression that such insults are little more than a nuisance. Instead, his focus is on the recognition and reception of the black soldiers by the black community.

This description of the black soldier as the black community’s hero is a recurring theme in Reed’s letters and chronicles tales of truly brave acts that indeed forced the Confederate Army to surrender in April 1865.²² Reed depicts a white masculinity that is eclipsed by a black masculine ideal. When Reed writes to his mother on February 25, 1865, the southern portions of South Carolina lay in ruins, and Reed does not shy from attributing those ruins to the works of his regiment as they made their way through the Carolinas. He writes, “we reach here we have ransacked every plantation on our way and burnt up every thing we could not cary away.” Reed’s focus on ransacking multiple plantations is symbolic of the dismantling of slavery. He has metaphorically burned a system of oppression that once held him in bondage. The deeper implications of this comment are also quite telling in the context of white and black masculinity. White

²⁰ The term “nigger soldier” is most likely a direct quote from a Confederate soldier and not the manner in which Reed has spoken of black men. Within the collection, Reed consistently uses the terms “colord men,” “color people,” “colord soldiers,” and “our Boys” when referring to his fellow soldiers and/or the black community.

²¹ Possibly “care about.”

²² From January to April 1865, the 102nd and several Union detachments embarked on the Carolinas Campaign, which would ultimately secure a Union win.

masculinity operated as an exclusionary masculine ideal reliant upon one's own initiative and work ethic—the self-made man. It was also defined by money and property—objects many white men obtained from black male labor. To ransack and burn plantations was symbolic in its rendering of a white masculinity—one obtained from the ill-gotten gains of slavery and the illusion of the self-made man—being stripped off and reduced to ashes.

His descriptions of the regiment's raid through the interior of South Carolina celebrate a black masculine identity that figuratively destroys white masculine authority.²³ In a letter dated May 15, 1865, Reed details how he and his fellow soldiers “Distroyed all of the cotton in the state and we burnt gins and brought six thousand contrabands to Charleston.”²⁴ Not only is his regiment charged with the task of destroying the economic symbols of slavery (cotton and cotton gins), but also they are responsible for freeing those enslaved. The image that Reed creates of African American men and soldiers burning South Carolina's cotton gins and their cotton while freeing their fellow brothers and sisters is an image of black masculine retribution and liberation. From a more intimate and familial lens, Reed crafts a portrait of a heroic son whose

²³ Reed is most likely referring to Potter's Raid, a twenty-one-day raid that took place in the interior of South Carolina in April 1865. In “Raising a Black Regiment in Michigan,” Michael O. Smith writes, “From November 1864 through April 1865, the 102nd United States Colored Troops fought several pitched battles and numerous skirmishes with Confederate forces, performing with courage on each occasion” (512).

²⁴ During this raid in which five companies from the 102nd USCT fought, they were successful in crippling the Confederate troops. General Potter's official report from the raid summarized their victory: “The results of the expedition may be summed up in the capture of 1 battle-flag, 3 guns, and 65 prisoners, 100 horses and 150 mules, and the destruction of 32 locomotives, 250 cars [boxcars], large portions of the railroad, and all the railroad buildings between Camden and Sumterville, 100 cotton gins, and presses, 5,000 bales of cotton, and large quantities of government stores. Five thousand negroes joined the column and were brought within our lines. Our entire loss was 10 killed, 72 wounded, and 1 missing.” A second report lists the number of contrabands at six thousand.

absence from his loved ones has not been in vain. Reed's time as a soldier has allowed him to engage in masculine acts that have been critical to the liberation of black people and that have proved to be a force with which to be reckoned by Confederate troops.

The tone of Reed's letter is indicative of a masculine concept in contest with white manhood. In a letter dated July 13, 1865, Reed writes, ". . . the reb is come home look like a slave." Reed creates the image of a defeated, tattered, and war-beaten white Confederate soldier whose appearance resembles that of a slave. In *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature 1820-1945*, authors Timothy Buckner and Peter Caster note how "a lack of manly qualities could define one as a slave" and such an ideal of "[m]anliness on the Southern frontier of the early-nineteenth-century United States was not built on . . . submission" (42). The Civil War had ended with a Confederate surrender only two months prior to the drafting of this letter. With the Union victorious, crediting the ultimate victory to the inclusion of black soldiers, Reed's words and tone are born of his own notion of a black masculinity that, when battle tested, positions itself as a triumphant masculinity that dares not surrender. In *Manhood in America* (1996), Michael Kimmel points to the Civil War as a battle that was not only "centered around the morality of slavery, [but] was also a gendered war in which the meanings of manhood were bitterly contested" (51). On the battlefield, black manhood figuratively defeats the white, oppressive, masculine ideal literally to free the enslaved black community through the eradication of slavery. Such a win appears to work as confirmation to Reed and many other black soldiers that black manhood stands as a force powerful enough to overthrow the literal and figurative ideas about white masculinity.

While Pvt. Reed's letters provide some rather puissant depictions and images of black masculinity in motion, within Reed there lies an overpowering need to furnish his mother and family members with a physical, tangible, and reverent image of black manhood. The optics of black manhood become a recurring subject in his letters. Reed makes reference to sending his "likeness" in four separate letters. In 1859, just two years prior to the Civil War, the *cartes de visite* was made available in the United States.²⁵ The excitement of having photographic images of family, combined with boys and men leaving home for war, propelled an explosion in commercial photography. In *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*, Maurice Wallace points to the *carte de visite's* affordability which often allowed soldiers to pose for more than one picture. According to Wallace, millions of these soldier portraits "comprised the largest class of . . . portraits" (73). In a letter dated September 2, 1864, Reed explains to his mother that he has not had time to sit for a picture. When he writes to his mother again on September 19, 1864, Reed notes that he is sending one picture that doesn't quite seem to do him justice by way of imaging. He writes: "mr James robison a sargents in our company and my self are agoint [going] to send our likenesses to you the reason i had it taken so ruff is i was on business in town and i did not have time to fix up any i am going to have it taken again it will be a little better." In describing his appearance as "ruff" and explaining that he didn't have time to make himself look more presentable for the

²⁵ Invented in 1854 by Andre Adolphe Eugene Disderi, the *cartes de visite* allowed photographers to produce eight images from one collodion-glass plate. The small prints were then mounted on card stock. The final picture measured 2 ½ by 4 inches, were inexpensive, and easily reproducible (Coddington xvii).

camera, Reed seems to be preoccupied with an image that doesn't speak to how he views himself.

Taken in the context of the images more commonly associated with nineteenth-century black Americans, such a preoccupation would not be totally unfounded. For Reed and thousands of other black soldiers, these pictures captured more than the image of a male loved one away at war. Indeed, as J. Matthew Gallman affirms in the "Foreword" of Ronald S. Coddington's *African American Faces of the Civil War: An Album* (2012), "[t]he *carte de visite* became the ideal vehicle for recording likenesses of both the anonymous soldier and the military hero" (xix). The ability to capture the image of a black military hero is critical in its capacity to reframe black manhood. Wallace notes how "[t]he *carte* distilled broad, black masculine ambition into a single image and helped to shape a specific form of black masculine identity" (75). The image of a uniformed black man presents a striking juxtaposition to the more prominent eighteenth and nineteenth-century images of black male slaves dressed in rags with their backs baring a maze of scars. Millions of images capturing the antithesis of a traditional "slave" picture re-imaged black masculinity by providing a literal snapshot and evidence of a prominent nineteenth-century black masculine ideal. Reed's numerous references to his likeness denote the importance of a pictorial representation of a nineteenth-century black masculine identity.

From Reed's collection of letters, we see the psychological and educational rewards of military service and how they shape black male identity. Sadly, we also see that the financial rewards of his service are never fully realized. Eight months after Reed's regiment is mustered out, he is residing in Springwells, Michigan. In a letter he

writes on April 14, 1866, Reed notes that he is “yet living But in a helpliss condition caused By a cut hand” and instructs his mother to “send the Money in a letter.” From the letter’s penmanship, we can infer that Reed’s injury is to the hand in which he writes forcing him to employ the aid of another. We learn that Angeline’s husband has died and that his older brother John has returned home. Forever the dutiful son in deed and word, Reed closes the letter: “so i remain [your] affecttion[ate] son Alonzo R. Reed good By for this time.” Pvt. Alonzo Reed returned to St. Louis sometime after April 1866. He died June 21, 1867 from peritonitis at the age of 22.²⁶ He is buried at Saint Peter’s Cemetery beside his brother John who died in 1871. Through analysis of Alonzo Reed’s personal correspondence, we can glean much about the intersection between black masculinity and epistolary tradition. Yet what requires no analysis at all is the tender affection and devotion felt by a son to his mother.

II. Letters from Sgt. Tillman Valentine to Annie (wife)

On June 26, 1863, Camp William Penn, located just eight miles north of Philadelphia and constructed specifically for the military training of black troops, opened its gates to receive eager volunteers. Heavy recruitment had taken place in Pennsylvania in the months leading up to the opening of Camp Penn resulting in black troops from near and far making the peregrination to join the fight for freedom. In “Camp William Penn and the Black Soldier,” Jeffrey D. Wert describes the overwhelming response from former slaves and freedmen who rushed into Philadelphia from “the cities of Scranton and Norristown and the counties of Schuylkill, Huntington . . . Bedford [and] two recruits

²⁶ “Reed, Alonzo.” *Missouri Death Records, 1834-1910*. St. Louis: 1867.

who walked from Lancaster” (341).²⁷ Organized by Colonel Louis Wagner and later commanded by Colonel Benjamin D. Tilghman, that first of eleven Philadelphia regiments to be formed at Camp Penn was the Third Regiment of the USCT. Hailing from Chester County, Pennsylvania, Tillman Valentine was mustered into the Third’s Company B on June 30, 1863. Enlistment records describe the twenty-seven-year-old Valentine as standing five feet four inches tall, with grey eyes, black hair, and a yellow complexion. On July 4, 1863, just days after enlistment, military records indicate that the young laborer was promoted to rank of sergeant (Valentine, Tillman 3). When Valentine set out for Camp Penn, he left behind his wife of seven years, Annie Elizabeth, and their three young children: Elijah (5), Clara (3), and Ida (2).²⁸ Valentine wrote to his wife during his three-year enlistment with three of those letters surviving. While the letters do detail some experiences in battle and the fraternal camaraderie of camp life, Valentine’s letters most clearly present notions of black husbandry and fatherhood that have often been absent from the larger conversations concerning black masculinity and black epistolarity. Valentine writes of his concerns not only for the present condition in which his family is living, but also of his hopes for their collective future upon his return. In the context of this study, Valentine’s letters also serve as the epistolary mechanism by which to understand another facet of nineteenth-century black masculinity and the promised financially, socially, and emotionally transformative experiences of soldiering on black

²⁷ Lancaster is approximately sixty-four miles from Philadelphia. Such a trek would have taken roughly one day to complete.

²⁸ Neither Tillman nor Annie knew of her pregnancy at the time of Tillman’s departure. Their fourth child, Samuel, would be born on March 3, 1864. The second letter in Valentine’s file dated April 25, 1864 inquires about Samuel’s whereabouts. For more information on the life of Tillman Valentine and the legal dispute over his pension, see Jonathan W. White, Katie Fisher, and Elizabeth Wall, “The Civil War Letters of Tillman Valentine, Third US Colored Troops” in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 171-188.

husbands and fathers. What can also be garnered from these extant missives is how black Northern, middle-class black ideals of respectability shaped nineteenth-century black masculinity, and in so doing, black masculine epistolarity.

On August 13, 1863, Sgt. Tillman Valentine departed Camp Penn with the Third USCT and set out for Charleston, South Carolina most certainly waving their regimental flag that bore the motto “Rather Die Freemen Than Live to be Slaves” (Spicer). For many black soldiers, military service incentivized freedom; however, Valentine’s motivations to enlist with the Union army were not driven by physical freedom. The 1830 census records note that Valentine’s parents were free.²⁹ The younger Valentine and his siblings were, at the very least, second-generation freedman. Thus, freedom was not the provocation. In “‘The Most Indispensable Man in His Community’: African American Entrepreneurs in West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1865-1925,” author Robert Bussel notes that “when compared to other African-American communities in southeastern Pennsylvania, West Chester afforded blacks a substantial degree of mobility, resulting in the ‘persistence of a middling sort of black’ by the dawn of the Civil War” (326). The *Chester County Deed Book Index, 1681-1865* indicates that Valentine’s father purchased land in the Pennsbury area sometime in 1831. However, even land ownership did not equate to financial or economic stability for freedman.

County records paint a picture of a family beginning to crack under financial strains. According to the *Chester County Deed Book Index, 1681-1865*, the Pennsbury

²⁹ According to genealogical records, just six years before Tillman Valentine’s birth, his parents are recorded as free mulatto residents of New Garden, Chester, Pennsylvania. Ancestry.com. *1830 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

land the senior Valentine purchased in 1831 was sold in 1833.³⁰ In 1832, the *Chester County Poor School Children Records Index 1810-1842* lists two of Tillman's older siblings—William and Elijah—as those children whose parents could not afford their education.³¹ In what appears to be generational poverty and a struggle to maintain financial independence, that same older sibling—William Valentine—is listed in the *Chester County Poorhouse Outdoor Allowances* and *Poorhouse Admissions* records in 1848 and 1850. This also appears to be a period in which the elder Valentine is not listed as a property owner. Thus, during the younger Valentine's formative years, he most likely witnessed his parents' financial hardships and their long-fought and hard-earned accomplishments. In 1860, just three years before his young son would march off to battle, Valentine, Sr. purchased land in West Chester. In *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature 1820-1945*, authors Timothy Buckner and Peter Caster explain that “[b]lack masculinity, like much human identity, is produced in ownerships of property, community, and self, however fictive the narratives of that self” (15). As one of the roughly five hundred black residents in West Chester, Valentine would have most certainly seen and aspired to the more financially stable and

³⁰ The *Chester County Deed Book Index, 1681-1860* shows Tillman Valentine, Sr. engaging in a series of land purchases and sales between the years of 1831 and 1860. Records show that the 1831 purchase would quickly be resold in 1833. This, in conjunction with *Chester County Poor School Children Records Index 1810-1842* that list two of Valentine's children as receiving assistance, suggest financial troubles for the Valentine family. Documents show the elder Valentine purchasing land in Lower Oxford in 1837 and selling parcels of that land twice, in 1840 and 1843.

³¹ The 1809 Pennsylvania General Assembly passed an act that provided for the education of its poor citizens. According to the Chester County, Pennsylvania website, “[t]he act required the commissioners of each county to direct the assessors of each township to receive from the parents the names of all children between the ages of 5 and 12, who reside in the township, and whose parents were unable to pay for their schooling” (Chester County Archives and Records Services, West Chester, PA). According to the Chester County Archives and Records, William's name also appears in the Pauper Index for receiving county assistance funds. Additionally, on April 16, 1850, an order was issued for William Valentine to be admitted to the Chester County Poorhouse.

abundant lifestyle that some black residents had managed to obtain. Military service, for this young laborer, seems driven by his desire as a young husband and father to provide more abundantly for his growing family while aspiring to middle class status.

In “Marital Parenthood and American Prosperity: As Goes the Middle-Class Family, So Goes the Nation” (2012), Ryan C. MacPherson highlights “the ideals of the male breadwinning and republican motherhood” as the “[t]wo particular family values that shaped the formation of the American middle class during the 1800s” (2). These two roles functioned tangentially: as the husband went off to provide for the family, the wife undertook the responsibilities of house and home to include the raising of citizen sons and daughters. In “Racial Uplift Ideology in the Era of the ‘Negro Problem,’” Kevin Gaines notes, “social progress for blacks was ideally measured in patriarchal terms of male-headed families and homes” (2). For those brave men who enlisted, there were grave concerns about how loved ones would get along in their absence from the homestead. When Valentine writes to Annie on December 26, 1863, she is about six months pregnant with their fourth son Samuel. He writes, “i received your letter and it give me joy to think you are in good sparets [spirits] and more over that you have plenty to eate for sum times when i am away out on picket the furthest post out and the rebels is not far frum me i look up at the stars and ask god to bless you and take care of you” (Valentine qtd in J. White et al. 181). Valentine seems certain in the knowledge that Annie and the children have *some* to eat; yet, he wants to think that there is *plenty*. Plenty implies abundance, denoting that perhaps the basic needs are already met. More than halfway through the same letter, after Valentine has described the escape of four hundred Confederate prisoners; inquired about loved ones; described a hometown

friend's hat; detailed a fight between two battle mates; and joked of a friend's three shirts, two coats, and one overcoat; he casually writes, "we cannot tell how soon we will get payed off but we think it will come on next month our full pay and then I will send you some money" (183). He quickly pivots and inquires when Annie will send him poetry and if she has yet to receive the watch and meat most presumably from his father and/or older brother John. The casual manner in which Valentine mentions his soldier pay could imply that he may feel confident that Annie and the children are well even in his absence.

At the time of this letter, Valentine's family had already been granted financial relief from the state. According to the Chester County government webpage, "[o]n May 15, 1861 the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed a law that created a board of relief for the support of the families of volunteer soldiers for the duration of the 'current hostilities.'" During the time that Valentine was serving, Annie received roughly \$6-\$7 per month in relief. Board of Relief dockets show that from July 26, 1863 to January 1865, Valentine's young family was paid relief totaling \$119.14.³² Valentine may have also felt a certain sense of comfort—initially—in knowing that his wife and children were in close proximity to parents and siblings. At the time of this letter, Valentine's parents had purchased property in West Chester, placing them in the same city and close-knit freed black community where Annie and the children were residing. Valentine suggests that John may have lived very close and perhaps had the physical and financial means—if not the moral inclination—to assist Annie, if needed.³³ Valentine writes, "tell

³² The original scanned document can be found on Ancestry.com attached to Tillman Valentine's name on the Booker/Price Family Tree that has been made public. The original record can also be requested from the Chester County, Pennsylvania government webpage. The Valentine's family entry is in Book 2 on page 423.

³³ John Valentine was approximately thirty-seven years of age in 1863. The 1870 Census lists his occupation as a thrusting machine operator with a personal estate value of \$120.

john that he shant loose nothing by what he does for you father does not seam to be much of a friend to you does he” (183). While Valentine seems disappointed that these two men in his family have not been as cheerful in their support, his tone is one of comfort, reassurance, and optimism. It does not seem to indicate that Annie is in distress over Valentine’s lapse in pay or his family’s aloofness to her need for help.

Yet in Valentine’s second letter dated April 25, 1864, we discover that Annie has a tenuous grasp on their financial rope, resulting in her request for money. He writes, “i have not sined the pay role yet but i will sine it in [missing word] of an hour for i feal as you want money and cante do with [missing word]” (183). Valentine details a few events that may have contributed to Annie’s need for money. Annie and the children have relocated and must pay rent. Additionally, her father has died and her mother has requested monies owed to her. Valentine writes, “i will send you 30 \$ in the next mail we will get paid on tomorrow i expect tell me if that will get you a new black dress and a bonet and pay 4 dolars rent” (184). It also appears that Annie’s relationship with Valentine’s family, particularly his father, has become more strained, and he, too, has his hand outstretched. He writes, “father thought hearde [hard] of cutting you [your?] wood did he well if you have any thing to pay him let him have it for he is quear” (185). Valentine’s suggestion that Annie pay his father for cutting her wood may point to an elder Valentine’s behavior that is more than eccentric and a younger Valentine whose suggestion does not square in the face of reality that Annie may not have “any thing” to give the senior Valentine.

When Valentine writes to Annie in April, their new baby Samuel is just one month old.³⁴ The young sergeant's letter does seem to imply that, with an additional child, both he and Annie are becoming more concerned about her financial stability and the support system that seems to be crumbling around her. Valentine inquires about the relief, instructing, "tell me if you get your mony that is your monthly pay yet and if you get any thing more for the babey tell me how [much]" (185). Because Tillman and Annie had another child born during his service, he was anticipating that the amount of her relief would increase to account for the newest addition to their family.³⁵ His worries about money seem to also increase his concerns for Annie's access to food and dredge up fears from the past. Valentine writes,

i of times study about you and the children when i go to eate my ruff
alonces [allowences] whether you have any thing or no or whether the
little ones is looking up in your face asking for bred and you got none to
give them elija uste to tell me sum times when i come home that you had
nothing to eate you donte know how it hurt me but i trust your heardest
[hardest] times is over. (184)

Valentine provides for the reader an understanding of how fragile the family's finances were prior to his enlistment and perhaps one of his reasons for enlisting. This passage implies the shadows of hunger and food scarcity loom ever near the family. Valentine is

³⁴ Tillman and Annie's youngest son was born March 4, 1864, despite Ancestry records that note March 4, 1867. Valentine's letter to Annie written April 24, 1864 mentions Samuel and asks if he has been added to the number of children to increase Annie's payment through the Board of Relief. Samuel is also named after Sgt. Valentine's younger brother who enlisted and served with the 54th Massachusetts USCT. See Edwin Redkey's *Grand Army of Black Men* for a letter written by Samuel Valentine.

³⁵ The relief docket does not show an increase in pay until August of 1865. Annie's monthly amount went from \$6 to \$7.

deeply troubled that his family remains in need of the basic necessities—a reality faced by many black soldiers. Despite his enlistment and the promise of fair wages, Valentine finds himself standing between the idealized representation of black masculinity and the reality faced by many black soldiers and their families.

Valentine mentions the black troops' efforts to abstain from signing their payrolls as a form of protest for equal pay. For those soldiers who refused to sign their payroll, the absence of *any* income was far more detrimental. Valentine's letter suggests that Annie has been honest about the family's current conditions and that she is unable to hold out for the efforts of the USCT's protest to be rewarded. Nearing the end of the letter, Valentine mentions that his company has been called to formation. Before closing, he writes, "i am back and have bin payed of [off] so i will sende it in this letter . . . take care of it donte luse it" (186). When Valentine writes to Annie on June 14, 1864, the reader discovers that her financial condition has not improved much. "[Y]ou asked me for sum more money of corse i will send it to you as sune as i get pay ed a gane [paid again] they say we are going to get our wright pay but i cante tell" (Valentine qtd in J. White et al. 187). Valentine's decision to break ranks with his fellow soldiers in their wage protest speaks to role as the breadwinner and provider even during his physical absence.

Providing for his family's financial needs was just one way that Valentine's letters reference his notions of nineteenth-century black husbandry and fatherhood. In "The Political is Personal: Black Family Manhood and the Social Science of E. Franklin Frazier, 1930-1945," author Malinda Alaine Lindquist points to the family as the grounding point for black masculinity and by extension the black community. While Lindquist's essay focuses on the period after the Civil War, the black family manhood

referenced was directly rooted in the values established sixty years prior. The family was a visible representation of a man's ability to head his household. The nineteenth-century black family also "constituted a means of expressing . . . concerns about and interest in family, manhood, culture, and class" (224). Valentine knows that his family's stability and perhaps class mobility would rest not only on their financial grounding but also on their collective moral and mental edification. The first mention of education appears in a hastily written postscript in Valentine's first letter. He writes, "learn the children to read." In his April letter to Annie, Valentine expands on this postscript when he writes, ". . . moste of all i wante you to teach the children good maners and try to im prove yourself and elevate your minde . . . use all exsurtion [exertion] to [too] to teach the children to reade and wright and take the gratest pains with them you know how donte forget this but think of it always" (184-185). When Valentine implores Annie to take great pains to ensure their children are refined in manner and mind, he is also keenly aware of the symbol of literacy in terms of his role as the head of the home and its implication for the fate of his children, and in great measure, the fate of the black community. Lindquist notes that, "[f]amily was the foundation upon which communities were built; it was where traditions were grown, assimilated, and acculturated, and fathers . . . played a major role, if not the major role, in this process" (224). Valentine's family does indeed function as the soil in which the seeds of literacy are planted.

Valentine's appetency may be rooted in the parameters set for nineteenth-century black masculine identity. It may also be due in some small measure to Valentine's own parents' struggles to acquire an education for all of their children, Valentine included. A common theme found in nineteenth-century African American biographies and personal

accounts, the focus on literacy and literacy traditions was a means of “[m]aking up for their own past losses by attempting to gain some measure of control over their children’s fate as readers and writers . . .” (Belt-Beyan 80). Coupled with his requests for his children’s education are also Valentine’s written attempts at improving his own literacy abilities. In his letter written April 25, 1864, Valentine vows, “if i live to get home we will live diferent for i am detir mand [determined] to elevare my minde” (Valentine qtd in J. White et al. 185). Valentine’s use of the phrase “elevate my mind” was commonly employed in terms of uplifting not only oneself but also the black race. Education was the way in which to lift one’s mind from the depths of illiteracy. Later in the same letter, Valentine, seeking his wife’s notice, inquires if she has seen any change in his writing abilities and then goes on to describe his practice method. He writes, “donte you think i am empruving in wrighting i have a copy that i wright in i will wright one lian good as i can is this lian good or is it not this is not as well as i wright sumtimes but i think i have em proved” (185-186). Valentine wants to improve in his writing, even while he faces greater physical threats on the field. In seeking Annie’s approval, Valentine gives the impression that perhaps Annie is more literate and well versed in writing and reading. It also highlights the notion of a masculine identity of father and family leader. Although he is requesting that Annie actually teach the children, by initiating such an appeal, Valentine is setting a standard of literacy to pass on to his children.

This standard involves both an inclination toward epistolary and creative writing. In Valentine’s first letter from the collection, he expresses his fondness for poetry when he inquires, “are you a going to sende me that potry [poetry] soon i want to see it” (qtd

in J. White et al. 182). The young sergeant's request is important in that it points to an affinity for poetry that he and Annie share. Yet, whose poetry is Valentine requesting? Is it from an established poet or an original poem written by Annie? These questions are relevant when, in reading the second letter in this collection, we discover that perhaps the young soldier is also a budding poet. Valentine writes to Annie after he has learned of her father's death and includes an original poem to address her mourning. He writes,

Your aged father is gont to rest
 we his face weal no mor see
 but when we meete in hevns streetes
 O we shall hapy be
 his body is low beneath the sod
 his solde [soul] is floen [floating] on hye
 disturbe him not but but let him rest
 let every tear be drye by thy husband Sirg T Valentine. (186)

The written proclamation of authorship is critical to the epistolary identity that Valentine presents. There is no question about the poem's author. Thus, Valentine memorializes himself as a poet in this letter and demonstrates the scope of his engagement in writing. The young sergeant's poem highlights how both epistolary and creative writing are important to this young couple.

Valentine's poem also points to an idea that may have escaped some researchers in the past: the exposure to creative writing. In Valentine's poem, we see two distinct stanzas and a very clear ABCB rhyme scheme. It becomes evident that Valentine is able to write poems because he has read them. Such a theory is proven in the third and final

letter from this collection. In the last few sentences of his letter written June 14, 1864, Valentine quotes a line from Thomas Moore's poem "Come, Rest in This Bosom" and writes, "i know not i aske not the guilt of that hearte i only know i love the [thee] wherever thou art" (188). Valentine's use of this line captures a very rare and romantic moment in nineteenth-century black male epistolarity. It also alludes to scope of Valentine's literacy and literary exposure. Could this poem have been the one he requested of Annie in his first letter? Or was this perhaps a poem the young soldier had committed to memory? While the epistle does not stand alone as a love letter, the inclusion of this tender verse does indeed capture the spirit of a love letter.

Valentine's letters also embrace the essence of that which nineteenth-century black men were to aspire. What was it to be a black man? Valentine's letters provide a checklist of sorts. He was literate enough to rise to the rank of soldier. In such a position, his letters speak of his bravery in leading his men. He cared for his family and sent money and trinkets of adoration. He was invested in his children and wife's education. He wrote and sent poems of comfort and love to his wife. From these letters, Valentine creates a very tangible guideline for black masculinity during and after the Civil War. This is the man that Tillman Valentine wants to be.

Deeper analysis of Valentine's letters points to the emotionally transformative experience of soldiering. Valentine has not always been and may not currently be the model of nineteenth-century black masculinity, but he desires to be that. He professes, ". . . i wante if i ever live to get home to live like a man and gie over all low and mean habets this war has caused me to think in terly [entirely] diferent from what i did i feal my self a man and is if i ought to be a man and as if i ought to act as a man"

(Valentine qtd in J. White et al. 184). Valentine's use of the words "different" and "habits" implies a deviation from consistent past behaviors that are no reflection of Annie's character. He writes, "i know that [y]ou are a good wife for you have proved it and you have prayed for me to become diferent" (185). Again, Valentine's use of the word "different" indicates an aberrant shift in behaviors, behaviors that have concerned Annie enough for her to seek the help and guidance of a higher power through prayer. From Valentine's letters, we see how his self-described "low and mean" habits have cast a cloud over their marriage. While his letters have clearly noted the financial strains that have plagued the young couple, Valentine's last letter—and subsequent actions—alludes to the more likely culprit and stands as the antithesis to black masculinity at this time. Valentine ominously writes, "well dear anne you neade not think that i have any galls [gals] here for i have not any all the boys has girsl [girls] but me amoste [almost] but i think to much of my little Children for that" (187). Through Valentine's own vague admission, his experience as a soldier has made him think differently about both his emotional obligations as a husband to his wife. His past habits seem to include womanizing and unwisely spending money. He has wasted time that could have been used to help his family via his own personal and educational improvement.

For Valentine, soldiering has done little to change his physical appearance, as he is "as purty [pretty] as ever and way [weigh] just as much as i ever did" (182).



Figure 3 : Sgt. Tillman Valentine cabinet cards

His attention to appearance could point to the less productive notions of masculinity to which Valentine may have ascribed. Though his appearance has not changed, his letters seek to convince Annie that his mentality—and perhaps his inclination to marital indiscretion—has. Soldiering has undoubtedly made it clear that his expectations and the black community’s expectations are asynchronous in that regard. With many black soldiers as former slaves, part of black masculinity was both the autonomy of and control over their own bodies. The stereotype of the libidinous, black male was just as dangerous as that of the black brute and rapist. With the influence of the black church and notions of Victorian sexuality and piety adopted by Northern, middle-class blacks, the black soldier was to exhibit discipline both in uniform and out, both at the home front and on the battlefield. In this, the notion of control extends to self-control and one’s ability to exercise restraint. If Valentine’s behaviors had not been directly challenged prior to his enlistment, something or many things occurred to initiate this type of self-reflection and desire to exert control over his actions for the betterment of his family. In the moment of writing, Valentine wants to be the type of man he has yet to become, and he wants Annie to feel confident in his determination to change. As a postscript in the first letter of this

collection, Valentine encourages Annie to be ever faithful when he writes, “keep your spares up i think we will be hapy sum day” (183).

By June 1864, when Sgt. Valentine wrote the last letter of this collection, he and the Third USCT had been in Jacksonville, Florida following several operations in South Carolina. When the Civil War ended, the Third was ordered to remain in Jacksonville “to protect the freedman and freedwomen who were congregating in Jacksonville” (J. White et al. 175). By November of 1865, the Third had mustered out of service and was honored in a parade ceremony in Harrisburg. Absent from this ceremony was Sgt. Tillman Valentine, who had not only remained in Jacksonville, Florida after his unit was mustered out, but had married Mary Ann Francis in Alachua County, Florida just sixteen days after the Harrisburg parade. From 1865 until his death in 1895, Sgt. Valentine married a total of three times without ever divorcing Annie. According to Annie’s pension deposition, she and Valentine “corresponded with one another up to March, 1865, but he never wrote me after that.”³⁶ She notes that she did not see or speak to her estranged husband until 1881 when she went to Jacksonville to visit her eldest daughter, Clara. By her own account, she was aware that he had taken on a wife named Edith. It is unclear if she knew about the two wives prior. Valentine returned only once to Pennsylvania in 1884 for a convention. According to Annie, the two saw each other “several times then but we treated one another as strangers; I had lost all confidence in him because of his getting another wife” (Valentine, Tillman *Pension Files*)

³⁶ General Affidavits of Annie E. Valentine, September 24, 1896; Deposition A.

Census records indicate that Annie and one of her daughters moved to Atlantic City in the 1880s, most likely attempting to capitalize on the booming tourist industry that was open to and heavily recruited African Americans from the surrounding states. Annie would return to Philadelphia, living with her oldest daughter and son-in-law. Through correspondence via Ancestry.com, Linda B. Rouse—one of Valentine’s descendants—expressed that Sgt. Valentine’s sons had a much more difficult time with their father’s abandonment and “suffered the most” (Rouse). According to Rouse, both boys served time in Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary for larceny charges. Valentine’s youngest child, Samuel, would die in the state penitentiary from physical disease and mental psychosis. Annie would go on to work as a domestic servant until she was physically unable to work any longer. Only after Valentine’s death, does Annie seem to receive some relief when she is rightfully granted a widow’s pension as his true and legal wife.

Life for Valentine while in Florida, however, was quite different. In 1866, he became a member of the Union Civil War veterans’ group Grand Army of the Republic. Census records indicate that by 1870, he had married Mary Susan Alford and had four children with her prior to her death just ten years later. Valentine was an active member of the Florida Freemason’s community, and even the Grand Master of the Prince Hall Freemasons from 1875-1888. Two years after the war, Valentine served as the Levy County voter registrar. By all appearances, Valentine managed to make quite a name for himself in Florida as both a carpenter and contractor. An 1884 article published in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania’s *The State Journal* highlights how Tillman Valentine and two other “colored contractors and builders of Jacksonville are doing yeoman service in

working out the problem of the race in Florida” (“Valentine, Tillman” Public Family Tree). In an 1884 West Chester local paper, upon Valentine’s return to visit his mother and other family members, he is quoted as stating, “he has been quite successful [in Florida] and has acquired a snug little property” (“Valentine, Tillman” Public Family Tree). Tillman Valentine died on March 12, 1895 from pneumonia and is buried in the Old Jacksonville Cemetery in Jacksonville, Florida.



Figure 4: Sgt. Valentine’s gravesite at Old Jacksonville Cemetery

On March 13, 1895, the *West Chester Daily Local News* published his obituary. Perhaps in the eyes of his old West Chester family and friends, he had become a model citizen and man. He helped black men to register to vote, owned property, had a thriving business that helped his community, and was an active member of the Methodist Episcopal church. On paper and from archival documents, Valentine does indeed become the man and create the life he wrote of, just not with Annie. With one family left destitute and struggling, moving hither and fro, it is hard to reconcile Tillman’s letters with the reality that Annie and her children faced.

Yet, through this asynchronous reality and the use of the Internarrative Identity theory, we are allowed another lens through which to reconcile Valentine’s masculine

epistolary self and the reality of his life beyond the four corners of his letters.³⁷

According to Ajit K. Maan, “in an Internarrative, the emphasis is less on individuality and more on community; that is to say, there is identification through relationship rather than through individuation” (59). As a soldier, Valentine sees himself as part of the community of black men reframing themselves as leaders and model citizen soldiers. Valentine’s narrative reflects both the domestic and communal expectations of black manhood under the framing of Northern black middle-class ideals. From this construct is a trope of black masculinity of which Valentine is aware and internalizes. His words also reflect that his actions have fallen short of that social trope. War and battle have forced his narrative to reconcile and integrate these perceived conflicts of black masculine identity. In applying Maan’s theory to Valentine’s letters, we are able to see how Valentine’s Internarrative Identity is born “in the dialectic between embodiment and self-representational acts” (Maan 61). Valentine is engaged in acts that embody masculinity and reshape his self-perception and how he is viewed by society. His letters portray a personal and communal identity in flux. The person he was stands in conflict with the soldier he is and the family man he wishes to become. Maan notes how the Internarrative Identity Theory functions “by bringing a sense of the past into the present [and] by being consciously aware of past and future in the present moment” (58). Valentine, thus, creates an epistolary narrative of his identity. With very little personal or intimate documentary evidence about Sgt. Valentine’s life after he settles into life in Jacksonville, Florida, we cannot presume that he ever *truly* becomes the man he writes himself to be.

³⁷ Maan’s theory asserts that “[e]xperience is still made meaningful by narrating it but in [the Internarrative Identity theory] ‘narrative’ is not understood as a synthesizing of experience into a unified structure but rather it is understood as manipulating and re-associating experience” (54).

What we can assert based on his own writings is that Sgt. Tillman Valentine aspired to be a better man, but in his marriage to Annie, he failed to align the present self with the written self. Such truth, however, should neither overshadow nor oversimplify the psychological power inherent in the masculine trope of the black soldier. Not only did it provide a model to which Valentine aspired, but it also inspired a way of letter writing that captured the very essence of the inherent psychological power of freedom

III. Letters from Spottswood Rice to Kitty Diggs (slave owner) and Cora and Mary (his daughters)

On September 3, 1864, when Pvt. Spottswood Rice sat down to write one letter to the woman who held his wife and daughters in bondage and another letter to those same daughters, he had been a soldier with the 67th USCT just shy of seven months. Rice was one of thousands of enslaved black men who seized the opportunity to escape bondage and seek freedom at Union lines earlier that year. Rice fled Benjamin Lewis's Missouri tobacco plantation and arrived near Glasgow, Missouri where a Union camp was settled. He, along with eleven other men from the Lewis plantation, enlisted with the 67th United States Colored Artillery. As Rice's daughter, Mary Bell, notes in her Federal Writer's Project interview in 1937, the strategic timing of Rice's escape and his enlistment were no mere coincidence. Bell recalls how "[d]ey enlisted de very night dey got to Kansas City and de very next morning de Pattie owners were dere on de trail after dem to take dem back home, but de officers said dey were now enlisted U. S. Soldiers and not slave and could not be touched" (G. White 25). On the evening of February 8, 1864, Spottswood Rice was no longer a slave, and in the stroke of his own pen, he became both

a man and soldier in the eyes of the government. The story of Spottswood Rice, however, is not one that depicts a slave whose sense of manhood was tied to his legal status. From various extant documents, interviews, and letters, Rice appears to have been a man whose innate sense of manhood motivated him to seek his freedom various times. While some black soldiers wrote of the psychological transformation they experienced once enlisted, by all accounts, Rice felt himself a man stripped of his God-given rights as a father and husband under the grips of American slavery even before he enlisted. Rice's letters are important because, in the context of a distinct black masculine epistolary tradition, they reveal his concerns for the safety of his daughters who still remained in bondage, and the promise he makes to free them from enslavement. The letters also reveal how Rice's black masculine identity was deeply rooted in nineteenth-century Judeo-Christian theology that placed black Christian faith and practice over what was perceived as the fraud of white Christian performance. Rice's manhood was not a white-granted acknowledgment, but a God-anointed and appointed right. Through Rice's letters, we see how the nineteenth-century black masculine ideal was shaped by both familial standards and religious doctrine.

Very little is known about Rice's life prior to January 1843. What can be gathered from his military enlistment records and his pension file is that he was born to Jeremiah and Evaline Rice in Madison County, Virginia on November 20, 1819. He was the property of John Collins and was put to work in a tobacco factory. In his pension deposition, dated September 27, 1886, Rice writes, "I worked in a tobacco factory nearly all my life from 10 years old" (6). Rice was sold as part of Collins's estate in January 1843 when a Missouri tobacco planter named Benjamin Lewis purchased Rice for

\$500.00. Rice's years in the tobacco factory and his ability to read and write, thanks to the efforts of Benjamin Lewis's son, made him both an invaluable asset and a threat to the Lewis plantation. Rice's daughter Mary describes her father as "de head man on dat plantation" who "cured all de tobacco as it was brought in from the field, [and] made all the twists and plugs of tobacco" (G. White 28). Mary, her four siblings (Noah, Spot Jr., Cora, and an older brother who died in the Civil War), and her mother Arry were owned by Kitty Diggs and lived on a separate plantation approximately a quarter of a mile from her father. She recalls the brutality her father endured and the angst her mother experienced while enslaved. Mary recounts:

I so often think of de hard times my parents had in dare slave days, . . . because my father was not allowed to come to see my mother but two nights a week. Dat was Wednesday and Saturday. So often he came home all bloody from beatings his old nigger overseer would give him. My mother would take those bloody clothes off of him, bathe de sore places and grease them good and wash and iron his clothes, so he could go back clean. (G. White 29)

Mary reveals the tender moments of love and compassion between her parents and the small acts that granted enslaved men dignity in the face of brutal inhumanity. This recollection highlights how family and the humanity embedded therein was a source of strength and inspiration to enslaved men. It was, however, no shield. After receiving a brutal beating that he felt was not deserved, Rice ran from the Lewis plantation. He was captured and returned three days later.

Although slavery had taken a toll on her father's body, it never broke his resolve for freedom. According to Mary, after her father was returned, he read "de emancipation for freedom to de other slaves . . .," and told Master Lewis "dat if he whipped him again, he would run away again, and keep on running away until he made de free state land" (G. White 28-29). From Mary's account, her father's first runaway attempt must have occurred sometime between August and September of 1863. With the Emancipation Proclamation already issued and the country in the full throws of war, Rice took the opportunity to pass the knowledge of freedom onto his fellow enslaved brothers and sisters and to articulate what type of treatment he would no longer accept from his master. This powerful moment details Rice's sense of masculine identity and personal authority. As a man, he would not be silenced in his personal and communal investment in the liberation of his people.

Benjamin Lewis knew that freedom was imminent and could do little to prevent Rice from future escape attempts. Lewis attempted to bargain with Rice to have him remain at the plantation once that time arrived. With promises of land and a fair and steady income for Rice if he stayed to assist the tobacco business, Lewis also hoped that Rice would convince the other slaves to stay, as well. What Rice did, however, could not have been further from Lewis's hope. Mary states that even though her father promised Lewis he would remain after emancipation, Rice knew the Lewis plantation was "[n]o place for a black man" (30). Six months later, Rice escaped again, but he was not alone. This time her father took eleven of "de best slaves on de plantation . . . and all of dem joined the U.S. Army" (30).

On February 9, 1864, when Rice joined Company A of the 67th USCT regiment, he was thirty-nine years of age.³⁸ He is described as being five feet six inches tall, copper complexion, with dark hair and eyes.³⁹ His pension confirms his daughter's recollection that he indeed "left [his] work and went directly from the barn to enlist in the Army, and was enrolled at Glasgow" (Rice 6). Pvt. Rice trained at Benton Barracks, located in St. Louis, about two hundred miles from Glasgow.⁴⁰ In November 1863, Missouri began official recruitment of black soldiers. Before the War's end, a total of five USCT regiments would train at Benton Barracks. With the tocsin sounded for service, enslaved black men began fleeing plantations in large numbers to enlist and prove themselves as men and soldiers. Some men fled with their families in tow. Others, like Rice, made the hard choice to go ahead of their loved ones.

These families left behind often faced severe physical consequences at the hands of irate masters. Harsh labor customarily assigned to men, physical and verbal abuse, the withholding of clothing and food, and being sold further South were threats that often became reality for wives and children left behind. In *Freedom's Soldiers*, Ira Berlin attests that "[a]ngry masters who vowed to take revenge upon women and children whose husbands, sons, and fathers dared to enlist had little compunction about making good their threats" (42). Meant to serve as a deterrent and a warning to black men who dared to escape, the risks that families endured and the decisions some men made to remain

³⁸ When Pvt. Rice enlisted, he was assigned to the Third Missouri Colored Infantry. The 67th Colored Infantry was created from the Third on March 11, 1864. His enlistment records indicate that he was reassigned to the 67th on or about March 12, 1864.

³⁹ The 1870 Census lists Rice as mulatto.

⁴⁰ Benton Barracks was constructed in 1861 as a training facility and depot for Union troops. Although there are no remains of the original site, the barracks was reported to have been large enough to hold upwards of 30,000 troops, had over a mile of barracks, and included a hospital with a patient capacity between 2,000 and 3,000.

with their families began to impact recruitment numbers. In a letter to Major O. D. Greene written February 11, 1864, Brigadier General William A. Pile reported that “[h]undreds of able bodied men are deterred from enlistment by fears of their families being abused or sold to Kentucky” (Pile qtd in Berlin *Black Military Experience* 242). In an attempt to assuage the valid concerns of current and would-be black recruits, a contraband camp and hospital was added to the Barracks just months before Rice enlisted. The contraband camp was established as temporary housing and aid for those black men, women, and children who were successful in escaping bondage. Thus, Rice must have eagerly awaited his wife Arry and their children’s arrival at the contraband camp.

He did not have to wait very long to be reunited with his family. In Arry Rice’s written testimony for her husband’s pension, she writes, “I saw him at Benton Barracks, MO after he enlisted about May 1864; I had been with him four days at that time, he had been sick there” (13). When Arry arrived at the Barracks, her husband had been confined in the hospital almost two months with erysipelas, a result of a training mishap. From his sworn pension deposition, Rice details the cause of his hospitalization:

While at Benton Barracks, in the last of Feb. 64, we were out on Batall’n drill one day and I had to run to reach my position the Co. were all on the run—and being loaded with my knapsack, gun and other accouterments, I stumbled and fell. Some of my comrades said that some of the men ran over me; but I don’t know whether they did or not. I was very badly hurt.

(6)

Rice's enlistment papers confirm that he was admitted to the Benton Barracks hospital shortly after on March 12, 1864. He would remain there until he was mustered-out on May 25, 1865.

While Pvt. Rice must have felt some relief and a sense of comfort in his reunion with Arry, the moment was less than celebratory. Arry arrived with their three sons, one who enlisted in a USCT regiment and ultimately died before the War's end. Daughters Cora, 23, and Mary, 12, however, were still in the Diggs family's possession, placing them in greater peril.⁴¹ Via two letters, Rice asserts his masculine rights as protector and father and seeks to relay a message of comfort to his daughter, and one of vindication to their captor. Rice's condition stands in juxtaposition to the gendered ways in which he portrays himself in his letters. Although the promises of rescuing his daughters and marching to Glasgow to confront Mistress Diggs are outside of the realm of Pvt. Spottswood Rice's physical abilities, his epistolary representation would leave no one the wiser.

Rice's first letter, directed to his daughters Cora and Mary, exudes a tone of paternal protection and reassurance. Foregoing a formal salutation, he begins with an opening formula and statement of intention. He writes, "My Children I take my pen in hand to rite you A few lines to let you know that I have not forgot you and that I want to see you as bad as ever . . . be assured that I will have you if it cost me my life" (Rice qtd in *Freedman and Southern Society Project*). Rice's statement of intention is a powerful one: his sole purpose for writing his daughters is to assure them that only death will prevent him from rescuing them from Kitty Diggs. Though freedom had granted Rice a

⁴¹ Kitty Diggs owned Mary. Her brother F. W. Diggs owned Cora.

sense of personal authority and autonomy, he was still denied his natural rights to exert parental authority over his children. Additionally, with Arry and the three other Rice children absent from the Diggs plantation, Cora and Mary were left without any fraternal protection. Pvt. Rice may have felt a sense of urgency and helplessness as he lay convalescing at Benton Barracks. To create a sense of certainty in their rescue, Rice connects his own masculine performative identity with that of an entire regimental army. He writes:

[O]n the 28th of the month 8 hundred White and 8 hundred blacke solders expects to start up the rivore to Glasgow and above there thats to be jeneraled by a jeneral that will give me both of you when they Come I expet to be with them and expect to get you both in return. Dont be uneasy my children I expect to have you. If Diggs dont give you up this Government will and I feel confident that I will get you. (*Freedman and Southern Society*)

Cora and Mary can feel secure in the fact that on a specific date, their father and 1,600 Union troops will march to Kitty Diggs's residence and forcibly retrieve them from bondage.

Rice's use of the words "expect" and "confidence" and the phrase "be assured" initiates a promise between father and child. As a slave, paternal authority was non-existent. Rice could not prevent their separation, abuse, or sale. As a soldier, he could. The collective identity associated with being a soldier empowers Rice in his epistolary representation. Thus, Rice's "Internarrative Identity is created in the dialectical mediation between the sameness of the body and representational possibilities" (Maan

61). Even if Pvt. Rice's body could not physically deliver on the promises made in his letter, the psychological power inherent in his role as a soldier allowed him the narrative agency to choose how he represented himself in epistolary form. Were his children aware of their father's present physical condition? Their knowledge of this could impact how well they received his words. Eliminating his present condition from the letter allows Rice epistolary control over how he represents himself.

In this letter to his daughters, Rice has chosen to highlight a paternal authority that is backed by military force. Rice wants not only his daughters to see this asserted masculinity, but also wants them to feel confident that Kitty Diggs has been made aware. He writes, "And I want her [Kitty Diggs] to remember that if she meets me with ten thousand soldiers she will meet her enemy" (*Freedman and Southern Society*). Cora and Mary can feel confident in the knowledge that their father, with the aid of other like-minded and able-bodied men, will carry out the threat of rescuing them from Kitty Diggs. Thus, inherent in this black masculine epistolary tradition is the narrative agency that is interwoven with self-assured masculine performance that supports the cause of the black man's quest for an acknowledged humanity. These threats of force are for the righteous and moral good of reuniting children with their parents.

By allowing black men to enlist, the government confirms Rice's assertions of manhood and parental authority. A larger portion of Rice's letter to Cora and Mary details how it is first and foremost God who grants paternal authority and familial autonomy, not slaveholders. If Cora and Mary are not convinced of man's efforts, Rice implores them to be faithful in God's command. Rice informs his daughters that Kitty Diggs accused him of trying to steal them. This implies that Rice made a previous failed

attempt to rescue them and could very well explain the fervor in which he requests their faith in God's intentions. He writes:

But I let her know that god never intended for man to steal his own flesh and blood. If I had no confidence in God I could have confidence in her But as it is If I ever had any Confidence in her I have none now and never expect to have . . . And as for her cristianantty I expect the Devil has Such in hell You tell her from me that she is the frist Christian that I ever hard say that aman could Steal His own child especially out of human bondage . . . I know that the devil has got her hot [heart] set againsts that that is write . . ." (*Freedman and Southern Society*)

Rice gives confidence to his daughters by juxtaposing God's true intentions alongside the manipulative and deceitful white Christian performance. The Christian faith to which Rice ascribes honors the father's role. That role is one that should not be undermined by another human. When Rice states that Diggs is the first Christian to parade such a belief, he implies that her Christian faith is an act and not reflected in her deeds. Her very position as a slaveholder stands as an affront to God's law. Rice makes clear that it is not God driving Kitty Diggs's actions; it is the Devil.

Such sentiment aligns itself with mid-nineteenth-century African Methodist Episcopalian ideology. Rice would go on to become an AME preacher and missionary after his service. Thus, he may have already been deeply rooted in the religious philosophy of the AME church either as a slave or perhaps while infirmed at Benton Barracks Hospital, where AME congregants were often seen aiding newly freed or recent refugees in and around the contraband camp. Within St. Louis during the war, there were

a notable number of aid societies affiliated with the AME church, a church, according to early church leader and historian Daniel A. Payne, whose formation was grounded in recognizing “our individuality and our heaven-created manhood” (Bailey 85). When Rice touts that Diggs cannot dictate his paternal rights, he is writing from a place of religious belief.

In Rice’s letter to Kitty Diggs, he is just as emboldened in his proclamations about the hypocritical nature of her self-professed Christian identity. While Rice’s choice of words and his epistolary representation are critical components to this letter, what is also of importance is how Rice uses epistolary conventions as a means of masculine performance. Although Rice was familiar with the accepted letter-writing conventions of his time, in his letter to Diggs, he intentionally foregoes the formal salutation and any variant of an opening formula. The letter abruptly opens:

I received a leteter from Cariline [Cora] telling me that you said I tried to steal to plunder my child away from you now I want you to understand that mary is my Child and she is a God given rite of my own and ou may hold on to hear as long as you can but I want you to remember this one thing that the longor you keep my Child from me the longor you will have to burn in hell and the qwicer youll get their. (*Freedman and Southern Society*).

Formulaic conventions and pleasantries have been abandoned. Because Kitty Diggs has no respect for God’s laws, Rice makes it clear in *how* he writes that he cannot grant her any respect.

Rice's use of the phrase "I want you to understand," may at first glance imply a wish or desire. However, Rice is actually giving a command. He commands her to acknowledge the paternal authority God grants to all men. Rice warns Diggs that both he and the military are prepared to confront her to make her fall in line with God's decree. He writes:

my Children is my own and I expect to get them and when I get ready to come after mary I will have bout a powrer and authority to bring hear away and to exacute vengencens on them that hold my Child you will then know how to talke to me I will assure that and you will know how to talk rite too . . . I have no fears about getting mary out of your hands this whole Government gives chear to me and you cannot help your self.
(Freedman and Southern Society).

Rice is prepared to "execute vengeance" to claim his daughters. In this passage, he asserts his masculine epistolary identity by commanding that she will speak to him as an equal and a free man.

The forceful tone of this letter is rooted in Rice's disdain for both the moral repugnancy of slavery and Kitty Diggs's refutations at Rice's previous attempts to obtain his children. He writes, "I offered once to pay you forty dollers for my own Child but I am glad now that you did not accept it" (*Freedman and Southern Society*). We can infer that Rice takes delight in Diggs's refusal because God's vengeance in the form of the war makes obsolete the abhorrent requirement to pay for one's freedom. She is a physical and spiritual adversary. "I want you to understand kittey digs," Rice warns, "that where ever you and I meets we are enmays to each othere." Both Kitty Diggs and the very institution

she represents and from which she benefits are the antithesis of all that Rice knows to be true of his God and his religion.

Rice's letter makes clear that he feels himself morally and spiritually superior to Kitty Diggs and her ilk. This is further exemplified in the closing of the letter in which Rice signs his name "Spotswood Rice." There is no request for Diggs to respond. Rice does not include a complimentary closing. He does, however, take the time to sign his name so that Diggs will never forget him, his words, or her actions that brought about the cause for such a missive. By refusing to adhere to contemporary epistolary etiquette, Rice's masculine performance is his choice in narrative agency. Kitty Diggs's brother F. W. Diggs, who was also Glasgow's postmaster, intercepts Rice's letter to his daughters. He sends them to the Commander of the Department of Missouri and demands that Rice be banished from the state.

No evidence exists to show that anything became of Diggs's complaint. Instead, through various extant documents, we know that by the April 1865, Pvt. Rice and his daughters are reunited. For the Rice family, it appears that Benton Barracks provided a steady transition to freedom. According to genealogical records, four months after Arry reunites with Rice, they officially marry on October 6, 1864 ("Rice, Spottswood" *Ancestry*). Arry finds employment at the Barracks and later in the city. Rice's children begin school. Mary recalls in her WPA interview that she began attending school at Benton Barracks the same year President Lincoln was assassinated. Pvt. Rice never fully recovered from his service injury, and by May 1865, he was discharged from the military.

Freedom allows the Rice family to live together, as Rice believed God intended. Immediately upon discharge, Rice and his family take up residence in St. Louis on Elliott

Avenue and Montgomery Street (Rice Deposition A, 6). In the 1870 Census, Rice, Arry, Mary, Noah, and Spottswood Jr. are recorded as living together. Rice's pension deposition also provides a wealth of information about his life after service. Rice notes that once discharged, he worked for one month for William Lewis, his former owner's brother. He then "peddled coal awhile during the Winter of 65 to 66" before working in a tobacco factory for a man by the name of Mr. Price (10). Rice was continually plagued by the injury he sustained on the parade grounds at Benton Barracks and was forced to seek employment that required minimal physical labor.

In 1871, Rice started work as a missionary for the African American Methodist Episcopal church. By 1874, he had become an ordained minister. The 1880 Census lists his occupation as "minister." Rice would go on to become an important leader in the AME Church and remained in St. Louis until his church duties moved him further west. He is credited with founding and erecting the first black church in New Mexico in 1882. After opening Grant African Methodist Episcopalian Church in Albuquerque, Rice served as the church minister for two years before heading to Colorado for more mission work (Walton-Raji). Rice continued to serve as a minister and missionary for the AME church until his death. On October 31, 1907, Reverend Spottswood Rice died at his home in Colorado Springs, Colorado. His death certificate lists the cause of death as acute jaundice and intestinal hemorrhage. He was 87 years old.

Spottswood Rice devoted his life to spreading a gospel that was critical in framing his identity during and after slavery. When Rice was physically unable to make good on the promises he makes to his daughters and Kitty Diggs, it was his faith that continued to motivate and inspire him. Rice believed that God's intention was for him—and other

black men—to assert their masculine and paternal authority, to live their lives as free persons, and to fight those persons who sought to deny Divine prophecy.



Figure 5: Spottswood Rice’s headstone at Evergreen Cemetery in Colorado Springs

Pvt. Spottswood Rice’s letters, along with those of Pvt. Alonzo Reed and Sgt. Tillman Valentine, are critical in their exemplification of how, in the ultimate quest for humanity, variant ideologies shaped nineteenth-century black masculine identity and, subsequently, black masculine epistolary. The letters detail masculine authority being asserted and chronicle the emotional and psychological impact of such freedom. In these organic, authentic, and unfiltered missives is evidence of how black men viewed, sought, and performed black manhood for self, family, and community. For Reed, Valentine, and Rice, the Civil War and military service allowed for a specific gendered resistance that enabled each to exercise their masculine authority on a personal, familial, communal, and national level. As each of these brave men claims their autonomous and god-granted right to head their homes and their families, by writing about this mental and psychological transformation, they inscribe in the annals of history how the Civil War was also a means of personal and epistolary freedom. It was a freedom that was granted and ordained by a higher power.

Evident in the lives and letters of Reed, Valentine, and Rice are also the notions of a divinely ordained black masculine identity, and the role of black religiosity and spirituality in black masculine development. The role of the church, specifically the AME church, and its message of the divine right of black men to head their households and provide for their families, was critical in how these soldiers embraced a notion of the greatness of the black son, husband, and father. As the next chapter will explore, the black church's message extended beyond just the greatness of the black man. According to the church, this moment in time was a divine prophecy being fulfilled, a manifest destiny revealing the greatness—the “chosenness”—of the entire black race.

Chapter Two: “We are the Blackest and the Bravest Race”

Black Masculinity and Black Nationalist Identity in Published Correspondence

“. . . I say that the negro is a man, and has all the elements of manhood, like other men; and by the way, I think that, in this country, he has the *highest* element of manhood”— H. Ford Douglas, *The Liberator*, July 13, 1860

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the notions of black freedom and manhood, and the means of attaining both while the country seemed poised to erupt, became a focal point of discussion in both African American and abolitionist circles. While individuals and smaller social movements had long fought to disassemble the system of slavery in the United States, the reality of a fractured country and the imminent threat of war created an opportunity for black men to thrust themselves into the national discourse concerning slavery, freedom, and black masculinity. Black leaders, black churches, and black newspapers all became the mouthpieces of a liberation movement that sought to engage and energize black men.

Although the goal was freedom from bondage, in the years before and even the days leading up to the Civil War, there was no single consensus within the black community on how best to accomplish the goal. Some black people believed it best to flee a country they believed would never acknowledge black freedom and equality, a country that had betrayed those black men who had fought for American freedom from English tyranny once before. Others within the black community felt entitled to reap the fruits of freedom that their enslaved ancestors and brothers and sisters had sown and were

currently sowing; they wanted to take up arms and make the national cause for union a cause for the end of slavery.

The moment of the Civil War's eruption is a critical one in terms of black nationalist identity and the varying solutions that were being debated at the time. In *Pre-Civil War Black Nationalism*, Bill McAdoo identifies two branches of black nationalism: reactionary and revolutionary. Between the years of 1830 and 1860, reactionary black nationalism was more prominent and essentially worked from the premise of creating solutions in reaction to the ever-changing forms of oppression in America. The most prominent form of reactionary black nationalism was black zionism. According to McAdoo, Martin Delaney was the major proponent and leader of black zionism. Early black zionism centered on the belief that America would never release her grip on the institution of slavery, and that, in an attempt to gain the "sacred right . . . of self-determination," freed black Americans would have to create "a nation within a nation" (McAdoo 26). With the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and other state and national laws that sought to prevent black citizens from exercising their rights as free individuals, many black zionists "did not believe in the revolutionary potential of the enslaved black masses," despite the rise in revolts and rebellions. Any black nation-state would ultimately have to be formed abroad. This ideology made Haiti, Liberia, and even Cuba potential spots for black emigration and resettlement.

In the pre-war years and the first year of the battle, Delany and Henry Highland Garnett advocated for African American emigration and colonization to Africa, Haiti, and even Cuba. The two leaders would eventually become outspoken supporters of this nascent Pan-Africanism and provide instrumental guidance in the formation of the

African Civilization Society, an organization created in direct response to white-led colonization movement and the American Colonization Society, directly responsible for the establishment of Liberia.⁴² In 1858 when the African Civilization Society was formed, the major black consensus was that the American Colonization Society was a scheme and a ruse to remove black people from American soil to avoid having to address and end slavery. The African Civilization Society wanted to ensure that it stood separate and apart from that cloud of suspicion. In addition to abolishing American slavery and dismantling the African Slave Trade, the African Civilization Society's mission was also "the civilization and christianization [*sic*] of Africa, and of the descendants of African ancestors in any portion of the earth, wherever dispersed" (Moses *Golden Age* 18). This black nationalist philosophy hinged on the belief of a black nation-in-a-nation, whether on American soil or abroad. In the eyes of Delany and Garnett, the current political and social climate made the option of remaining on U.S. soil less viable.

Frederick Douglass, however, did not agree with the African Civilization Society and could find very little distinction between the white-led American Colonization Society and the black-led African Civilization Society. Anti-slavery was the one distinguishing factor with which Douglass could agree. He took great offense at a "wolfish idea that elbows us off the sidewalk and denies us the rights of citizenship" (Moses *Golden Age* 87). Working from David Walker's black nationalist thought articulated in his *Appeal*, the idea that any place other than America as the black American's destined home was an affront to those who had already toiled on American soil. Douglass summed up what he perceived to be the ACS's message: "The African

⁴² Liberia, located in West Africa, was founded by the American Colonization Society in 1822 as a place to resettle freed black people from America and the West Indies.

Civilization Society says to us, go to Africa, raise cotton, civilize the natives, become planters, merchants, compete with the slave States in the Liverpool cotton market, and thus break down American slavery. To which we simply and briefly reply, ‘we prefer to remain in America’” (87). Douglass’s sentiment represented the larger number of black Americans who were anxious to see how political events would unfold.

When the first shots rang out at Fort Sumter, however, Douglass felt that further talk of emigration was pointless and most certainly overshadowed the more appealing opportunity for black men to potentially be a part of the fight for freedom. In the May 1861 issue of *Douglass’ Monthly*, he observes how events within “the last ten days have made a tremendous revolution in all things pertaining to the possible future of the colored people of the United States,” and, hence, “[w]e shall stay here and watch the current events, and serve the cause of freedom and humanity in any way that shall be open to us during the struggle now going on between the slave power and the government” (450). Though there had been no formal call for black volunteers, Douglass was privy to the fact that Confederate forces were using black bondsmen to shore up their fortifications and forcing them to work as body servants. Douglass believed that the time was fast approaching when black enlistment in the Union Army would become an inevitable reality. Douglass sounds the call to black men:

The Government is active, and the people aroused. Again, we say, out of a full heart, and on behalf of our enslaved and bleeding brothers and sisters, thank God!—The slaveholders themselves have saved our cause from ruin! . . . [A]nd have given a chance to all the righteous forces of the nation to deal a death-blow to the monster evil of the nineteenth century.

— FRIENDS OF FREEDOM! BE UP AND DOING: —NOW IS YOUR TIME! The tyrant’s extremity is your opportunity! Let the long crushed bondsman arise! and in this auspicious moment, snatch back the liberty of which he has been so long robbed and despoiled. Now is the day, and now is the hour! (451)

Many black citizens and black leaders, including Garnet and Delany, heard Douglass’s call and acted accordingly.

Delany, who had been in London seeking financing for an African expedition under the auspices of the African Civilization Society, returned to America just six weeks into the war. He would go on to enlist and serve as a recruiter for the Federal Army. His son Toussaint L’Ouverture Delaney enlisted as well, and served in the 54th Massachusetts USCT. At this moment, hopes for an African resettlement were not erased, but merely tabled for the immediate calling of a potential revolutionary end to slavery. Delany’s sudden change in course represents the broader feeling among many black nationalists in the larger conversation of black nationalism and seemingly impacts the convictions and ultimate decisions of his followers.

While the debate between reactionary and revolutionary black liberation tactics created more heated debates, both ideologies converged on the belief that black men would be called upon by God to bring an end to slavery starting in the West and continuing globally wherever black and brown people remained in the unnatural state of bondage. The notion of a divine calling of black men to rise up, or “Ethiopianism,” became critical in the formation of a nascent black nationalist identity. Rooted in Old Testament scripture from the book of Psalms 68:31, Ethiopianism’s divine prophecy and

its revolutionary context, were both appealing to a black nationalist identity that sought actively and collectively to dismantle slavery. With its earliest recorded reference made by Prince Hall on June 24, 1797 at a meeting in Boston, pamphlets and speeches by nineteenth-century black activists and abolitionists such as David Walker also harkened back to the Biblical prophecy as a charge to black men to fight for freedom. In *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses places Ethiopian mysticism in the larger context of revolutionary black nationalism:

Among black writers [Ethiopian mysticism] made repeated appearances during the nineteenth century and by World War I, Ethiopianism had become not only a trans-Atlantic political movement, but a literary movement well-known among all black people from the Congo basin to the mountains of Jamaica to the sidewalks of New York. Ethiopianism involved a cyclical view of history—the idea that the ascendancy of the white race was only temporary, and that the divine providence of history was working to elevate the African peoples. (23-24)

In *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (2016), Benjamin Fagen highlights historically how “[b]lack chosenness had always been, at least in some part, a means to the end of freedom from bondage” (146). Juxtaposing black American struggles to the Biblical Israelites, the notion of black chosenness was deeply intertwined with the black struggle for freedom from enslavement and was thus seen as critical in the formation of a black nationalist identity that had begun to emerge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

In September of 1829, the *Freedom's Journal*, America's first black newspaper, published *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America*. The pamphlet, written by a thirty-three-year-old, black Boston transplant, called for the quest for individual black freedom to be replaced by the fight for collective black liberation. Within the four articles, David Walker asserts that black people must unite in racial solidarity and use any and all means to destroy the system of slavery; he stresses the duty blacks have to educate themselves on their true cultural and racial identity in order to unify; he outlines the hypocrisy of white Christianity and its role in maintaining slavery; and he criticizes colonization attempts as a scheme to take away land and isolate remaining enslaved blacks. Walker believed that white men had historically proven themselves to be morally and spiritually deficient in their treatment of black men. He writes, "I ask you, O my brethren! are we MEN? . . . How we could be so *submissive* to a gang of men, whom we cannot tell whether they are as *good* as ourselves or not, I never could conceive" (27). Though not the first pro-black pamphlet of its time, Walker's ideas of black cultural and moral superiority were indeed shocking and jarring.⁴³

The root of this notion of cultural and moral superiority was a distinct spiritual ideology. In "Black Theodicy: African Americans and Nationalism in the Antebellum North" (2000), Patrick Rael explores the deeply entwined and coexisting ideologies of black nationalism and black spirituality. Rael notes that beginning in the 1820s, "black thinkers by and large embraced American nationalism's premise of chosenness, though . . . [f]or them, slavery constituted a blight on the divine plan which urgently required

⁴³ In 1797, Prince Hall delivered a speech before members of the African Masonic Lodge in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Lodge published his speech in pamphlet form later that year.

explanation . . .” (4). The timing of this emergence both of spiritual thought and of black nationalist identity is no coincidence. The African Methodist Episcopalian Church was born in the late eighteenth century, and by the early 1800s, under the leadership of Richard Allen, the Church’s membership had grown. Additionally, its message and purpose evolved from one of spiritual uplift and charity to spiritually guided social justice and social protest. Initially formed in response to discrimination within the Methodist Episcopal Church, the A.M.E. Church moved its focus from discrimination within the church to within the community. The Church not only supported and encouraged civic participation like voting, but it also created a safe haven and communal network for newly freed and runaway slaves. Through various societies, the Church provided aid that helped those making the transition from enslaved to free. In “African Methodist Episcopal Church (1794-present),” Michael Barga notes that “[b]y the early 1820’s, the A.M.E. Church was a realized hope for blacks who wished to create their own society as a response to the overall oppression faced throughout the country” (7). Thus, the Church played a valuable and critical role in the quest for black freedom, a quest that was written as a prophecy to be fulfilled.

America could not fulfill her destiny while the sin of slavery sullied her every step. Black theodicy foretold a nation and a world that would ascend to its rightful place only through the force, strength, and favor of the very people it held in bondage. Explaining why, as Rael notes that “African-American spiritual belief has often been considered an important component of the antebellum black nationalism at the center of these struggles” (“Black Theodicy” 2). This symbiotic relationship is further evidenced in Walker’s rhetoric just a year prior to the publication of his *Appeal*. In 1828, Walker

stood before the General Colored Association of Boston to proclaim that the nation's black citizens were not only God's chosen people but were also destined to walk in His glory and favor. Walker exalted:

. . . I cannot but bless God for the glorious anticipation of a not very distant period, when these things which now help to degrade us will no more be practiced among the sons of Africa, . . . [a]nd . . . I verily believe that God has something in reserve for us, which when he shall have parceled it out upon us will repay us for all our suffering and miseries.

(Freedom's Journal 6)

Just as Walker predicts in his speech that black people are certain to walk in God's favor, his *Appeal* prophesies that it will not come without a violent reckoning.

When Walker, a member of a Boston African Methodist Episcopalian Church and supporter of the *Freedom's Journal*, wrote his *Appeal*, his goal was to have it move beyond Northern anti-slavery groups and reach those most in need of his words—those enslaved in the South. He believed that enslaved people needed to hear his words to empower them to resist oppression. Just weeks after its publication, and with the aid of shipmen who believed in the anti-slavery movement, Walker's pamphlet reached ports and black hands in states as far south as Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana.

Using American revolutionary rhetoric, the Declaration of Independence, and Biblical allusions to black "chosenness," Walker's *Appeal* caused such a stir that there were calls and monetary rewards for his death; Georgia, Louisiana, and North Carolina passed black anti-literacy laws; the Anti-Slavery Reformation formed and gathered

momentum; and, perhaps purely coincidental, two years later, Virginia slave Nat Turner would lead his famous rebellion in Southampton County.⁴⁴ Many white slaveholders believed that more literature of the sort combined with more literate slaves would most certainly instigate and initiate widespread slave insurrection. This was a valid concern. Words had the power to reshape one's mental condition and, subsequently, the physical condition. Aside from the success of Toussaint L'Ouverture's Haitian slave insurrection, American slaves had little hope for mass freedom by way of slave revolts and plantation rebellions. Yet Walker and other early black nationalist progenitors did provide a source of hope by creating an ideology that would psychologically and spiritually prepare God's chosen children for the inevitable moment when they would have the opportunity to fulfill their destiny. They also noted the importance that message dissemination would play in garnering a unified black nationalist identity that would work as the armor in the battle for freedom.

The black press had long been an important and powerful tool in the black community in terms of providing information to uplift and unify the race. Fagen notes that in an 1847 report written and distributed by the Committee on a National Press, "many black Americans in the antebellum era connected their commitment to establishing and maintaining black newspapers to their belief that black Americans would lead the world to universal emancipation," a claim firmly grounded in "the belief that God had selected black Americans as his chosen people on Earth" (3). Thus, the black press had long been priming black people for a liberation movement that would require the "superior gifts and talents,"—the so-called "markers of exceptionalism" necessary to

⁴⁴ The state of Georgia offered a bounty of \$3000 to anyone who brought back Walker dead and \$10,000 if alive.

free black men and women from bondage and “lead the world to holy perfection” (Fagen 6).

In December 1860 when South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union, black leaders, citizens, preachers, and would-be soldiers wondered if this was the moment for which black people had so desperately and longingly awaited and used the nation’s many black press houses as the platform for dialogue. By early 1861, unfolding political events made it quite clear that war was imminent. Black Philadelphia resident and teacher Alfred M. Green wrote in the *Anglo African* that this was the time black men must be prepared:

The issue is here; let us prepare to meet it with manly spirit, let us say to the demagogues of the North who would prevent us even now from proving our manhood and foresight in the midst of all these complicated difficulties; that we will be armed, we will be schooled in military service; and if our fathers were cheated and disfranchised after nobly defending the country, we their sons have the manhood to defend the right and the sagacity to detest the wrong; time enough to secure ourselves the primary interest we have in the great and moving cause of the great American Rebellion. (McPherson *The Negro’s Civil War* 32-33)

Green implies what many black leaders were beginning to believe: the “American Rebellion” had provided a potential opportunity for black men to engage in sanctioned violence that could result in the acknowledgement of black manhood and the end of black enslavement.

Magnifying this national debate and providing a critical platform for black voices to be heard, many black newspapers began publishing articles, editorials, and letters that focused on the topic of black chosenness and various ways of attaining black liberation either in America or beyond her shores as the War began. In *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (2002), Rael points to the critical role of the black press in terms of its relationship to black nationalism. Noting the influence of the relatively inexpensive penny press, Rael highlights how “newspapers proved the most important agents for propounding a nascent black nationalism” that turned a regional feeling into a national movement (214). By way of Green and thousands of other writers and contributors, Walker’s black liberation and black nationalist rhetoric resurfaced in the ever-increasing numbers of black newspapers around the country. In Stanley Nelson’s documentary *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords* (1998), historian Christopher Reed notes how nineteenth-century black newspapers “informed people, elevated morale, [and] built a sense of racial consciousness”—elements that were critical in the fight for freedom. Black newspapers like the A.M.E. Church’s *Christian Recorder*, Thomas Hamilton’s *Weekly Anglo-African*, and the controversial emigrationist and non-black owned but black-focused *The Pine and Palm* served as platforms for black citizens to debate and discuss the variant solutions to black oppression and became vehicles in a black liberation movement.

Once the war began, black volunteers and enlisted soldiers served as war correspondents to these newspapers. Their letters are not only part of the black literary tradition, but they also exemplify and uphold nineteenth-century conventions and standards for the journalistic epistolary tradition. In “Journalism, Letters, and Nation:

The Newspaper Letters of Samuel Bowles's *Across the Continent (1865)*" (2007), Katrina J. Quinn notes how the "newspaper letter lies at the intersection of journalism and epistolary, assimilating traditions of journalistic writing as well as the discursive functionality of personal correspondence" (43). There is an intricate dance in which the writer must engage to maintain the professional neutrality of reporting while engaging the ethos of the reader through shared ideas, experiences, and hopes. This was accomplished while adhering to a journalistic epistolary tradition that, for the purpose of typeset and printing space, excluded a salutation, opening formula, and formal closing, and that oftentimes substituted initials for the author's name. Yet in its—as Quinn coins—"double functionality"—black soldiers' war correspondence provided commentary on the events on the battlefield, allowing black men access and claim to voice, identity, and visibility. Black soldiers were also able to include their personal experiences and perspectives in the broader communication of events, thereby allowing a more intimate element commonly absent in journalistic writing.

While scholarship about black military service in the Civil War has done much to reveal the underlying political, social, and personal motives that prompted black men to volunteer and eventually enlist, that scholarship has not succinctly and clearly defined black nationalist ideology as the platform for a liberation movement that would be catapulted by the nation's fractured status, nor has such scholarship used black soldiers' letters as evidence in highlighting such an identity. Scholarship has instead focused on the boon of freedom that could be taken from black service by Southern bondsmen, and even the economic and political status that could be attained by the Northern freedmen. Yet, in the soldiers' very own words, a sense of racial pride and unity, a belief in the

“chosenness” of black people, and the opportunity to prove the worth of black manhood were all at the root of black service.

The personal and published letters appearing in this chapter reveal a black masculine letter writing tradition deeply rooted in a black nationalist identity and shaped by a journalistic epistolary tradition. Black soldiers welcomed the opportunity to see a prophecy fulfilled. War allowed for the prophecy of black revolutionary nationalism to be in some ways fulfilled, thus creating opportunities for masculine performance, critical to identity and perception. The letters in this epistolary tradition celebrated a black masculine identity that was fueled by the fires of black revolution, liberation, and messianic self-conception. As a chosen group, black men saw their involvement in the Civil War as divinely directed and expected.

From the letters written by William Henry Johnson, *A Colored Man*, and Charles Singer, we see the flux of black nationalist identity between 1861 through 1865 as it moved from reactionary black nationalism to revolutionary black nationalism, how that shift influenced notions of manhood, and how that masculine ideal influences a black masculine epistolary genre. The letters in this chapter affirm how nascent black nationalist identity and rhetoric became the tocsin for enlistment and service to fight the ultimate battle for black freedom in America.

I. Letters from Pvt. William Henry Johnson published in the *Pine and Palm*, 1861-1862

From the outset of the Civil War in April 1861, black men in both the North and South expressed a strong desire to participate in a war they felt centered on the core issue of their existence in America: the abolition of slavery. For many, the reasons for black

male Southern participation was clear since southern states had not abolished slavery by the start of the war, and as a fractured part of the country, had seceded to maintain the right to continue the institution of human bondage. From the larger white national perception, Black men in the North seemingly had little incentive to enlist. Most Northern states had gradually ended slavery many decades prior to the war. In states such as Connecticut, black citizens had been free for over a decade before the Civil War. New York passed legislation in 1799 that called for gradual abolition of the enslaved to begin in 1827.

Yet, despite no longer living in bondage, black residents continued to live in a state of quasi-freedom. Their access to education remained restricted, and economic opportunities, which had previously been controlled by the state's white citizens, were now lessened by the country's transition from agricultural to an industrial society. Despite these true boons of freedom remaining in the clutches of a state that seemed intent on relinquishing its control over its African American population as slowly as possible, many Northern black leaders and black citizens remained steadfast in their quest for full citizenship rights. Yet when the federal government passed the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, African Americans nationwide became increasingly skeptical and, in some cases, cynical that they would ever see total black freedom. Without hinging any hope on the country charting a new course in that direction, many black leaders and abolitionists, who had diligently worked to make black liberation in America a reality, now began setting their sights on freedom abroad. One such Northerner was William Henry Johnson.

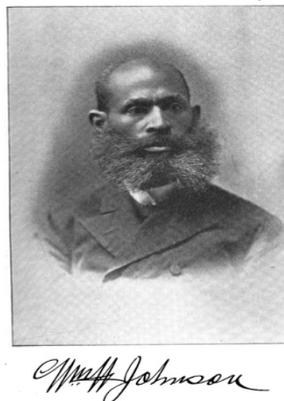


Figure 6: Photograph of William H. Johnson from his autobiography

William Henry Johnson had long been active in the cause for black freedom and liberation. In fact, Johnson's participation in various abolitionist and anti-slavery groups and movements led him to Connecticut just two years before the outbreak of the Civil War, and ultimately influenced his decision to volunteer even before the United States government had legally agreed to allow black men to enlist. Johnson was born free in March 1833 in Alexandria, Virginia. While his parents were also free at the time of his birth, a letter from his sister included in his autobiography states that their mother Patsy was born a slave on the Cedar Grove Plantation in Providence Forge, Virginia, approximately one-hundred thirty miles from Alexandria (Johnson 68). It does appear from his autobiography that Johnson did receive some formal schooling through a local church, where he learned to read and write. Johnson departed to Philadelphia around the age of twelve, where he entered into a barbering program until 1853, when he relocated to Albany, New York.

His move appears to have either been motivated by or ignited a passion to participate in the early abolition movement. A self-described "Freesoiler," Johnson notes that his early years in the anti-slavery movement were under the guidance and tutelage of

Garrett Smith, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and many other high-profile black leaders and activists of that time who guided him in the intricacies of working on the Underground Railroad.⁴⁵ Fired up with the spirit of freedom, Johnson returned to Philadelphia two years later in 1855 and organized the “Proscribed American Council,” a secret abolitionist organization with the mission to “revolutionize public opinion in Philadelphia” seemingly in direct response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (Johnson 16). The Council, under Johnson’s leadership, was successful in aiding fugitive slaves until events in 1859 forced Johnson to flee the city to avoid imprisonment for his work assisting fugitives. Johnson then made his way to Norwich, Connecticut.

Two years after Johnson arrived in Norwich, the Civil War broke out. President Lincoln issued a call for soldiers to travel to the nation’s capital for a ninety-day training period. While black men were not formally allowed to enlist, many attempted to volunteer their services in all-white Union regiments. Johnson volunteered with the 2nd Connecticut Volunteer Infantry as an “independent man,” and after his ninety-day period, he joined the 8th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. For Johnson, the war was about revolutionary freedom and the honor in meeting “a manly up-and-open-faced combatant” (Johnson 20).

In the first year of the war, Johnson served as a war correspondent for the short-lived, emigrationist paper *Pine and Palm*. Run by James Redpath, a Scottish-American abolitionist, the *Pine and Palm* was financed by the Haitian government (Fielder 2). The *Pine and Palm* was a black-focused, white-owned paper with the mission of promoting

⁴⁵ The Freesoil Party briefly existed between 1842 and 1852 as a party whose sole platform was anti-slavery expansion. They would eventually merge with the Republican Party moving from anti-expansion to anti-slavery.

the black nationalist ideas of emigration and resettlement. The *Pine and Palm* went into circulation in May of 1861 as the go-to print source for those black leaders and citizens who sympathized with the emigrationist cause. While the paper advocated for “the building up of Hayti, by an enlightened and organized emigration,” the paper was clear that it did “not believe in a distinctive Nationality, founded on the preservation of any race, as a finality” (“The *Pine and Palm*”). James Redpath, the *Pine and Palm* editor, asserted the publication’s primary objectives was to “stand by man as man,” noting, however, that “at this stage of the world’s progress, the fact of a powerful Negro Nation is a lesson imperatively needed in order that the African race, wherever it exists, may be respected as the natural equal of other families of man” (“The *Pine and Palm*”). The “wherever” for this powerful black nation in terms of the newspaper’s focus was without question Haiti. Johnson contributed nine letters to the *Pine and Palm* before it folded, and before he, like many other black citizens, truly believed that this was their moment to fight to free all black American people. Johnson’s letters, published in the *Pine and Palm* between 1861 and 1862, are important to this study because they reveal the sudden transitory ideological shift from emigration to revolution by way of military participation. While Johnson went on to serve as a war correspondent for black newspapers *The North Star* and *The Christian Recorder*, his letters published in the *Palm and Pine* underscore the critical role of the black press in capturing a unique moment when a distinctly black nationalist identity shifts and how that reshapes the black masculine ideal in terms of the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

When Johnson writes his first war correspondence on July 24, 1861 to the *Palm and Pine*, Confederate militias had forced the Union troops to retreat to Washington,

D.C. This unforeseen victory forced President Lincoln to rethink his prediction of a swift and speedy war. If the war were to continue in this fashion, the federal Army would need more soldiers. With the uncertainty of a Union victory and the ability to bring those seceded states back into the fold, Williams and many other former black zionists maintained restrained enthusiasm for the war effort while maintaining a loose but ever-present grasp onto the option of emigration and resettlement. Johnson writes:

There is much talk in high places and by leading men, of a call being made for the blacks of the North; for Africa to stretch forth her dusky arms, and to enter the army against the Southern slaves, and by opposing, free them. Shall we do it? Not until our rights as men are acknowledged by the government in good faith. We desire to free the slaves, and to build up a negro Nationality in Hayti; but we must bide our own time, and choose the manner by which it shall be accomplished. (Redkey 12)

Johnson's quote is a perfect epistolary example of the current stance by many black nationalists in the zionist sect.

Johnson does not fully believe in the war effort or its intended results; instead he asserts that black men must make use of this time and opportunity while keeping their broader sights on resettlement in Haiti. This sense of "a hope maintained" that Johnson offers would have been critical to the morale of black zionists who had not yet bought into the idea of a revolutionary end to slavery and who were not convinced that life for black Americans would reflect there had been any violent, abrupt, or legal end to slavery. This clarifies Johnson's tone and message in terms of the broader sense of maintaining support for this form of reactionary black nationalism, while also gauging the efficacy of

revolutionary black nationalism in the form of military service. At the forefront of Johnson's mind when writing this letter appears to have been how best to create the appearance of balance *between* two black nationalist ideologies in a publication whose platform centered solely on one ideology.

Yet Johnson's quote provides an idea upon which both ideologies could agree: that the time had come for "Africa" or Northern, freed black men to enlist in the Union army, and thereby free Southern enslaved blacks. Johnson's direct and explicit reference to Psalm 68:31 particularly called upon persons following the reactionary black nationalist ideology to reflect on their chosenness and privilege, and to think of their enslaved brethren and their plight. "Chosenness was not simply a status to be enjoyed and proclaimed; black religious leaders consistently reminded their brethren that chosenness carried with it a particular set of responsibilities" (Fagen 4). So, too did Johnson by asserting that two goals could be accomplished by a unified race. Fighting for black freedom did not mean black emigrationists could no longer set their sights and plant new roots outside of America. In fact, in so doing, black men would begin to fulfill their prophecy as the chosen nation.

A year later in 1862, however, when Johnson writes to the *Pine and Palm* editor, the appearance of balance is nearly impossible to detect, and Johnson's tone seems to mirror the larger spirit of revolutionary black nationalism. In March 8, 1862, when Johnson pens his letter, the Union troops are still celebrating a hard-fought victory after the capture of the Roanoke Islands in the Burnside Expedition. Additionally, though with extreme measure at best and procrastination at worst, the country and the Lincoln administration began inching towards emancipation, causing a palpable shift in the

country's political atmosphere. The reality of emancipation in America had a significant impact on the level of commitment and support by black Americans for emigration to Haiti. As the number of free black men volunteering with all-white Union regiments increased, so too did support for those men and the cause of liberation by military or revolutionary means. Union wins were a boost to the morale of both Union troops and the hope of black citizens.

Johnson notes the importance of the Union victory at the Burnside Expedition. He writes, “[y]ou can estimate something of the importance of our victory, by a recent speech made by the rebel President, Jeff. Davis” who seemingly attributed the win to “the combined forces of the world” (Redkey 18). Davis's own words, however, trigger in Johnson the revolutionary black nationalist spirit that was deeply rooted in black American Christian theology that placed the enslaved as the ultimate liberators. Johnson notes how Davis's assumption would not be too inconceivable, “for it was a strong position, and determined troops, in a good cause would have baffled us for weeks—yes, I may say for months; but their cause was of the Devil, and they themselves were cowards—hence, our success is not to be marveled at” (qtd in Redkey 18). If, as Johnson writes, the Confederate cause “was that of the Devil,” he thus suggests that the Union cause and that in which he and other black men are participating is part of God's divine order. Additionally, Johnson's use of modesty—whether feigned or sincere—in downplaying the significance of the Union's strategic win. While he states that the Confederate troops were cowards, seemingly incapable of pulling off a win against the Union troops, the statement also carries with it the message that a win perceived as easy could only be accomplished by persons with superior gifts and talents displayed on the

battlefield. Johnson sets an example before his reader of the black man's chosen status and his ability to change the world.

Johnson's allegiance to black freedom here seems more revolutionary. His participation in the war effort aligns with his early revolutionary black teachings that saw black freedom as a Divine promise. If slavery was the work of the devil, liberation was God's work. The opportunity and ability to participate in this fight was also one of the cornerstones of revolutionary black nationalism. McAdoo notes that "[b]lack revolutionary nationalism depended entirely upon the proven revolutionary potential of the enslaved black masses as the one force capable of ultimately determining the course of black liberation" because it was founded "upon the notion of the revolutionary overthrow of the oppressor, and the assertion of the rights of . . . an oppressed black nation" (35). Johnson affirms this idea, noting how the rapid abolition of slavery is "the natural course of events, and must be; for wherever the Federal Army goes, the so-called master dies, and the slaves, once chattels, are transformed into men!" (Redkey 19). The revolutionary spirit of Toussaint L'Ouverture that reactionary black nationalists, or black Zionists, celebrated could actually be transferred to the Union cause if black men were to put their emigrationist dreams on hold to fight in Civil War. Instead of praising the Haitian fruits of revolution, Northern free blacks could actually sow freedom's harvest on American soil. Johnson presents the opportunity for black men to be revolutionaries.

Johnson's quote also points to a divine promise of freedom made to black people. Slavery is an abomination of natural law. Its end is nothing more than a restoration of divine and natural order. The black soldier is responsible for the ultimate destruction of the slave master, and, in so doing, he breathes new and transformative air into his

brethren's body. Johnson's imagery can be likened to the notion of the Phoenix (here the black man) rising from the ashes of slavery and starting anew.

Johnson's letters are critical in this study for both the breadth in which they showcase changing black nationalist attitudes during the war and how they highlight black participation in various literacy traditions, including the journalistic epistolary tradition. Johnson's letters exemplify nineteenth-century structural conventions for both newspaper and letter writing. The letters do not use a formal closing, but Johnson does sign each of his letters with the initials "W. H. J." He addresses each of his letters to the "Editors of *The Pine and Palm*, Boston, Mass.—" and bypasses the variant stock nineteenth-century opening formulas typical of personal letters that inquired into one's health or explained any lapses in time between the last written correspondences. Johnson's July 24, 1861 letter begins, "We have met the enemy in this pro-slavery war—and we have fought two great battles—one the longest and most sanguinary ever fought in America" (qtd in Redkey 11). He goes on to provide great detail about the two major losses incurred by the Union on the 18th and 21st of July.

What Johnson also does in his reporting of facts is guide the readers' emotional response by providing his own. Johnson writes how such a loss of "life, ammunition, and honor" drove the Union troops "like so many sheep into Washington, disgraced and humiliated" (11). He flashes back to how proud the troops felt as they marched off to battle, recounting how the military bands played "Yankee Doodle Dandy." "What!," Johnson writes, "50,000 brave and Union-loving men get beaten? No, it could not be" (11). Johnson's shock is the black nation's shock. It is a shared feeling when placed with the range of emotions that the nation as a whole was feeling in the midst of war and

national chaos. Here, Johnson fluidly moves between the formal chronicling of events and the informal emotional assessment of said events, thus merging the spheres of journalism and epistolary form to exemplify the double functionality of nineteenth-century newspaper letters.

Another way in which the circles of journalism and personal correspondence overlap in published correspondence is the extent of discourse that has been maintained between the newspaper reader and the contributor, or in this case, the war correspondent. According to Quinn, “one functional commonality between the newspaper letter and the private letter is the potential to be read either as a distinct text or as part of a larger, ongoing discourse” (58). In a letter published in the *Pine and Palm* on March 27, 1862, Johnson begins by writing, “My last letter to you was written after our first victory, and I had just overlooked the field of our operations” (18). Johnson’s sentence presumes that the current readers have read his previous letters, and most importantly the very last letter published in Redpath’s newspaper. He goes on to detail the days in battle and the number of Confederate troops captured in the battle on Roanoke Island. This relaying of facts and attention to a neglected but relevant detail is but another example Johnson’s ability to move smoothly between and blend two writing styles.

Johnson’s letters also incorporate elements of nineteenth-century travel letters that were often featured in newspapers throughout the country. Quinn notes that “[l]etters of nineteenth-century travelers regularly addressed subjects as the weather, conditions and especially the inconveniences or dangers of traveling, [and] the quality of accommodations and food.” (68). While Johnson’s service cannot closely be compared to “travel,” this type of information often given in travel letters was also common in

soldier's letters. More specific to black soldier's letters, such information was significant to and indicative of the treatment black soldiers received while serving. In the closing paragraph of Johnson's March 1862 letter, he writes, "The sanitary condition of the Division is good, notwithstanding the hardships we are subjected to, in being exposed to the inclement weather, night after night, with no covering save the canopy of heaven" (19). As a black volunteer in an all-white regiment, Johnson assuages his readers' concerns about his treatment and the conditions to which he is exposed while serving.

In June 1862, three months after this letter, Johnson received a medical discharge for an injury sustained in battle. Johnson returned to Albany, New York and worked to recruit more black men to enlist. He continued his work as a war correspondent, writing for *The North Star*, *The Christian Recorder*, *The Freeman*, *The Age*, and *The State Republican*. Johnson would go on to work for black freedom and equality in America becoming "the first colored man elected to any official" position in the state of New York, drafting and working to pass the state's Civil Rights of 1873, and ensuring the voting rights of black New Yorkers through various bills and laws (Johnson 19). What Johnson hailed as the culmination of his life's work, however, was his role in crafting New York Bill No. 492 which repealed "all laws on the statute books prohibiting the free and equal accommodation of children of African descent in the public schools of this State" (18). Johnson took his fight beyond the battlefield, continuing the pursuit of equality and all the rewards that citizenship had to offer his people.

In his autobiography published in 1900, he wrote, "The Negro-American earned his freedom by his valor and his sacrifice on the field of battle, his full citizenship and enfranchisement as a just bounty freely voted by the people, for his faithfulness to the

cause of a reunited country” (240). Johnson believed in the divine power of black people. He believed that a prophecy would be fulfilled, and he knew that his responsibility as a black man was to put in the works required to raise black people to their original place.

In 1895 in Albany, Dr. William Henry Johnson lectured on the days of slavery. Addressing the “younger generation, especially . . . the young men of my race,” he declared:

The country owes you a debt of gratitude for two things: first, for the patient sufferings of your ancestors during the one hundred years and more of enforced bondage at the South, for which the general government was responsible. Then for the bravery and heroism displayed by the 178,975 Negro soldiers, your ancestors, that turned the tide in favor of the Union cause. After thirty years of peace the time has certainly come when the truth of history touching the rebellion and the valor of the Negro should be told. (Johnson 240)

William Henry Johnson’s life works sprung from his deep-rooted black nationalist identity, despite the fluctuation between the two branches of the ideology. He, like many other black Americans at the time, wanted to entertain all routes for black freedom and liberation. Where Johnson never wavered was in his belief that, with opportunity and unity, he and other black men had the power to fulfill their destiny. This was their revolution. This was revolutionary black nationalism. What makes Johnson’s letters of value is how they provide compelling commentary on his feelings, thereby shaping how the reading audience should feel, mostly likely while he too was deciding on which black

nationalist identity to support. Yet what makes this moment in the nineteenth century and Johnson's letters so important to this research is that the Civil War provided an opportunity for black men to exercise one component of masculine and black nationalist performance in the physical fight for freedom.

II. Letter from A Colored Man of Louisiana found September 1863

On January 26, 1861 when delegates at the Louisiana secession convention voted 113-17 in favor of secession, Louisiana became the sixth state to split from the Union (Sacher). The road to secession, however, had not been clear-cut and decisive. Louisiana was and wanted to continue to be a slave state, but it did have some reservations about committing to secession. As John M. Sacher writes in "Louisiana's Secession from the Union" (2011), although its white citizens were pro-slavery and anti-government interference, as far back as 1832, Louisiana "repeatedly rejected the initiative of radical southerners who demanded that the South leave the Union."⁴⁶ However, the country's changing political and social climate demanded the state take a more aggressive position, and on March 21, 1861, Louisiana "transferred its allegiance to the Confederate States of America" (Sacher).

Following the convention vote, the state's governor, Thomas Overton Moore, called for men to start organizing state militias or guards. Newspapers began printing ads in an attempt to recruit militia volunteers. On April 21, 1861, the *Daily Picayune* printed

⁴⁶ In 1832, Louisiana cast a vote of "no support" at the secessionist convention held in South Carolina, and refused to send a delegation to the 1850 secessionist convention in Nashville, Tennessee.

one such advertisement that had been submitted by twelve self-proclaimed “Defenders of The Native Land.”

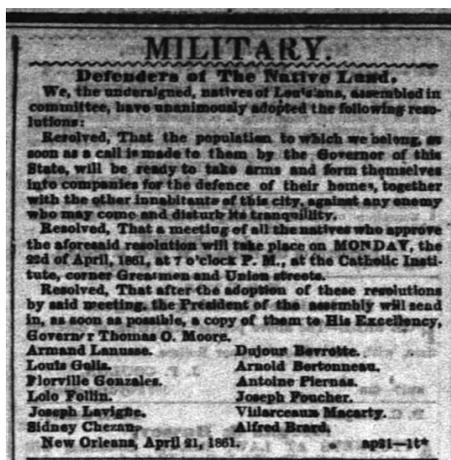


Figure 7: Advertisement by the “Defenders” printed in the Daily Picayune

The advertisement outlined three resolutions adopted by the Defenders, the first of which “[r]esolved, That the population to which we belong, as soon as the call is made to them by the Governor of this State, will be ready to take arms and form themselves into companies for the defence [*sic*] of their homes, together with the other inhabitants of this city, against any enemy who may come and disturb its tranquility” (“Defenders” 5). The men resolved that on the following evening at a local church, all natives in attendance would move to approve and adopt the resolutions and forward a copy to the Governor. This would have been a relatively inconsequential event had it not been for the more than fifteen hundred free black men who showed up to the Catholic Institute on April 22nd to sign the militia muster roll. Pledging their support to their state and its land and property (in some cases, slaves), these business owners would go on to become the Louisiana Native Guard. On May 12, 1861, Governor Moore accepted the Louisiana Native Guard as one of their state militia, making them the first all-black regiment in the Confederate States of America.

Shortly after the Louisiana Native Guard mustered into the CSA, however, problems arose. While black men could command individual companies within the Native Guards, Governor Moore mandated that white commanders lead all Native Guard regiments. Additionally, the Native Guards were never properly equipped with military supplies. In *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War (1998)*, James Hollandsworth, Jr. notes that even by January 1862, “[m]any of the men were still without uniforms or equipment, and one company had only ten muskets” (7). Native Guards had to use whatever weapons, ammunition, supplies, and clothing they could procure amongst themselves and with their own financial resources. While the Native Guard had proclaimed its commitment to their native land, they were beginning to wonder about Louisiana’s commitment to them.

In January 1862 when the state legislature altered a conscription bill to include the statement that all “free white males,” regardless of nationality, were allowed to bear arms in the state militia, Native Guards were left to wonder no more. According to Hollandsworth, “[t]he Confederate authorities never intended to use black troops for any mission of real importance. If the Native Guards were good for anything, it was for public display; free blacks fighting for Southern rights made good copy for the newspapers” (10-11). The Louisiana Native Guards disbanded the following month having never seen battle or served in any real military capacity.

In a turn of events, two months later with the Union capture and Confederate surrender of New Orleans, it was the black men of the disbanded Louisiana Native Guard who refused to leave the city. When Confederate troops abandoned the city, Union troops found free black men who were willing now to cast their allegiance with the

Union. General Benjamin Butler, the commanding Union general at that time, saw an opportunity to increase his military force. In a letter written to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Butler felt quite confident in his ability to recruit and raise an all-black regiment. He wrote, "They are free; they have been used by our enemies, whose mouths are shut, and they will be loyal" (Butler qtd in Hollandsworth 15). By September 1862, Gen. Butler had managed to raise three black regiments, and the Louisiana Native Guards became part of the Federal Army. The Native Guards would go on to make a name for themselves in battle, most notably in the failed but valiant attempt at the siege of Port Hudson in May 1863, when Captain Andre Cailloux was fatally wounded. Captain Andre Cailloux, formerly a black company commander in the Native Guards when they were part of the Confederate Army, headed the two regiments who participated in this assault.

Cailloux was born a slave on a New Orleans plantation in 1825. By the time he entered the Louisiana Native Guard in 1861, he was a prosperous businessman and outspokenly proud in his African heritage. In *A Black Patriot and a White Priest: Andre Cailloux and Clause Paschal Maistre in Civil War New Orleans* (2006), Stephen J. Ochs writes that Cailloux often and proudly proclaimed himself to be "the blackest man in New Orleans" (9). Born to a Creole mother and African father, Cailloux's outspoken sense of black pride helped to change the face of the Louisiana Native Guard. "Despite orders that only free men could be accepted for enlistment, Cailloux, like other black officers, turned a blind eye to the status of recruits, welcoming others," and in so doing created a sense of solidarity among black Louisianans that had not been seen before (Ochs "The Rock of New Orleans"). When Cailloux's remains were returned two

months later to the Union and his wife, he received a military hero's funeral held on July 29, 1863, with thousands of people in attendance. Captain Andre Cailloux was hailed the first black Civil War hero, and his distinguished funeral made headlines from the local *L'union*, to the *Anglo-African*, and the national *Harper's Weekly*.



Figure 8: Painting of Capt. Andre Cailloux

Ochs notes that through Cailloux's service and death a far larger impact was felt.

He writes:

[Cailloux] helped to vindicate black manhood in the eyes of many, legitimate the use of black troops in combat, and unite free people of color and freedman in and common cause of liberation and equality. In giving his life to that cause, he became an inspiring icon to his community, encouraging its pride and steeling the resolve of black activists in New Orleans, both Creole and Anglophone to achieve emancipation and the rights of citizenship, including suffrage. (163)

His service and valor, however, also changed the messaging among black men about their service. This was about more than land and property; it was about black freedom and black pride, which became one of the primary hall markers of Cailloux's legacy. Quite reasonably, such a resonate legacy and fervent black celebration of those ideas created

further anxiety among many white New Orleans citizens who were becoming increasingly anxious of a united and armed black populace.

Thus, on the evening of September 1, 1863 when a white New Orleans policeman found a collection of handwritten pages laying in the street that criticized white Union intentions and spoke of black pride and black military service, he was unhesitant in delivering them to Chief of Police, Lt. Col. James A. Hopkins, Sr., who in turn promptly forwarded the letters to the Union provost stationed in New Orleans. On September 4th, Brigadier General James Bowen received those “papers written by a Colored man, found in the street” (“Statement of A Colored Man” 1). The papers would have most likely been discarded had it not been for the alarming content that detailed a black soldier who was proud of his race and his black comrades, but whose interest in the Union effort only went so far as how it advanced the quest for black freedom and equality. A Colored man’s letter was never printed in a newspaper nor was it addressed to an editor. However, for the purpose of this research, the Colored man’s letter is included in this chapter because of the identifiable journalistic epistolary standards he employs. While drawing on the rhetoric of the Constitution, the Emancipation, and various other laws and codes to frame his argument for the equal rights of black soldiers and citizens, the Colored man’s letter also echoes Captain Andre Cailloux’s sentiments of black pride by extolling black men’s chosen role in altering the trajectory of the nation.

Despite the great care in which the Colored man takes to maintain anonymity, he litters many hints within his letter that help to glean something of his identity. Within the eight-page handwritten letter, there are two closings that allude to both his age and his political affiliation. On the seventh page, he signs “A Colored man,” erasing any doubt

to his race. Located on the very next page, in what appears to be a postscript, the Colored man notes that “the writer was born in 1818 Feb 16th” and is “one of the union colored friends” (“Statement” 10). In addition to his age, race, and political stance, his letter also reveals how he came to be a soldier in the Union and the criticism which he reserves for the federal government and which may provide insight as to why he avoids using his name, rank, and company in the close and signature. He writes:

I heard a federal officer say after the fall of Port Hudson to a colored soldier we will not want any more negro soldiers go home to your master i myself went to a union lawyer on some Business the first question are you free or slave Before the fall of port Hudson the white Preachers told us we were all free as any white man and in Less than a month after you weare taking us up and puting in the lockups and cotton presses giving us nothing to eat nothing sleep on And having negro traders for recruiting officers showing his sword over us like we were dogs By those means you will soon have the union north if any union man can deny this i will write no more. (6)

What the Colored man presents to the reader in describing his transition from slave to soldier is a very different and less savory depiction of how black men were “recruited” to serve by both white and black troops in the Federal Army.

In fact, the Colored man’s account aligns with the numerous complaints Union officials had begun to receive after federal troops began occupation of New Orleans and may likely reference several occurrences in which Union recruiters and the local police had forcibly and violently strong-armed black men to enlist. In “Crescent City Radicals:

Black Working People and the Civil War Era in New Orleans” (2015), James Illingworth recounts the February 23, 1863 unlawful seizure of over twenty black men who had been formerly employed at New Orleans Gas Works, and the violent “recruitment” of a man named Peter. Illingworth describes how local authorities barged into the black man’s home and informed him of their intention to place him in the Union Army. Upon his refusal, Peter “was set upon and cruelly beaten by the squad, one of them using a knife upon him and wounding him in three places” (228). Violent and immoral “recruitment” practices such as these exemplified the Colored man’s skepticism of the so-called Union cause. When so many black men were eager to serve and fight, the Colored man views such enlistment practices as yet another means of forced servitude.

For the Colored man, removing one’s *choice* to serve was not only problematic, but it was also emblematic of the country’s racial malaise. On the second page of his letter, he writes:

it is retten that a man can not serve two masters But it seems that the
 colored population has got two a noble master and a union master the
 both want our servises one wants us to make cotton and sugar And the
 sell it and keep the money the union masters wants us to fight the battle
 under white officers and the injoy both money and the union black soldiers
 And white officers will not play together much longer. (“Statement” 4)

As not only a witness to the treatment of the volunteer Native Guards, but also a victim of forced military service, the Colored man’s cynical warning points to a truth that many black volunteer soldiers learned early on: white Union soldiers were not much different than their Confederate counterparts. Because they came with their own set of biases and

notions of white superiority, the Colored man cautions “we must look out white officers may be union men but slave holders at heart . . . always on hand when there is money”

(5). Black recruitment and enlistment were not about black freedom; they were about the money to be gained from recruitment bonuses.

This very revelation, and the lengths to which white union recruiters were willing to go to round up black men, was but one point of contention. Once enlisted, black soldiers were not primed, trained, or groomed to fight. Instead, they were relegated to the backbreaking labor of digging trenches, building fortifications, and burying the dead. Black soldiers from the Native Guard discovered early on that their earnest zeal to participate in combat was met with swift resistance. The Colored man writes, “[W]e have been made fools of from the time Butlers fleet landed here but I have remained At my old Stand” (“Statement” 9). Despite the treatment that the Colored man and other black men received as black soldiers, they remained steadfast. Why? As the Colored man writes, it is quite simple: “I know very well that the white union man can not put down the rebeles” (9). If black people are to obtain black freedom as one of the boons of this war, the author feels quite certain black people cannot rely on the white union soldier to deliver.

The resolute faith in the black soldier reveals the crux of the Colored man’s message, which centers on black pride and the black man’s role in the military as the singular means to freedom from slavery. For the Colored man, his fealty to the Union army is rooted solely in how such allegiance can end black enslavement in America. He is aware that the “union friends [are] not fighting to free the negroes,” and is also aware that this is an opportunity for black men to “fight for what we want” (“Statement” 5).

From his observations and experiences, white superiority merely masks the true countenance of white inadequacy. He writes, “the colored population is not educated but what great responsibility has been placed on them the have been steam boat pilots ingenears [engineers] and Black Smiths Coopers Carpenters Shoe makers Drivers on plantations Sugar makers porters on Steam boats and at hotels Dineing Servant Porters in Commision houses grocery stores Public weighers Carrige Drivers preachers of the gospel the best soldiers the united States Can Raise” (3). The Colored man’s choice to use the word “best” is purposeful in his attempt to highlight the continuum of white hypocrisy.

In a war that was begun *over* black bodies, white men were faced with having to fight alongside the very black men they had previously dismissed when approached with their desire to serve. From the Colored man’s perspective, any motivation by black men to enlist other than the advancement of black freedom is foolish. He writes:

. . . the northern man say the did not come South to free the negroes but to save the union very well for that much what is the colored men fighting for if the makes us free we are happy to hear it And when we are free men and a people we will fight for our rights and liberty we care nothing about the union we have been in it Slaves over two hundred And fifty years we have made the country and so far saved the union and if we have to fight for our rights let us fight under Colored officers for we are the men that will kill the enemies of the government. (“Statement” 7)

The Colored man’s tone is direct and his words make clear his purpose for remaining a soldier—“freedom and liberty . . . for the collered people” (5). His outright disdain for

the Union and its purported cause is supported by the country's history and the treatment he has experienced and witnessed. Such contempt, however, works to strengthen his pride in his and his ancestors' role in building this country, and his resolve in tearing down a system that prevented them from enjoying the fruits of their labor.

What the Colored man exemplifies in this quote is his own revolutionary black nationalist identity. He recognizes the true impact of his ancestors' toils and the resolve to thrive under the heels of oppression. According to McAdoo, "the black revolutionary nationalists had a deep and abiding pride in their ancestral origins and history [and] were proud of the resistance put up by black men during their captivity" (36). For the Colored man, that the white man was unsuccessful in shrinking black resolve for freedom was cause to be proud. Because of black people's immeasurable resilience, the Colored man is most certain that only the soldiers in the USCT can effectively fight the evils of Confederate rebels. Echoing the proud sentiments of Captain Andre Cailloux, the Colored man writes, "we are the blackest and the bravest race" ("Statement" 5). A war can only be won by the bravest, and for the Colored man, it is his blackness that has placed him among the ranks of the most valiant.

Yet, it is not his blackness that has granted him favor—instead his blackness is the mark of his chosenness, and it is God who has called for black men to fight for black freedom. The Colored man's letter sheds light on the role of the black church and the Ethiopianist message, highlighting how "the excitement of the wars is mostly keep up from the churches [that] say god is fighting the battle but it is the people" ("Statement" 5). While the Colored man appreciates the church's message, he is quick to note that it is not God fighting. Because "god fought our battle once," he writes, now "the way to have

peace is to destroy the enemy” (5). Destruction of the enemy must involve the black soldier.

Such destruction was not guaranteed under the leadership of white Union officers. The fact that slavery was still legal in Louisiana highlighted this. For the Colored man, the end to slavery must involve the black soldier at all ranks within the military. The chosenness of the black soldier dictated that he could fight the battle and *lead* his own troops in the fight against the Confederates. Because the Colored man questions the true motives and allegiances of white Union officers, he implores the government to “declare freedom at once and give us something to fight for Black soldiers Black officers and all white rebels” (10). The Colored man’s demand for black officers to lead their own troops also aligns with Ethiopian mysticism in the divine chosenness of black people. As Moses notes, Ethiopian mysticism was often “accompanied by a belief that all black people could and should act unanimously under the leadership of one powerful man or group of men, who would guide the race by virtue of superior knowledge or divine authority” (*Golden Age* 11). As a former slave now freedom fighter, the Colored man feels his request to serve under the direction of a commander who looks like him, values him, and is just as invested in black freedom is not an outlandish request, especially given the more recent successful military engagements fought by the USCT. For the Colored man, there was indisputable evidence of the collective power and divine authority of the black soldier.

The Colored man’s letter paints a very vivid picture of a blossoming black nationalist identity taking shape in Louisiana. From his letter, the reader grasps a clearer picture of the social, political, and cultural climate of New Orleans during the Civil War

and discovers a writer versed in some aspects of epistolary journalism. The Colored man's letter is best described as "a mix of memoir, expose, political theory, quotation and outrage" (Hager, "A Colored Man's Constitution" 2). His message of black freedom and liberation; the role of the black soldier in this endeavor; his direct quotes and memorized passages pulled from the Constitution, Emancipation, Civil Code of Louisiana, and the 1862 Conscription Act; his informal commentary on the social atmosphere juxtaposed with the formality of those governing documents; and his decision to withhold his name all suggest that this letter was intended to reach a broader audience who would embrace or be motivated by these words. The double-functionality present in the letter is indicative of a missive meant to motivate, inspire, and empower a larger black audience.

There are also characteristics present in the letter that support the notion this inspirational missive was perhaps written with the intention of being published. The Colored man's letter possesses neither a salutation, nor an opening formulaic bridge. Instead, his letter begins rather abruptly with "first" and then proceeds to quote directly Article II, Section 2 of the United States Constitution.⁴⁷ Additionally, the Colored man's use of feigned modesty intimates his possible intention of having the letter printed in a newspaper. On the seventh page of his letter, he apologizes for his epistolary skill, scribing, "i am sorry that I am not able to write good" ("Statement" 9). This literary approach, most often seen in slave narratives of the early nineteenth century, was used to excuse any flaws in writing or to assure the reading audience—mostly white—of the writer's humility. Yet, the Colored man's use of this literary approach is not for the

⁴⁷ The Colored man writes, "first the president Shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and many of the united States and of the militia of the Several States when called unto the actual service of the united States" ("Statement" 3).

benefit of a white audience, and was instead mostly likely addressed to a more literate and well read, free black and Creole population—the very same population that supported the Native Guard and publicly mourned the loss of their own beloved Capt. Andre Cailloux.

At the time the Colored man writes his letter, the *L'union*, considered the South's first black newspaper, was most widely read by New Orleans's Afro-Creole community. Founded by Afro-Creole activists and brothers, Jean Baptiste and Louis Charles Roudanez, the *L'union* ran its first publication in September 1862 and made very clear its intentions.⁴⁸ In “Race, Memory, and the World That Made New Orleans” (2015), Mark Charles Roudane, a descendant of the Roudanez brothers, notes how “the front page of the inaugural edition condemned slavery and published passionate correspondence from Victor Hugo,” and in so doing, “a black narrative was born . . . [as] the free black community coalesced around the newspaper.”⁴⁹ Published in both French and English, *L'union* was edited by Paul Trevigne, a noted language teacher in the New Orleans community. According to John Blassingame in *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (1973), with Trevigne's influence, *L'union* was “written in a florid style” and was seen as “one of the most impressive of New Orleans' papers” (131). Yet, part of *L'union's* narrative of black freedom was clearly centered on Louisiana's exemption from the Emancipation and the quest for universal emancipation. Just as the Colored man does in his letter, *L'union* used the country's governing documents to guide its mission. Blassingame writes:

⁴⁸ *L'union* ran for two years from 1862 to 1864, when it became *The Tribune*. See Mark Charles Roudane's article “Race, Memory and the World That Made New Orleans.”

⁴⁹ Eighteenth-century French poet and novelist, Victor Hugo was the author of *Les Miserables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Basing its platform on the Declaration of Independence, the rights of man, liberty, and republican principles, *L'union* saw no possibility for saving the Union with slavery intact. A hindrance to progress, a degradation to the bondsman, and a shackle on the white man, slavery was too much of a burden for the nation to bear. On December 2, 1862, *L'union* asserted:

‘The institution of slavery in modern societies is one of the most formidable obstacles which hinders the development of nations.’

(Blassingame *Black New Orleans* 32-33)

Less than a year after *L'union* publishes this statement, the Colored man's letter is found adrift on a New Orleans street. The following month after the Colored man's letter is found, a Louisiana state court ruled in favor of black emancipation, outlawing continued bondage of its black natives (Blassingame 33).

While the Colored man's letter never makes it to *L'union* or any other newspaper, it does reveal the influence the paper's mission had on shaping the arguments he articulates. The Colored man saw firsthand how Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation afforded no true promise of freedom to all. He saw how quickly freedom could be snatched from the black man whenever the government saw fit to use black labor, and he realized that only the black soldier was fully invested in total black liberation. His letter shows his skill in using the country's governing documents to support total emancipation and the need for black soldiers and officers to make freedom a reality. Additionally, the Colored man's letter sheds a most profound light on the revolutionary black nationalist spirit that brought together New Orleans's free and enslaved black populations. His proclamations of black pride and the divine chosenness of black people are testaments to

the impact of black nationalist ideology on the Colored man's identity as a soldier in the fight for liberation. The Colored man scribes a black polemical epistle that is solely unique to the black New Orleans experience and intended to further carry the revolutionary black nationalist message and spirit that began with the rise of the Native Guard and the fall of Capt. Andre Cailloux.

III. Letter from Sgt. Maj. Charles. W. Singer to the editor of *The Christian Recorder*

When Kentucky lawmakers passed the Conscription Act of February 1864, it allowed for the enlistment of slaves and free blacks in the state. The passing of this law also placed Kentucky among the last of the Union states to support fully and willingly black military service. Although Kentucky entered the war on the side of the Union, it was an attempt to receive all of the protections afforded to states that refused to secede. The state's governor, Thomas Bramlette, was a noted Confederate sympathizer, whose opposition to black enlistment and abolition was part of his gubernatorial campaign platform. In *Black Liberation in Kentucky* (1983), Victor Howard notes that during one of Bramlette's campaign speeches in Covington, the then-candidate "made public pledges to 'sweep away emancipation, confiscation [and] negro regiments' by providing the necessary leadership to help defeat the Confederates" (49). His interest in defeating the Confederates went only so far as protecting the state's slaveholding status.

Bramlette, like most Kentucky slave owners and slavery sympathizers, believed that their loyalty to the Union would be rewarded by the federal government's hands-off approach, and to a certain degree, that was indeed the case. Fearing that an end to slavery would push a loyal border state like Kentucky to join the Confederacy, the state

“remained the keystone of Lincoln’s policy of continuous appeasement” (Howard 3). It was an appeasement that Kentucky continued to use to its advantage even after the Emancipation Proclamation and the official establishment of the Bureau of Colored Troops in May 1863. When other states in the Union had begun almost immediately to enlist free black men and set up training camps, Kentucky stood fast and refused to allow even the recruitment of its free black residents. Bramlette believed “the enlistment of free blacks would imperil slavery” and used a variety of tactics—on both a state and national level—to prevent such recruitment (Howard 49). In October 1863, Bramlette requested the President and the War Department secure black recruits from Kentucky’s surrounding states including Maryland, Tennessee, and Missouri. Lincoln obliged. When “the Kentucky press informed the people that the president had not intended to enroll the free blacks as a preliminary to arming them but instead might employ them as laborers,” Bramlette made no efforts to clarify the extent of accuracy in the statement (49). It was true that the military could employ black men to dig trenches and garrison forts; however, it was also true that by 1863, the military was in fact intentionally recruiting, training, and arming black men. And the word was swiftly reaching the ears of eager black men. As Howard highlights, “blacks recognized in the war an opportunity to lessen their burdens, and they began to take advantage of the situation almost as soon as the conflict started” (2). Bramlette was fighting the inevitable. The state could prevent neither black recruitment nor the abolition of slavery much longer.

Additionally, as the war progressed and white male enlistment could not keep pace with the casualties, it became clearer to President Lincoln that he could no longer provide the state immunity. Lincoln called for the nation’s states to collectively send

300,000 men to battle; he set Kentucky's quota at 12,701 (Howard 50). Although a rather small number, Kentucky was unable to meet the federal government's request. Black recruitment could be averted no longer, and impressment soon followed.

While the state could no longer circumvent national law, that did little to change Bramlette's obstructionist behavior. In "Lorenzo Thomas and the Recruitment of Blacks in the Mississippi Valley, 1863-1865" (2002), Michael T. Meier notes that in 1863 when Major General Lorenzo Thomas, the newly-appointed adjutant general of the US Army, confronted the governor about his continued efforts to obstruct Thomas' recruitment efforts, Governor Bramlette dismissed his claims and pointed to Lincoln's promise to Bramlette "that recruitment of blacks would not take place in Kentucky" (264). The fact, however, was that recruitment had taken place in Kentucky, and with that recruitment came swift changes to slavery as Kentucky had known it.

By 1863, Kentucky's institution of slavery was irreversibly weakening. The state's "disintegrating [hold on slavery] started shortly after massive troop movements began across Kentucky; with or without the army's consent, slaves rushed to join the Union ranks in large numbers" (Howard 2). Those slaves and freedmen who were unable to seize the opportunity during those troop movements, often fled to the border states to join other regiments. In *The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border* (2016), Christopher Phillips writes how "recruiting stations operating just outside Kentucky's borders offered ample opportunity for escaping slaves, estimated at hundreds per day in two southern Kentucky counties, to cross the border and enlist" (258). The strategic placement of these recruiting posts proved fruitful to the cause of enlistment. According to Phillips, "by January 1864 seven thousand slaves"

were reported to have escaped the state to join the Union army. However, by 1864, at the time Thomas confronted Bramlette about black recruitment in Kentucky, the state had already raised the 8th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery in Paducah. “Impressment in Kentucky,” Phillips asserts, “provided the springboard to full slave enlistment there” (259). The men of the 8th were being trained for battle, and in March 1864, they would be tested when “Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry quickly raided the area, attempting to massacre black garrisons at Paducah” near Ford Anderson (259).

This battle was critical in that it signaled a turn in the tide for black recruitment and black freedom—two concepts that were met with massive and often violent white resistance. Howard describes in great detail white terroristic attempts to prevent black enlistment:

Outraged Kentuckians threatened the slaves and often apprehended them on their way to enlist, sometimes beating, maiming, and even murdering them . . . Slaves who were rejected as physically unfit for service were in similar danger when they attempted to return to their homes. Between May 13 and July 1864, eight slaves were killed in Nelson County for attempting to volunteer. In Marion County, slaveholders caught two blacks attempting to enlist and cut off their left ears. Four owners whipped fifteen Negroes in Lebanon because they wanted to enlist. When seventeen blacks left Green County to enlist, a mob of young men followed and whipped them. (64)⁵⁰

⁵⁰ In *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (2003), Marion Lucas explains in more detail the whipping of the fifteen men in Lebanon. He writes, “In the Lebanon area ‘certain persons’ detained a group of about seventeen recruits under false pretenses, releasing them after administering a hundred lashes to each . . .” (156).

Such examples of this sweeping violence were not isolated incidents and became more frequent in occurrence as black men seemed unwavering in their fervor to serve. Yet, there were reports of community assistance to protect black recruits. In *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (2003), Marion Lucas describes such efforts to guard black volunteers, noting how “on one occasion, Hancock volunteers had to be locked in the jail to protect them from an angry mob, some of whom were Kentucky white recruits” (156). Despite the great lengths Kentucky had gone to keep blacks intimidated and enslaved, black men continued to enlist.

Enlistment numbers soared as more all-black regiments were being raised and formed at Camp Nelson. Located in Jessamine County near the Kentucky River, Camp Nelson was a training camp, the largest black recruitment center, and would eventually become a refugee camp for freed blacks. According to the Camp Nelson Restoration and Preservation Foundation, by August 1864, there were already more than 2,000 black men at the camp ready to enlist, and “by the end of 1865, about 10,000 men—or 40 percent of Kentucky’s African American soldiers—had passed through Camp Nelson making it the most important center for African Americans in Kentucky” (“Recruitment and Training Center”). Roughly half of the twenty-three USCT regiments raised in Kentucky were organized and trained at Camp Nelson. In May 1864, the 107th USCT sent its first group of recruits to Camp Nelson for training.

On May 16, 1864, just thirteen days after the 107th USCT was organized in Louisville, twenty-four-year-old Charles W. Singer was among the first of the regiments’

recruits sent to train at Camp Nelson. Enlistment papers describe Singer as standing five feet five and one-half inches tall, with black eyes, black hair, and a yellow complexion.⁵¹



Figure 9: Sgt. Maj. Charles W. Singer in 1866

Initial records note his occupation as “farmer;” however, additional forms in Singer’s military file list his occupation as barber, which is consistent with census records, family archival documents, and Singer’s pension depositions. According to Ancestry.com census records, the Covington native was a free black man working in his father’s barbershop around 1860. By all accounts, Singer’s life in Covington was rather uneventful. Yet Singer’s status as a freedman, living in a racially hostile and volatile state like Kentucky in the throes of civil unrest provides another critical lens into black enlistment and service.

Singer’s life and his family’s experiences under Kentucky’s version of freedom were critical in shaping his beliefs about the war and his notions of true freedom. Phillips writes, “on the margin of slavery, . . . many black residents were acutely aware that ‘freedom did not offer all the privileges that slavery denied, nor did slavery deny all the

⁵¹ Early duplicate enlistment papers describe Singer as standing five feet eight and a half inches tall. Subsequent military records and medical documents have five feet five and a half inches tall.

privileges of freedom” (73). As the Civil War raged on and slavery was wrenched from the state’s grip, and the rise in white mob terror and violence increased, free blacks became fearful that they could be in danger of losing their property, their land, and even their lives. While many blacks were enlisting to gain freedom, when the newly promoted Sgt. Singer writes to the *Christian Recorder* in September 1864, he notes that freedmen in Kentucky were also enlisting to maintain, if not *increase*, their freedom, and at the root of the decision to serve were three key elements of nascent nineteenth-century black nationalism: racial unity, freedom, and the revolutionary black nationalist willingness to fight for total liberation. The content and composition of Singer’s letter, along with his decision to write to the *Christian Recorder*, the journalistic arm of the AME church, align with the notions of nineteenth century black male epistolarity.

Singer was born on November 19, 1839 in Covington, Kentucky to free parents, Jonathan and Ann Singer (*Singer Pension Files*).⁵² The 1860 Census shows Singer as the oldest of eight children. Singer and his family were part of the extremely small number of free blacks in Kentucky. Phillips describes the free black population as “miniscule” in number, noting that free blacks in the state “never constituted more than 1 percent of its overall population or more than 5 percent of its black population,” and the majority of those free blacks were concentrated in Louisville (72). Additionally, outside of Louisville, where the largest cluster of free blacks resided, Kentucky’s free blacks were scattered about in isolated pockets of the state. This was the case for Singer and his family who, according to “Kenton County (KY) Slaves, Free Blacks, and Free Mulattoes, 1850-1870,” were among the eighty-five free black residents in Covington (“Kenton

⁵² Pension Deposition, Charles Singer, Sgt. Maj, A, 107th USCT; United States Index of Civil War Pension Files, 1861-1934, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

County”). While Singer’s father was a thriving businessman, with two successful barbershops, and, according to the 1860 Census, property valued at \$4000, the younger Charles grew up observing the restrictions of black “freedom.”

In “Free Blacks Faced Half Measures Along the Road to Genuine Freedom: Charity Southgate, Jonathan Singer used both guile and courage” (1992), Jim Reis notes that when “Jonathan J. Singer came to Covington on November 27, 1836 [it] set the community abuzz” (1). Born in 1810 in western Virginia, when Singer arrived in Covington, he made one of only three free blacks in the town. At the time, free blacks were not legally allowed to reside in Kentucky, and the few blacks that were allowed to stay were required to have a local white citizen sign and act as a representative or quasi-master. Much of the concern about the presence of free blacks in the state centered on the optical and psychological effect seeing black freedom in form would have on those still enslaved. In “John Singer—Covington Black Barber” (2015), Tim Talbott expounds on an 1870 article published in Covington’s *Daily Commonwealth* in which Singer was interviewed about his life in the town. Singer reflected on his early reception by the Covington townspeople, “explain[ing] that his settlement as a free black man in Covington was first met with resistance.” The *Daily Commonwealth* article further describes how Singer’s “friends and opponents were somewhat embittered [and] some of the latter even threatened him with violence. Danger stared him in the face and he lived in bodily fear all the time” (Reis 3). Threats, violence, and property theft and damage were common intimidation tactics used to prevent more freed blacks from entering and settling in the state and to ensure that those who did remain would not cause problems.

In spite of the ever-present dangers, Singer stayed in Covington and became a well-known barber. In 1838 a group of white Covington citizens and friends of Singer organized a petition to allow him and his growing family to remain in the city legally. The petition was submitted to the state lawmakers, and on February 15, 1838, the Kentucky State Legislature approved and passed Act 842 of which Section 2 “further enacted, that John Singer, of the city of Covington, shall be entitled to all the benefits of this act; and his is hereby permitted to reside in the city of Covington and the county of Campbell” (Talbot).

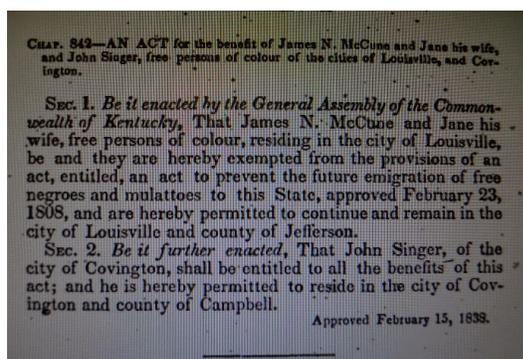


Figure 10: Legislative Act 842 for John Singer

For Singer, “all the benefits of this act” permitted him and his family to remain in the state as free and “unmolested citizens,” but did not entitle him to true citizenship. Jonathan Singer could own property and run his barbershops, but he would not be able to vote or run for any political office. Singer’s freedom came with conditions and contingencies, realities of which his oldest son Charles was keenly aware.

For Charles Singer, enlistment with the 107th was about gaining true freedom, a truth he confirms in the first line of his letter to the editor of the *Christian Recorder*. Written September 18, 1864 and published October 8, 1864, Singer begins his letter proclaiming, “Freedom! What a glorious word to commence with! I place it above all

others except God” (Redkey 213). As a man who had never been held in bondage, Singer’s decision to begin his letter proclaiming the wonders and glories of freedom speaks to the type of freedom that he had experienced. *This* freedom is worthy of epistolary exultation and something that those already freed should fight to extend to their sisters and brothers still held in bondage. Singer writes:

I never was a slave; but my imagination furnishes me a picture, which must approximate somewhat to the reality of that miserable condition. I sincerely and candidly think that every man in the North should, to the fullest of his abilities, aid and further the cause of freeing the slaves now held in bondage by Southern tyrants . . . We should not forget the fact that the free colored man’s elevation is at issue, as well as the slave’s. (213)

For Singer, there is little separating the free and enslaved black man’s existence, reality, and destiny in the country. They are inextricably linked. Thus, to Singer, racial unity is a necessity in this moment. Black people—north and south, free and enslaved—must be devoted and invested in the War’s outcome and the ultimate impact on black existence moving forward.

Black unity stands as one of the pillars of black nationalism, and the point at which reactionary black nationalism and revolutionary black nationalism—and all forms of black nationalism to follow—converge. In *Black Nationalism in America* (1970), Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick assert “[t]he simplest expression of racial feeling that can be called a form of black nationalism is racial solidarity [, which] generally has no ideological or programmatic implications beyond the desire that black people organize themselves on the basis of their common color and oppressed condition to move in some

way to alleviate their situation” (xxvi). Singer most certainly bore witness to the how fragile black freedom was under the strain of a national war, regional racism, and local terrorism and violence. A Confederate victory brought about horrifying possibilities for black people as a collective. Singer warns of that hypothetical, but all too possible reality: “Suppose the rebel army was as far North as the Union Army is South, what would be the result? I tell you. Our homes would be burned to the ground, and our aged and defenceless parents barbarously treated. Rather than have such outrages perpetrated, I would remain in the army the rest of my life. Should this Government be overthrown, the experiment of civil and religious liberty will be overthrown with it” (qtd in Coddington 172). Singer’s words are an attempt to bridge the emotional distance between northern and southern blacks. What geographically may seem too far to be of true interest to northern free blacks could rather quickly land on their doorsteps. As a free black man in a border state, these cautionary words reflect the racial climate of Singer’s hometown and the realities faced by other Kentucky freedmen.

Singer’s experience as a freedman in a state that had tightly controlled the influx into and existence of free blacks in the state while also attempting to prevent the unification of free and enslaved makes racial solidarity a more prized concept for the young soldier. It underscores one of the primary tenants of black nationalism and also echoes the rhetoric of the black community’s leaders of the time. On May 11, 1853 when Frederick Douglass spoke before a New York audience, he pointed to the very reasons why the growing population of black people should unite and form a solidified and cohesive force in a racially divided and hostile country. Douglass stated:

This people, free and slave, are rapidly filing up the numbers of four millions. They are becoming a nation in the midst of a nation which disowns them, and for weal or for woe this nation is united. The distinction between the slave and the free is not great, and their identity seems one and the same. The black man is linked to his brother by indissoluble ties. The one cannot be truly free while the other is a slave. The free colored man is reminded by the thousand petty annoyances with which he meets of his identity with an enslaved people and that with them he is destined to fall or flourish. We are one nation, then. If not one in immediate condition, at least one in prospects. (“Call to Arms!” 427)

Douglass reveals the realities of “freedom” for black Americans and how the spheres of freedom and enslavement continually overlap because of the nation’s legal sanctions on human bondage. Freedom in its truest and most organic form could not and would not exist until slavery is abolished, and that would require that black people be united. What lay on the horizon for all black people was heavily dependent upon black solidarity.

Singer viewed black solidarity, forged in part through black enlistment, as a means to fulfill one of the primary goals of black nationalism: the eradication of global enslavement. Enlistment and the opportunity to aid the Union in defeating the Confederates was the ripple of freedom that would flow to the Kentucky River and hopefully cross the seas to reach others in the African Diaspora who were still living in bondage. Singer writes, “Remember soldiers, we are fighting a great battle for the benefit not only of the country, but for ourselves and the whole of mankind” (Redkey 214). A battle to mend the nation’s fissure was also a means to break the chains of

slavery, and it would require black unification and military participation. For Singer, “on the result depends our future happiness” (214).

Happiness, in the young sergeant major’s eyes, took many forms, and freedom was a central ingredient. Neither happiness nor freedom could be realized without the black man’s aid to the government in the form of enlistment and service. “Why should we not cling, with courage, to this Government,” Singer asks, “—her interests, laws and institutions? There are many reasons for so doing. It is not merely that I am grateful for the protection and citizenship that I may hope for; but I recognize in the stability of this Government a source of strength to other nations. While this Government stands, there is hope for the most abject, disabled and helpless of mankind” (qtd in Coddington 173).

Singer highlights the symbiotic nature at this critical moment in time between the freedom of America’s enslaved population and the stability of the government. Through the American government’s stability, there exists a model and a symbol to other nations under whose gaze the country has fallen. Just as Haitian freedom was the model of freedom to the enslaved beyond its shores, black freedom in America would stand as a symbol of hope to other oppressed black and brown people and nations, as well.

Freedom in all forms for black Americans would not be realized without black men who were willing to fight for it. For Singer, freedom was a boon too highly prized and one not to be tasked to those already enjoying its rewards. He writes, “The eyes of the world are upon us . . . One portion is gazing with contempt, jealousy, and envy; the other with hope and confidence. Do you expect to execute this high trust by allowing yourselves to be trampled down by your enemies in the North?” (qtd in Redkey 214). Placing black people’s liberation and ultimate future solely in white people’s hands was

not an option for Singer. Yet, he also realizes that beyond the fight on the battlefield, black Americans may possibly need the government's aid after the last shots rang out. Singer hypothesizes and cautions that black people "may, at some future day become an independent nation. Should we ask for the protection of the United States Government, we could not, with the consistency, be refused if we do our best to aid in this time, its time of danger . . ." (215). Singer was more than aware of the brutal and unceasing violence that befell black Kentuckians as they fought for freedom and even to enlist, and he feared white terroristic retribution that would be wrought upon them at the war's end. He knew black people would need the Government's assistance and protection.

Singer's focus on the reasons that freedman should enlist and the *Christian Recorder* as the chosen publisher are not coincidental. As one of the arms of the African Methodist Episcopalian Church, a church whose message centered on social uplift and whose mission was to end black bondage, the *Christian Recorder* was playing a critical role in its attempts to amplify black voices during this pivotal time. In the "Introduction" to *Freedom's Witness: The Civil War Correspondence of Henry McNeal Turner* (2013), Jean Lee Cole expounds on this role. He writes:

In a fundamental way, the *Recorder* and other African American periodicals helped define the outlines of what Carla Peterson has called the "ethnic public" sphere of African American society—a sphere that was wider than the domestic sphere of the family as well as localized ethnic communities, but distinct from the national public sphere—that is to say, they created a distinctly *African American* community. (6)

At the time Singer writes his letter, much debate within the black community centered on the benefits of and treatment during military service, particularly for those who were already free and somewhat removed from the horrors of battle and the resulting fallout. As black soldiers continued to submit letters and reports to black newspapers, there were some concerns about how black soldiers would be treated. In “Black Churches and the Civil War: Theological and Ecclesiastical Significance of Black Methodist Involvement, 1861-1865” (1994), Sandy Dwayne Martin points to pay inequities, the absence of black commanders and officers heading black regiments, and, after the Fort Pillow massacre, Confederate treatment of black soldiers and their open defiance to military policies of war as “genuine concerns expressed by the black religious leaders as well as the general black populace” (177). Martin notes that, while the general position in the black community was support for the black men who enlisted, many within the community were hesitant to throw in full support for black enlistment.

Although small in number, the “opponents to black military involvement were portrayed as unshakeable in their hardened, absolute opposition to the supporters of the war efforts” (Martin 178). The AME church was built on black nationalist ecclesiastical beliefs, often rooted in the divine chosenness of black people, and the chosen people would need to unite. Thus, papers like the *Christian Recorder* were attempting to change those minds by including the thoughts and experiences from those on the battlefield.

Singer’s letter seems to address some of these concerns. The tone of Singer’s letter aligns with both the overarching mission of AME Church and the use of war correspondents by the *Christian Recorder* in turning the opinion of blacks critical of the war and bolstering black participation in the war. As a soldier and a correspondent,

Singer plays a key role in the *Christian Recorder*'s attempts to unify black people in their support of black enlistment. Cole affirms the importance of this role, noting, “[p]erhaps the most important of the contributions to the *Recorder* during the Civil War period were the regular ‘correspondences’ whom one might describe as a hybrid between a writer of a ‘letter to the editor’ and a regular newspaper columnist, [who] came from all walks of life . . . and wrote for the express purpose of conveying ‘the news’” (5-6). Singer brings the news that “freedom” even for the free is a divine word with incredible power, and it should be a reality for all enslaved black people. “I wish for nothing but to breathe, in this land with my fellow subjects, the air of liberty” (Singer qtd in Redkey 214). Singer’s wish expresses the larger mission of the *Christian Recorder* and the AME church.

Singer’s letter also represents the epistolary and journalistic quality the *Christian Recorder* required of its correspondents. At the time of Singer’s letter, the *Recorder*’s editor, Henry McNeal Tanner, was eager to receive more submissions, and more importantly, more submissions that would be of the desired quality for publication. War correspondents had the potential to change the minds and reshape the views of the reading audience, but they also had the power to carry the black community’s epistolary standards into every reader’s home. In *Race Patriotism: Protest and Print Culture in the A.M.E. Church* (2012), Julius H. Bailey details some of the desired newspaper letter-writing conventions for the *Recorder*. Bailey writes:

Tanner tried to guide contributors to improve their chances of getting published. He advised them to keep their correspondences to one page. If submitting a longer article, he urged contributors to write on only one side of the paper to lower the likelihood of errors and to use pen instead of

pencil. Tanner reminded readers to always sign their names to their submissions and chastised those who opened their letters with an apology for writing. “It is your privilege, and if you are a minister regard it [writing] as a duty.” (22)

In relation to the “ethnic sphere” of the black press, Tanner’s discouragement of self-effacement for the ability and willingness to participate in literacy and epistolary practices, is specific to the history such practices have held in the black community. Feigned modesty was a standard nineteenth century literary approach found most commonly in slave narratives and letters published in newspapers with a larger white reading audience. Singer aligns the content of his letter with the parameters set forth by Tanner, and instead of beginning his letter with an apology, he begins with the proclamation of the joys of liberty and the glory that is attached to the word “freedom.”

Singer’s letter also demonstrates the intersection of journalism and epistolarity. While the missive is formal in its language, structure, and tone, it is equally poetic in its declarations and descriptions of freedom and the realities that may befall all black people—and the world at large—if they do not claim this opportunity to fight. Singer employs persuasive rhetoric in his attempts to unify black men around the concepts of enlistment and service. His ethos is built around the common experience of being a freedman; yet, his pathos is constructed around the reality that there are restrictions of freedom among freedman. The common desire to exist as true and free citizens in a country whose constitutional documents proclaim these rights to all is the mythos that Singer hopes will bind all black people. Thus, Singer’s letter exemplifies what Quinn regards as the “double functionality” where the writer’s personal experience [and]

commentary on a limited range of topics” converge (58). Singer is qualified to encourage his readers to consider enlistment: as a man who has never lived in bondage, he has enlisted and can speak on the intrinsic rewards of true liberation. For Singer, that sense of true liberation came in the fight for full freedom, including citizenship.

Letters such as Singer’s may very well have been instrumental in changing the minds of and rallying able-bodied black men to recruitment stations around the nation, and more notably in his own home state. The end of the Civil War credited Kentucky with providing over 25,000 black soldiers, roughly 13 percent of the Union’s black troops, second to Louisiana (Phillips 259). With the critical aid of black soldiers’ service, slavery had been abolished and freedom proclaimed to all, just as Singer had imagined. Sadly, Singer’s prediction of black people’s possible need for government assistance and protection also came to fruition, again most notably in Kentucky. The end of slavery was the start of a new reign of terror in the state. Phillips notes that rogue Confederates and disgruntled guerilla vigilantes had formed the Regulators, eventually to become the Ku Klux Klan. These violent gangs “employed terror tactics to maintain the political and racial status quo and to undermine new political mandates” (Phillips 296). Terror in the form of property destruction, theft, public whippings, and lynching became commonplace with little involvement from local authorities to defray the violence. In the eyes of the Regulators and their like, if slavery could not exist in Kentucky, blacks could not reside there either. Phillips highlights the impact of this violence and threats of violence, noting, “by 1870 Kentucky’s black population had declined by nearly fourteen thousand, or just less than 6 percent, but some estimates double that figure” (298). Many black Kentuckians resettled just over the state line in Ohio.

When Sgt. Maj. Singer mustered out of the 107th USCT in November 1866, perhaps aware of the increasing racial violence and terrorism at home, he settled in Hamilton County in Cincinnati, Ohio. Census data and family records indicate that his family remained in Covington. According to pension records, Singer gave up barbering as a profession and became a musician by trade, playing the violin “in a string band” and “giving music lessons” in Cincinnati.⁵³ Due to ailing hearing and rheumatism, by age 64, he was working as a waiter. Singer never married and there are no records of any children. He died April 10, 1915 and was interred at Dayton National Cemetery. The freedom that Singer proclaimed is evident in the life he lived during and after his service.



Figure 11: Sgt. Maj. Charles Singer’s headstone at Dayton National Cemetery

A little more than thirty years after David Walker asked if black men would stand and be men for liberation, as the letters in this chapter affirm, two hundred thousand black men fell in formation, stood at attention, replied with a unified and resounding voice that not only were they men, but they were indeed “the bravest and blackest.” Walker believed that free blacks could not truly and trustingly enjoy the fruits of freedom while their black brothers and sisters remained enslaved. Walker’s *Appeal* implored

⁵³ General Affidavits of Charles A. Fox and Charles Singer, 11 May 1894; Deposition A.

black people to be proud of their origins, their identity, and their ability to survive and endure the cruelties of slavery. The letters of Johnson, a Colored Man, and Singer express how nascent ideas of black nationalism were deeply intertwined with ideas of race, freedom, God, and epistolarity. These letters typify other letters by soldiers that speak to the intersections of black pride, black revolution and liberation, and ultimately the black man's role in changing the course of humanity.

These letters also represent the larger body of epistolarity specific to nineteenth-century black masculinity and military service. Using standard journalistic epistolary conventions within the "ethnic sphere" of the black press and with the blessing of the AME church, these letters are powerful in their representation of black letter writing. In this moment in time, these brave black men are able to participate in a battle that is as close as they may ever get to the type of revolutionary fight for black freedom and liberation as executed during the Haitian Revolution. The feelings of black pride and the divine notion of a "chosen people" attached to this early black nationalist identity are critical in their decisions to fight and for whom. This fight was not solely about an end to slavery in America. It was about a global end to oppression and a destiny manifested that placed black people back in the position as divinely ordered. Readers are made aware of these facts repeatedly in these letters. They also represent the willful and intentional act of epistolarity and the desire to be seen and heard as men, as soldiers, as citizens. Through these letters we see how black manhood is a revolutionary move toward freedom. For Johnson, a Colored Man, and Singer, the fight for freedom was the first step to ultimate liberation. The black soldiers' letters in this chapter exemplify the larger body of missives that depict how many members of the USCT continually engaged in and

ultimately honed their epistolary skills. As the next chapter will reveal, these sharpened epistolary skills would become more crucial to the fight for equality and rights both within the military ranks and in the civilian world as soldiers moved beyond the “ethnic sphere” of the black newspaper and onto the desks of those in the upper echelons of the federal military and government. Blended with a writing tradition deeply rooted in the northern black petition and protest tradition, the next chapter will explore how this epistolary merge becomes a hallmark of black masculine epistolarity.

Chapter Three: “Give This a Moment’s Attention”

Black Masculine Epistolarity and the Black Protest Writing Tradition

“. . . we humbly and respectfully state that we are colored men (legal voters); all voted for the present administration. The question now is will you allow us the poor privilege of fighting, and . . . dying, to support those in office who are our own choice?”—W.T. Boyd and J.T. Alston to Sec. of War Simon Cameron, November 15, 1861

On April 23, 1861, eleven days after the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, Jacob Dodson, a thirty-four-year-old, free, black Washington D.C. native and resident, sat down to write a letter to then Secretary of War Simon Cameron concerning African American service and participation in the nation’s war efforts. Only three sentences in length, Dodson’s letter reads:

Sir: I desire to inform you that I know of some three hundred of reliable colored free citizens of this City, who desire to enter the service for the defence of the City.

I have been three times across the Rocky Mountains in the service of the Country with Fremont and others. I can be found about the Senate Chambers, as I have been employed about the premises for some years.

Yours respectfully,

Jacob Dodson, Coloured⁵⁴ (Moody 107)

⁵⁴ Dodson’s letter can be found in Sheldon Moody, Calvin Duvall Cowell, Frederick Clayton Ainsworth, Robert N. Scott, Henry Martyn Lazelle, George Breckridge Davis, Leslie J. Perry, and Joseph William Kirkley, eds. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, series 3, vol. 1* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office 1880-1901), p. 107, from the Cornell University Library Digital Collections,

When Dodson wrote to Secretary Cameron, he was writing as a black man attempting to use his experiences working with both the government and its military as a means of changing the current political position the country maintained: that the Civil War would be *over*, but not *with* the help of black men. He was also writing as a man quite familiar with the government, the military, and the protocol of addressing one's superior officer. Housed in the War Records Office in the National Archives as part of the manuscript collection *The Negro in the Military Service of the United States*, Dodson's letter appears to be one of the first personal correspondences by a black man concerning black military service in the Civil War addressed to Secretary Cameron. By all accounts, Jacob Dodson was the perfect person to initiate the right to fight.

At eighteen years of age, Dodson accompanied noted abolitionist and 1856 Republican presidential candidate John C. Fremont on his 1843 expedition and exploration of the Western Frontier. While he was listed as a personal servant to Fremont, Dodson actually took a lead role when he provided reconnaissance that successfully aided the party through the Sierra Mountains and established routes for Western exploration, trade, and settlement. In 1846, Dodson accompanied Fremont on a third expedition. When Fremont's party reached what is now California, the Mexican-American war was underway. Fremont's California Battalion of Mounted Rifleman joined with Captain Richard Owen's company and fought off the Mexican army, helping to secure the territory for the American government. Additionally, as Shirley Ann Wilson Moore writes in *Sweet Freedom's Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841-1869* (1947), in 1847, "Dodson, Fremont, and Don Jesus Pico made an

<http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/text/pageviewer-idx?c=moawar;cc=moawar;ll=Jacob> (accessed 17 May 2019).

eight-day, 840-mile round trip from Los Angeles to Monterey to alert the American army about a rumored Mexican attack” (89). The information Dodson, Fremont, and Pico relayed proved critical in terms of tactical and strategic military preparation.

For his actions, Dodson became the most noted African American volunteer to serve in the Mexican-American War. By 1849, Dodson had returned to his hometown of Washington, D.C. He was employed in the US Senate and eventually married Catherine Washington.⁵⁵ Although Dodson had been paid for his part in the three expeditions on which he accompanied Fremont, in 1855, he petitioned the Congress for full military compensation for the services he rendered to the country during the Mexican-American War. According to Wilson Moore, Dodson argued that he was indeed a veteran of the Mexican War and “had served in Richard Owens’s company of the California Battalion under Fremont” (89). The following year, a Californian senator by the name of John B. Weller brought forth a bill that would honor Dodson’s request and provide him monetary relief equal to that of any other white veteran who fought during the Conquest of California. In 1856, President Franklin Pierce (1853-1857) signed into law Weller’s bill allowing Dodson to receive “all the pay and allowances of an army private . . . as a member of the exploring expedition” between July 7, 1846 and April 14, 1847 (Moore 89). In this act, the government was willing to compensate Dodson like a veteran even if it was unwilling to label him officially as such.

Given this experience, it is not surprising then that at the onset of the Civil War, Jacob Dodson was one of the first black men to petition Secretary Cameron to seek black participation and enlistment in the nation’s cause. Dodson had the name, the credibility,

⁵⁵ According to Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org, Dodson officially married Catherine Washington on October 6, 1861.

and the experience to make not only the inquiry to serve, but also the bold assertion that he could bring forth triple digit numbers of free black volunteers to fight alongside him.

On April 29, 1861, Dodson was also given the dignity of a response:

SIR: In reply to your letter of the 23d instant, I have to say that this Department has no intention at present to call into the service of the Government any colored soldiers.

With respect, &c.,

SIMON CAMERON

Secretary of War.⁵⁶

Cameron's response to Dodson includes all of the epistolary formalities normally found in military correspondence, or correspondence between a higher ranking official and a lower ranking subordinate. Although Cameron politely rebuffs Dodson's petition, Dodson's letter marks the beginning of a barrage of missives from black men to Secretary Cameron.

In October 1861, freedman, doctor, and Battle Creek, Michigan resident G. P. Miller wrote to Cameron expressing his "wish to solicit the privilege of raising five to ten thousand free men to report in sixty days to take any position that may be assigned us (sharpshooters preferred)" (Aptheker 460). In addition to requesting soldiers be assigned the position of sharpshooter, Dr. Miller also requested "white persons for superior officers" (460). On November 9, 1861, then Acting Secretary of War, Thomas Scott responded to Miller. Scott referenced how "the orders of General Sherman and other officers of the U. S. service authorize the arming of colored persons only in cases of great

⁵⁶ Cameron's letter is found on page 133 in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, series 3, vol. 1* (see footnote 53).

emergency,” and, while he fully appreciated “the patriotic spirit and intelligence” of Miller’s letter, “upon reflection” Scott was quite confident that Miller would “perceive that there are sufficient reasons for continuing the course thus far pursued.”⁵⁷ Scott signed his letter “Very respectfully” and included his acting title.

Letters from black men residing in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and even Canada landed on Secretary Cameron’s desk all within the first eight months of the Civil War. While some men were writing as individuals, others were using a collective epistolary power to assert their right to enlist. Cleveland residents W. T. Boyd and J. T. Alston wrote to Cameron promising “a thousand names, as either signers or references” of potential black recruits (Aptheker 461). There is no record of a response. And, as this chapter will explore, once enlisted, black men continued to write letters of redress over racial disparity and discrimination.

While the letters are consistent in their initial message, so too are they quite revealing in the structural and stylistic epistolary conventions evident in each of them. Written in a formal epistolary style, each of the letters contains the following: a formal title to the letter’s recipient; an opening or salutation; in some instances, feigned modesty in both narrative descriptions and self-referents; and, a formal closing (e.g., “Very respectfully,” “Your humble servant,” or “I remain your obedient servant”). Such closings were common in military correspondence and followed the British rules of etiquette in both epistolary and interpersonal redress to distinguish subordinates from superiors. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), James C. Scott expands on how the rules of etiquette functioned in petitions and variants of

⁵⁷ Scott’s response to Miller is found on page 626 in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, series 3, vol.*

formal, public discourse. Scott writes, “rules of etiquette represent . . . a kind of grammar of social intercourse, imposed by the guardians of taste and decorum, which allows its users to safely navigate the shoals of strangers—especially powerful strangers” (47). Black men who began writing to Secretary Cameron, the governors of their states, and eventually President Lincoln were cognizant of the epistolary decorum expected in military correspondence and used this knowledge to gain access from the guardians of enlistment, freedom, and citizenship.

The men penning these letters were also sentient of the historical impact organized and persistent writing in the form of petitions had on northern black abolition efforts during the late 1700s. African Americans were petitioning for burial rights, schools, churches, adoption rights, and individual freedom. Between 1773 and 1774, Massachusetts’s slaves began a steady and persistent petitioning campaign for their freedom. In *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (1991), Sylvia R. Frey describes the 1773 petitioning efforts of a “group of Boston slaves [who] presented three petitions for freedom to the general court and to General Thomas Gage, a British commander in chief in America and governor of Massachusetts Bay” (53). In 1774, “a grate Number of Blacks” sent Gage two more petitions offering to fight under his command on behalf of the British Army if he would arm them in battle and set them free after battle. The petitioners’ inclusion of the words “grate” and “Number” seems to infer that black enslaved activists were growing in number and wanted those in power to know.

The Massachusetts slave petitions also highlight how the black colonial abolitionists were willing to seek freedom from whomever could grant it. In *In Hope of*

Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860

(1997), James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton explain how “throughout the 1770s Massachusetts’ blacks continued to press for abolition, calling first on the British colonial government and then on the government in rebellion” (55-56). As the country moved closer to its fight for freedom from Great Britain, slaves found a current and seemingly powerful argument for their own liberation. Slaves who petitioned Governor Thomas Hutchinson between 1773 and 1774 to free all enslaved blacks in the state quipped, “We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow men to enslave them” (55). The irony that a country that enslaved others was fighting for freedom from a tyrannical government made for powerful rhetoric that the Massachusetts enslaved population employed in their petitions.

The rhetoric of the American Revolution that centered on freedom from tyranny became a powerful point of reference for black Americans, especially as it was coupled with the recent growing religious zeal the country had experienced. Thus, “the liberation rhetoric of the Revolution and the renewed emphasis on the equality of persons before Christ in the Second Great Awakening that swept the South after 1785 inspired a certain portion of the black population to resort to massive, organized resistance” (Frey 328). In the South, organized resistance came in the form of community creation and cohesion, identity and culture, insurrection and flight. Northern resistance followed the tactics and measures employed by early colonial Americans in their quest to gain freedom and independence. With the increase of literacy rates among blacks and the rise of the black press in northern colonial circles, the petition and the pamphlet became critical tools of resistance that moved beyond Massachusetts’s state lines and were being used by

abolitionists and activists in New York.⁵⁸ In *African or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (2008), Leslie M. Alexander analyzes the power of the petition and its use among the black political activists in New York. While strategically employed as a “way to articulate political discontent,” Alexander notes that the true power of the petition “lay in its ability to challenge the notion that Blacks were subhuman by demonstrating their intellect and organizational skills, and in its powerful demand for equal rights, by entering their protest into permanent record” (10). Thus, despite the fact that black New Yorkers’ petitions were “routinely rebuffed,” they knew that any record of their fight for freedom in the form of a petition or a printed pamphlet would become part of the nation’s historical archives.

With this knowledge, no petitioning attempt was in vain. In *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (2006), Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer detail the attempts of eighty free black Philadelphians who, in 1799, sent a petition to Congress “to end the transatlantic slave trade and pass a law to prevent the kidnapping of free people of color in the United States” (84). Congress would not entertain the petition, noting that because people of African descent were not technically citizens, they “had no right to seek redress of wrongs from the federal government” (85). Even without getting the results sought, these eighty black Philadelphia freedmen were successful in creating another document in the growing historical body that evidenced the articulation of black discontent. Thus, the use of the petition as public transcript was also a means of using the processes and political strategies that had typically been

⁵⁸ According to James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, authors of *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*, “by mid-century, about two-thirds of black adults in six large and medium northern cities had at least a rudimentary reading ability” (206).

accepted and honored by white Americans as part of British parliamentary tradition and procedure.

Black Americans were intentional in their use of the petition and all of the venerable language, etiquette, and pretense associated with written resistance. As Scott argues, “the greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast” (3). The appearance of controlled discontent is significant when presenting a petition or public transcript. It must be controlled enough to adhere to the rules of politeness even when the grievance calls for a much more aggressive response. Scott describes this delicate dance as part of the “theatre of power” that “by artful practice can become a political resource of subordinates” (34). The movements and positions of such a dance involve the use of language, tropes, phrases, and allusions that figuratively disarm those in power and allow the powerless an entry point for discourse of grievances.

Even with practice and successful employment of this form of resistance, any petition, “no matter how respectfully worded” implicitly signals an “autonomous collective action from below and [is], hence, troubling” to those in positions of power (Scott 63). Petitions historically have been viewed as a more peaceful tool to communicate discontent in ways deemed acceptable by the ruling class, who could subsequently provide redress from someone in a power position. By seeking redress from people in power, petitioning also functioned as a less traditional way for subordinate groups to enter political discourse. In “The First Amendment Right to Petition Government for a Redress of Grievances: Cut From a Different Cloth, 21 Hastings

Const. L.Q.15” (1993), Julie M. Spanbauer notes how historically, “petitioning encompassed both *individual* and *collective* written requests to executive, legislative, or judicial authorities,” and in “receiving redress,” early petitioners were essentially privy to “quasi-judicial procedures such as administrative review” (17). If there had been no other way to get the attention of those in political authority, “the right to petition guaranteed a minimum level of consideration [even if] that might only be a vote to summarily deny a petition” (Spanbauer 26). Thus, in the instance of the Philadelphia petitioners, despite Congress’s assertion that black people had no right to petition, there are countless cases in which black petitioners—undeterred—continued to exercise that right.

On a small scale, some progress was made through the efforts of early black petitioners. Northern black freedmen were inserting their voices into the political sphere of public policy. Their grievances and attempts at redress were being recorded in the annals of local, state, and federal history. Yet, the stylistic and linguistic “masking” or etiquette required in its construction and presentation failed truly to present the growing black nationalist identity that did not find peaceful and polite discontent an accurate depiction of black frustration. Additionally, “petitioning was not as effective a method for spreading propaganda unless the petitions were subsequently published in a newspaper, pamphlet, or the like” (Spanbauer 38). While some early black petitions moved from isolated administrative view to a larger audience made possible by print, the vast majority of petitions failed to reach the light of day. Print would need to be paired with a form of written protest that had fewer stylistic restraints. Black activists and abolitionists appropriated yet another American Revolution print protest tradition: the

pamphleteering tradition. In the adoption and use of this form of print protest combined with the explosion of print in northern black communities, black writers were able to move their plight and their fight to the socio-political spotlight.

Like the petition, the pamphlet rose to prominence as American colonists battled with the British monarchy. Patrick Henry and Thomas Paine were two noted colonial pamphleteers who used the medium to criticize British control and rule over the young colony. In *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Literature, 1790s-1860* (2001), editors Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapsansky define the pamphlet “as something between a broadside and a book” that is “adaptable as an argumentative essay, a short narrative of events, or a bare-bones sketch of an organization’s proceeding” (2). The pamphlet was a useful tool in quickly relaying opinions and political positions in a rapidly changing political climate. They were relatively easy and inexpensive to print, making the pamphlet “both a medium of the moment—allowing publishers to publish quickly their views—and a substantial document that could stand the test of time” (2). Just as America’s early colonists used the pamphlet to express their displeasure with British rule and to assert their separate and distinct American identity, so too did black abolitionists writers and freedom fighters. From the late 1700s to the year leading up to the Civil War, black political protest writers scribed hundreds of pamphlets that were quickly published and creatively disseminated to black communities throughout the country.

Within the early black freedom movement, pamphleteering was thus another means of expressing discontent by addressing, empowering, and unifying black people, which became material in creating a space to debate black oppression and enslavement.

As Real, Newman, and Lapsansky note, “the mere presence of African Americans in print constituted an affront to white supremacy, and a powerful argument for equality” (5). Like early colonists, black pamphleteers were addressing issues of freedom, equality, and identity. Yet, early black pamphleteers like David Walker, Richard Allen, James Forten, Henry Highland Garnett, and many others also used the pamphlet to shape a black identity that would quickly lay the foundation for a nascent black nationalist ideology. What made the pamphlet such a unique print body for this type of black nationalist identity to unfold was the freedom of its writers to employ a variety of persuasive and rhetorical strategies.

Where the set structural and linguistic conventions of the petition called for a certain etiquette that required the writer to don a polemical and literary mask, the pamphlet allowed for the demasking of that sort of politesse. According to Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky, such a demasking could be best obtained by “mastering the art of literary persuasion,” having a “familiarity with the rules of formal debate,” and an “understanding of history, logic, and rhetorical styles” (19). Early black pamphleteers were grounding themselves in a political protest writing style that also allowed for more variance in tone than petitions. Black pamphleteers knew when to employ feigned modesty, when to be deferential to authority, and when to be less controlled in their discontent. A deferential style was “a notch up, a sarcastic tone [that] projected impatience with white hypocrisy and apathy” but “still another turn of the dial brought blasts of anger” that spoke to the bubbling rage of black discontent (20). The power of the pamphlet that had been used *by* early American colonists was being used *against* them.

Black pamphleteers were using the pamphlet as a tool of protest that American Revolutionary protesters had used and were using the historical rhetoric of the American Revolution as staples of their arguments for freedom. The freedom that the pamphlet allowed as a genre of protest writing let black pamphleteers “‘signify’ on so-called American themes—and speak to white Americans—by claiming their rights and liberty as outraged observers (a common trope of American Revolutionary essayists)” (Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky 18-19). In addition to the trope of the “outraged observer,” black pamphleteers also used autobiography and history as tropes that shaped black protest and black identity. Described as the “most fascinating trope of black pamphleteering,” the critical accounting and retelling of history became “a trope validating black activism” (24). The freedom that pamphleteering as a genre provided and its demasking of politesse, pomp, and tonal etiquette allowed black people the space to engage in the conversation of black oppression on local, national, and global scales. Thus, the pamphlet helped foster a physical, psychological and spiritual connection among black Americans that would serve as the cradle for a fledgling black nationalist identity.

As the country moved closer to its ultimate divide over the institution of slavery, written protest became even more essential in message dissemination and black communal unification. Black literacy rates continued to rise, and with that, so too did the numbers of black newspapers. By the start of the Civil War, there were hundreds of black newspapers that were still steadfast in their efforts to keep their black readers abreast of the swiftly changing political landscape. The pamphleteering tradition did not disappear. In fact, the “genre remained a critical part of African-American protest during and after the Civil War” (Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky 26). Black pamphleteers

discussed black liberation, emigration, and eventually black participation in the war effort. The pamphlet became the vehicle to propagate black nationalist thought and cultivate a black nationalist identity. As the conversation over black military involvement moved to the reporting about and by black soldiers, the petition and pamphleteering traditions organically merged to become integral components of the letters black soldiers began writing to their military superiors and the military's ultimate commander-in-chief. The respect for and adherence to military custom and etiquette naturally lends itself to the more restrained etiquette of the petition tradition. Yet, the issues of freedom, equality, and discrimination faced by men who were actively serving were specific to the black experience in America. Thus, the letters written by Dodson, Miller, and many others at the start of the Civil War signal—what I assert—is a new genre in the black American written protest traditions: the epistolary protest tradition.

This chapter explores the blending of the petition and pamphleteering traditions with the letter-writing tradition of the Civil War and explore how these letters extend the black written protest tradition. Letters from Garland White, Robert Hamlin Isabelle, and seventy-four members of the 55th Massachusetts USCT's Company D highlight the historical use of the protest letter as a tool to gain access to military service, to ascend among the ranks once enlisted, and to request equal pay. These soldiers' letters are also a form of resistance for those expressing their grievances over discrimination and mistreatment by white officers. The letters in this chapter were written without the intention of publication but most certainly by authors who were confident that their missives would be recorded or documented in historical archives, serving as proof of the

active means by which African Americans, specifically black men, sought to push back against slavery and oppression during the Civil War.

The recipients of the letters in this chapter also cover a broad spectrum of military authority, from a local recruiter, to an immediate superior officer, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, and ultimately President Lincoln. Each letter employs nineteenth-century formal epistolary conventions interwoven with the American Revolutionary rhetoric and the etiquette most commonly associated with the petition. Additionally, the letters from the Civil War soldiers explored in this chapter blend the common tropes, rhetorical variance of tone, and black nationalist underpinnings of the pamphleteering tradition. The missives analyzed in this chapter are evidence of a new epistolary genre born out of civil unrest and are equally indicative of a paper protest tradition deeply rooted in the northern African American abolitionist cause and movement of the late 1700s.

White, Isabelle, and the men in the 55th Massachusetts's Company D use the pamphlet as a tool for emotional release and for psychological empowerment. They employ the political finesse of petitions. In the letters' eventual move from private to public sphere, they shake the foundation of a country that had tried to prove enslaved and free black people were content in their lot or intellectually and socially incapable of changing that status. Black soldiers wrote passionately and persistently, and, in so doing, these soldiers' letters carry forth the black protest writing tradition, crafting a distinctly black and masculine epistolary protest tradition specific to black male service during the Civil War. These letters lay the foundation by which black citizens, most notably black

Civil War veterans, would go on to fight for citizenship and suffrage rights during and after Reconstruction.

I. Letters from Garland H. White to Edwin Stanton (Secretary of War) and William H. Seward (Secretary of State)

On May 7, 1862, Rev. Garland H. White—who had escaped slavery and fled to Canada two years earlier—wrote what appears to be his first documented letter as a free man. His letter was addressed to the Honorable Edwin Stanton, the nation’s second Secretary of War. At the time of White’s letter, the nation was in its second year of the Civil War. Black enlistment had not been legally authorized; however, small numbers of black freedman had volunteered with all-white regiments. In fact, it would be another year before Lincoln would issue the Emancipation Proclamation, and another two months before the Confiscation Act of July 1862 and the Militia Act of July 1862 would be adopted. However, talk of black involvement in the war and black freedom had managed to follow White across the Canadian border. While enjoying his newfound freedom, White kept his fingers on the pulse of the events surrounding the war, and perhaps risking his freedom, wrote to Stanton expressing his willingness to return to the States and offering his recruiting services to enlist freedman.

White’s willingness to risk his freedom by reaching out to Stanton is of no true surprise when placed in the larger context of White’s life and his road to freedom. The son of enslaved parents Madison and Nancy White, Garland White was born around 1831 on a plantation in Hanover County, Virginia (“Garland H. White”). Records indicate that White learned to read and write sometime before the age of 12 when he was separated

from his family and sold to the Georgia planter, Robert Toombs (*Forged through Fire: Bethel AME Church* 2). As the body servant to Toombs, White frequently traveled to the nation's capital during Congressional sessions. Shortly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, during one of those trips, one of Toombs's slaves fled from the Senator's home. In *Black Refugees in Canada: Accounts of Escape During the Era of Slavery*, authors George and Willene Hendrick detail the escape and write that in that moment, "White had dramatic evidence of the dangers of fleeing" (97). Although witnessing the harrowing nature of this escape may have given White reason to suppress his own desire to escape, it did not diminish his desire to be free.

Ten years later, White seized his opportunity when he fled from Toombs while they were in Washington, D.C. for the Congressional session. Presumably aided by Quakers in the area and using the Underground Railroad en route to his escape, White made his way to Canada, initially residing in Chatham Canada, West. As a free man, White married Georgianna Williams in Kent County, Ontario on November 4, 1860 and they eventually settled in London, Canada West in 1861 where he was appointed as the head minister of the AME Church there (Hendrick and Hendrick 98). He and Georgianna started a family and by 1861 had one child: Anna.⁵⁹ By all accounts, White's new life of freedom in Canada was a good one, but when he received word that the Civil War had begun, he was overcome with a desire to help the cause of his fellow enslaved brothers and sisters. When White penned his letter to Stanton on May 7, 1862, black men were volunteering in the Union but not in an authorized capacity. It would not be until the end of the year that the President would formally allow black enlistment. Shortly after the

⁵⁹ White and his wife would go on to have two more children: a daughter (Jane) and one son (Emory).

Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in January of 1863, White returned to the United States.

White and his family settled in Toledo, Ohio where he worked as a minister for an AME Church. By all appearances, it seems his relocation was with the intention of fulfilling his desire to recruit black men to serve in the USCT. Shortly after his move, White began traveling through Ohio to recruit for the 54th Massachusetts USCT. He would go on to recruit for the 14th Rhode Island USCT, the 55th Massachusetts USCT, and finally the 28th Indiana USCT, earning \$15 for each successful recruit and proving his worth as a recruiter by recruiting “colored men for every colored regiment raised in the north” (Hendrick and Hendrick 99). Although White initially worked to recruit black soldiers, his goal was to become an army chaplain, a goal that failed to materialize with the 54th Massachusetts USCT and the 14th Rhode Island USCT. On January 4, 1864, White enlisted as a private with the 28th Indiana USCT’s Company D (99). Although his primary duties were that of soldering, White continued to serve as a recruiter and eventually began unofficially assuming chaplain duties. White penned condolence letters to the loved ones of those soldiers who had died and administered the last rights to those soldiers who were on their deathbeds. Sometime in the spring of 1864, after the 28th had departed Indiana for Washington, D.C., White wrote to Secretary of State Seward seeking an officer’s commission to be appointed chaplain (99). Seward forwarded White’s request to Secretary of War Stanton, who eventually appointed White as a chaplain of Indiana’s 28th USCT, making him one of the first black commissioned officers and only one of fourteen black chaplains in the Union Army (“Forged through Fire” 3).



Figure 12: 28th Indiana USCT Regimental Flag

White's unique role as an AME minister, recruiter, and then chaplain for the USCT also made him the perfect candidate to serve as a correspondent for the *Christian Recorder*. From 1862 until the end of the Civil War, White contributed several letters and eyewitness accounts from the recruiting field to the battlefield. While he is most well-known for his letter published in the *Christian Recorder* that recounted the fall of Richmond and detailed his reunion with his mother from whom he had been estranged for over twenty years, White's lesser known letters provide an accounting of the ways black soldiers used letters—or petitioned—to enlist and to advocate for advanced rank once enlisted. Two of White's letters analyzed in this section exemplify the epistolary protest tradition. In White's letter to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and Secretary of State William H. Seward, White employs the strategies and stylistic conventions used by early black petitioners as he attempts to recruit for the Union and to receive an officer's commission for his role as a USCT chaplain.

When Garland White wrote his May 1862 letter to Stanton, he was taking the first step at inserting his thoughts and feelings into the discourse surrounding black enlistment. Most likely aware of the efforts of Frederick Douglass and other advocates for black military service, White attempts to approach the topic from a different angle.

Introducing himself and presenting his own unique backstory, White begins by informing Stanton that he is writing about a “subject of great importance to your & my country” (Garland H. White 28). White’s reference to the Civil War as a subject of grave importance to both Stanton and himself attempts to present a common concern that should, by all appearances, supersede issues of race to bring everyone together to fight for a common cause. Although White is at present safely residing as a free man in Canada, he notes that he is merely “stoping in canada for awhile but it is not my home” (28). His “stop” in Canada alludes to a fixed desire to return to his home country, a country that he was forced to flee in order to live as a free man. White establishes his credibility and the accuracy of his self-portrayal by digressing to inform Stanton about his humble beginnings and from whom he escaped to make his way to freedom. White writes:

My name is G. H. White formerly the Servant of Robert Toombs of Georgia. Mr. Wm H Seward knows something about me. I am now a minister, & am called upon By my peopel to tender to your *Hon* thir willingness to serve as soldiers in the southern parts during the summer season or longer if required. our offer is not for speculation or self interest but for our love for the north & the government at large, & at the same time we pray god that the triumph of the north & restoration of peace if I may call it will prove an eternal overthrow of the institution of slavery which is the cause of all our trouble. (28)

The insertion of names that would be quite familiar to Stanton is neither coincidental nor done without some thought. White wants to let Stanton know that not only is he writing

as a free man who had managed to flee to Canada, but that he also escaped from one of the country's most outspoken proponents of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. As White notes, "Mr Seward & many other of both white & colored know me in Washington" because, as he highlights, many know him "all thro the south for I traveled with Senator Toombs all over it nearly" (28). Because of his travels and the circles in which he has mingled, White is "certain of raising a good no. in the west & the north" (28). He is a "minister of the gospel" and is known among those who most certainly traveled in the same political circles as Stanton (29). This gives White a perceived sense of credibility and authority in approaching Stanton with the proposition of allowing him to recruit black men, who, at the very least, would be willing to take the place of white Union troops who had been suffering miserably during the summer "sickly season."⁶⁰ White is also attempting to bridge the social gap as he addresses Stanton, a man who, in using Scott's terminology, is a "powerful stranger." The means to close the divide between stranger and acquaintance seem tied to other interpersonal relationships that both White and Stanton maintain.

As a minister, White also uses religion and the mythos of Christianity as a tool of persuasion in addressing Stanton. He informs Stanton that he is "quite willing to spend my life in preaching against sin & fighting against the same" (Garland H. White 28). Slavery is a national sin and a stain on the reputation of the country. White is prepared to continue his fight against slavery whether the fight is in the pulpit or on the battlefield. He is presumably willing to do that with or without Stanton's blessing. Throughout White's letter, there are various references to God and White's prayer that a higher power

⁶⁰ According to Hendrick and Hendrick, "it was believed that blacks were more immune than whites to yellow fever and malaria, then prevalent during the summer months" (98).

will be of some influence to Stanton if White is unable to change his mind. White prays “you in gods name to consider the condition of your humble speaker in the distant,” and by the letter’s end, hopes “heaven bless you & your dear family” as “the prayer” (29).

Yet, White does attempt to speak to the possibility that Stanton could become a change agent by positively responding to his petition to recruit. He writes, “as simple as this request may seeme to you yet it might prove one of the greatest acts of your life. an act which might redown [renown] to your honor to the remotest generation—” (29). In short, White presents Stanton with an opportunity that has the potential to make the Secretary of War more than a footnote in the nation’s history books. The logic undergirding White’s letter is that if Stanton is not moved to respond positively to his request, perhaps he is motivated to play an integral role in altering the trajectory of the nation.

As White mentions earlier in the letter, slavery is the source of the country’s current turmoil. In offering his services to scour the states for black volunteers, White is attempting to provide a solution to rescue not only the country from its current condition, but also to deliver his brothers and sisters from bondage. Although, at the time the letter is written, White has enjoyed years of freedom in Canada, he has not forgotten the current circumstances of his enslaved brethren. He writes, “A man who are free from all the calamities of you land. yet when he thinks of his suffering countrymen he can but fell that good might make him instromental in your hands to the accomplishments of some humble good” (Garland H. White 29). White appears to be referencing one of the ideas set forth in the early black nationalist writings of David Walker that called for black men and women—whether freedmen or bondsman—to unite over the cause of black freedom.

When White writes of his inability to enjoy freedom knowing that others remain in bondage, he is referencing the notion of “chosenness” that called for free blacks to assume the responsibility that was bestowed by God upon them in aiding those who had not managed to escape to freedom. As an AME preacher, White would have been quite familiar with this stance. His letter, indeed, seems to be driven by that knowledge.

White’s letter also makes clear in no uncertain terms that the nation is at a critical juncture. Such a weighty decision to allow black enlistment rests upon the shoulders and the conscience of those in power like Stanton. In White’s letter, he states that Stanton has the power to influence others to act on their convictions and to subsequently steer the nation onto a new course. He explains, writing, “So now my chance to do good as I think rest altogether with you. now may the good lord help you to make a faverorabl desition” (Garland H. White 29). Placing such a responsibility and the ultimate accountability on Stanton is White’s way of saying that while black men want to enlist and have asked to serve the nation in her time of need, it is not the black man’s decision. White prays for discernment as Stanton makes his decision and signs his letter, “your most obedient sirvant G.H. White minister of the gospel” (29). No archival evidence suggests that White received a response from Stanton.

White’s letter to Stanton is an example of how black men and soldiers specifically used the epistolary form to petition the government to accept their aid in the war effort. He begins his letter with the common salutation “dear sir,” adhering to the rules of politeness most commonly seen in early black petitions. Cognizant of the power dynamics between the formerly enslaved and the Secretary of War, White’s use of a formal salutation and his use of Stanton’s title “*Hon*” (Honorable) highlight his

awareness of what Scott terms “the theatre of power.” Additionally, White uses feigned modesty concerning his ability to write when, in his postscript, he asks Stanton to “please excuse my bad writing as I never went to School a day in my left [and] learned what little I know by the hardest” (“A Black Regiment” 28). Such use of an affected humility—commonly used in slave narratives—further accentuates and stresses the theatre of power. As Scott notes, “what may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends” (34). White’s ability to engage in the petitioning tradition despite his early life of enslavement that sought to keep him illiterate is something of which to be proud. Yet, this approach of feigned modesty is meant to disarm the reader, allowing an entry-point for White to initiate a conversation with Stanton.

Stanton does hold the power either to affirm White’s sentiments to approve his petition to recruit or to deny his request altogether. In this way, Stanton is a powerful stranger. Because of Stanton’s position of authority, White uses controlled discontent when approaching the issue of slavery and black military service. White refers to slavery as the “cause of all our troubles,” a sin, and one of the “calamities of your land” (“A Black Regiment” 29). While White’s descriptions of slavery and its impact on the nation are true, his choice of words and decision to refrain from more detailed descriptions of the ways in which slavery have negatively impacted the lives of black people are representative of a more controlled anger. This is most likely employed to avoid a more abrasive epistle that could prevent Stanton from reading any further, thus killing any chances White sees in serving as a recruiter and adding black men to the Union’s military

ranks. Additionally, White's initial suggestion is to recruit black men to soldier during the summer season, essentially to temporarily relieve white troops who were suffering from sickness and disease. He offers Stanton the possibility that the black troops recruited would work "longer if required" (28). White implies that, if given the opportunity to serve temporarily, black troops would be willing to stay on as soldiers. Yet, in the least aggressive manner of expressing his commitment to black service, White notes that he wants "to see my friends at port royal & other places in the South" (29). White presents potential black recruits and soldiers as his friends, attaching his character and his position to other black men who invested in the outcome of the Civil War and would offer their services for any duration of time, be it seasonal or long-term military assistance.

As events would play out in the recruitment and enlistment of black soldiers, they did continue their service for the duration of the war, a feat in which White's recruiting services were often crucial in terms of the numbers of recruits needed to raise USCT regiments. Yet, there exists no evidence that White's letter was the determining factor in being brought on board as a field recruiter. By all accounts and remaining archival documents, Stanton never responded to White's letter of petition. Despite the lack of response, White was in no way deterred, as is evidenced by his claim "to have recruited half of the 28th United States Colored Infantry regiment" in Indiana (Hendrick and Hendrick 99). His integral role in recruiting the 28th to full regimental strength was also White's path to his ultimate goal: a commission as a chaplain for the USCT.

When White joined the 28th Indiana USCT, he was serving under Lt. Col. Charles E. Russell, described as a "white officer sympathetic to blacks who requested his

assignment” (Hendrick and Hendrick 99). At the time that White enlisted, the 28th USCT was not at full regimental strength. While undergoing rigorous training at Indiana’s Camp Sullivan, White continued to recruit for the 28th USCT. After reaching full strength, on April 24, 1864, the 28th USCT left Indiana and marched to Washington, where they would join the Army of the Potomac (99). Just three months later on July 30, the 28th USCT would be one of several USCT regiments to participate in the Battle of the Crater in the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia. Although the Battle of the Crater resulted in an abysmal defeat and an ultimate Union surrender, historians note the bravery and valor in which the USCT soldiers fought. The 28th sustained grave losses on the battlefield. In *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (2012), William Fox notes that the 28th lost approximately half of its soldiers in the Battle of the Crater. There were 11 men killed, 64 wounded, and 13 declared missing (Fox). White administered the last rights to those soldiers who perished in the failed Battle of the Crater and wrote letters of condolence to their respective family members. Even without the title, White was willingly doing the work of an army chaplain. White would detail these actions in his subsequent written attempts to receive a commission.

On May 18, 1864, while the 28th USCT was stationed at Camp Casey in Washington, D.C., and just two months before the failed Battle of the Crater, White wrote to Secretary of State William H. Seward asking for a commission to be chaplain. White’s letter begins: “dear sir please pardon me for troubling you with business that is not Immediately connected with your office, yet it being justice to myself & of interest to my comrades in the military service of the government, I hope your honor will at once pardon me for the liberty I take in writing you such a letter” (White qtd in Berlin’s

Freedom's Soldiers 121). As White states, he is taking the liberty of writing to Stanton to receive justice for himself and his fellow soldiers, who are rightfully due the benefits of and access to a chaplain. His willingness to serve voluntarily as a chaplain to his unit, a role with immense emotional and spiritual responsibility to those on the receiving end of his works has propelled him to seek a response to his multiple requests for commission.

White references his “past correspondence whilst in Canada” and his desire to “serve my country to the best of my humble ability” (121). White wants Seward to know that he has been invested in the Civil War, and that his initial letter that professed his desire to serve was actually backed up with actions far beyond the scope of his official duties. White goes on to detail the ways in which he has already been of benefit to the nation in its time of war. He writes:

I have recruited colored men for every colored regiment raised in the north forsaken my church in ohio & canvassed the intire north & west urging my people to inlist & have succeeded in every instant at various times were told that I would have the chaplaincy of some one of the colored Regiment. I have nearly recruited half the men in the 28th U.S. Colored Infrantry Regiment raised in Indiana Gov. O.P. Morton of Ind promised to give me the office *but* could not as it was transferred from the volunteer serv to that of the regular Army. my officers ahce [have] me acting as a chaplain but no man seeke my commission. I pray you will see me justified after having done as much as I have in raising troops. (qtd in Berlin's *Freedom's Soldiers* 121)

As White notes, he has been instrumental in aiding the Union Army by recruiting and supplying them with willing and able-bodied soldiers. He refers Seward to “Gov Andrew of Mass Todd of Ohio Morton of Ind Seymore of New York & Spridge of Rhode I” (121). These are the governors from the states for which White recruited prior to recruiting for and enlisting in Indiana’s 28th. Indiana’s own governor apparently saw White as fit for the role of a chaplain and even promised to get White the commission. White infers that Governor Morton would have granted the commission for which White sought, but the volunteer regiments were then moved under the umbrella of the Federal Army, which at that time would not appoint a black chaplain. To support White’s request further, he is keen to point out that his white commanding officers have unofficially placed him in the role of chaplain essentially because there have been no other Army chaplains—black or white—who have sought the role within the black regiment.

From White’s letter, it is affirmed that no one wants the position or duties therein that he has willfully accepted, executed, and continues to seek in an official appointment. To show his faithfulness to the Union’s military efforts, White continues highlighting the fact that he “joined the regt as a private to be with my boys & should I fail to get my commission I shall willingly serve my time out, but I know you can get me my commission if any other gentleman in the world can & at the same time feel quite certain that should you fail to give my humble plea due consideration no other will” (White qtd in Berlin’s *Freedom’s Soldiers* 121-22). The flattery that White uses in his letter to Seward mimics the same type of praise that he bestowed upon the Stanton just two years prior when he wrote from Canada.

White is engaging in that theatre of power with a powerful stranger—Seward. Yet, while Seward may have been in a position of power, he was not a complete stranger to White. Hendrick and Hendrick note that “Seward was a long-time foe of slavery, and perhaps played some role in White’s escape from Toombs” in 1860 (99). This could account for White’s faith in Seward as his last hope for a commission. Perhaps due to the four years since Seward aided White in his escape, White writes, “I pray you will aid me in springing from so humble an origin as myself namely that of being the body servant of Robert Toombs” (qtd in Berlin 122). If Seward had forgotten White’s identity, he wanted to ensure that his memory was refreshed. As White closes his letter, he blesses Seward and his family “in all your future pursuits” and ends with the common military closing, “I am dear sir your very humble servant” (122). Seward does begin the process to get White’s commission as chaplain. In his forwarding recommendation, Seward writes that he in fact was acquainted with White “when he was a slave of Robert Toombs and I knew him afterwards in Canada” (Hendrick and Hendrick 99). This affirms that although Seward was not a stranger to White, White addresses him as such and plays his role in the theatre of power used to address a superior officer or a powerful stranger in authority.

Seward’s letter, along with Lt. Col. Russell’s reference letter was forwarded to the Secretary of War Stanton, but White was initially denied the appointment. White persisted in his quest for his commission with Seward’s continued aid and endorsements. According to White’s pension file and deposition, “he was mustered in as Chaplain [in the] same Reg’t to date October 25, 1864” (“White, Garland”). Although White’s commission as chaplain was the equivalent of an officer’s rank, White was not initially given an officer’s uniform for fear that it would cause outrage among white soldiers and

lower ranking officers who would be forced by long-standing military custom and tradition to salute and stand at attention in an officer's presence. He was, however, immediately paid as a captain, receiving \$100 a month plus rations (Hendrick and Hendrick 102). That White was granted the commission for which he fought so long is proof that his dogged petitioning efforts were successful.

White would go on to serve with the 28th USCT for the duration of the Civil War. He was with them near Richmond, the Capital of the Confederacy, when Confederate forces deserted their posts and left the city, and when Union troops descended on the city. White writes to the *Christian Recorder* on April 12, 1865 describing the scene and poignantly highlighting that the 28th USCT “was among the first that entered the city” as they marched to a large crowd of “ten thousand voices” from people that had “assembled on Broad Street” after the “doors of all the slave pens were thrown open and thousands came out shouting and praising God, and Father, or Master Abe, as they termed him” (White qtd in Redkey 175-76).



Figure 13: April 3, 1865 issue of the National Republic

White's letters to Stanton and Seward noted his immense faith and pride in the black men he would go on to recruit and serve with during the Civil War. The devotion to his

regiment did not end, even when he was unsure if his great deeds would be rewarded with the commission he so diligently sought. In his letter to the *Christian Recorder*

White affirms this, writing:

Some people do not seem to believe that the colored troops were the first that entered Richmond. Why, you need not feel at all timid in giving the truthfulness of my assertion to the four winds of the heavens, and let the angels re-echo it back to the earth, that the *colored soldiers of the Army of the James were the first to enter the city of Richmond*. I was with them, and am still with them, and am willing to stay with them until freedom is proclaimed throughout the world. (qtd in Redkey 178)

White in fact remained with the 28th USCT after the Civil War until the regiment was mustered out in Corpus Christi, Texas on November 8, 1865.

After Chaplain White was formally mustered out of the 28th USCT, he and his family briefly resided in Maryland (Garland H. White “Freedman’s Bureau, Records of Freedman’s Complaints, 1865-1872”). By 1867, the family had returned to Toledo, Ohio where White resumed his duties with the AME Church. While in Toledo, White filed a lawsuit against the city’s school system that refused to allow his oldest daughter Anna to attend her zoned school because of her race. On March 3, 1871, the *Weekly Louisianan* published a statement in reference to White’s 1870 lawsuit noting the prejudice in the North had not died with the end of slavery. White was noted to be an “owner of real estate to the amount of \$10,000, on which he is taxed for the support of schools and the erection of buildings; and he says the nearest colored school is so far from his residence that he has had the necessity of employing private tutors for his daughter, who he alleges

in every respect is qualified for admission to the ward school” (“Notable Black Toledoans”). From this published article in the *Weekly Louisianan*, we bear witness to the sizable amount of White’s worth after the Civil War. It also becomes quite clear that White did not stop fighting for the rights of freed black people even after the last soldier was mustered out of the Army. While White’s efforts were instrumental in desegregating Toledo schools, he and his family would not remain in Ohio to reap the benefits of his endeavors.

White’s work with the AME Church would eventually move him to North Carolina, where pension files note that White and his family “resided in the Town of Halifax, NC from the year of 73 to 82, moved to Wilmington [North Carolina, and] returned to Weldon 7 miles from Halifax” (“White, Garland” Pension Deposition C). He continued preaching with the AME Church and eventually ran for a Congressional seat in North Carolina in the mid-1870s. White, who had joined the Democratic Party—the Party of the Confederates—lost the election to a local black Republican politician named John Adams Hyman (“Notable Black Toledoans”). White’s affiliation with the Democratic Party not only cost him a possible election win and a Congressional seat, but it also cost him his standing as a minister in the AME Church. By 1880, White had been relieved of his duties of minister with the Church.

His inability to continue preaching was also due to health issues that had grown worse over the years. In his pension application and deposition, White notes that “while serving in Co. D, 28, Reg’t USCT he was disabled by lung disease near City Point, Virginia May 20, 1864.” White was granted an initial pension of \$8.00 per month; however, by September 5, 1890, when White was sixty-four years of age, his invalid

pension was increased to \$10.00 because the respiratory issues which afflicted him had “led to heart disease” (“White, Garland” Pension Deposition D). He eventually relocated to the nation’s capital where he was employed as a Congressional messenger. White succumbed to heart failure attributed to his long-standing respiratory and lung disease on July 5, 1894.



Figure 14: Garland H. White’s headstone at Arlington National Cemetery

Chaplain Garland H. White’s life epitomized the quest for freedom and the various means that black men were willing to take to free themselves and their enslaved brothers and sisters. White’s letters provide a roadmap of his life’s goals from his very first years of freedom until his death. His use of the letter as a means to petition and insert himself into the fight for black liberation and to gain his rightful commission as a religious officer of the military exemplify the power of the written word in initiating change for the lives of black men and women in the U.S. Cognizant of the pomp involved in addressing military and political figures, White charts a new course for his own life and the lives of the black men he served with in the USCT.

II. Letters from Capt. Robert Hamlin Isabelle to Capt. Wickham Hoffman and Brig. Gen.

Dave Ullman

Sometime in February 1870 during the Louisiana House of Representatives session, House member Robert Hamlin Isabelle addressed the representative body on the issue of the segregated school systems within the state. A native of New Orleans, Isabelle had been a vocal advocate and a proponent for school integration, believing the division that existed within the schools would not create a unified people in the state or the nation. Isabelle proclaimed, "I want to see the children of the state educated together; and when they grow up to be men they will love each other, and be ready, if any force comes against the flag of the United States, to take up arms and defend it together" (Isabelle qtd in Hollandsworth 109). Isabelle believed that white children would continue to look down upon black children if they were forced into separate and segregated schools. Additionally, he feared that segregated schools would continually receive inadequate funding that would lead to poorly run educational institutions with unqualified teachers, further widening the divide in the goal of a more unified state.

Yet, a closer look at Isabelle's statement before the House members shows that he also feared that legally sanctioned segregationist policies would at some point prove to be detrimental to the nation at large should the time come when unity would necessitate protecting the country. How would black and white men come together when laws and public policies had historically sought to keep them separated? This was no conjecture on Isabelle's part. In fact, he had seen firsthand how racism and discrimination within the military almost cost the country its reunification during the Civil War.



Figure 15: Robert Hamlin Isabelle

Between 1868 and 1870, Robert Hamlin Isabelle was one of thirty-five black members of the House of Representatives to serve after the Civil War and during the Reconstruction. While he was one of a large number of black members in the state's House of Representatives and had attended the state's Constitutional Convention as it sought to reframe Louisiana's governing laws and public policies, Isabelle was also one of eight members who had served as an officer with the Louisiana Native Guards during the Civil War. Black men who were voted into the House came with an agenda to radically integrate the state's public places and spaces. In *Black Legislators in Louisiana During the Reconstruction* (2011), Charles Vincent notes that by 1868, Louisiana's black legislators came to office with an agenda that centered on civil rights. It was Robert Hamlin Isabelle who introduced one of the first civil rights bills "to protect all persons in their civil and public rights" (92). Vincent expands on the Isabelle bill, its parameters, and the consequences for citizens' failure to comply. He writes:

The purpose of the bill was to enforce the thirteenth article of the constitution by making segregation a criminal offense and by demanding that all persons, 'without regard to race, color, or previous condition shall enjoy equal rights and privileges in, their traveling' and on public conveyances, in public resorts, or businesses where a license was required

by the state. Fines ranging from one hundred dollars to five hundred dollars and imprisonment from three months to one year were imposed on convicted violators. (Vincent 92-93)

Isabelle's bill was met with harsh resistance from white Louisiana lawmakers and citizens who opposed extending civil rights to their black neighbors. Despite this pushback, Isabelle's bill passed the House the first day it was introduced. On August 28, "the House passed the measure by a vote of fifty to fourteen," and by mid-September, the Isabelle bill "passed the Senate by a fifteen to seven vote" (Vincent 93). Louisiana's governor, and former Union officer, Henry Clay Warmoth, subsequently vetoed it.

Isabelle and other black legislators continued to push forward. By 1870 they were focused on introducing bills and passing legislation that would integrate Louisiana's public schools and make access to schools easier for the state's black children. Bills were introduced and passed that allowed school children free passage on public roads, bridges, and ferries. Children would no longer be forced to pay tolls, as the tolls were viewed as a way of preventing access for those children whose families could not afford to pay them. Black legislators were temporarily successful in their attempts, as Louisiana schools were partially integrated for three years before their progress was rolled back to segregated educational institutions.

Undeterred, the state's black House members also moved to provide aid to Straight University's medical department, and, with the help of Robert Isabelle, the bill successfully moved through the House. It was ultimately vetoed "on the grounds that it was a private institution and aid to it conflicted with Article 140 of the constitution which forbade state appropriations to private institutions" (Vincent 92). Resolute, black

legislators then moved their focus to the state’s library, desiring to move the library from a more remote and removed location in a neighboring law school to a more central location near the legislature building.



Figure 16: Black members of Louisiana’s Convention and Assembly of 1868

For the newly elected black men in the state’s House of Representatives and the Senate, there were few successes and many losses. They were, however, unflinching and dauntless in their efforts to enact change for the state’s citizens. Those legislators who served in the Native Guards were bringing with them the same grit and determination that had served them well in combating racial prejudices that they faced in the Union Army. As Vincent notes, “the war was also an experience in political education for blacks . . . who would later serve as leaders in Reconstruction . . .” (1). Black officers who had served in the Native Guards were not new to protesting discrimination. In fact, widespread discriminatory practices within the Union Army prompted a sizeable number of black officers to resign en masse but not before numerous letters of protest had been written to the appropriate military and political leaders. Isabelle was one of many black officers who, in 1863, used the epistolary tradition to protest racism within the Union Army. The two letters written by Isabelle that are analyzed in this section exemplify how black officers in the Native Guards used the petition to protest discriminatory and racist

practices, to advocate for the rights of black officers, and to fight to maintain their military rank.

Robert Hamlin Isabelle was born in Opelousas, Louisiana on April 3, 1837 to freed parents, George Baptiste Isabelle of France and Nancy Willis, who originally hailed from Virginia (“Robert Hamlin Isabelle in the New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790-1915”). He had two brothers, an older brother named Thomas and a younger brother named Patrick. By all accounts, Isabelle grew up as part of the opulent and well-established free black New Orleans community. In 1860, just one year before the start of the Civil War, this class of freed blacks, termed the “hommes de couleur libre,” was worth more than two million dollars in personal property and land (Hollandsworth 3).⁶¹ Robert Isabelle was an established dyer, while his brother Thomas ran a thriving sewing machine business in the city. Both brothers’ businesses were frequently advertised in local New Orleans newspapers (Vincent 54).

When the Civil War began, the Defenders of the Native Land submitted an advertisement calling on willing black male volunteers to meet to discuss their participation in defending the state of Louisiana. By early 1862, both Robert and his brother Thomas answered that call, closed their businesses, and joined the Native Guards. Thomas was assigned to the 1st Regiment of the Native Guard’s Company A, and Robert was assigned to the 2nd Regiment’s Company H. Both brothers were quickly moved up the ranks to officer, and before September of 1862, Thomas was a lieutenant, and Robert a 2nd lieutenant. As a member of the 2nd Louisiana Native Guard, the younger Isabelle

⁶¹ Translates to “free men of color.”

not only performed the duties as an officer and soldier, but he was also instrumental in getting new recruits to join and fill the other regiments in the Native Guards.

On both September 27 and October 12, 1862, the 1st and 2nd regiments were officially mustered into the Union army's 74th Regiment (Hollandsworth 117).

Although Isabelle had proven to be an excellent soldier and recruiter, he and other black officers had not escaped the racist practices and treatment from white subordinates once the Native Guards were absorbed into the 74th. There were several complaints early on by black officers that white soldiers were refusing to salute them or to follow their orders. In one reported case, a black captain formerly from the 3rd Regiment reported for duty with the 13th Maine Infantry—an all-white Union regiment—to inspect their guard and was met with forceful objection. The soldiers from the 13th not only “refused to acknowledge his authority, but also “grounded their rifles in protest and threatened to kill him should he attempt to coerce their obedience” (Hollandsworth 43). Soon after when the men formerly of the 2nd Regiment reported for duty at Ship Island, members of the same Maine regiment became so hostile and belligerent over the presence of black troops and their officers, “they had to be placed under arrest and transferred to Fort Jackson” (Hollandsworth 43). Initial complaints about such treatment were directed to General Benjamin Butler, who had been an advocate for black enlistment and had been somewhat sympathetic to the concerns that black officers had expressed. Black officers remained in their positions, due in some small part to General Butler's belief that the Native Guards' black officers, who were mostly Creole and light-skinned, had assimilated well into white culture and “had much more the appearance of white gentlemen than some of those who have favored me” (6). Appearance, however, did not replace the disdain and outrage that

white soldiers felt in their knowledge that no matter how white the officers from the Native Guards appeared, they were still black, and many of them, following in the spirit of Andre Cailloux, were quite proud of their black heritage.

By December 1862, Major General Nathaniel P. Banks replaced General Butler. Major General Banks did not like the notion of black officers commanding white soldiers. Pointing to their “arrogance and self-assertion,” Banks viewed black officers as a “constant embarrassment and annoyance,” whose mere presence sapped the morale of “both the white troops and the negroes” (Hollandsworth 71). Like the white troops in the 13th Maine Infantry, Banks did not want to be forced to salute a black man either. As the new department commander, Banks met the Native Guards officers’ initial complaints with a dismissive attitude. When pressed, he intentionally misinformed the complainants that it was not his policy but instead the government’s that prohibited the commission of black officers. He advised them to resign or risk being shamefully discharged. These efforts were to push black officers from their positions and have them replaced with white officers. Unknowingly, a small number did resign, only to discover Banks’s hidden agenda.

Banks continued his campaign to get rid of the Native Guards’ black officers by threatening to withhold their pay while promising white and black enlisted men that they would be paid. While he was not able to make good on his threat, his racist attitude and practices began to wear on many of the black officers. Banks then implemented examining boards in which regimental officers unfairly and underhandedly tested black officers and where harsher consequences were issued. On February 24, 1863, “three black officers from the 2nd Regiment were discharged from service for reasons of

incompetence” after “failing” on of these examinations (Hollandsworth 72). The following day, black officers from the 3rd Regiment resigned en masse.

In a letter written February 25, 1863 and published in the *Weekly Anglo-African* on March 14, 1863, Isabelle describes the resignation of the black officers in the 3rd writing, “I am sorry to announce that seventeen of the colored commissioned officers of the 3rd have resigned, owing to some disagreement between them and Col. [John A.] Nelson” (Isabelle qtd in Redkey 251). The disagreement to which Isabelle refers took place following Col. Nelson’s discriminatory examination that resulted in more failing marks for the Native Guards’ black officers. Isabelle continued:

They have not been made aware that several thousands of this class are free-born, well educated property-holders, who have always enjoyed all the respect and privileges, with the exception of voting, of other citizens. Hundreds of them have graduated in Europe, are licensed to practice all kinds of professions, are doctors, dentists, &c. Silversmiths, portrait-painters, architects, brick-layers, plasterers, carpenters, tailors, cigar-makers, &c—all responded to the call of Gen. [Benjamin] Butler, closed up their establishments and enlisted as privates in the regiments of Native Guards to fight for the Union. Nearly four thousand of those brave and patriotic colored sons of Louisiana have enrolled themselves for three years or during the war to defend the flag of their country and keep Louisiana in the Union. (Redkey 251-52)

For Isabelle, the treatment he and the other black officers from the Native Guards were being subjected to boiled down to racism. Despite the background, social status, and

sacrifices black men had made to fight for the Union, racism would not allow Banks, Nelson, and others to respect black officers as their military equals.

Even though the officers of the 3rd had resigned, those from the Native Guards' 1st and 2nd Regiments were not ready to follow suit. Hollandsworth notes “all of the line officers in both regiments were black, and their pride of serving in the first black regiments in the Union army was great” (72). Instead, they decided to petition. On March 2, 1863, the other black officers joined together, and with the leadership of Captain P. B. S. Pinchback, they wrote a petition to express their grievances to their commanders, noting that the examinations were a means of forcing black officers from their positions. White officers did not have to pass the exams, but black officers did. Isabelle was among those petitioners. While many of the black officers waited for Banks's response, four of the officers, Isabelle one of them, knew Banks would reject their petition, and resigned (73-74).

On March 3, 1863, 2nd Lt. Isabelle wrote his letter of resignation to Capt. Wickham Hoffman. In the first sentence of his letter, Isabelle informs Hoffman that through this letter, he has “the honor to respectfully tender my resignation” (Isabelle qtd in Jones 97). Isabelle intentionally uses the word “honor” because there exists a specific pride among the Native Guards' black officers in asserting some control over the decision to no longer be dishonorably treated. Isabelle chooses to resign instead of being continually humiliated by racist and discriminatory practices. He has not been subjected to the shame of being dishonorably discharged from the military. Instead, Isabelle creates the space and opportunity—in written form—to outline his concerns, objections, and his reasons for resigning.

Isabelle writes that when he joined the army, it was “with the sole object of laboring for the good of the union supposing that all past prejudice would be suspended for the good of our Country and that all native born americans would unite together to sacrifice their blood for the cause as our fathers did in 1812&15 to save our native soil from her threatened doom” (qtd in Jones 97). Like black activists from the Revolutionary Era, Isabelle alludes to a moment in the nation’s collective history in which black men volunteered their assistance and risked their lives for the protection of the country. This reference is important as Isabelle highlights how insignificant race was in terms of integrated regiments in the army during the Wars of 1812 and 1815. In *Amongst My Best Men: African Americans and the War of 1812* (1996), Gerard Altoff confirms the integration of troops during the War noting that “when the ranks were finally opened, black soldiers were incorporated into regular regiments beside white troops, where their racial identity was swallowed up” (xi). Altoff highlights the one aberration to this fact: in the Battle of New Orleans there were all-black regiments that fought for the country. As a native Louisianan, Isabelle may very well have been privy to the knowledge that both integrated and all-black regiments existed during the War of 1812. In aligning with the pamphleteering tradition and blending it with the black petition tradition, Isabelle uses American history as the trope that authenticates his epistolary protest. Strategically inserting this fact into his resignation letter also points to the Union Army’s hypocrisy in attempting to force out black officers and its intentional decision to ignore the racially motivated practices that continue to plague the Union regiments.

The racially motivated practices that the Federal Army commanders failed to address had the potential to hinder the Union from its primary goal to keep the states

united. Aware of and witness to this, Isabelle writes that, after his “five or six months experience, I am convinced that the same prejudice still exists and prevents that cordial harmony among officers which is indispensable for the success of the army” (Isabelle qtd in Jones 98). Isabelle makes it quite clear: the Union army cannot expect military success, which relies on unity and “cordial harmony,” when it has done little to address the cancer that grows within its regiments. Thus, as Isabelle concludes in his letter, “I respectfully tender this resignation subject to your approvale hoping that the blessings of god will Ever smile upon the flag of my country” (98). He signs his letter “Respectfully your obedient servant” and includes his rank and his original company and regiment—2nd Lieutenant, Co. H 2nd Louisiana Volunteers, Native Guard (98). Isabelle’s closing was a common one used by subordinates in military correspondence to their superiors. Isabelle follows the proper epistolary protocol while respecting the military’s chain of command by working up the echelon to submit his complaint.

Yet, Isabelle’s letter is not merely a letter of resignation. Instead, his succinct but detailed reason for his resignation and his inclusion of the military’s past history of having integrated and all-black regiments in a war in which the nation was victorious, turn his resignation letter into a protest against the race prejudice that exists and is, in some ways, fostered by white troops, officers, and commanders. There exists no documental evidence that Capt. Hoffman responded to Isabelle. His resignation was accepted, and he was honorably discharged with his commissioned rank. Very shortly thereafter, however, Isabelle, following in the same footsteps of what many other black officers from the Native Guards had done, re-enlisted. This time, Isabelle was assigned

to Co. A of the 7th Louisiana Infantry's Colored Regiment and had attained the rank of Captain ("Isabelle, Robert H." Service Records).

When Capt. Isabelle re-enlisted, he remained committed to speaking about the racial discrimination and division that existed in the Union regiments. Continuing to use epistolary form as a means to protest, on June 12, 1863, Isabelle penned a letter to Brigadier General Dave Ullman to bring to his attention to the tensions that persisted between the army's inaction and the military's goal moving forward. Addressed to the "Hon Brig Genl Dave Ullman," Isabelle begins his letter, informing the Brigadier General "that there are more than one thousand free colored citizens in this city who are anxious to enlist in the united states army to share their blood & lives in the common cause of the country" (Isabelle qtd in Jones 98). Creating a collective identity, Isabelle avoids mentioning the cause of freeing enslaved black people. Instead, the common cause of the country is to keep the union intact. But, as Isabelle continues, these eager men are not the "common man." Isabelle notes that many of the interested volunteers are "very wealthy" and have "graduated in Europe as well as having considerable experience of the military tactics being used" (98). In Isabelle's words, these men are of a more respectable status than that which they have been assigned and the treatment they have experienced by the military. These are, in some respects, men with more means, property, wealth, and education than some of the white officers.

Including the status of these black men seeks to juxtapose their treatment by military personnel against their respect given within their communities, especially in terms of how examinations have been used as a tool to force black officers from their ranks. Isabelle directly references the examinations that have been used against black

officers, asserting that these men are “capable of passing before a board of examination to prove their qualification as to they being lines officers” (qtd in Jones 98). Isabelle’s quote does not mention the unfair manner in which black officers have been tested and assessed. He avoids mentioning the large number of black officers who have been forced out of their positions. Isabelle’s controlled discontent is a means of keeping Ullman engaged in the letter enough to read its entirety.

It also provides an opportunity for Isabelle to make a request or petition the brigadier general. Outlining what black officers in the Union regiments truly desire, he writes, “[A]ll they ask is the privilege of selecting their own line officers or for you to select from our own race such persons as you might find qualified” which, he continues, was a “privilage our fathers enjoyed in 1812&15 and as the late battles of East Pascagoula Miss & Port Hudson has proved . . . the colored officers are capable of commanding as officers” (qtd in Jones 98). Again, we see Isabelle employing the trope of American history to criticize the current military’s practices. For Isabelle, their present treatment doesn’t square in the face of history.

If black officers had commanded regiments before, Isabelle questions why opposition and apathy to the situation exists now and references two more recent military engagements: the battle at East Pascagoula’s Ship Island in Mississippi in April 1863 and the Siege of Port Hudson in Louisiana in May of that same year where the 2nd Regiment—led by black officers—had fought. These were battles where members of the USCT and their black officers had proven themselves heroic and valiant. Because of this heroism, Isabelle requests the implementation of protocols that worked before be supported now. Isabelle and other black officers see the military’s racial disunion as

counterproductive to the Union's very goal. Holding fast to discrimination that had historically been pushed aside at the most critical of moments in the nation's history would not serve the nation well. Isabelle asserts that military officials now would be quite wise to follow in the footsteps of their forefathers in this regard. "I hope that you will pardon me for my familarness," Isabelle writes, "but I feel that it is the duty of every man to come forward and aid in putting down this unholy rebellion and save our country from her awful threatened doom" (qtd in Jones 98). Again, Isabelle makes clear that the Union troops—black and white—will need to come together to save the country. The consequences to do otherwise could be quite grave.

The concept of unity above race is so important to Isabelle that he breaks from epistolary formality and apologizes for the appearance of familiarity—a familiarity that is a more common stylistic attribute found in pamphlets. As Scott explains, in a petition, one of the "linguistic marks of subordination" is the use of "hyper-polite forms" or "hyper-correct grammar," or a "risk-averse use of language by the powerless . . . to avoid taking liberties with language that might give offense" (30). Due in part to the psychological empowerment he felt in his first letter by protesting discriminatory practices, or perhaps due to his advancement in rank upon re-enlistment, Isabelle's break from the hyper-polite form functions as an assertion of his manhood and how he views himself as an accomplished black officer. Isabelle briefly moves himself from the language of the subordinate to the familiar language of an equal.

Isabelle continues by assuring Ullman that black officers and recruiters would be able to "raise a regiment in less than one week of able bodied well educated men" (qtd in Jones 98). He wants Ullman to know that any new black recruits would most certainly be

able to handle the physical and mental demands of military service and battle. He closes his letter, “Respectfully,” but unlike in his letter to Hoffman, where Isabelle writes as an “obedient servant,” he now describes himself as Ullman’s “humble servant” (98). This change is powerful, in that Isabelle’s past epistolary protest against the military’s racist practices has moved his view of himself beyond obedience into humble defiance. There is no record to indicate that Ullman responded to Isabelle’s letter.

Capt. Isabelle’s letters are important to this study because they exemplify the merging of the petition and pamphleteering tradition to create a new epistolary form of protest and activism for black men serving in the Union regiments. Within both letters, we see Isabelle, steady in his emotions, controlling his discontent all while engaging in the form, address, and tone most commonly seen in early black petitioners of the Revolution. He adheres to the rules of etiquette outlined and made epistolary custom “to safely navigate the shoals of strangers—powerful strangers” like Banks, Hoffman, and Ullman (Scott 47). His participation in the group petition written by the other officers from the 2nd Regiment shows that black men in the service were willing to fight on a variety of fronts to protest racial injustice. Engaging in the organizational process of petitioning functions as an assertion of black manhood and becomes part of the history of black activism and protest. Isabelle is witness to the power inherent in written protest, so much so that he engages in the process more than once.

Isabelle’s letters also highlight the significance of the pamphleteering tradition and how the use of the history as trope allowed for solid rhetoric that confronted current military policies. In both letters, he references the presence of black commanders and integrated regiments during the War of 1812. His letters allow him to initiate discourse

about racial policies in a deferential manner, a tonal attribute most commonly seen in the pamphleteering tradition. Isabelle defers to history by noting the role black men played in their service to the country and asking why those same actions are being so staunchly opposed at this current juncture in history. Black men who have enlisted and are willing to enlist have put no stipulations on how they will serve their country. Isabelle's letters ask military commanders why they have continually placed restrictions on black service. His ability to outline these facts to a superior commander is an assertion of manhood and in some ways "also restore[s] a sense of self-respect and personhood," feelings commonly attributed to one who has resisted domination of some form (Scott 210). By engaging in the paper protest tradition, Isabelle exemplifies the lengths to which black men were willing to stand up for the ideas—state, country, honor, and dignity—which mattered most to black Civil War soldiers.

At the Civil War's end, Capt. Isabelle was mustered out and returned to New Orleans to his wife, Jamesetta, whom—according to his pension files—he had married on November 5, 1863 ("Isabelle, Robert Hamlin" Pension Deposition). He briefly returned to his business as a dyer before joining the New Orleans police force, where he rose to the rank of corporal before embarking on a political career. Before the June 1867 Radical Convention, Isabelle resigned from the police force to serve as secretary of the Radical Executive Central Committee (Vincent 55). In 1868, Isabelle was elected as one of eight legislators to represent New Orleans in the state's House of Representatives and went on to become one of Louisiana's most prominent legislatures in the fight for black civil rights. Census records indicate that in 1870 Isabelle lived with his wife, two

children—William and Alice, —and his younger brother Patrick. The following year, “Isabelle’s real estate and property was valued at \$3,000” (Vincent 55). After his political career, Isabelle attended Straight University where he earned a degree in law.⁶² On May 31, 1876, the *New Orleans Republican* announced that Isabelle had been admitted to practice law in the state. He remained a practicing attorney and prominent figure in the city, briefly serving “as adjutant of the Farragut Post in the” Grand Army of the Republic (Hollandsworth 112).

ADMITTED TO PRACTICE.
 On motion of Simeon Belden, Esq., on presentation of diplomas from Straight University, John Waits Cumberland, Alfred Elias Billings and Robert Hamlin Isabel were admitted to practice in all the courts of the State.
 On motion of E. K. Washington, Esq., Alexander Fortune Riard, John Eugene Staes and Eugene Lucy, also graduates of Straight University, were admitted.

Figure 17: *New Orleans Republican*, May 31, 1876

On May 3, 1890, Isabelle applied for a pension, testifying that he had suffered from a “disease of the bowels and digestive organs, disease of mouth, loss of teeth from scurvy and disease of the testicles” that were all the result of an injury to his stomach that he sustained while serving with the Union army (“Isabelle, Robert Hamlin” Pension Deposition). In December 1862, shortly after he enlisted, Isabelle “landed on the hilt of his sword while jumping from a moving train at Bayou Des Allemandes . . . and suffered a hernia that afflicted him from that point on” (Hollandsworth 113). He received a pension of \$10 a month until his death on February 18, 1907.

⁶² Straight University merged with New Orleans University in 1935 to form Dillard University.

Capt. Robert Hamlin Isabelle spent his life fighting for the civil rights of black people. As an officer from the Louisiana Native Guards' 2nd Regiment, Isabelle was one of many black men who petitioned to fight these discriminatory practices during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Isabelle imagined a nation where logic, history, and common goals would overrule the ignorance of racism. He fought for the dignity of black officers and remained unwavering in his quest for a freedom that would be the ultimate legacy to honor the consummate sacrifice that many black men made for their country and their fellow black brothers and sisters. Isabelle was cognizant of the stereotypes and the narrative that had been created for black officers. He was willing to use the powers of the petition and pamphleteering tradition to create new possibilities for black service, black manhood, and black protest.

III. Letter from members of Co. D of the 55th Massachusetts to President Abraham Lincoln

In the early 1863 while Isabelle and other black officers in the Native Guards were awaiting the final decision about their rank, farther north in Massachusetts, black men were looking for formal authorization to begin enlisting. In January of 1863 during the Massachusetts legislative session, Senator Charles Sumner introduced a bill that would allow for the enlistment of black men into the state's regiments. The Civil War was in its second year, and although white enlistment had slowed significantly, there seemed to be no end to the battle between the states. Massachusetts's governor, John Albion Andrew—a noted proponent of abolitionism—strongly supported the inclusion of black men in the Union regiments and encouraged Sumner to bring forth the bill (Bowen

51). This was done most likely as a precautionary measure. Governor Andrew had already written to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton asking for the authority to raise a black volunteer regiment in the state and was awaiting Stanton's reply. While Sumner's bill failed to get the votes it needed to pass, Governor Andrew's request to the Secretary of War fared much better. By the middle of January 1863, Stanton received the following order from Secretary Stanton:

That Governor Andrew of Massachusetts is authorized, until further orders, to raise such number of companies of volunteer artillery for duty in the forts of Massachusetts and elsewhere, and such corps of infantry for the volunteer military service as he may find convenient; such volunteers to be enlisted for three years or until sooner discharged, and may include persons of African descent, organized into separate corps. (Bowen 52)

Stanton did add one stipulation: only white officers would command the USCT regiments. Andrew agreed to the stipulation and wasted no time working to raise Massachusetts's first black regiment. In February 1863, Andrew appointed well-known Boston businessman and abolitionist, George L. Stearn, to begin recruiting black men for Massachusetts's first black regiment (Smith, John 250). The famed 54th Massachusetts USCT would become the state's first black regiment.

Yet recruitment within the state's boundaries proved to be arduous. There were simply not enough free black men in Massachusetts to fill the quota. In order to meet the numbers to raise an all-black regiment, Stearn would have to look outside of the state for additional potential recruits. Stearn hired a reputable and influential corps of recruiters, to include Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin

Delany, and many other noted black leaders and activists, who “traveled all through the North and even into Canada, urging black men to join the army” (McPherson *The Negro’s Civil War* 175). Two of the first recruits for the 54th were Douglass’s sons, Charles and Louis. Recruitment efforts, however, were challenging. Many black men were hesitant to enlist because of the stipulations Stanton placed on black officers being commissioned to lead all-black regiments. There were additional concerns over the Confederate States Army’s stance on how black soldiers would be treated if captured.

Some northern black men met the idea of enlistment with a lukewarm reception because of a change in wartime earning potential. As McPherson notes, “the booming war economy had created full employment and prosperity for Negroes in some parts of the North” (175). Promises of financial gains through military service were not as impactful. This was most true in New York State, where a large number of black men found few good reasons to risk their lives when they were already, for the most part, reaping the promised financial benefits. However, this was not the case for many of the other northern states targeted in Stearn’s recruiting efforts. Black men who were still being blocked from more lucrative and stable jobs did see the financial rewards of military service to be one of several boons of war. Enlistment numbers rapidly increased beyond expectations. As McPherson details, “by the end of April recruits were coming in at the rate of thirty to forty per day, and Governor Andrew soon had enough men to form a second Negro regiment, the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts” (180). The sister regiment to the 54th, the 55th Massachusetts was raised in May of 1863 and reached its full capacity by the end of June. The recruits—commanded by Colonel Norwood P. Hallowell—trained at Camp Meigs in Readville, Massachusetts.

The 55th Massachusetts contained ten regiments with close to 1,000 soldiers from varied and diverse backgrounds, this due in some part to recruiting efforts that went beyond the Massachusetts state lines and to the increased mobility black men experienced from the instability of war and Emancipation. Col. Hallowell disaggregated the demographics of his regiment, breaking down the origins, occupations, freed status, literacy, and more of the soldiers he commanded. He wrote:

Of the 961 enlisted men in the 55th, the largest number (222) were born in Ohio, followed by Pennsylvania (119), Virginia (106), Indiana (97), Kentucky (68), Missouri (66), and Illinois (56). The remaining 207 men were born in eighteen states (including 11 slave states), the District of Columbia, Nova Scotia, Canada, Africa, and places “unknown.” Collectively, the men had plied forty-six trades and occupations. The most common profession was farmer (596), followed by laborer (74), waiter (50), cook (27), teamster (27), sailor (20), mason and plasterer (16), and hostler and shoemaker (9 each). The men included 247 former slaves, 550 “pure blacks,” 430 men of “mixed blood,” 477 men who were literate, 319 men who could read and write, 52 church-members, and 219 married men. The men had one thing decidedly in common. They entered camp uniformly poor and ragged. (Smith, John 29)

These were men who, in short, were locked into lower paid occupations, and most certainly found the financial benefits of military service as the opportunity to exit the army better than they had entered.

Many of the former bondsmen of the 55th were most likely entering freedom with little to no money to start a new life. There were many married men, many with families back home desperately awaiting financial assistance. Smith notes that as far back as August of 1862, Stanton began promising new black recruits that they would be paid the same as white soldiers. White recruits were paid \$13 per month and given a \$3 clothing allowance. However, Stanton's promises were not aligned with the War Department's policy and parameters set forth by the Militia Act of July 1862. According to Smith, the "framers of the act had assumed—erroneously—that African Americans who joined the army would serve not as soldiers but as laborers and, accordingly, should be paid at a lower rate than whites" (49). As outlined by the Militia Act of July 1862, black volunteers would be paid \$10 per month with a \$3 deduction for clothing to be paid to the federal government. Black soldiers from the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments were just two of several regiments that enlisted under the pay promises Stanton made. In May 1863, Stanton formed the Bureau of Colored Troops and attempted to make good on his promise by requesting that the War Department make an exception to the pay policy set forth by the Militia Act of 1862. Black men were not being recruited for labor but for military service. His request was denied. The following month, just as the last few men were being mustered into the 55th Massachusetts USCT, the War Department enforced the unequal pay for black soldiers.

Understandably, black soldiers of the USCT were disheartened by the decision. Members of the 54th and 55th were angry and offended to the point of action. They collectively made the decision on their first step in protesting the military's position, and refused any pay as long as it remained unequal. Members of the 55th faithfully and

dutifully continued training at Camp Meigs until “July 21, 1863 when orders were received for the 55th Massachusetts to embark for Newbern, North Carolina” (Dhalle). While they were indeed a battle tested regiment—most well known for the Battle of Honey Hill—the men of the 55th made a larger impact off the battlefield when they protested and petitioned against unequal pay. Soldiers from the 55th embarked on a campaign for equal pay by protesting unfair wages, making the public aware of their points of contention by writing to local and national newspapers, and finally by writing protest letters to military officials and political figures. As tensions heightened and the threat of more forceful actions loomed near, seventy-four members of the 55th’s Co. D penned a petition to President Lincoln requesting they be paid equally and retroactively, while also threatening a mass resignation if he failed to grant their request. The protest letter by the men of Co. D exhibits the structural and stylistic conventions of the traditional petition while employing many of its tonal and hyper-formal markers. It also exposes how their protest was rooted in manhood, dignity, and honor—not money.

The events leading up to Co. D’s protest letter had been unfolding since the War Department’s disappointing announcement regarding pay. The soldiers and the black community that supported their service implored those in positions of authority to reconsider. In August 1863, Frederick Douglass—who had successfully recruited a good number of men in the 54th and 55th—spoke directly with President Lincoln about the inequity in pay. According to Douglass, as he relayed the details of his discourse, Lincoln believed:

the employment of colored troops at all was a great gain to the colored people—that the measure could not have been successfully adopted at the

beginning of the war, that the wisdom of making colored men soldiers was still doubted—that their enlistment was a serious offense to popular prejudice . . . that the fact they were not to receive the same pay as white soldiers seemed a necessary concession to smooth the way to their employment at all as soldiers, but that ultimately they would receive the same. (Douglass qtd in McPherson 201)

Believing pay equality to be in the near future, the men of the 54th and 55th decided they would refuse any pay until it was equal pay. This would initiate their protest against discriminatory pay while they honorably fulfilled their obligations to the military and their country.

The general feeling among soldiers and those who supported black soldiers centered on the selfless sacrifice black soldiers were making and how quickly they answered the nation's call for men to fill each state's quota of servicemen. Soldiers in the 54th and 55th, in particular, felt they had enlisted under false pretenses. For the 55th, the last five companies were filled with men who had, just weeks earlier, been promised pay that was on par with that received by white soldiers. Sensing the mounting tensions, in December 1863, Governor Andrew called for a special session with the state's legislature and brought forth a law that would allow the state to pay soldiers the difference they were due, thereby making their pay equal to their white counterparts. The law passed, and Governor Andrew promptly "sent one of his assistant adjutant generals to South Carolina to make the payments" (Bowen 56). The adjutant generals were met with soldiers who flatly and consistently refused the payments. Bowen writes, "as often as this sum was offered them, [they] refused to accept anything less than the soldier pay to

which they believed themselves entitled” (56). Accepting the state’s offer was an affront to their dignity and manhood. James M. Trotter, a sergeant in the 55th’s Co. K, wrote to the *Christian Recorder* in December 1863 to explain more clearly his and his comrades’ position. He writes:

A great deal has been said of the ungratefulness of the 55th. We would like to know if we must sacrifice our principle and manhood to keep our name from being slandered . . . We did not come to fight for money, for if we did, we might just as well have accepted the money that was offered us; we came not only to make men of ourselves, but of our other colored brothers at home, and we do highly honor the generous-hearted people of the State of Massachusetts for their prompt and generous offer. It is not the money of 1863 that we are looking at! It is the principle: that one that made us men when we enlisted. (Trotter qtd in McPherson 202)

Trotter’s letter captures the overarching theme of their protest. At the core was the issue of black manhood and the government’s refusal to acknowledge and respect black manhood, black service, and black sacrifice.

Trotter’s letter was not an anomaly. Editors from newspapers such as the *Christian Recorder* and the *Weekly Anglo-African* received an influx of letters from soldiers, recruiters, and citizens criticizing the additional racially discriminatory offense to which USCT troops were being subjected. In the meantime, Stanton went before Congress to requesting they pass some form of legislation that would honor the USCT’s request of their government. The soldiers remained hopeful that Congress would move swiftly, but strategic and calculated delays by Congressional Democrats began dashing

their hopes. Soldiers had lost their patience and were now moving from written requests to defiant action. In January 1864, one of the Civil War's most noted accounts of mutiny among the USCT occurred when Sgt. William Walker of the 3rd South Carolina Volunteers, "marched his company to his captain's tent and ordered them to stack arms and resign from an army that broke its contract with them," and was subsequently "court-martialed and shot for mutiny" (McPherson *The Negro's Civil War* 205). Stacking arms was a sign of mutiny, and the consequence for such an action was death.

Sgt. Walker's execution did very little to deter the Massachusetts regiments. By February 1864, tensions had risen to threats of mutiny within the 55th. In a letter to his parents, Capt. Charles P. Bowditch wrote about an "anonymous letter" that Col. Hallowell received "from one of our men saying that if we were not paid by the 1st of March, the men would stack arms and do no more duty, and that more than half the regiment were of that way of thinking" (qtd in McPherson 204). McPherson notes that shortly thereafter, one soldier from the 55th "was court martialed and shot" (205). In early June, two soldiers from the 54th were intentionally shot and wounded for insubordination. Colonel Hallowell recounted the incident acknowledging that, despite military protocol, which necessitated he shoot the two soldiers, "I believe them to be entirely right, morally" (Smith 51). At the time of this occurrence, the men in the 55th had gone more than a year without pay.

On June 16, 1864, seventy-four men from the 55th's Co. D stationed at Folly Island, South Carolina decided to make one last attempt for fair pay before resorting to a mass resignation. The soldiers, who had grown cynical of receiving any help from Congress, petitioned President Lincoln. The petition is organized into six major points

that include very brief explanations of their grievances and what they deem to be acceptable means of redress. Using only the title “Sir,” to begin, the members of Co. D are direct as they “Call the attention of your Excellency to our case” (qtd in Berlin *Freedom’s Soldiers* 124). In the first point, they inform the President that they “wase enlisted under the act of Congress of July 1861 Placing the officers non Commissioned officers & Privates of the volunteer forces in all Respects as to Pay on the footing of Similar Corps of the Regular Army” (125). This reference to the Confiscation Act of 1861 attempts to bring Lincoln’s attention to the manner in which the enslaved became “contraband” to aid the Union initially through labor and then through soldiering. While the Confiscation Act of 1861 and 1862 issued no dictate about equal pay, these were Congressional Acts that became the entry point for black volunteers and then enlistment. Even as contraband laborers, black men were to receive pay.

Yet, as the second point outlines, the men of Co. D had gone without pay for “thirteen months & a Great many longer” because the pay “Which the Paymaster Has Said was all He Had ever Been authorized to Pay Colored Troops,” was “not according to our enlistment,” thus explaining why the soldiers had both “Refused the Money” and any efforts the state of Massachusetts made to bring black soldiers’ pay on par with their white counterparts (qtd in Berlin *Freedom’s Soldiers* 124). The men of the 54th and 55th enlisted under the promises that Stanton made, that black soldiers would be paid \$13 along with a clothing allowance just as white soldiers had been paid. While Massachusetts’s state efforts were acknowledged, the principle of the protest was rooted in something more than money, a point more clearly conveyed in the third point. As the petitioners note, “we came to fight For Liberty justice &Equality . . . gifts we Prise more

Highly than Gold” (125). Despite the dire conditions black soldiers’ family members were living in back home, the acquisition of more money was not driving the letters, protests, and petitions. These men were serving “To Do Battle for God & Liberty” (125). Their request at this juncture was that their sacrifices be equally and honorably acknowledged.

These were sacrifices that the men of Co. D made all while continuing to perform their military duties. As noted in the fourth point, the men had “cheerfully & willingly” performed their duties for “over thirteen months” (qtd in Berlin 125). The use of the words “cheerfully” and “willingly” implies the dignified and honorable manner the men continued to serve in the face of such racially injurious actions. Men of the 55th had been subjected to excessive and grueling fatigue duties that blurred the lines of the purported reason for their enlistment. Yet, just one month earlier, the 55th had engaged in its first major battle on James Island in South Carolina, effectively invalidating the War Department’s claims that black volunteers were only laborers. The men refer the President to their regimental record that would prove their “conspicuous valor & endurance in Battle” (125). The 55th were a battle-tested regiment who had served, without interruption, all while receiving no pay.

For “these sufficient reasons,” asserted in the fifth point, the seventy-four members of Co. D were “Demanding our Pay from the Date of our inlistment & our imediate Discharge Having Been enlisted under False Prentence as the Past History of the Company will Prove” (qtd in Berlin *Freedom’s Soldiers* 125). The men have waged a hefty claim against the government. They have called into question the ethical recruiting practices, claiming deception to be the means by which black men were induced to enlist.

They have broken with the hyper-polite form most commonly used in a petition to an authority figure. The men in Co. D are not “asking,” “requesting,” or “praying” for Lincoln to make the right decision and grant their request; they are “demanding.” The choice to use “demanding” speaks to the petitioners’ frustration and anger that has been brewing since black soldiers began entering the Union’s ranks. According to Scott, “an individual who is affronted may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation, but when the insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product” (9). In the case of these soldiers, racially driven pay and rank policies have created the space and need for this collective product and the confrontation in the form of a petition.

For the men of Co. D, this petition to the President to seek redress is not the last step in resistance and protest. In the sixth and final point, the men—returning to a more formal tone and a formulaic phrase frequently used in a petition—write: “Be it further Resolved that if imediate steps are not taken to Relieve us we will Resort to more stringent mesures” (qtd in Berlin 125). The men have clearly drawn a line in the sand and have made quite clear how they will proceed. This is not a threat; it is a promise that allows cathartic release and psychological empowerment for these men. Petitions of grievance that sought specific redress often came with a “sense of personal release, satisfaction, pride, and elation – despite the actual risks often run” (Scott 208). Yet the gains of self-respect, dignity, and manhood outweighed any other liability, whether real or imagined. Even if Lincoln did not make good on their demands, there was a sense of psychological empowerment among the men of Co. D inherent in the expression of displeasure and their ability to collectively communicate that to the highest military

official—the Commander-in-Chief. There was most likely additional satisfaction knowing that other regiments were also poised to take further action. The men of the 55th were not alone in their efforts at protest and redress.

Returning to a common closing formula used in epistolary military correspondence, the men write, “We have the Honor to Remin your Obedint Servants The members of Co D” (qtd in Berlin 125). Being forceful in their notions of what appropriate redress would be does not force the petitioners from breaking completely with the rules of etiquette in both military and petitioned correspondence. Yet, the use of the word “obedient” signifies more of an adherence to learned epistolary phrases than a state of mind and being. In fact, according to military custom, the men were breaking the chain of command by petitioning the President instead of their direct commander. They were not displaying obedience by demanding instead of requesting. They were, in their tone in the fifth point, breaking from obedience. By stating there were more serious steps to be taken should they not receive immediate redress, the soldiers of Co. D set the expectation of a response in some form.

They did not have to wait very long for a reply. Unbeknownst to the men as they crafted their six-point petition on June 16, just one day earlier on June 15, 1864, Congress passed a law to grant black soldiers equal pay, but not without some condition. The newly passed law “made retroactive to January 1, 1864, for all black soldiers, and retroactive to the time of enlistment for those Negroes who had been free on April 19, 1861,” creating a distinction between the definition of a freeman and a freedman (McPherson *The Negro’s Civil War* 206). Those soldiers who had been enslaved prior to the Emancipation were defined as freedmen, and those who had been free on or before

April 19, were freemen. This stipulation sought to divide black men and place more value on the life of a freeman than a freedman. In the case of those freedmen who had escaped enslavement for the purpose of joining, quite logically there remained a feeling of injustice. Aware of the impact this clause would create, Col. Hallowell, who had moved from the 55th to the 54th, created an oath to circumvent the stipulation. His oath, also called the “Quaker Oath” read: “You do solemnly swear that you owed no man unrequited labor on or before the 19th day of April, 1861. So help you God” (206). The oath would be used by the 55th and adopted by quite a few other Northern regiments. At last, the men of the 55th would be rewarded for their steadfast protest efforts.

Unfortunately, they would have to wait a bit longer to receive the pay the law had set forth. In early October 1864, the men of the 55th received their pay. Their brother regiment received theirs just three days earlier on September 28th (Bowen 56). Sgt. James D. Ruffin of the 55th's Company F wrote a letter to his sister-in-law shortly after the men received their pay. Describing the scene as a “glorious celebration,” Ruffin wrote, “There was a procession, then a mass meeting where speeches of various gentlemen were made, and readings of resolutions to be published in the papers. In the evening we had a Grand Supper” (McPherson 207). Although the men celebrated the occasion, they were also keenly aware of the devastating impact their loved ones felt as they waited sixteen months for financial relief. The 55th is reported to have sent via Adams Express Company “more than \$60,000 to their families and friends” (Bowen 56).⁶³ For the men of the 55th this was quite possibly the sweetest victory.

⁶³ “During the Civil War Adams Express Company initially acted as paymaster for *both* the Union and Confederate armies. Later, it set up a separate wholly owned company, Southern Express, to handle payments to Southern troops. Reportedly, at least one slave was shipped north to Philadelphia in a box as a way for his master to free him” (“The Express Companies”).

The 55th dutifully served for the remainder of their enlistment. On February 17, 1865, they were among the first Union troops to march into Charleston, South Carolina after Confederate troops had vacated the city. Col. Bowditch attempts to describe the setting:

Words would fail to describe the scene which those who witnessed it will never forget, —the welcome given to a regiment of colored troops by their people redeemed from slavery. The few white inhabitants left in the town were either alarmed or indignant, and generally remained in their houses; but the colored people turned out en masse . . . The glory and the triumph of this hour may be imagined, but can never be described. It was one of those occasions which happen but once in a lifetime, to be lived over in memory for ever. (qtd in McPherson 240)

With their dignity restored, sacrifices acknowledged, and services commended, the 55th remained in South Carolina until September 1865, when they were mustered out.

The men from the 55th's Co. D took part in the protest for fair wages and used the petition tradition to their advantage. By using the protest tradition that northern black activists heavily relied upon during the Revolutionary era to enact change, these soldiers showed impressive organizational and epistolary skills. The familiar phrases, terms of address, and the structural components of the petition are quite telling. The decision to use the petition before engaging in a mutinous rebellion highlights the familiarity these soldiers had with how to navigate the shoals of resistance effectively. Resistance among the 55th took a number of forms. The refusal to accept the money offered, the letters sent to the military's high-ranking officials, the organized stacking of arms, and the petitions

written to the President were all used to resist and to define what black manhood looked like on and off the battlefield. Their collective resistance and the success therein were the assertion and confirmation of black manhood.

The letters by Chaplain Garland H. White, Captain Robert H. Isabelle, and the members of Company D of the 55th show how black men used the written protest tradition as a tool to assert their manhood. At every turn, the government and the nation struggled with its acceptance of black manhood. White wanted the opportunity to serve his country as a recruiter and a chaplain, raising regiments of black men and providing spiritual aid in their journey to true liberation. Isabelle desired the right to have his rank recognized and honored and would settle for nothing short of that. The members of the 55th's Co. D forced the government's hand in their quest for true equality. Each of these men combined the characteristics of the petition and the pamphlet with the letter to create an epistolary genre that spoke quite clearly and sometimes forcefully about the importance of asserting black manhood. It was the manhood that had been ignored while black men labored without pay in the fields. It was the same manhood that was called upon to aid in the preservation of the Union. Delays, status distinctions, discriminatory pay and military practices were all in direct response to the jarring reality of the function of black manhood in America.

The Civil War created an anomalous space for an epistolary genre that centered on what it was to assert black manhood during a time between bondage and freedom. The letters in this chapter represent but a small sampling of men who merged the petitioning and pamphleteering traditions to usher in a new epistolary genre, a genre written by black

men, about black men, and ultimately for the advancement of black men. These black men would leave the battlefield to enter their communities as leaders and change agents. From the letters in this chapter we see how the paper protest tradition was yet another way black soldiers showed their natural manhood.

What was it to be a black man in America in the nineteenth century? The letters of Alonzo Reed, Tillman Valentine, and Spottswood Rice reveal a black masculine ideal rooted in hetero-patriarchal concerns for family. To be a black man in the nineteenth century was to seize the opportunities of masculine performance—to fight, to protect, to write. These men were writing their masculine identity into existence and challenging notions held about black manhood. They were reporting and transcribing their psychological, physical, and spiritual journeys to freedom and self-discovery. They were fighting for their families and their country. For William H. Johnson, *A Colored Man*, and Charles Singer, nineteenth-century black masculinity was rooted in an early black nationalist identity and a notion of the divine “chosenness” of black people. Their letters make clear the importance of military service to the ideas of revolutionary black nationalism. The Civil War provided black men an opportunity to manifest their God-granted destiny in the fight for black liberation and black ascension. The letters of Garland White, Robert Hamlin Isabelle, and the seventy-four men of the 55th Massachusetts’s Co. D portray clearly how nineteenth-century black manhood was firmly rooted in the opportunity and ability to protest, to vocalize discontent, and to effect change. It was to assert proudly and unflinchingly oneself into the public sphere, to write oneself into history, to counter the fictitious and stereotypical narrative, and to express freely the history of black existence, black hopes, and black dreams.

Through the sampling of letters, “We Showed Our Natural Manhood” reveals how a nineteenth-century black male epistolary tradition was born. The very nature of war created an epistolary tradition that was rooted in masculine identity, black nationalist ideology, and the early northern black protest tradition. In the fight for personal freedom and black liberation, these letters reveal how the events both on and off the battlefield during the Civil War allowed for black masculine performance that altered the course of history. In following the lives of many of these soldiers after their service, we see how black masculine performance on the battlefield and within the service was harnessed, as black soldiers became black community leaders, activists, and politicians. Their letters leave to us a very clear notion of how black manhood operated on both the individual and collective sense over the course of the Civil War. It is this epistolary tradition left behind for us that quite clearly and beautifully documents the many ways these soldiers and the hundreds of thousands of other United States Colored Troops rose up during the most critical moment in our nation’s history and showed the nation their natural manhood.

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