

# *Invisible Men: Blacks and the U.S. Army in the Mexican War*

By

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MARGARET Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* had its share of interpretive distortions regarding mid-nineteenth-century America, but it also picked up on a few aspects of the historical record that are often overlooked. When the recently widowed Scarlett O'Hara arrives at the Atlanta railroad station early in the Civil War, she encounters Uncle Peter, a servant about whom she had been apprised by her late husband: "He went through all the Mexican campaigns with Father, nursed him when he was wounded—in fact, he saved his life."<sup>1</sup> In alluding to the participation of American blacks in the Mexican War, Mitchell showed her familiarity with something that has not only eluded scholars of black history, but even specialists in the black military experience. While historians have devoted massive amounts of print to blacks in the Revolution, War of 1812, Seminole War, Civil War and even the peacetime pre-Civil War military establishment, they have virtually ignored the presence of blacks in American armies south of the Rio Grande during what Robert W. Johannsen has emphasized as the nation's first foreign war.<sup>2</sup> Recent studies perpetuate the oversight: Bernard C. Nalty's *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* lacks even an index entry for the Mexican War, while Martin Binkin and Mark J. Eitelberg's *Blacks and the Military* skips from the War of 1812 to the Civil War without mentioning the war with Mexico. The *Encyclopedia of Black America* parries the issue by suggesting that "[s]ervice by Afro-Americans in the Mexican War was apparently limited to those who served as crews of Navy vessels on duty off the Mexican coast and in California."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York, 1936), 143-44.

<sup>2</sup>Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas* (New York, 1985), 12.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York, 1986); Martin Binkin and Mark J. Eitelberg, *Blacks and the Military* (Washington, 1982), 13; W. A. Low and Virgil A. Clift, eds., *Encyclopedia of Black*

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The rationale for this gap in black history is that Afro-Americans, prior to the conflict with Mexico, had been excluded from U.S. Army service. Although the navy imposed a five percent quota system on free black enlistments (and prohibited any slaves from being “entered for the naval service or to form a part of the Complement of any Vessel of War of the United States”), the army, by virtue of a February 18, 1820 order and General Regulations issued in 1821, excluded *all* blacks.<sup>4</sup> State militias also refused to admit blacks. Delaware’s volunteer militia act, passed on the eve of the Mexican War, limited membership in all prospective branches—artillery, infantry, cavalry, dragoons, riflemen and grenadiers—to “free white male citizens.”<sup>5</sup> Since the closest blacks came to soldiering in Mexico were as servants of whites, they could hardly merit attention. After all, they did not affect the course of campaigns or battles, and servant duty in war was something of a universal experience: what was true of one conflict should be true of others. After dwelling on the War of 1812 for four pages in his synthesis of the black American military experience, Jack D. Foner dismissed the Mexican War service in a brief statement: “Blacks served in the Mexican War only as body servants. Pre-Civil-War America saw the black as cowardly and childlike, with little fighting ability.”<sup>6</sup>

One can hardly criticize scholars for ignoring participation in a war in which black Americans themselves seemed to take little pride. A leading scholar of the Negro Civil War experience explained that mid-nineteenth-century black Americans, when they urged that Union armies be opened to Negro enlistments, used the Revolution and War of 1812 to illustrate black fighting ability. This slighting of the black experience in Mexico presents problems, and not just because there is evidence that a scattering of American Negroes did participate as soldiers. Rather it leaves those blacks who served in *any* capacity during

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*America* (New York, 1981), 834; Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History* (New York, 1974), 30. The categories in Lenwood G. Davis and George Hill, eds., *Blacks in the American Armed Forces, 1776-1983: A Bibliography* (Westport, 1985), skip from “Blacks in the War of 1812” to “Blacks in the Civil War,” though the heading “Blacks in the American West” does include an article on Jacob Dodson, a black who served in the Mexican War.

<sup>4</sup>Harold D. Langley, “The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service—1789-1860,” *Journal of Negro History* 52 (October 1967): 279-80; Foner, *Blacks and the Military*, 27. See also Abel P. Upshur to John White, 5 August 1842 and J. C. Spencer to White, 5 August 1842, in “The Negro in the Military Service of the United States,” Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, Record Group [RG] 94, National Archives, M858. These letters show that some slaves served in the navy as personal servants of officers, and that there were hundreds of blacks, primarily slaves, serving in the U.S. army prior to the Mexican War as laborers, dock hands, cooks, coopers, carpenters and in a variety of other capacities.

<sup>5</sup>*Laws of the State of Delaware, 1845* (Dover, 1845), 74.

<sup>6</sup>Foner, *Blacks and the Military*, 22-25, 30.

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the Mexican War as erased from the record as Ralph Ellison's unacknowledged "Invisible Man." Akin to black cowboys in Texas and black miners in the California gold rush prior to their discovery by modern scholars, it implies that there is no story worth telling, no social history worth relating, about Negroes in the land campaigns of the Mexican War.<sup>7</sup> This study demonstrates that there is indeed a history to be written about blacks in the Mexican War.

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The black experience in the Mexican War derived from the desire of most American army officers to have servants attend to their needs and comforts south of the border. This was true of regulars prior to the actual outbreak of hostilities. Ulysses S. Grant, stationed at the New Orleans barracks in July 1845, wrote his fiancée Julia Dent upon getting orders for the Rio Grande frontier, "I have a black boy to take along as my servant that has been in Mexico. He speaks English, Spanish and French. I think he may be very useful where we are going." Following the large influx of volunteers after the outbreak of war, the selection and procurement of a sufficient number of competent servants constituted one of the most pressing responsibilities of newly commissioned officers prior to departure for the seat of war. Colonel William B. Campbell of the First Tennessee Volunteers wrote to his wife from Nashville on June 3, 1846 that he would "get me a free negro here for a servant," only to hear from his uncle several days later, "I fear in your hurry you have not attended to one very important matter. Have you provided yourself with a good servant? This is all important. You ought to have two, but one will answer, if a good one." Likewise, Captain James Lawson Kemper, commissioned assistant quartermaster, recorded the following in his diary about an interview with Colonel John Francis Hamtrack of the First Virginia Volunteer Regiment: "Was sorry to find Col. so great a stickler for the minutiae of military regulations as to equipments. He thinks it vastly important that I should be looking after spurs, sword, servant, and all that." Several days later Kemper went "over to Pourtsmouth in search of a servant," was unsuccessful, but eventually engaged one named Peter. While the hiring of servants was generally an individual concern, on occasion servants were employed on behalf of whole units. A Kentucky officer in Zachary Taylor's army, for instance, wrote the editor of the *Louisville Morning Courier* in July 1846: "We

<sup>7</sup>James M. McPherson, ed., *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York, 1965), 162-63; Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947; reprint, New York, 1982), 3; Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (New York, 1965); Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven, 1977).

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brought a negro man with us from New Orleans. We pay him \$20 a month."<sup>8</sup>

Many officers took several servants with them across the Rio Grande. Colonel Campbell wound up procuring two servants. General Taylor used four, while General William J. Worth employed three. Generals Winfield Scott and William O. Butler each had four servants. Federal statutes established a sliding scale in which one could have extra servants the higher his rank. Captains and lieutenants of infantry and artillery, for instance, were restricted to one servant, colonels and majors two, brigadier generals three, and major generals four. Since the federal government reimbursed officers for servant hire (\$7-\$8 per month per servant), provided clothing allowances (\$2.50 per month per servant) and extra rations for servants, and mandated that company officers could only detail soldiers as private waiters when "hired servants" could not "be obtained," there was every incentive for officers to arrange for a maximum retinue. Few officers failed to meet their servant quotas.<sup>9</sup>

Blacks, therefore, must have been a part of every contingent of American troops bound for the war, from its early stages prior to Congress' declaration of war through its conclusion. Theodore Talbot, who joined John C. Frémont's famous third exploring expedition of 1845, noted that Frémont's mess included "a Negro," while John Kenley, aboard the transport *Alexandria* in July 1847, found himself in a detachment of "eleven officers and one hundred and ninety-eight enlisted men, with some half-dozen servants." Not all Mexican War

<sup>8</sup>U. S. Grant to Julia Dent, 6 July 1845, in John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 14 vols. (Carbondale, 1967-1985), 1:49. William B. Campbell to Fanny Campbell, 3 June 1846, and David Campbell to W. Campbell, 12 June 1846, Campbell Family Papers, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; James Lawson Kemper Diary, 8, 12 and 15 February 1847, in Robert R. Jones, ed., "The Mexican War Diary of James Lawson Kemper," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 74 (October 1966): 417, 419, 425. W. P. F. to Walter N. Haldeman, 26 July 1846, Louisville *Morning Courier*, 21 August 1846. See also Sylvester Churchill Journal, 25 July 1846, Library of Congress [LC].

<sup>9</sup>Vouchers of: W. Campbell, 1 November 1846 to 31 March 1847, File Box 1176; Zachary Taylor, 1-30 November 1846, and William J. Worth, 1-31 December 1846, File Box 1175; Winfield Scott, 1 January to 28 February 1847, and William O. Butler, 1 November 1846 to 31 January 1847, File Box 1187, Records of the General Accounting Office, Records of the Paymaster, RG 217. "Pay and allowances to officers in the army, 1812, 1820, 1838, and present time," *Senate Document 246*, 29th Cong., 1st Sess., (Serial 474); John F. Callan, ed., *The Military Laws of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1863), 276; U.S. War Department, *General Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1841* (Washington, 1841), 18. Whether the servant reimbursement rate was \$7 or \$8 depended on the branch of service, because it was indexed at the pay of privates, which varied by branch. Thomas M. Exley, comp., *A Compendium of the Pay of the Army from 1785 to 1888* (Washington, 1888), 56. Prewar stipulations about servant privileges in the regular army were extended to the volunteers by Congress' initial war act. *U.S. Statutes at Large* 9 (1846): 10.

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servants, by any means, were black. William Campbell reassured his uncle that he had hired a "kind & attentive" "Irish servant." Major Philip Barbour found a "Mexican boy" at Matamoros who would "come to me tomorrow at \$4.00 a month." Talbot recorded that a Chinook Indian accompanied Frémont. Many whites, such as R. C. Reeder, undoubtedly a relation of his employer Lieutenant Thomas A. Reeder of the Arkansas Cavalry, also turn up in the record. Still, the percentage and total number of black servants is striking. One group of army pay vouchers lists 192 private servants; of these 34 are described as "black," 17 "slave," 59 "dark," 6 "mulatto," 4 "Negro," and 4 "copper." While some servants went undesignated by race, it appears that the great majority, if not two-thirds, of all Mexican War servants were Negroes.<sup>10</sup>

Most Mexican War black servants were male, but a sprinkling of Negro females, such as the mulatto "Blanche" who worked for Lieutenant P. P. Peel of the Second Indiana Volunteers, do turn up in the record. The records show that northerners also used large numbers of black servants. Pay vouchers for officers of the New York volunteers reveal that seven of fifteen servants were Negroes, and not all of them were drawn from the nation's free black community. One pay voucher for example, from A. G. Whiteside, Second Illinois Volunteers, requested a \$7 reimbursement for his slave named Samuel, who served with him at Buena Vista.<sup>11</sup>

Some blacks in America's Mexican War army also served as soldiers. At least one mulatto slave defied army regulations and enlisted, using the government's call for volunteers as a cover to cross the color line into temporary freedom. On April 1, 1848, Colonel Henry Wilson,

<sup>10</sup>Theodore Talbot to his mother, 25 June 1845, in Robert V. Hine and Savoie Lottinville, eds., *Soldier in the West: Letters of Theodore Talbot During His Services in California, Mexico, and Oregon, 1845-53* (Norman, Okla., 1972), 23. John R. Kenley, *Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, War with Mexico, in the Years 1846-7-8* (Philadelphia, 1873), 279. W. Campbell to D. Campbell, 3 July 1846, Campbell Papers; voucher of Thomas A. Reeder, 1 January to 31 March 1847, File Box 1188, RG 217. The National Archives contain twenty-one boxes of paymasters' vouchers for the Mexican War. Civilians connected with the American forces, such as treaty negotiator Nicholas Trist, also brought black servants to Mexico. And at least one black civilian—a Galveston free mulatto barber, who was later murdered in Matamoros—voluntarily followed the army. Kenneth M. Johnson, "Nicholas Trist: Treaty-Maker," in *The Mexican War: Changing Interpretations*, ed. Odie B. Faulk and Joseph A. Stout Jr. (Chicago, 1973), 189. *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, 24 April 1847.

<sup>11</sup>Vouchers of P. P. Peel, 1-30 April 1847, A. G. Whiteside, 1-28 February 1847, File Box 1188, and vouchers of officers of the New York Volunteers, File Box 1175, RG 217. For another northern officer who had a slave servant, see the voucher for Lieutenant S. S. Condon, 1 January to 31 March 1847, File Box 1188, RG 217.

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commanding the Department of Vera Cruz, drummed John Taylor of the Voltigeurs out of the service with a dishonorable discharge when it was discovered that the former slave had tricked a U.S. recruiting officer into believing he was white. Dick Green, servant of Charles Bent, the American appointed governor of occupied New Mexico, was allowed to shoulder arms after Bent's assassination, and would later suffer a wound as a member of Colonel Sterling Price's command at the battle of El Embudo.<sup>12</sup>

Countless other blacks, because they were expected to hold the reins of their masters' horses, found themselves risking their lives in battle even though not formally enrolled as soldiers. Lieutenant Dabney Maury, remembering his wound at Cerro Gordo, retained this very image many years later when he recalled how he had appropriated another lieutenant's horse, being held by a Negro named Tom, to reach a surgeon in the rear: "I was a sorry spectacle, covered with blood, pale and faint, one man leading my horse, while Tom . . . glad enough to get off from that field, kept close to me with a flask of brandy. . . ." Even servants well behind the battle lines faced danger. General John A. Quitman learned after the fighting for Monterrey on September 21, 1846, that Harry Nichols, his body servant, had been under heavy enemy fire. "He declares," Quitman wrote home, "while far in the rear of my Brigade, that the Mexicans kept shooting cannon balls at *him*. Sometimes he avoided them by dodging, sometimes by jumping & sometimes by lying flat on the ground." Quitman's daughter wrote back that Colonel Jefferson Davis' servant had returned to Mississippi with similar accounts. "[H]e says, the day of the battle, he was so often *aimed* at, & to avoid the bullet[s] & bombs that were flying about as thick as hail, he was obliged to *dodge so much*, that when night arrived he was so sore & stiff that he could scarcely walk. . . ." War correspondents on occasion posted jocular accounts of servant cowardice, calculated to appeal to the racial stereotypes of their readers. "Truth" in the New York *Spirit of the Times* told about Bill, the "big, two fisted negro" from Louisville who left fellow Kentucky "darkies" boasting of the Mexicans he intended to kill, only to cower behind a Veracruz sand hill the first time he heard a rifle crack. A New Orleans *Daily Delta* reporter recounted how two "niggers" had taken precipitate flight at Buena Vista, one of them seeking refuge in an army bake oven! Whether or not these particular tales were apocryphal, accounts of servant bravery overshadow them. One black servant even seems to have sacrificed his life to save his master. According to a Washington *Union* correspondent,

<sup>12</sup>Orders No. 125, 1 April 1848, and Orders—Special Orders, Department of Vera Cruz, 1847-1848, RG 94. "Documents from War Department," *SED 1*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess. (Serial 503), 526.

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David, the slave of an army captain, threw himself in front of an enemy lance at Huamantla, and died within minutes.<sup>13</sup>

During battles, black body servants fulfilled an important function by bringing their masters the sustenance necessary to keep fighting under exhausting conditions. Lieutenant Raphael Semmes of the navy, who accompanied American ground forces during the Mexico City campaign, observed that General Worth's slave/servant, Abram, would always turn up "near the general, toward the close of an engagement, with a basket of refreshments on his arm." According to one of John Quitman's daughters, after the assault on Mexico City's Belén gate her father felt so obligated to his slave/servant Harry Nichols for providing him a bowl of chicken broth following a day without any food, that he henceforth rewarded Harry with a five-dollar gold piece on the battle's anniversary.<sup>14</sup>

Of course camp duty and other non-combatant assignments accounted for most Afro-American service in the Mexican War. Servants often cooked for their masters, and it would appear they often were hired or taken to Mexico expressly for that purpose. In September 1846 Quitman's daughter recorded: "Cousin Mary wrote to me that you had purchased a cook in New Orleans, . . . I hope that he succeeds better in making biscuit than Harry did." Black cooks also prepared a substantial share of the American army's campaign fare. In addition, servants performed an almost infinite variety of camp functions: they rubbed down horses, scoured Mexican markets for fresh fruit, solicited army physicians for Christmas rum and brandy for the troops, entertained the soldiers with song, and handled the washing and drying of clothing. Perhaps the description of the duties of the Kentucky servant mentioned in the Louisville *Morning Courier* best conveys the rhythm and context of Negro life in the Mexican War army: "His business is to wait on the Company officers . . . to cook for us & c. In short he is our man-of-all-work. We buy our provisions from the Sutler, and our man has his . . . chest in which he keeps them, together with his cooking utensils, table

<sup>13</sup>Dabney Herndon Maury, *Recollections of a Virginian in the Mexican, Indian, and Civil Wars* (New York, 1894), 36, 38. John A. Quitman to Eliza Quitman, 22 November 1846, and Louisa Quitman to J. Quitman, 29 December 1846, Quitman Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. New York *Spirit of the Times*, 17 April 1847; New Orleans *Daily Delta*, 2 June 1847; Washington *Union* correspondent quoted in New York *Herald*, 23 November 1847. Davis' servant was Jim Green, whose particular job had been horse care at Davis' Brierfield plantation. James T. McIntosh, ed., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, 5 vols. (Baton Rouge and London, 1971-1985), 3:95n.

<sup>14</sup>Raphael Semmes, *Service Afloat and Ashore During the Mexican War* (Cincinnati, 1851), 316. Rosalie Quitman Duncan, "Life of General John A. Quitman," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* 4 (1901): 421.

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ware, and other small articles." The same chest served as bed for this servant at night.<sup>15</sup>

Their contributions to the military in Mexico extended well beyond routine camp chores. En route to the war theater, blacks assigned to look after officers' baggage battled seasickness. On the march, Negro teamsters drove army wagons. After battle, they indeed established antecedents for the Uncle Peter fictional character by nursing the wounded. Thus Lieutenant Colonel Alexander K. McClung, hit by enemy fire at Monterrey, requested a week later that a private be assigned "to assist my servant in turning me over, and in lifting me out of bed." Second Lieutenant William M. Gardner, after taking a musket ball in the chest at Churubusco, was removed to a "small unoccupied house in San Angel, and left there in charge of Moses, my negro servant. . . ." Occasionally particular skills brought blacks unusual assignments. John C. Frémont took Jacob Dodson, a free black servant, on an 840-mile mission in California in 1847, because he needed Dodson's expertise with the lariat to lasso horses for mount changes. For at least one slave, war service terminated when he was assigned to accompany his dead master's corpse back home.<sup>16</sup>

Service with the American army in Mexico brought Negroes little relief from the prejudices, indignities and violence they suffered back in the states; American troops carried "nigger" jokes and the rest of their racist cultural baggage with them. Major Luther Giddings denigrated black servants with the Ohio Volunteers as the "sable descendants of Ham." Despite such ill treatment black servants *could* win appreciation for loyal service. George T. M. Davis, John Quitman's aide, recalled

<sup>15</sup>L. Quitman to J. Quitman, 18 September 1846, and J. Quitman to E. Quitman, 22 November 1846, 3 June 1847, Quitman Family Papers. J. B. Robertson, *Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico by a Member of "The Bloody-First"* (Nashville, Tenn., 1849), 96; Philip Gooch Ferguson diary, 13 August 1847, in Ralph P. Bieber, ed., *Marching with The Army of the West, 1846-1848* (Glendale, Calif., 1936), 312-13; Samuel G. French, *Two Wars: An Autobiography of Gen. Samuel G. French* (Nashville, 1901) 69-70. *Louisville Morning Courier*, 21 August 1846.

<sup>16</sup>J. Davis to Varina Howell Davis, 10 December 1846 in McIntosh, *Papers of Jefferson Davis* 3:94; George Rutledge Gibson journal, 9 July 1846, in Bieber, ed., *Journal of a Soldier Under Kearny and Doniphan, 1846-1847* (Glendale, Calif., 1935), 140; K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 152. J. Quitman to E. Quitman, 14 August 1846, Quitman Family Papers; Alexander K. McClung to J. Quitman, 1 October 1846, J. Quitman Papers, Mississippi State Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.; The Memoirs of Brigadier-General William Montgomery Gardner, United States Military Academy Library, West Point, N.Y., 31-33; G. M. Bergman, "The Negro Who Rode With Frémont in 1847," *Negro History Bulletin* 28 (November 1964): 31-32; James M. Guthrie, *Camp-Fires of the Afro-American* (Philadelphia, 1899), 230. Neal Harlow claims that Frémont only traveled 750 miles, and notes that Dodson gave out on the last day. Neal Harlow, *California Conquered: War and Peace on the Pacific, 1846-1850* (Berkeley, 1982), 255-61.



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later how Quitman's body servant Harry Nichols earned his "profound admiration and esteem" for "single-hearted devotion, watchfulness, and obedience to his master. . . . No more true, kind, generous and considerate heart ever beat in the breast of a white man," Davis believed, "than that which throbbed in good old Harry's." But perhaps more revealing than Davis' recollections was the court martial in Los Angeles of Dragoon Private Ed Cuneau for his refusal to take some horses out to pasture on grounds that he "would not be hurried, & drove like a Negro."

It is instructive to contrast the sentence of hanging which a U.S. military commission handed down to a Kentucky officer's free black servant for the rape of a Mexican woman, with the one-year imprisonment imposed on a white American accused of murdering an "American Mulatto man." In the first case, an army officer, troubled by whether justice could be achieved for a member of a "degraded and friendless race" surrounded by few "from whom he could expect either compassion or pity," provided defense counsel. The second lieutenant who carried out the actual execution years later expressed guilt about enforcing what may well have been an unjustified sentence and reflected that the incident had "completely destroyed" his appetite for Veracruz garrison duty.

I am not certain that I did not hang an innocent man, but my office was to obey orders, not to speculate as to the innocence or guilt of my prisoner, who had been convicted by a military court on the charges of having offered violence to a Mexican woman of low order.

Nor was the murder of the American mulatto at Puebla an isolated case. General Persifer F. Smith reported from the headquarters of the Louisiana brigade on July 9, 1846: "On the day after we arrived here . . . 1st Corporal William Winchester . . . shot Major Lyon's servant Samuel Venables a free man of color with a pistol & killed him. As the story is related by the witnesses it was an unprovoked murder." Other such incidents may have passed unreported. There is little reason to discredit J. B. Robertson's (First Tennessee Regiment) later reminiscence of the time a Texas Ranger at Camargo called a Negro a "darkie" and knocked him off his saddle into the San Juan River because the servant refused to apologize for spattering water on him. The servant, it turned out, belonged to none other than army commander Zachary Taylor. The Ranger, quick to recount the incident to Taylor before Taylor could say anything to him, boasted that he would have done it to the "darkie" even had "it been Old Zack's negro himself." Taylor, disarmed by the "half compliment to himself," decided not to punish the Ranger.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>New York *Herald*, 8 March 1847; [Major Luther Giddings], *Sketches of the Campaign in Northern Mexico in Eighteen Hundred Forty-Six and Seven by an Officer of the First Regiment of Ohio Volunteers* (New York, 1853), 110; George T. M. Davis,

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Everyday hazards incident to military life only compounded the racial hostility blacks encountered. Disease killed several times more regulars and volunteers than did battle wounds. Servants who received less clothing, shelter, food and medical care, surely suffered a proportionate number of deaths. No statistics about Mexican War mortality for blacks are available, but Mexican War manuscripts mention sick Negroes and Afro-Americans who met a variety of misfortunes. Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, commander of the Third Infantry Regiment under Zachary Taylor at Corpus Christi, Texas, recorded in his diary just prior to the war: "One of the most terrific storms I ever knew. Two valuable colored servants struck by lightning." Private J. W. H. Tipton penned in his journal about the crossing of a river during the Tampico campaign, "there was a Molato Negro driving a wagon: and as he was pulling up the Bank the bolt pin broke off[f] of his wagon he dis Mounted from his Saddle Horse and got in the wagon to throw the lode out: there being a loded Pistol liing in the wagon: he picked it up and it went off and shot him through the left hand with three balls." General Quitman wrote home from Monterrey during some cold weather in December 1846, "Poor Harry has been very sick—chill & fever with tendency to inflammation of the brain." Servants suffered scorpion bites at Tampico, and dropped from heatstroke on the march from Camargo to Cerralvo. Should it be any wonder that Captain Robert Buchanan of the Fourth Infantry was instructed to report in his next letter home whether "the Black Boy you took with you from W[ashington]. is still with you, as his Parents are anxious"? The separation from loved ones, and the anxieties and homesickness it engendered, no doubt constituted the highest price that many American blacks paid for their contribution to the Mexican War.<sup>18</sup>

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*Autobiography of the Late Col. Geo. T. M. Davis: Captain and Aide-De-Camp Scott's Army of Invasion (Mexico), From Posthumous Papers* (New York, 1891), 136-37, 294. Gardner Memoirs, 16-17; Orders No. 35, Orders Book, Seventh New York Volunteer Regiment, Jonathan D. Stevenson Papers, New York Historical Society, New York City; General Orders No. 101, 9 April 1847, Headquarters of the Army in Mexico, and General Orders No. 245, 3 August 1847 [copy], Regimental Order, Letter and Casualty Book, First Infantry, New York, RG 94. Robertson, *Reminiscences*, 112-14. Some of the volunteers may have avenged the hanging of the black servant at Veracruz, since he had been attached to the Tennessee Regiment, by assaulting a couple of Mexican civilians and killing one of them. See Robert Anderson to his wife, 11 April 1847, in Eba Anderson Lawton, comp., *An Artillery Officer in the Mexican War, 1846-1847: Letters of Robert Anderson* (New York, 1911), 128.

<sup>18</sup>Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York, 1974), 397; Ethan Allen Hitchcock diary, 24 August 1845, in W. A. Croffut, ed., *Fifty Years in Camp and Field: Diary of Major-General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, U.S.A.* (New York, 1909), 197. J. W. H. Tipton journal, 30 December 1846, microfilm edition, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville; J. Quitman to E. Quitman, 10 December 1846, Quitman Family

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Still, for some blacks the Mexican War provided opportunity. The deprivations of military service compelled white soldiers and black servants to mix together at cockfights and other social amusements, and the inevitable result was a temporary democratization of race relations. Private William S. Johnson, participating in the occupation of Puebla in July 1847, noted how American-run betting operations had sprung up in the city, and that he had seen “Commissioned Officers among Army followers, Teamsters, Soldiers and *Negroes!* All engaged in gambling together. . . .” Black army servants in the Mexican War (like black American soldiers in World War I France) also discovered that foreign women had greater racial tolerance of them than did white females back in the States. In occupied Santa Fe, black servants “took the shine” at their own fandangos and, in the eyes of local inhabitants, outclassed their employers and masters. New York *Herald* correspondent “MEXICANA,” reporting on a bash which General Stephen Watts Kearny threw at the Governor’s House, commented it was “astonishing” how “Mexican women prefer attending the parties of gentlemen of color, to any others that are given.”<sup>19</sup>

Economic opportunities for blacks supplemented social betterment. An American sheet in Mexico City announced that one “Harry,” previously a cook for General Worth, was running a restaurant in the capital and guaranteeing “the best Suppers ever given, since the arrival of the American army.” Similarly, two black servants with American forces invading California later secured positions as cooks at Sutter’s Fort and the Monterey jail.<sup>20</sup>

From the outset of the war, blacks, capitalizing on Mexico’s lack of slavery, fled to enemy lines. In a letter dated April 14, 1846, from the army’s camp on the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros, *Spirit of the Times* correspondent Captain William S. Henry reported that “three or four of the officers’ slaves have run away.” Observing the same phenomenon, Captain Philip N. Barbour wondered whether fellow officers might be compelled to switch to white servants if the army remained on the border much longer. Military penetration of Mexico only multiplied escape opportunities. Raphael Semmes mused that

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Papers. Kenley, *Memoirs*, 228; [Giddings], *Sketches*, 110. Carolina V. M. Frye to Robert C. Buchanan, 15 September 1846, Robert C. Buchanan Papers, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

<sup>19</sup>New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, 31 October 1847. William S. Johnson diary, 17 July 1847, in John Hammond Moore, ed., “Private Johnson Fights the Mexicans, 1847-1848,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 67 (October 1966): 218; John Taylor Hughes diary, 15 January 1847, in William Elsey Connelley, ed., *Doniphan’s Expedition and the Conquest of New Mexico and California* (Topeka, 1907), 92. New York *Herald*, 25 January 1847.

<sup>20</sup>Mexico City *Daily American Star*, 24 December 1847. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 7-8.

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William Worth's "faithful fellows" might have departed "without let or hindrance" "at all times" during the Mexico City campaign, and there is scattered evidence of fugitives throughout the war record. In fact, growing publicity about the Mexican escape hatch may have enticed a few slaves who remained in the states. "The steamers Palmetto and Edith arrived at Vera Cruz on the 8th inst . . .," noted the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* on June 17, 1847. "On the Palmetto a lady is said to have arrived from New Orleans in search of a runaway slave. Her pursuit is represented as successful."<sup>21</sup>

The question becomes not whether army slaves chose to run away, but rather why more of them did not. The fact that references to runaways in reminiscences, letters and war correspondents' reports are scattered indicates that the overwhelming proportion of slaves remained with their masters, a curious pattern in light of the epidemic of fugitive incidents which marked the American Civil War just a decade and a half later. Perhaps slaves were less informed of opportunities in Mexico than in the American North. Maybe the language barrier deterred slave runaways. Officers/masters may have had effective ways of imposing camp control over their slaves. Perhaps slaves shared their masters' cultural biases regarding Mexican civilization; Semmes contended that slaves observed the degraded condition of Mexican peons and concluded that they were better off as gentlemen's servants than consorting as free men with "Indian trash." Mixed reports from fugitives returning to American camps, however, probably had more to do with giving potential runaways pause. Correspondent Henry noted that a major's "boy" returned to Taylor's army with accounts of having been treated with "the most distinguished consideration" behind enemy lines and offered "the first seat at the table, and the best bed in the house," but William M. Gardner reported that his Moses, who took leave in Mexico City encountered a less open-armed reception. "I never could get much out of him about his period of freedom," Gardner later recalled, "but he certainly looked both hungry and seedy when he returned." For their part, officers may have made subtle adjustments in the master/slave dialogue while in Mexico to offset temptations. "It would amuse you to hear the difference in the *tone* of orders to the slaves, produced by two or three degrees of latitude," Henry related. "It's now, in the *softest* coaxing manner, 'Willis, boy, have you got dinner cooked? Get it as

<sup>21</sup>New York *Spirit of the Times*, 16 May 1846, 10 July 1847; Philip N. Barbour journal, 4 April 1846, in Rhoda van Bibber Tanner Doubleday, ed., *Journals of the Late Brevet Major Philip Norbourne Barbour* (New York, 1936), 28. Semmes, *Service Afloat and Ashore*, 316; New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, 17 June 1847. Llerena Friend, *Sam Houston: The Great Designer* (Austin, 1954), 182-83. A Matamoros paper, on April 11, 1846, put the number of slave runaways from Taylor's army at six; see Bauer, *Mexican War*, 43.

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soon as you can'—whereas, away from here, it would be 'why have you not got your dinner ready, you rascal? you had better be on the look out, or you'll catch a little of the d--st licking.'"<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, much of the story of blacks in the Mexican War will continue to elude historical disclosure. How useful it would be to know what transpired when free blacks and slaves interacted in American forces south of the border; however it is unlikely that scholars will ever find out. What is missing in particular is the black perspective on the war. The Afro-American history of the conflict must, it appears, continue to be derived from extant white materials. By the 1930s, far too many years had passed for Federal Writers' Project interviewers to find a group of surviving slaves with memories of the Halls of Montezuma. The index to the massive published collection of 1930s ex-slave interviews offers only one mention of the Mexican War, the recollections of Lewis Adams of Copiah County, Mississippi, who merely reported that he had gone off to Mexico as the servant of a volunteer captain. Earlier opportunities to record the black Mexican War experience were simply overlooked. When "James," who served as a slave in the Mexican War, was presented by his former mistress to attendees of a United Confederate Veterans meeting in 1899, the veterans apparently made no inquiries about his service in Mexico.<sup>23</sup>

Scattered evidence does provide some hints about how blacks internalized their own Mexican War experience. Rather than conceptualize their service as involuntary or passive, Negro veterans (along with blacks in all other conflicts this nation waged during the ages of slavery and segregation), focused on the positive aspects of their participation and found cause for pride. General Thomas J. Wood's "man" illustrated their attitude. He stayed with Wood at a New York hotel after the war, and assumed the role of a military authority as he regaled various servants at the hotel with recollections of the war. In 1861, Jacob Dodson, arguing in behalf of fellow black Mexican War veterans that free blacks living in the nation's capital should be allocated a role in the city's defense, recalled to Union Secretary of War Simon Cameron that he had been "three times across the Rocky Mountains in the service of the Country with Fremont." Several years earlier, in fact, he had applied for and won Mexican War service pay from Congress, by claiming that he had technically been mustered into Richard Owens' company of the California Battalion under Frémont. Dodson's congressional advocates, including former Mexican War general Senator James Shields of Illinois and slaveowning Represen-

<sup>22</sup>Semmes, *Service Afloat and Ashore*, 317; *New York Spirit of the Times*, 16 May 1846. Gardner Memoirs, 36.

<sup>23</sup>George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 41 vols., (Westport, 1972-1979), Supplement, Series 1, vol. 6, p. 5; Guthrie, *Camp-Fires*, 230.

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tative John A. Quitman of Mississippi, blanched not at all at Dodson's pretensions as a U.S. army veteran; rather, Quitman lauded Dodson for joining the army. Both houses of Congress must have agreed with Senator John B. Weller of California that Dodson fully merited just "what he would have received if he had been of a different color—in other words, if he had been a white man." The Dodson relief bill passed without debate.<sup>24</sup>

Most U.S. Army blacks fared less well than Dodson and returned from the Mexican War as invisible men. Amidst the vast literature generated by the conflict no black soldier emerged a war hero. Newspaper lists of officers aboard homeward-bound ships from the seat of war made no mention of attendant chattels and hired servants.<sup>25</sup> But blacks, in a variety of capacities, had nonetheless made a substantial contribution to the American ground effort in Mexico, and the surviving details are worth relating, despite gaps in the historical record. That blacks participated in the war at all reminds us not only that it is impossible to write (or portray in the media) American military history oblivious to its racial dimension, but also of the symbiotic relationship binding American white and black history in general even regarding subjects presumably immune to the connection. The details enrich understanding of legal discriminations confronting antebellum blacks, the reciprocal context of slave/master relations, slave resistance and loyalty, and, indirectly, the desperate economic plight of many antebellum urban free blacks. That large numbers of Afro-American dwellers in both northern and southern cities would agree to endure severe hardship and risk their lives and health for low pay in Manifest

<sup>24</sup>Loren Schweniger, ed., *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Thomas* (Columbia, Mo., 1984), 122-23; Jacob Dodson to Simon Cameron, 23 April 1861, in McPherson, *Negro's Civil War*, 19; *Congressional Globe*, 33d Cong., 2d Sess., 210, 493, and 34th Cong., 1st Sess., 136, 392, 482, 913, 938, 985. The Dodson bill was introduced in the Thirty-Third Congress and passed the Senate. Reintroduced in the Thirty-Fourth Congress, it passed the Senate on February 21, 1856 and the House of Representatives on April 15, 1856. President Franklin Pierce, yet another Mexican War general, signed the bill into law on April 18. The legislation awarded Dodson "all the pay and allowances" of a U.S. army private for service between July 7, 1846 and April 14, 1847, minus \$281 which Frémont had already paid him "for his services as a member of the exploring expedition within this period." It should be noted that Congress made this award despite Secretary of War Jefferson Davis' formal opinion that Dodson had never been enrolled in the California Battalion, but rather had served the battalion in a civil capacity. Jefferson Davis' endorsement is found on Richard Burgess to Jefferson Davis, 19 August 1854, summarized in the calendar in Lynda Lasswell Crist, ed., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, 5:367.

<sup>25</sup>See for example the lists in the New Orleans *Daily Delta*, 24, 28 and 30 November 1847 and 19 January 1848. The best discussion of Mexican War heroes and literature is in Johannsen, *Halls of the Montezumas*, 108-43, 175-203.

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Destiny's war—a conflict often depicted in the urban press and discussed on city streets as a strike for slavery's expansion—is a profound statement of their own career prospects. Invisible men, it seems, faced some rather human dilemmas even in the relatively prosperous late 1840s. Service with the American army in Mexico seemed to offer a promising alternative to the marginal existence they forsook back home.