

Before Sherman: Georgia Blacks and the Union War Effort, 1861-1864

By CLARENCE L. MOHR

THE COLLAPSE OF SLAVERY IN GEORGIA HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN identified with General William Tecumseh Sherman's devastating march from Atlanta to the sea during the autumn of 1864. According to some estimates as many as nineteen thousand bondsmen fled to freedom behind Sherman's advancing columns, thereby inflicting a crippling blow upon Georgia slavery if not on southern independence itself. In reality, however, Sherman's march to the sea represented the end rather than the beginning of black defections from Confederate Georgia. The most revealing escapes occurred earlier in the war and involved black people on or near the Georgia seaboard. Unlike the thousands of Negroes who followed Sherman's conquering army to Savannah, blacks reaching Union lines earlier in the war were usually the instruments of their own deliverance. The timing and method of their escape efforts were matters of conscious choice, and their decision to strike out for liberty meant risking recapture, punishment, and even death in case of failure. By looking for patterns in these early escapes and by examining the statements and actions of successful fugitives one can learn much about the culture, values, and aspirations of black Georgians on the eve of emancipation.¹

Escape from the seaboard became possible early in 1862 when northern naval and military forces bloodlessly captured Georgia's

¹ Two different perspectives on the black response to Sherman are presented in Edmund L. Drago, "How Sherman's March Through Georgia Affected the Slaves," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, LVII (Fall 1973), 361-75; and Paul D. Escott, "The Context of Freedom: Georgia's Slaves During the Civil War," *ibid.*, LVIII (Spring 1974), 79-104. Drago relies heavily upon the letters, diaries, and reminiscences of Union soldiers, while Escott's study is drawn mainly from the Federal Writers' Project interviews with ex-slaves.

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deserted Sea Islands.² Ignoring an intense campaign of anti-Yankee atrocity stories, local blacks immediately began making their way to Union-held territory.³ Hard-pressed sailors in the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron gave the refugees protection and assistance but recorded their arrival rather haphazardly. Consequently, only a small fraction (perhaps 25 percent) of the slaves and free Negroes who fled Georgia during this early period were mentioned in official documents.

The disparity between actual and reported incidents of escape is illustrated by population data from a settlement of black refugees on St. Simons Island near the mouth of the Altamaha River. Established by the Union navy in March 1862, the St. Simons settlement (officially designated a "colony") was only one of several locations to which escaped slaves from Georgia were taken. In the space of some nine months the island's black population grew from none to nearly 600, but during this same period the total number of black escapees reported by military and naval commanders on station off the Georgia coast was only 144, or about a fourth of the black population of St. Simons alone. By the most conservative estimates, then, commanders of individual blockad-

² Actually, Union forces landed on Tybee and Wassaw islands during the closing weeks of 1861. White planters began leaving the Sea Islands shortly after the fall of Port Royal, South Carolina, in November, and by early 1862 there were only Confederate garrisons at most offshore locations. General Robert Edward Lee ordered the military evacuation of St. Simons Island in February 1862, and by the end of March all of Georgia's coast was under Federal control except Fort Pulaski, which surrendered on April 11 after a two-day bombardment. Alexander A. Lawrence, *A Present for Mr. Lincoln: The Story of Savannah from Secession to Sherman* (Macon, Ga., 1961), 40-41, 46-47; T. Conn Byran, *Confederate Georgia* (Athens, 1953), 68-72; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (30 vols., Washington, 1894-1922), Ser. I, Vol. XII, 581, 590-92, 612-15, 663-64 (hereinafter cited as *ORN*).

³ Georgia newspapers outdid themselves in combing the Union and Confederate press for material which would depict northern racial attitudes and practices in an unfavorable light. Some stories, like reports that Yankees sold black refugees as slaves in Brazil and Cuba, were complete fabrications. Most reports, however, especially those stressing poor living conditions in contraband camps, exploitive working arrangements, and high black casualty rates in combat, had at least an element of truth. The impact of such propaganda on Georgia blacks is difficult to gauge. Susie King Taylor, then a teenage slave girl in Savannah, learned from her grandmother "that the white people did not want slaves to go over to the Yankees, and told them these things to frighten them." Many blacks were unwilling either to accept Confederate warnings at face value or to dismiss them out of hand. As late as 1863 two escaped slaves from Savannah told Union naval officers that Georgia bondsmen were "still very uncertain as to how they will be treated" by northerners. One of the escapees was deterred from fleeing sooner by stories "about being sold to Cuba, as we [Yankees] are only fighting to get cotton and niggers." *Macon Daily Telegraph*, January 14, 1862, p. 2; June 17, 1862, p. 3; June 18, 1862, p. 1; August 12, 1862, p. 2; October 16, 1862, p. 2; November 27, 1862, p. 2; February 18, 1863, p. 1; March 2, 1863, p. 4; March 2, 1864, p. 2; *Savannah Daily Morning News*, April 29, 1863, p. 1; September 18, 1863, p. 2; October 31, 1863, p. 1; Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops [.] Late 1st S. C. Volunteers* (Boston, 1902), 7-8 (first quotation); *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 671-72 (second quotation).

ing vessels failed to record some 70 to 80 percent of the Georgia fugitives who passed through their hands.⁴

Whether or not this ratio remained constant throughout the thirty months preceding Sherman's invasion is uncertain. If it did and if three out of four black escapees went unreported, then the 561 Georgia slaves and free Negroes known to have reached Union lines from December 1861 through October 1864 would represent a total of 2,000 to 2,500 actual escapees (see Table 1). If one assumes, on the other hand, that the volume of escapes declined and the efficiency of reporting increased markedly after 1862, an estimate of 1,000 black refugees for the entire period would still be well within reason.⁵

Whatever the precise number of refugees may have been, enough escapes were reported to reveal clear trends in several key areas. For purposes of analysis, escape efforts may, at the outset, be separated into two basic categories: (1) those conceived and initiated by blacks without initial Union assistance (hereafter designated "black initiated" escapes) and (2) those occurring during Union coastal or river raids (hereafter designated "rescues"). Out of a total of fifty-six reported escape incidents some forty-two fall within the first category. These "black-initiated" efforts involved 290 individuals, or roughly 45 percent of the 650 known Georgia fugitives (see Table 1). The volume and frequency of black-

⁴ The basic facts concerning the St. Simons "colony," at least to the extent that they are available in the *ORN*, can be found in George A. Heard, "St. Simons Island During the War Between the States," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XXII (September 1938), 249-72. The exact number of blacks on St. Simons at the time of its evacuation in November 1862 was not recorded. Writing from Beaufort, South Carolina, in mid-August 1862 General Rufus Saxton referred to the settlement as "a colony of 400." Charles T. Trowbridge, who was on the island during this period, placed the black population at five hundred, while Susie King Taylor, who left with the other St. Simons refugees in November, gave the number as six hundred. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (70 vols. in 128, Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, Vol. XIV, 375 (hereinafter cited as *OR*); Thomas W. Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* ([East Lansing, Mich.], 1960), 212; Taylor, *Reminiscences*, 14. Unless otherwise indicated, all quantitative references to escape incidents are derived from the table which accompanies the text.

⁵ Many historians have been misled by an August 1862 petition from the citizens of Liberty County, Georgia, offering twenty thousand as a "low estimate [of] the number of slaves absconded and enticed off from our sea-board . . ." In the context of the document "our sea-board" almost certainly refers to the seaboard of the entire Confederacy. Even if this were not the case, however, the notion that twenty thousand slaves had fled the coast of Georgia, much less Liberty County alone, by August 1862 would still be highly implausible. Significantly, Charles Colcock Jones, Sr., who actually wrote the Liberty County petition, made no such claim. On the contrary, his personal letters reveal that black escapees during this period were numbered in scores rather than hundreds or thousands. For the petition itself see *OR*, Ser. IV, Vol. II, 36-38. An unrevised manuscript draft of the document in Jones's handwriting survives in the Charles C. Jones, Jr., Collection (University of Georgia, Athens, Ga.).

initiated escape efforts varied considerably over time. Whereas "rescue" incidents simply mirrored the pace of Union military operations along Georgia's coast, black-initiated efforts were concentrated most heavily during the first nine to twelve months after the arrival of Federal blockading vessels. The number of such incidents declined slowly throughout 1863 and dwindled to almost nothing after the first three months of 1864.

TABLE 1
BLACK FLIGHT FROM COASTAL GEORGIA
1861-1864

<i>Blacks Reaching or Attempting to Reach Union Lines</i>	1861	1862	1863	1864	Total
Alone or in Pairs	3	13	11	5	32
Percentage	(50.0%)	(8.4%)	(13.6%)	(10.2%)	(11.0%)
In Groups of 3 or More	—	141	64	44	249
Percentage	—	(91.6%)	(79.0%)	(89.8%)	(85.8%)
Method					
Unknown	3	—	6	—	9
Percentage	(50.0%)	—	(7.5%)	—	(3.1%)
Total	6	154	81	49	290
Initiated by					
Blacks	6	154	81	49	290
Percentage	(100%)	(45.2%)	(100%)	(22.1%)	(44.6%)
Freed by Coastal Raids	—	187	—	173	360
Percentage	—	(54.8%)	—	(77.9%)	(55.4%)
Total	6	341	81	222	650
Captured During Escape Attempt	—	39	26	24	89
Percentage	—	(11.4%)	(32.1%)	(10.8%)	(13.7%)
Successful Escapees	6	302	55	198	561

This table summarizes a more detailed monthly record of escape incidents compiled primarily from the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (30 vols., Washington, D.C., 1894-1922), Series I, Volumes XII-XV.

This pattern suggests that logistical factors were of central importance in determining the rate of black escapes. There was, for example, no perceptible increase in escape attempts following the issuance of the final Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. To most black Georgians freedom was a condition rather than a theory, and in Georgia, as in neighboring South Carolina, Negroes who reached the Sea Islands were virtually free from the moment of their arrival.⁶ What varied in Georgia was not the desire of black people for liberty but their physical opportunity to obtain it. Black-initiated escapes were most numerous in 1862 because the number of blacks near the Georgia seaboard was larger then than at any subsequent period of the war. By 1863 nearly all coastal planters had moved their slaves well inland to areas where escape was difficult if not impossible.⁷ The impressment of 1,500 black laborers to work on Savannah's defenses in the summer of 1862 further increased the pool of potential escapees, while the Union navy's black settlement on St. Simons Island offered tangible proof of northern willingness to grant fugitives a sanctuary.⁸

⁶ On the irrelevance of Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation to the realities of black life in the South Carolina Sea Islands see Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill, 1965), 12-13. "Emancipation," Williamson notes (p. 13), "simply recognized a fact already established . . ."

⁷ Surviving evidence indicates that by the end of 1862 a substantial majority of the more than 34,000 slaves in Georgia's coastal counties had been moved well inland. Albert V. House, Jr., ed., "Deterioration of a Georgia Rice Plantation During Four Years of Civil War," *Journal of Southern History*, IX (February 1943), 98-113, especially 104, 109-10; House, ed., *Planter Management and Capitalism in Ante-Bellum Georgia: The Journal of Hugh Fraser Grant, Ricegrower* (New York, 1954), 14-15; Edward M. Steel, Jr., T. Butler King of Georgia (Athens, 1964), 157-58; H.O.C. to Henry Lord Page King, May 12, 1862, Thomas Butler King Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N. C.); Charles L. Schlatter to Joseph E. Brown, September 1, 1862, Telamon Cruger Smith Cuyler Collection (University of Georgia); C. C. Jones to Eliza G. Robarts, December 13, 1862, Robert M. Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven and London, 1972), 998-99. Throughout the war a few slaves, usually lone males, made their way to Union lines from deep in the interior of Georgia. In 1862, for example, "several" black fugitives reached the coast from a hundred miles inland, while two came all the way from Macon. Other bondsmen in southwestern Georgia followed the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers to their confluence at the Apalachicola and then traveled southward to make contact with Union forces along the Florida coast. The total number of such escapees was never great, and many were intercepted by Confederate troops. *ORN*, Ser. 1, Vol. XIII, 20; Boston *Commonwealth*, January 3, 1863, p. 4; Lt. Col. Charles F. Hopkins to Capt. James Barrow, March 14, 1863; Capt. Theodore Moreno to Gen. Howell Cobb, May 9, 1863, Howell Cobb Collection (University of Georgia).

⁸ Although slaves were not actually impressed until August 1862, some 800 blacks were at work on Savannah's defenses as early as March. With impressment the number rose to 1,500 in August but declined to 1,000 by November. In December 1862 a second impressment of 1,500 slaves was carried out, and during the first three months of 1863 the black

The size and composition of escape groups were even more revealing than their frequency. In antebellum days the typical runaway episode involved a young, healthy male traveling northward alone. The fugitive's major physical obstacle was distance, and the most crippling psychological barrier he faced was the pain of abandoning home, friends, and family.⁹ This picture changed drastically, however, when Union blockading forces reached Georgia's coast in 1862. With freedom then as close as the Union-controlled Sea Islands, escaping ceased to be a solitary endeavor. Adult men continued to lead or participate in most defections, but statistics reveal a clear trend toward collective escape efforts involving family groups or, occasionally, plantation communities.¹⁰

Relevant information is available for a total of forty-two separate black-initiated escape incidents involving some 290 people. Thirty-two of the escapees fled Georgia alone or in company with one other person; 249 of the remaining 258 black fugitives (some 86 percent of the total) reached or attempted to reach the Sea

labor force was often as large as 2,000. These impressed slaves, mostly young men from middle and southwestern Georgia, tended to offset the drain on Savannah's black population caused by white residents moving their slaves inland. By 1863 runaway advertisements for slave military laborers were common in Savannah papers. Clarence L. Mohr, "Georgia Blacks During Secession and Civil War, 1859-1865" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1975), 139-41; *Savannah Daily Morning News*, January 5, 1863, p. 2; January 12, 1863, p. 2; April 1, 1863, p. 2; August 5, 1863, p. 2; October 1, 1863, p. 2; October 22, 1863, p. 2.

⁹ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), 110-11, 117-20; James B. Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama* (University, Ala., 1950), 292; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 648-49; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972), 108-14.

¹⁰ It should be emphasized that the statements in the text apply only to blacks seeking refuge behind Union lines. Among other Georgia bondsmen the antebellum escape patterns continued during the war years. William A. Byrne found after examining fugitive-slave advertisements in the *Savannah Morning News* from 1861 to 1864 that "the typical runaway was a black male in his twenties. Women were outnumbered by more than two to one It was the 'prime' hand which ran away, not the old man or young boy." Byrne, "Slavery in Savannah, Georgia, During the Civil War" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 1971), 119. Several factors help explain the contrast between newspaper runaway advertisements and Union military records of black escapes. For purely economic reasons planters were likely to be more concerned with recovering young adult men than less valuable slaves. Thus, the young, black male runaway was perhaps somewhat more visible than women, children, or old people. Data drawn solely from the Savannah area also reflects the abnormally high proportion of young men in the black population, a condition brought about by the large-scale impressment of slave military laborers and the simultaneous removal of many female domestic servants. Throughout the war, of course, Savannah itself was also a final destination for lone male fugitives from the up-country. Perhaps more significant than any of these considerations, however, is the likelihood that many of the advertised runaways never attempted to reach Union lines but simply hid themselves in or near the city for varying periods, as had always been common practice. In other words, while some fugitives sought permanent freedom on the Sea Islands, others continued to settle for the more limited (and less dangerous) objectives of antebellum times.

Islands in groups of three or more (see Table 1). Although the specific age and sexual makeup of these groups was seldom recorded, surviving evidence suggests that most of the large parties included women and children as well as men. In 1862, for example, the black refugee population on St. Simons Island grew from 26 men, 6 women, and 9 children in late March to 60 men, 16 women, and 13 children by mid-April. When abolitionist clergyman Mansfield French visited the island in July a total of 52 black children were presented for baptism during one afternoon service. Susie King Taylor, an ex-slave from Savannah, recalled that by the time she left St. Simons in October a majority of its 600 inhabitants were women and children.¹¹

Strict policing made mass escapes more difficult in 1863, but black families continued to flee. In July "two or three families" of free Negroes from Darien, Georgia, reached Union lines together with "four slaves whom they owned." Nineteen blacks from Samuel N. Papot's plantation near Savannah were less successful in October, when their boat was captured by Confederate pickets. Approximately one-third of the would-be escapees in this group were men, the rest women and children.¹² In late December 1863 thirteen black fugitives from McIntosh County, Georgia, were taken aboard the U.S.S. *Fernandina* in St. Catherines Sound. The leader of the party was a twenty-seven-year-old slave named Cain, who, like most of the escapees, had formerly belonged to William King. Accompanying Cain was the twenty-two-year-old woman Bella and her six-year-old son Romeo, the twenty-five-year-old woman Lizzie and her four children (Joseph, Sam, Eve, and Martha, aged twelve years, four years, two years, and five months respectively), and finally the thirty-two-year-old woman Sallie with her four children (Fannie, Joseph, Emma, and Ben, who ranged in age from eleven years to seven months). Early in 1864 Cain left the *Fernandina* to rescue his relatives from the vicinity of Sunbury, Georgia. He returned on January 7, along with ex-slave Sam, bringing the forty-five-year-old woman Grace, her five children (Judy, Elizabeth, Phoebe, Victoria, and James), her son-in-law Charley, and her grandchildren (Arphee, Virginia, Clarissa, and Edward).¹³

Under the best of circumstances black-initiated escape efforts

¹¹ *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XII, 727, 756; New York *Daily Tribune*, August 9, 1862, p. 3; Taylor, *Reminiscences*, 14.

¹² Savannah *Daily Morning News*, July 22, 1863, p. 2; October 19, 1863, p. 1.

¹³ Elinor Barnes and James A. Barnes, eds., *Naval Surgeon: Blockading the South, 1862-1866: The Diary of Samuel Pellman Boyer* (Bloomington, 1963), 247, 254-55; cited hereinafter as Barnes and Barnes, eds., *Boyer Diary*.

were risky, a fact graphically illustrated by the failure of some eighty-nine Georgia fugitives to reach Union lines. From a purely pragmatic standpoint the lone young black man probably continued to stand the best chance of escape throughout most of the war. By including women, children, or old people in escape parties, therefore, black Georgians repeatedly showed their willingness to place family and group loyalty above individual self-interest. A typical episode occurred in September 1862 following the successful escape of twenty-three slaves from plantations on both sides of the Savannah River. The main party paddled their way to freedom in a large canoe, but two men, one woman, and a child failed to reach the boat on time and were left behind to face pursuers. A Georgia planter reported the grim outcome in a private letter. Overtaken while fording a creek, the group refused to stop, whereupon "Bob, who was leading, was shot in the leg and immediately taken. Peter was also fired at and fell" but fled deeper into the marshes in a "wounded condition." After a "pursuit of 3 or 4 miles" the woman and child "became exhausted" and surrendered but refused to reveal the hiding place of their wounded companion.¹⁴

More successful escapes also underscored the importance of family ties among Georgia's black refugees. An abolitionist officer from Massachusetts recalled three or four brothers in a black family named Wilson who planned a daring escape from the interior of Georgia. Leaving their youngest brother behind to look after an aged mother, the other men, in company with their sister and her children, fled downriver in a log dugout. Before reaching the coast the boat came under heavy fire from Confederate pickets, who wounded every male occupant of the open craft. Despite their injuries the men eventually completed the voyage and reached the safety of Federal gunboats. Even more striking was the case of a seventy-year-old Georgia black woman, who, after failing in one escape attempt, assembled her twenty-two children and grandchildren on an abandoned flatboat and drifted forty miles down the Savannah River to freedom. When rescued by a Union vessel "the grandmother rose to her full height, with her

¹⁴ Port Royal *New South*, September 13, 1862, p. 3; John Screven to Mary Screven, September 12, 1862, Arnold and Screven Family Papers (Southern Historical Collection). These were not the only slaves who failed to make the rendezvous. The planner of the mass escape, an eighty-year-old slave named Paul on the Daniels plantation in South Carolina, remained behind by choice. Two days later he also reached Union lines, having slipped away while the other Daniels slaves were being moved farther inland. At least one attempted mass escape failed completely in October 1862, when a group of thirty-one runaways were recaptured and confined in the Savannah jail. Boston *Commonwealth*, January 3, 1863, p. 4; Byrne, "Slavery in Savannah," p. 123.

youngest grandchild in her arms, and said only, 'My God! are we free?'¹⁵

If family commitments shaped the pattern of wartime escape efforts they also influenced the nature and scope of black support for the Union cause. Nowhere was the importance of family ties more evident than in the realm of actual military service. Northern recruiters discovered early that the prospect of securing the freedom of friends and relatives was a powerful inducement for blacks to join Union ranks. Or, taking the opposite viewpoint, blacks soon discovered that the Union army offered an effective vehicle for rescuing family members still held in bondage. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who commanded numerous black Georgians in the famous First South Carolina Volunteers, candidly admitted that his soldiers "had more to fight for than [did] the whites. Besides the flag and the Union, they had home and wife and child."¹⁶ A northern official who spent the summer and fall of 1862 with Georgia blacks on St. Simons Island fully confirmed this judgment. In early October he attended a Negro "war meeting" at St. Helena village, where several speakers including one black man addressed an assembly of ex-slaves:

They were asked to enlist for pay, rations and uniform, to fight for their country, for freedom and so forth, but not a man stirred. But when it was asked them to fight for themselves, to enlist to protect their wives and children from being sold away from them, and told of the little homes which they might secure to themselves and their families in after years, they all rose to their feet, the men came forward and said "I'll go," the women shouted, and the old men said "Amen."¹⁷

Family considerations were clearly uppermost in the minds of many black Georgians as they embarked on their first combat

¹⁵ Higginson, *Army Life*, 191-92. On the importance of family ties among some 2,400 black escapees in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1862 and 1863 see Herbert G. Gutman's landmark study, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1976), 268-69. Although the present essay was completed prior to the appearance of Gutman's work, our findings reveal a close correlation between data from Georgia and Virginia.

¹⁶ Higginson, *Army Life*, 194. Ironically, many of the traditional explanations for the superior fighting qualities of white Confederates apply with equal force to the ex-slaves in Union ranks. As Higginson observes (p. 200), "they were fighting, in a manner, for their own homes and firesides."

¹⁷ Article signed "L" in Boston *Commonwealth*, February 21, 1863, p. 2. The article was probably written by Jules S. DeLacroix, the civilian superintendent of plantations on St. Simons Island during the summer and fall of 1862. See Rufus Saxton to Capt. [Charles T.] Trowbridge, August 21, September 1, 1862; Rufus Saxton to Capt. J. E. Thorndike, September 1, 1862; Rufus Saxton to Capt. J. H. Moore, September 1, 1862; S. Willard Saxton to [Jules] S. DeLacroix, December 23, 1862; January 13, 1863, Rufus Saxton Letterbook 1, Rufus and S. Willard Saxton Papers (Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn.).

mission in November 1862. At the staging area on St. Catherines Island the former bondsmen "needed no 'driver's lash' . . . for they were preparing to go up Sapelo River, along whose banks on the beautiful plantations, were their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, wives and children. Weeks and months before some of the men had left those loved ones, with a promise to return . . ." if the way were opened. A white observer who accompanied the expedition up river found it "very affecting" to see the soldiers gaze "intensely [at] the colored forms on land," frequently calling out such things as "Oh, masir, my wife and chillen lib dere" or "dere, dere my brodder." When the ships were unable to take away slaves from certain plantations the disappointment of relatives on board was acute and virtually "inexpressible (except by sighs)."¹⁸

Some black Georgians were unwilling to risk such disappointments and took the business of rescuing friends and relatives into their own hands. One of the first to adopt this self-help philosophy was ex-slave March Haynes, who functioned unofficially within the military command structure of the Department of the South. Described as "a pure, shrewd, brave efficient man," Haynes was literate and had worked as a stevedore and river pilot in antebellum Savannah. "Comprehending the spirit and scope of the war," Haynes began smuggling Georgia fugitives into Union lines shortly after the fall of Fort Pulaski in April 1862. When white suspicions against him became too great, he fled Savannah with his wife but continued his rescue efforts from the Sea Islands. Although the term "commando" did not exist in the military vocabulary of the 1860s, Haynes's activities fit neatly under this modern rubric. General Quincy Adams Gillmore of the Tenth Army Corps recognized the value of Haynes's services and "furnished him with whatever he needed in his perilous missions," including a "staunch, swift boat, painted a drab color, like the hue of the Savannah River." Allowed to "select such negroes to assist him as he thought proper," Haynes landed repeatedly "in the marshes below Savannah" and entered the city under cover of darkness. Sheltered and supplied by local blacks, he sometimes remained for several days collecting "exact and valuable information" on the strength and location of Confederate defenses. He also made night reconnaissances "up the creeks along the Savannah, gathering information and bringing away boat-loads of negroes." On one expedition Haynes was shot in the leg by Confederate pickets and in April 1863 was apparently ar-

¹⁸ Chicago *Tribune*, November 19, 1862, p. 1.

rested and temporarily jailed by Savannah authorities.¹⁹

Liberating friends and relatives was only one of many motives for black enlistment in Union ranks. Nearly all Negro soldiers shared a basic hatred of bondage and a desire to strike out directly at the slave system. Undoubtedly, some ex-slaves viewed military service as an opportunity both to demonstrate personal courage and to consummate the process of self-emancipation by meeting white southerners in battle. Yet even the most dedicated abolitionists admitted that black attitudes toward former masters were ambivalent and complex. Upon reaching the Sea Islands in 1862, for instance, Colonel Higginson "expected to find a good deal of the patriarchal feeling" among local Negroes but discovered instead a very different and more discriminating attitude. Many former slaves did indeed claim "to have had kind owners and some expressed great gratitude to them for particular favors received" during slavery. To these same black people, however, the central fact of being owned was "a wrong which no special kindness could right." Thus, whatever their feelings toward individual whites, they looked upon the mass of slaveholders as their "natural enemies." Confederate observers like Mrs. James Sanchez of Florida confirmed the existence of a generalized hostility toward slaveholders among black escapees. In early 1863, while traveling to Georgia under a flag of truce, Mrs. Sanchez was detained briefly at Union-occupied Fort Pulaski. "The negroes there were far more insolent than the [white] soldiers," she reported. The blacks "took great pleasure in insulting the whites; cursing the 'd—n rebel secesh women and men' and laughing in their faces."²⁰

Such racial antagonisms often went hand in hand with personal grievances against former owners. Higginson mentions several black Georgians who seethed with anger over slave experiences and whose desire for revenge steeled their courage on the battlefield. For some bondsmen the war was quite literally an extension of earlier rebellious activities. The theory that black defection to Federal lines acted as a "safety valve" against slave uprisings within the Confederacy finds at least partial confirmation in the career of a militant black runaway named Nat. Owned by a

¹⁹ Frederic Denison, *A Chaplain's Experience in the Union Army* (Soldiers' and Sailors' Historical Society of Rhode Island, *Personal Narratives*, 4th Ser., No. 20: Providence, 1893), 30 (first quotation); Denison, *Shot and Shell: The Third Rhode Island Heavy Artillery Regiment in the Rebellion, 1861-1865* . . . (Providence, 1879), 261 (second and subsequent quotations). The *Savannah Daily Morning News*, April 28, 1863, p. 2, reported that "A negro man named *March*, the property of Mr. John C. Rowland, has been arrested and committed to jail, charged with harboring and running off to the Yankees several negroes from this city. . . . He will probably have an examination in a few days."

²⁰ Higginson, *Army Life*, 193; Milledgeville *Confederate Union*, February 24, 1863, p. 2.

planter in Glynn County, Georgia, Nat left his master some time in 1860 and remained at large for the next four years. By the summer of 1862 he had reached St. Simons Island, where he engaged in operations somewhat similar to those of March Haynes. Described by white Savannahians as a "notorious runaway . . . and rascal," Nat was ultimately accused of killing one white civilian and two Confederate soldiers. In his most daring wartime exploit he led six other black men some thirty miles up the Altamaha River to rescue their wives and children from bondage. In the course of the expedition he fought off white attackers twice and exchanged gunfire with a Confederate river patrol. Even after most black refugees had been moved to Port Royal, Nat remained on St. Simons and soon joined forces with another slave rebel named Harvey. Denounced on the mainland as "spies, murderers, incendiaries and thieves," the pair survived until June 1864, when both fell victim to a shotgun-wielding southern soldier. At the time of Nat's death Georgia whites held him responsible for the escape of from seventy to a hundred slaves from the coastal counties.²¹

Whether or not they were rebels before the war, Georgia's black soldiers were ready to redress past wrongs if the opportunity arose. During the 1862 Sapelo River expedition, for example, black troops singled out the plantation of Captain William Brailsford for a special retaliatory attack. Brailsford, a wealthy cotton planter, known for his flamboyance and fiery temper, had succeeded Georgia slave trader Charles Augustus Lafayette Lamar as captain of the Savannah Mounted Rifles in 1861. By July of the following year he was actively engaged in a campaign to recapture slaves from the Georgia Sea Islands. After Union officers refused his request to return black fugitives from St. Simons, Brailsford descended on St. Catherines Island with thirty armed men in October 1862, killing two black refugees and capturing four others.²²

The memory of this attack was still fresh in the minds of black soldiers as they ascended the Sapelo early the next month. Even without the St. Catherines raid Brailsford would probably still

²¹ A firsthand account of Nat's activities during the summer and fall of 1862 appears in the Boston *Commonwealth*, February 21, 1863, p. 2. On his earlier and subsequent career as a runaway as well as the circumstances of his death see Savannah *Daily Morning News*, June 24, 1864, in Macon *Daily Telegraph*, June 28, 1864, p. 1. For a critical assessment of the "safety-valve" thesis as applied to *antebellum* runaways see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 657. The concept was probably more applicable during the early 1860s than at any other period because of the volatile wartime situation.

²² Myers, ed., *Children of Pride*, 1471; Savannah *Morning News*, July 2, 1887; p. 3; *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 196-97; George Anderson Mercer Diary, October 25, 1862 (Southern Historical Collection).

have been a marked man, for on board the Union gunboats were several of Brailsford's former slaves, including Sam Miller, who had been whipped severely by the hot-tempered planter for refusing to betray another escapee. Since Brailsford's plantation was also a major Confederate picket station Union officers agreed after "full consultation" to destroy the place during their retreat. Landing after sunset the black troops routed a strong force of defenders and pushed inland nearly half a mile, burning cabins, outbuildings, and finally the Brailsford mansion itself. When interviewed immediately after the attack, morale among the black soldiers was high. Some spoke of having "grown three inches," while Sam Miller said simply, "I feel a heap more of a man."²³

If the alliance between Georgia blacks and the Union military was cemented with blood, it was also constructed upon the shifting foundation of pragmatic self-interest. Throughout most of the war the aims and goals of northern commanders corresponded neatly with individual priorities and racial or group loyalties of black refugees. So long as this community of interest existed black allegiance to the Stars and Stripes remained strong. When Federal policies ceased to be mutually beneficial, however, black cooperation and white benevolence declined proportionately. The process was visible on St. Simons Island during the spring and summer of 1862 when naval authorities set out to make the black colony self-supporting. Shortly after the first blacks were landed on St. Simons in March Commander Sylvanus W. Godon decided they should "procure their own living from the land . . ." and ordered them also "to plant cotton and thus . . . become of use to themselves." By mid-April some eighty acres of corn plus additional fields of potatoes and beans were under cultivation, and in late May Godon reported triumphantly that "Thus far the Government has not spent a dollar on these people . . ." Actually, the government probably did more than just break even, for by late July St. Simons's black residents had planted three hundred acres of food crops and picked 25,000 pounds of valuable Sea Island cotton.²⁴

The navy's agricultural achievement fell considerably short of being a genuine cooperative effort. Godon quickly discovered that black refugees showed "a great dislike to do the work they have been accustomed to . . ." under slavery. Toiling daily in the aban-

²³ Chicago *Tribune*, November 19, 1862, p. 1 (quotations); Port Royal *New South*, November 15, 1862, p. 3; *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. XIV, 191-92; Mercer Diary, November 9, 1862.

²⁴ *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XII, 634 (first and second quotations), 756; Vol. XIII, 21 (third quotation); New York *Daily Tribune*, August 9, 1862, p. 3.

done plantation fields seemed "to make their condition the same as before," and appointing an ex-slave to direct the work accomplished little because even the black foreman needed "pushing" and "indulges his men too much away from the care of fields . . ." Ultimately, Godon's solution to the problem was simple and direct. "Where work is neglected my rule has been to stop off the ration of beef or something else," he wrote in late June; adding "and I have also placed men in irons for punishment."²⁵

If Godon's heavy-handed methods produced results, they did little to build black trust in the motives of the Federal officials. Confidence was further eroded by the navy's inability to shield the St. Simons settlement from Confederate attack. Naval officers did their best to protect the island, but black refugees seemed more impressed by the flintlock muskets they received for self-defense than by the navy's good intentions. In May 1862 a large Confederate force actually landed on St. Simons but was repulsed at the last moment by fire from a newly arrived Union gunboat.²⁶ The island's black residents took the lesson to heart, and when a second rebel attack occurred in August the ex-slaves seized the initiative.

Ironically, the second Confederate landing on St. Simons coincided almost exactly with the arrival of some thirty-eight black soldiers from Port Royal, who were all that remained of General David Hunter's recently disbanded Negro regiment. Still lacking any official military status, the troops and their white commander Charles T. Trowbridge were eager for a chance to prove themselves in battle. Grabbing their knapsacks and cartridge boxes "with alacrity," the men came ashore only to discover that twenty-five local blacks were already armed and in pursuit of the invaders. According to one writer the action was "entirely a spontaneous thing." No white man accompanied the local defenders, who were commanded, instead, by two of their own number, John Brown and Edward Gould. Overtaking the invaders in a swamp, the ex-slaves fought a brief engagement and suffered several casualties including their leader John Brown, who was killed.²⁷

²⁵ Samuel F. Du Pont to his wife, May 24, 1862, John D. Hayes, ed., *Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from His Civil War Letters* (3 vols., Ithaca, N. Y., 1969; cited hereinafter as Hayes, ed., *Du Pont Letters*), II, 70-71 (first two quotations on p. 71); "Notes on the Colony at St. Simons," *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 144-45 (last three quotations on p. 144).

²⁶ Du Pont to his wife, May 13, 1862, Hayes, ed., *Du Pont Letters*, II, 51-52; *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XII, 689.

²⁷ Boston *Commonwealth*, February 21, 1863, p. 2 (quotation); Higginson, *Army Life* 212-13; Taylor, *Reminiscences*, 12-15; *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 244-45, 248, 251-52; *OR*, Ser. I, Vol. XIV, 375.

The August encounter was not the end of local defense efforts on St. Simons. When Captain Trowbridge's company left the island in early November, shortly before being mustered into Union service, the seventy or so black men who remained behind took further precautions against attack. "Immediately they organized a guard on each plantation, appointed their own sergeant or leader, and guarded the island day and night" until its evacuation five weeks later. The men met for drill each afternoon at Thomas Butler King's plantation, where assignments for night guard duty were also made. Even during this final period the defenders did not rely on government support and received neither clothing, pay, nor rations.²⁸

Elsewhere along the Georgia coast conditions were much the same. When Confederate forces attacked St. Catherines Island in 1862 they were fired on by six black men, armed like the St. Simons defenders with flintlock muskets.²⁹ On Cumberland Island during this same period armed blacks clashed with both Confederate raiding parties and unsympathetic Union naval officers, who came to the aid of R. Stafford, a white slaveowner who had remained on the island. The Stafford incident occurred in early September when a number of the planter's former slaves returned from nearby Fernandina, Florida, in company with other escaped bondsmen. Many of the blacks had obtained guns, and they took up residence on Stafford's plantation "refusing to submit to any control, killing the cattle and overrunning the private dwelling with arms and clubs in their hands" Naval officers declared the blacks in "a state of mutiny" and sent an armed party of marines to Stafford's assistance. Apparently determined to maintain slavery even inside Union lines, Lieutenant Commander William Talbot Truxtun reported the arrest of nine Negroes "belonging to Mr. Stafford and said to be dangerous." Truxtun placed the men in irons but later released them "at their own request and at the desire of their master (who gives up all claim to them)" Significantly, the black prisoners did not actually go free but were retained on board Truxtun's vessel as part of the crew. Approximately a month after this brush with the Union navy Negroes on Cumberland Island were attacked by a company of Confederate cavalrymen. The encounter was brief but resulted in the capture of twelve blacks, who were returned to slavery on the Georgia mainland.³⁰

²⁸ Boston *Commonwealth*, February 21, 1863, p. 2.

²⁹ Mercer Diary, October 25, 1862.

³⁰ *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 298-301 (first, third, and fourth quotations on p. 299; second on p. 300); Mercer Diary, October 22, 1862. For subsequent Confederate activities on Cumberland Island see *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIV, 186.

Episodes like that on Cumberland Island make the zealous self-defense efforts of Georgia escapees more readily understandable. They had learned in antebellum days to take freedom where they found it and to guard it tenaciously. If, as Willie Lee Rose argues, "Getting out of the master's power was the essence of freedom . . ." for most blacks, then preventing the master's return in either actual or surrogate form was a logical response to wartime conditions along Georgia's coast.³¹

There was, of course, a more positive side to black life on the Sea Islands. One Georgia escapee recalled that the St. Simons colony consisted of numerous small settlements "just like little villages." Despite fear of Confederate attack, women and children were free to move about at will and engage in social activities forbidden during slavery.³² On St. Simons, Sapelo, St. Catherines, Ossabaw, and elsewhere agricultural operations centered around food production and were apparently conducted on both a collective and an individual basis. The ex-slaves combined subsistence farming with limited cash transactions in ways which harkened back to their previous commercial dealings in the rural South. They frequently sold vegetables and poultry to the crews of nearby warships, and the women took in sailors' washing to earn extra money. On St. Simons schools were conducted for black children and adults during 1862. Both literate fugitives and white naval personnel served as teachers, and navy surgeons treated the sick and elderly on some islands.

Initially, at least, conditions on the Sea Islands were fairly conducive to stable family life. In July 1862 the Reverend Mansfield French found blacks on St. Simons eager to formalize their marriage vows "in the most public and solemn manner" possible. The abolitionist clergyman performed numerous marriages and also baptized black children. On these occasions the extended kinship patterns evolved during slavery were clearly visible. Candidates for baptism lined up in two rows. "On . . . [the] right stood a father and mother, with five children; then a mother with so many of her children as she could rescue from Slavery; and then, perhaps, a father, with the two or three children, and their grandmother, in the place of the poor mother, who had been sold." In the left line "were children presented by [distant] relatives or strangers, the parents being sold . . ." or not yet escaped from

³¹ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York, Indianapolis, and Kansas City, 1964), 166.

³² Taylor, *Reminiscences*, 12.

slavery. The Reverend Mr. French genuinely wished to protect black family ties, but he was also a leading advocate of Negro military service. During the summer of 1862 the two objectives were not necessarily incompatible. French could not have known that in the later stages of the war callous Union conscription policies would wrench many black fathers away from their wives and children, thereby achieving what southern slave markets had failed to accomplish.³³

Although Sea Island refugees showed a strong desire for autonomy and independence, open confrontations between blacks and Union forces were rare. From the outset Georgia escapees showed a general willingness to aid the northern war effort within reasonable limits. Virtually all refugees shared whatever military information they possessed at the time of their escape, and many offered their services in more tangible form. The quality of military intelligence received from ex-slaves was usually high. Black estimates of Confederate troop strength sometimes proved unreliable, but escapees furnished accurate and detailed information on the ironclad warships under construction in Savannah harbor as well as up-to-date reports on the movements of potential blockade runners.³⁴ In the course of the war black defections stripped the

³³ Barnes and Barnes, eds., *Boyer Diary*, 15, 73, 181, 189, 203, 217; "Tariff of prices to be charged to officers' messes and sailors for articles purchased of negroes on the island of St. Simons, Georgia" *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 159; see also *ibid.*, 19-20; *ibid.*, Vol. XV, 7; New York *Daily Tribune*, August 9, 1862, p. 3. On most Georgia Sea Islands the family arrangements of black escapees too old for military service remained largely intact throughout the war. In September 1862, for example, black residents of Alexander McDonald's Ossabaw Island plantation included "March and his wife, Aunt Sally . . . ; Ceaser and his wife, Molly; Old Peggy, 120 years old, an old widow; Bob, an old widower . . . ; and John, a bachelor . . ." In late November 1863, after most black men of military age had been pressed into Union ranks, some twenty aging ex-slaves still lived on the Waldburg plantation on St. Catherines Island. Included in this group were "Smart and his wife; Young Cudgel, his wife, and grandson Mike (Young Cudgel is . . . 50 years old, and his grandson Mike is 4 years old . . .); Old Cudgel, a widower; Old John, a carpenter . . . ; Old Bob, an old widower . . . ; Old Man Willie, who . . . is 110 years old . . . ; Aunt Estrella, sister to Smart's wife . . . ; Aunt Nabbie . . . ; and Aunt Mollie . . ." Barnes and Barnes, eds., *Boyer Diary*, 15, 209. On the disruption of black families by military conscription in South Carolina and Louisiana see Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 265-69; C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1976), 146-59.

³⁴ For representative examples of the various types of military information furnished by ex-slaves see *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XII, 460-61, 664-65, 776-77; Vol. XIII, 231, 342, 354, 671-72; Vol. XV, 48; Du Pont to his wife, August 6, 1862; Du Pont to Gideon Welles, October 25, 1862, Hayes, ed., *Du Pont Letters*, II, 180, 266-67; New York *Daily Tribune*, August 11, 1862, p. 2; Baltimore *American*, in Savannah *Daily Morning News*, March 26, 1863, p. 1. Many Union officers and even some Confederates acknowledged the value of information provided by Georgia's black escapees. See the description of the *Fingal* given

Confederate navy's Savannah Squadron of numerous highly competent river and coastal pilots, while the Union navy benefited both from the escapees' services and from the Confederate navy's resulting weakness.

Among the first black pilots to reach Union lines was Isaac Tatnall, who escaped in December 1861 from the packet *St. Mary's* in Savannah harbor. Valued at \$1,500 and hired by his master for \$35.00 per month, Tatnall had piloted vessels along the entire length of the Georgia coast and could navigate the Savannah River even at night. Union naval officers found he could "be perfectly relied upon," and he remained aboard warships off Georgia as late as 1863.³⁵ Another 1861 escapee was the slave Brutus, who proved to be "quite familiar with the rivers and creeks between Savannah City and Tybee Island." Captain (later General) Quincy A. Gillmore placed "great reliance on Brutus' statement" after learning that "everything he said of Big Tybee Inlet, was verified with remarkable accuracy . . ."³⁶ Other additions to the Navy's pilot force during 1862 and 1863 included the slave Cassius, who claimed to be "a good pilot" by virtue of his experiences as "fireman on one of the small steamers used for inland navigation . . ."; an unnamed slave, who worked on a Rebel tugboat in the Ogeechee River; and, finally even the black pilot from the Confederate blockade runner *Nashville*.³⁷ "These men risk their lives to serve us . . . [and] make no bargains about their remuneration . . .," wrote Union admiral Samuel Francis Du Pont early in 1862. The pay differential was amply demonstrated by the fact that two years later black pilots serving under Du Pont earned from \$30 to \$40 per month, only a fraction of the salaries paid their white counterparts in the same squadron and less than half of the \$100 per month received by Moses Dallas, one of the few black pilots serving the Confederate navy at that time.³⁸

by an escaped slave in early 1863 (*ORN*, Ser. I, XIII, 536) and compare it with the detailed description of the *Fingal* (C.S.S. *Atlanta*) in William N. Still, Jr., *Iron Afloat: The Story of the Confederate Armorclads* ([Nashville], 1971), 128-30. As Professor Still notes (p. 136), Union admiral Samuel F. "Du Pont's intelligence concerning the Confederate ironclads was uncanny."

³⁵ *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XII, 460, 469 (quotation), 487-88; Vol. XIV, 212, 251; Vol. XV, 180-81; John Rodgers to Capt. Davis, January 2, 1861 [1862], Robert M. Thompson and Richard Wainwright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1865* (2 vols., New York, 1918), I, 94-96; Du Pont to his wife, January 3, 1862, Hayes, ed., *Du Pont Letters*, II, 306.

³⁶ Gillmore to Gen. Thomas W. Sherman, December 30, 1861, Thompson and Wainwright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence*, I, 90-93 (quotations on pp. 91 and 92).

³⁷ *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 671-72; Port Royal *New South*, January, 31, 1863, p. 2.

³⁸ Du Pont to Gustavus V. Fox, January 4, 1862, Thompson and Wainwright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence*, I, 89-90. On Moses Dallas see *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XIV, 704,

Despite equally unattractive pay rates the Union army also received its full share of Georgia recruits. Particularly valuable were the services of Abraham [or Abram] Murchison, a literate slave preacher from Savannah, who helped initiate the first recruiting efforts among black refugees on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, in early 1862. After a private interview with General David Hunter, Murchison called a meeting of all black males on April 7, where the prospect of military service was first broached to the former bondsmen. Murchison addressed this meeting, explaining with "clearness and force . . . the obligations and interests" which should induce blacks to take up arms for the Union. A *New York Times* correspondent reported that Murchison's language on occasion "rose to eloquence . . ." as he described "the labors, hardships and dangers, as well as the advantages of soldier life . . ." At the conclusion of his address 105 recruits were enrolled, and within a week the number of volunteers had reached 150.³⁹

Perhaps because of age, Murchison did not join the army himself but remained on Hilton Head throughout the war, serving as the religious and secular leader of local blacks. A Baptist during slavery, Murchison was formally ordained by Union army chaplains and reportedly baptized more than a thousand freedmen in Port Royal harbor during the war.⁴⁰ By 1864 he had also become a pivotal figure in the self-governing black village of Mitchelville, where under army auspices he exercised the powers of magistrate. At night the village was off limits to all whites, and the black soldiers of the provost guard were placed under Murchison's control to make arrests for disorderly conduct. When Mitchelville residents held their first election in 1865 two black Georgians headed the ticket. March Haynes, the daring spy and commando, was elected marshal, while Abraham Murchison assumed the duties of recorder.⁴¹

The men Murchison had helped recruit in April 1862 formed the

708; Vol. XV, 478, 481. Pay differentials between black and white pilots, as well as the overall role and status of black sailors, are thoroughly documented in Herbert Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXII (April 1947), 169-200.

³⁹ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953), 109-10, contains an accurate summary of Murchison's recruiting activities, apparently drawn from the *New York Times*, April 19, 1862, p. 2; May 1, 1862, p. 2 (quotations).

⁴⁰ Denison, *Shot and Shell*, 139; Denison, *A Chaplain's Experience*, 28-29; Williamson, *After Slavery*, 194.

⁴¹ George L. Hendricks, "Union Army Occupation of the Southern Seaboard, 1861-1865" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1954), 155-56, 177-78; *American Missionary*, IX (May 1865), 98-99.

nucleus of General Hunter's ill-fated black regiment which, as mentioned earlier, survived only in the form of a thirty-eight-man company sent to St. Simons Island. In November 1862 this hardy remnant, augmented by thirty to forty Georgia recruits from St. Simons, was mustered into service as Company A of the First South Carolina Volunteers. Company E was also composed largely of refugees from St. Simons, and black Georgians were scattered throughout the rest of the regiment.⁴² The mandatory conscription of Sea Island Negroes begun in 1863 ensured that Georgia bondsmen would ultimately find their way into all the black regiments raised in the Department of the South. Recruiting for Colonel James Montgomery's Second South Carolina regiment occurred mostly in Florida, but during June 1863 a special draft for the Third South Carolina Volunteers was conducted at Ossabaw Island and Fort Pulaski, Georgia, as well as at Fernandina, Florida, near Georgia's southern border. This regiment, which was soon consolidated with the embryonic Fourth and Fifth South Carolina Volunteers to form the Twenty-first United States Colored Troops, numbered slightly over three hundred men until December 1864, when its ranks were filled by black Georgians who had followed General Sherman to Savannah.⁴³

In addition to purely military training the army provided some blacks with valuable leadership experience and allowed many others to begin or expand their formal education. Much of the educational work was carried on by literate ex-slaves like Sergeant Edward King of Darien, Georgia, and his young wife Susie, who also served the regiment as nurse and laundress.⁴⁴ Although involved in no decisive military campaigns, the "First South" nonetheless acquitted itself well in numerous raids and partisan expeditions from the Edisto River to the St. Johns. Perhaps most important, the black troops' solid performance under close public scru-

⁴² Higginson, *Army Life*, 214; Taylor, *Reminiscences*, 16, 46; Boston *Commonwealth*, February 21, 1863, p. 2.

⁴³ Hendricks, "Union Army Occupation," 80-89; Dudley T. Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York, 1966), 138.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Reminiscences*, 11, 21. While still on St. Simons during the summer of 1862 Mrs. King taught basic reading skills to some forty black children and a number of adults. Available evidence suggests that she worked in conjunction with New York marine Edward Herron of the U.S.S. *Florida* who had collected "a school of fifty [black] scholars" on St. Simons by July 1862. New York *Daily Tribune*, August 9, 1862, p. 3. On the desire for education among black troops in Fort Pulaski at the close of the war see James L. Owens, "The Negro in Georgia During Reconstruction, 1864-1872: A Social History" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1975), 152-53.

tiny paved the way for slave enlistments throughout the South.⁴⁵

Students of both slavery and Reconstruction can gain valuable insights from the wartime behavior of Georgia's black refugees. Viewed from an antebellum perspective the escape and subsequent military service of many black Georgians underscore the importance of slave family ties and simultaneously cast doubt on the depth of black commitment to the paternalist ethic. On the pivotal questions of how southern bondsmen viewed the nature of the war and the meaning of emancipation the Georgia experience is particularly revealing. Some black fugitives may, as Joel R. Williamson argues, have "fled not so much to freedom as away from slavery," but the weight of surviving evidence suggests that most participants in well-planned and deliberately executed efforts to escape had a far more definite concept of liberty.⁴⁶ From the outset blacks on the Sea Islands adopted a pragmatic stance which defined freedom in terms of immediate and tangible realities; family stability, physical security, freedom of movement, the right to determine one's own work and living arrangements, and the opportunity for education were apparently central concerns for numerous Georgia escapees.

To recognize that newly freed blacks had a clear sense of priorities is not necessarily to argue that their view of postemancipation life was sophisticated or fully defined. In certain realms black behavior was little more than an extension of familiar slave survival strategies altered or reshaped in the crucible of wartime chaos and uncertainty. There can be little doubt, however, that for the thousands of freedmen who took possession of Georgia's coastal and Sea Island region under the auspices of General Sherman's famous Field Order 15 much more was ultimately at stake than the simple issue of landownership. At its most elemental level the Georgia freedmen's ill-fated struggle for political power and economic independence can probably best be understood as a quest for collective autonomy, tempered by a largely

⁴⁵ No definitive history of the First South Carolina Volunteers presently exists. See, however, Phillis M. Cousins, "A History of the 33rd United States Colored Troops" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Howard University, 1961), 35-51, 61-64, for an itinerary of the regiment's movements and a description of the principal military actions in which it engaged. The activities of Colonel James Montgomery's Second South Carolina Volunteers (Thirty-fourth United States Colored Troops) are discussed in Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 244-53; Cornish, *Sable Arm*, 138-42, 148-50, 244.

⁴⁶ Williamson, *After Slavery*, 7.

defensive impulse toward racial separatism. In this broad objective, as well as in regard to more specific goals, the freedmen of 1865 shared much in common with those black Georgians who seized their liberty before the coming of Sherman.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ The best point of departure for studying postwar developments in the area embraced by General W. T. Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15 is Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 46-71. See also Manuel Gottlieb, "The Land Question in Georgia During Reconstruction," *Science and Society*, III (Summer 1939), 356-88; Edwin D. Hoffman, "From Slavery to Self-Reliance: The Record of Achievement of the Freedmen of the Sea Island Region," *Journal of Negro History*, XLI (January 1956), 8-42; Lawrence N. Powell, "New Masters: Northern Planters During the Civil War and Reconstruction" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1976), 250-54. Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen's Community* (Westport, Conn., and London, Eng., 1977) sets Georgia events in broad context and offers numerous interpretative insights.