



The Enslaved and the Civil War

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Framing Question

How did African Americans enslaved in the Confederacy undermine the Southern cause during the Civil War?

Understanding

Slaves held in the Confederacy weakened the Southern war effort in a variety of ways and in so doing played a vital role in obtaining their own freedom and in expanding the aims of the war to include not only restoring the Union but also abolishing slavery.

Text

[Testimony of Alonzo Jackson, Southern Claims Commission, 1873](#)
(excerpts)



Newly freed slaves in South Carolina, 1862

Background

When we think of ways in which African Americans contributed to the defeat of the Confederacy, we typically think of the military service they rendered. Indeed, between 180,000 and 200,000 African Americans served in the Union Army and Navy. They included escaped slaves like those in the First South Carolina Volunteers, which in 1864 became the 33rd United States Colored Infantry Regiment, and free African Americans like those in the 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. While many African Americans met the enemy directly in combat, those held in bondage in the Confederacy also managed to mount their own subtle, indirect, and surreptitious offensives. Their actions and their desire for freedom not only weakened the Confederacy but also helped redefine the purpose of the war from restoring the Union to abolishing slavery.

For instructional purposes, you might summarize their contributions to the Union victory as follows:

- They fled the South, denying the Confederacy valuable economic resources, including chiefly their labor.
- They “stole” other slaves and encouraged still others to run away.
- Because slaves knew their territory, they made excellent guides for Union troops in the South.
- For the same reason, they made excellent spies.
- They aided Union prisoners of war and Confederate deserters.

No single text encompasses all these activities, but the testimony of Alonzo Jackson before the Southern Claims Commission offers an excellent opportunity to illustrate many of them, while documenting the courage and ingenuity the enslaved brought to the challenge of weakening the Confederacy from within.

In 1871 President Ulysses S. Grant established the Southern Claims Commission to reimburse Union sympathizers who remained in the South during the war for property either given voluntarily to the Union Army or confiscated by it. Claimants had to prove that they had lost property and that they had been loyal to the Union. Commissioners were surprised when hundreds of former slaves applied for funds. Among them was Alonzo Jackson, who had been enslaved in the tidewater town of Georgetown, South Carolina. From other sources we know that he submitted a claim of \$1,925 to compensate for property taken by Union soldiers, including two mules, a gun, and \$1,500 worth of rice. The Commission rejected the rice claim entirely and awarded him only \$250 for the rest. In his testimony Jackson recalls three instances in which he guided Union soldiers who had escaped from the Confederate stockade in Florence, seventy miles west of Georgetown, to the safety of Union outposts.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

Text Analysis

Testimony of Alonzo Jackson on his aid to escaped Union soldiers

Excerpt 1

My name is Alonzo Jackson – I was born a slave, in the state of Virginia — and am 64 years of age — I reside at Georgetown state of South Carolina and am a Livery stable keeper by occupation... I have lived all the time at Georgetown since 1823 — and from that time was a slave until made free by the war when the US. forces came to Georgetown in February 1865 — When the war began in 1861, I belonged to Mr Joseph B. Pyatt who lived on his own plantation about 2 miles from Georgetown (he lives there now). For 18. years just before the war I hired all my time from my master and continued to do so all the time I was a slave — When the war began I was employed as “hostler” (in the same livery stable which I now keep on my own account)... I remained, employed as stated, until February 1864 — when I hired a flat boat at Georgetown and did freighting business on the “SamPitt” “Black” “Pee dee” & “Waccamaw” rivers...

About 8 months before Georgetown was occupied by Union soldiers [February 1865] — while I was in the freighting business on my flat boat on “Mingo creek” (up “Black river”) about 30 or 40 miles from Georgetown by water, 3 white men came near the boat which was at the bank of the river — I was on the boat with only one person a colored man (in my employ named “Henry”). As soon as the 3 white men saw we were colored men they came to the boat and said “we are Yankee soldiers, and have escaped from the rebel “stockade” at Florence, we are your friends can’t you do something for us we are nearly perished.” As soon as I saw them, before they spoke, I knew they were Yankee soldiers — by their clothing. They were all private soldiers — so they told me — I invited them to come on the boat and told them I would hurry and cook food for them, which I did and gave it to them in my boat — As soon as they entered the boat I shoved off from land and anchored in the creek about 60. ft from shore — I was loading cord wood in my boat when the soldiers came and had completed my load within about 4. cords — I did not wait to take it all — fearing that, some one else might come and catch the Yankees — Neither of the 3 soldiers ordered me to take them in the boat, or made any threats — They did not go in the boat or secure it in any way so that I could not leave in it — They only entered the boat after they had told me who they were (as stated) and when I invited them — They were very weak — and had no weapons — They had no shoes on — It was then winter weather, and cold — The 3 Yankees did not suggest anything for me to do for them except to feed them — and wanted to get to the gun boats — They did not know where the gun boats were — I did — and I told them I would take them where they could get to the gun boats unmolested.

The soldiers did not pay or give me anything — or promise anything to me at any time — and I have never received anything for any service rendered to any Union soldiers — They did not threaten me or use any violence — they were very friendly and glad to get into such good hands — They showed that they felt very grateful — I hid the 3 soldiers in my flat boat and started at once down the river towards Georgetown as soon as the tide allowed — In about 3 days time we came to “North Island” (about 12 miles from Georgetown) which I then knew was in possession of the Union forces — I did not pass Georgetown by day light for fear of being stopped by the rebels who had “pickets” all along the shore to stop all boats from going below — In the night I floated with the ebb tide (without being seen) to “North Island” — I got there in the night and landed the 3 soldiers in my small boat — I showed them the direction to cross the Island so as to get to the gun boats — I knew there were many of the gun boat people on the shore there at that time — I saw the 3 soldiers go as I directed — I never saw or heard from any of the 3 soldiers afterwards — but through a colored man named “Miller” (who was on the shore near the gunboats) learned that the 3 soldiers had got to the fleet — “Miller” told me this about 2 weeks after I took the 3 soldiers — he saw them and described them so that I was certain he had seen the same 3 soldiers safe in the protection of the gun boats.

About 2 Months after this occurrence — I brought 2 other Yankee soldiers (one a corporal) to “North Island” from the same place in “Mingo creek.” The circumstances were nearly the same except that when I saw the soldiers I called to them saying there was “no

danger” — for they were running away in a swamp — They came nearer and asked me if I was a friend to them that, they were Yankee soldiers who had escaped from rebel prison — I replied that “I was as good a friend as ever they had in their lives”! Then they came on my boat where I fed and delivered them (as before described) on “North Island.” In February 1865 while I was at “Mingo creek” as before I found 4. other Yankee soldiers there who also said they had escaped from Florence — I fed and took them towards “North Island” but told them it might not be necessary as the Yankees were then probably at Georgetown — When we came near Georgetown I found out that this was true — and landed the 4 soldiers there — I never asked or received anything or the promise of anything for what I gave or did for any Yankee soldiers during the war — While they were in my boat I kept them hidden away — I know I would have been killed if the rebels had found out that I had Yankees on my boat — I cannot remember that I ever did anything else to aid any Union soldiers — I never had a chance to do anything else — or I would have done it!

1. From the information Jackson provides, what inferences can we make about his status as a slave and his place in Georgetown? Cite specific evidence from the text to support your inferences.

2. What do you think his relationship with his master was like?

3. Why would his master allow him the relatively high degree of independence and mobility he seems to enjoy?

4. Why might he be especially well positioned to help Union escapees?

5. Why is it important for Jackson to note that the soldiers did not order him to help them?

6. What in this and other paragraphs suggests that Jackson knew the territory? Cite specific evidence.

7. Why is it important for Jackson to note that he received no pay for the help he rendered the escapees?

8. What does Jackson's testimony suggest about communications among the enslaved and whites loyal to the Union?

9. Would Jackson have made a good spy? If so, why?

Testimony of Alonzo Jackson on his aid to escaped Union soldiers

Excerpt 2

I sympathized with the Union cause — “I knew what I needed most and looked that way certain”! I wanted to be free — and wanted my race to be free — I knew this could not be if the rebels had a government of their own — All the time during, and before the war, I felt as I do now that, the Union people were the best friends of the colored people — I always rejoiced over Union victories — I talked with a few white men at Georgetown and with such colored men as I could trust, in favor of the Union all the time during the war, but I knew my life would be taken if it was known how I really felt about the war... I was all the time anxious for the success of the Yankees — I never did or said anything to help the rebels and never wished for the success of any rebel soldiers — I did what I could for the Yankees and wanted to do more! I was always ready and willing to do what I could even at the risk of my own life — I could every time have avoided bringing the Yankee soldiers to “North Island” and could have caused their arrest if I had wished to do so, on my way to “North Island.”

10. Why does Jackson include this information in his testimony?

Glossary

livery stable: business that houses, feeds, and cares for horses for a fee

hostler: man who takes care of horses, especially at an inn

cord wood: wood that has been cut up, as for firewood

unmolested: unattacked

ebb tide: period between high tide and low tide, during which water flows away from the shore

Text

- Excerpts from testimony of Alonzo Jackson, 17 Mar. 1873, claim of F. Alonzo Jackson, Georgetown Co. SC case files, Approved Claims, ser. 732, Southern Claims Commission, 3rd Auditor, U.S. General Accounting Office, Record Group 217, National Archives. Published by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project in the series *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, series 1, volume 1, “The Destruction of Slavery,” eds. Ira Berlin, et al., (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 813-818, and in *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*, eds. Ira Berlin et al. (The New Press, 1992), pp. 154-161. <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/AJackson.html>

Image

- “African Americans emancipated by the Union army,” photograph by Henry P. Moore captioned “Slaves of the rebel Genl. Thomas F. Drayton, Hilton Head, S.C.,” May 1862, detail. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-04324. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006683283/>