UNMADE: AMERICAN MANHOOD IN THE CIVIL WAR ERA

A Dissertation

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by

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This dissertation is ultimately a story about men trying to tell stories about themselves. The central character driving the narrative is a relatively obscure officer, George W. Cole, who gained modest fame in central New York for leading a regiment of black soldiers under the controversial General Benjamin Butler, and, later, for killing his attorney after returning home from the war. By weaving Cole into overlapping micro-narratives about violence between white officers and black troops, hidden war injuries, the personal struggles of fellow officers, the unbounded ambition of his highest commander, Benjamin Butler, and the melancholy life of his wife Mary Barto Cole, this dissertation fleshes out the essence of the emergent myth of self-made manhood and its relationship to the war era. It also provides connective tissue between the top-down war histories of generals and epic battles and the many social histories about the “common soldier” that have been written consciously to push the historiography away from military brass and Lincoln’s administration. Throughout this dissertation, mediating figures like Cole and those who surrounded him—all of lesser ranks like major, colonel, sergeant, or captain—hem together what has previously seemed like the disconnected experiences of the Union military leaders, and lowly privates in the field, especially African American troops.
for my father, a gentle soul
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INTRODUCTION:
THE WAR THAT MADE YOU AND ME

One can hardly walk into a bookstore or watch public television without being whipsawed by self-help prophets selling us the secret of how to take control of our lives. We are promised that we can parlay a mortgage payment into a fortune, become masters of our bodies, overcome aging, beat cancer, have multiple, mutual orgasms, and raise sensitive children with enough ambition to get into the Ivies.

In his most recent ultranationalistic work “What’s So Great about America,” Dinesh D’Souza assures his readers that more than any place on the planet, Americans “get to write the script” of their lives. What they become depends on the story they compose.1 If D’Souza can be accused of raking in a fortune by peddling old wine in new bottles, his readers don’t seem to mind. He is, after all, merely the latest in a long lineage of American stump speakers who have preached the gospel of self-help. In this big-tent gospel, adherents give obeisance to the individual’s power to master fate and cash out talent for success, fulfillment, and status. And as in any storefront evangelical church, backsliding is a symptom of anemic faith (in oneself instead of Jesus).

1 Dinesh D’Souza, What’s so Great about America (Washington, DC; Lanham, MD: Regnery Publishing; Distributed to the trade by National Book Network, 2002), 83,131.
This belief that through focused planning and hard-boiled will individuals can fashion their own destinies is what many vaguely mean by “the American Dream.” While the “dream” is often evoked to address a loose set of common hopes and beliefs about anything from the purpose of life to the justification for government, it is something that, as Jim Cullen has put it, “seems to envelop us as unmistakably as the air we breathe.” Though Cullen’s claim sounds a bit inflated it actually squares with what most of us have come to barely notice. If Americans filter out the bromides during political conventions, post-game interviews, and almost any debate about American education, they do so because they know beforehand what’s going to be said, and because they have already been at least partially converted to the creed. That is, many Americans believe that an open, democratic society exists primarily for the purpose of producing self-actuated beings. As they might imagine it, thanks to individuals like Paul Revere, Thomas Jefferson, Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, Abe Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr., more and more Americans, through micromanagement of the self, can be masters of their destinies.

2 Jim Cullen points out that the “American Dream” has consisted of various tenets: freedom to worship; upward mobility, home ownership, land ownership, quest for equality, and personal fulfillment (fame, fortune, sexual pleasure, peace of mind, etc.). Cullen of course makes no claim that these categories are exhaustive. Clearly many of these overlap and sometimes collapse into each other: The upwardly mobile American may be motivated in the pews from the church of his choosing, make a fortune through real estate, and expect his original fortune to bring more fulfilling sex, fame and even better returns in the market. See: Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8-9.

3 I do not mean to disparage this hope in creating a world where station reflects merit, but instead to argue how profoundly this hope has taken hold in our culture. Of course, the American Dream, or meritocracy does not sufficiently describe the larger visions held by any of these individuals. But, at the same time, one cannot talk long about their legacies without touching upon the ways in which ideals like freedom, democracy, and equality overlap with meritocratic ends. To the extent that Americans disagree about the American Dream it is over the degree to which it has been fulfilled or aborted, more than its central tenets. For example, as Christopher Lasch has pointed out,
If meritocracy or what Abraham Lincoln called the “race of life” could be blamed for merely creating ambitious men lusting for rank, it would be disconcerting enough. But it does this and worse. Meritocracy can stigmatize those who have countervailing commitments to community, family, craft, nation, or God. Scott Sandage has shown how in the making of meritocratic America, financial collapse or even mild setbacks took on moral meaning. In his study of business failure in the nineteenth century, Sandage demonstrates how the very meaning of the word “failure” in America shifted from an isolated misstep in business calculations to a description of a person’s soul. Failure went from something that happened to businessmen, to a character trait that defined them. Losing became an indictment of the soul; it had never been so psychologically disturbing to stall or plod.

Medieval peasants, unlike their impoverished counterparts today, for all their suffering, maintained a modicum of dignity as they, at least, could trace their lowliness to someone else’s actions (God’s) while believing they were an essential part of a divinely ordered society.

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when Americans dispute affirmative action all sides seem to take merit as the central issue. “Both sides argue on the same grounds. Both see careers open to talent as the be-all and end-all of democracy, when in fact, careerism tends to undermine democracy by divorcing knowledge from practical experience, devaluing the kind of knowledge that is gained from experience, and generating social conditions in which ordinary people are not expected to know anything at all.” See: Christopher Lasch, The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 78-9.

While the American political right and left are going about it in different ways, both sides place meritocracy as one of the highest goals. Conservatives may look to individuated selves overcoming systemic obstacles; while their political counterparts place faith in public education and the taming of public and private mechanisms. Both sides, though, by and large are trying to chase down a society that creates a deserving elite—a society which will reflect the individual’s talents more than bloodline, race, or privilege (either from systemic prejudice, or government intervention).
If French peasants could blame it all on the mysterious orderings of Jesus, Sandage’s work reminds us that Gilded Age “losers” needed only look within.⁴

While meritocracy breeds plenty of ambitious individuals, it condemns and confuses those who are only half on board—and of course those left standing on the platform. Jennifer Hochschild makes the convincing case that today’s American poor, and in particular, indigent blacks, have fallen “under the spell” of the meritocratic American Dream. The belief in unfettered agency and in the power of merit, she contends, serves to mask the complex structures that keep certain folks in certain places. In what scholars call “racial uplift,” we find that this spell particularly divides and compromises the African American community. And it is not just capitalists and racial minorities who have bought into it. In his parting diatribe the late Christopher Lasch called academics and professionals onto the carpet for participating in what masks as an egalitarian system of meritocracy, but which, he argued, merely recruits fresh blood into the American elite. Because our own nocturnal dreams often plumb the very things that can destroy us, large portions of Americans, from second-graders to the aged, experience the “meritocrat’s nightmare.” In these dreams we have slept in, or forgotten about a final test. An otherwise ho-hum image of sleeping in is so unsettling precisely because of the fear of slipping up in a system that is supposed to measure our real value.⁵ From the boardroom, to the admissions office, to the

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boudoir, to the welfare line—this is an abiding American mindset that seems to come naturally to most of us.\(^6\)

Tracing the origins of self-making, or the "culture of control," brings one into a thicket of tangled beginnings found in religion, science, emerging conceptions of the self, the gradual conflation of work with morality, and the rise of the market.\(^7\) The transformation of religious sensibilities in the nineteenth century were particularly important in all of this. The "embourgeoisement" of evangelicalism supplied the final gutting of the once mysterious, |

\(^6\) Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 412.; Lani Guinier, "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: Brown V. Board of Education and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (2004), 92-118.; Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). A professor once half-jokingly confessed to me that he contemplated purchasing his own book during the Super Bowl just for the rush of watching his neglected work break into Amazon’s top 100,000. (Based on hourly sales, Amazon.com regularly ranks its most sought after books from first down to the millions; the rank of "none" is like reading your book’s obituary.) I envisioned thousands of scholars hunched before their monitors, licking their wounds, stuffing their electronic shopping carts to the brim. This pitiful scene only seemed possible of course, because for several hours every winter, over a hundred million Americans gather to take part in a major ritual of our national sports obsession—an obsession where lasers, instant replays, elaborate ranking systems and asterisk marks are implemented to maintain hallowed lists of record holders and undisputed champions. From the gridiron to the classroom we are egalitarians, seduced by rank.

passive miracle of grace, and transformed it into a gradual process of self-mastery where humans controlled their own salvation.\(^8\) While the logic of Calvinist grace and salvation may have helped create a society of eager and industrious money gatherers, the sweated money proved more alluring than the Puritan God.\(^9\) This theological shift injected moral meaning into one’s station and cleared the way for the ubiquitous “self-made man.” As the story goes, the nineteenth century was a sort of prolonged climax of confidence in the individual’s ability to assure his own salvation, remake the world, establish Zion, and move upward in purpose and influence. It was surely no coincidence that many Americans believed not only that they could earn their way into heaven, but also that with enough planning and good behavior, they could hasten the return of Christ to earth, making him come to them.\(^10\)

The work that follows is not intended to be a genealogy of the American Dream; nor does it seek to give a definitive interpretation of “self-made men.”\(^11\) Instead it will provide

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\(^8\) Lears, "Something for Nothing: Luck in America", 1-24, 135-40


\(^11\) There really is no work that thoroughly sifts out the various origins of meritocracy. The term was actually coined in the mid-twentieth century by the writer Michael Young, who depicted a futuristic dystopian England, tyrannized by academic and professional merit testing as a way to create secure classes. See: Michael Dunlop Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033: The New Elite of our Social Revolution (New York: Random House, 1959). While the word is usually coupled with higher education, its emphasis on creating a just society where individuals get what they deserve would have
the background of a world in flux—when Americans grappled with the concept of self-made manhood during a war that promised to spawn a nation of self-makers. As Eric Foner has shown us in his work on free labor ideology and the making of the Republican Party, scads of men, like the central figures in this narrative, came to believe that the primary purpose of society and government was to guarantee certain limited rights before the law—not for the sake of equality—but instead for the promise that talents would correlate with status.12 In other words, Lincoln and his party earnestly set out to create what the Revolutionary generation called “a natural aristocracy”—a world where merit trumped bloodline and talent reflected station. By and large the men who rushed to Lincoln’s party before the war did not dream of a world of social equality: Instead, they aimed to provide all men certain limited equalities before the law and, in turn, level the playing field and create a society of the deserving—with both winners and losers who only had themselves to thank or blame. In short, the party that controlled national politics for the remaining half of the nineteenth century, the one that freed four million slaves and secured certain constitutional equalities for freedmen, was also committed to creating a society made up of unimpeachable social ranks.13


13 ibid.; Cullen, "The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation", 59-102 The thing about Republicans is that while they admitted there was a bottom and top rung, they insisted that these rungs were always in motion—usually upward. A farmhand today would be a landowner and employer tomorrow. This gave many northerners the ability to at once admit to the
While the history of American meritocracy and self-making seems to originate in antebellum American, the story stretches back and beyond even Jefferson's age and his venerated soil. The increasingly internalized meaning of station was not created ex-nihilo in the American Revolution or the ensuing century. Yet by the middle of the nineteenth century a sizable number of Americans casually spoke of controlling their own destinies in ways that would have baffled, if not horrified, their great grandfathers. Indeed, a consistent trait in American self-making was the conscious effort to distance oneself, both psychologically and geographically, from one's father and kin. Just as grandfathers would have been startled by the open ambitions of their descendents, they would have been equally disturbed by the ways in which young men in antebellum America used the lives of forefathers as benchmarks to surpass.

One of the paradoxes of the American Civil War was that so many northerners viewed it as a chance for men to make the ultimate sacrifice for community and family, while at the same time the war allured a growing population of ambitious men willing to leave their families so they could outpace their fathers. For this and other reasons, the Civil War Era existence of marked poverty, especially in the cities, while at the same time reduce it to an ephemeral problem that all must shoulder for a season.

14 Earlier generations would have been shocked, not just by the extent to which their descendents wished to control their own destinies, but the things they deemed fulfilling.


(when Americans grappled with and took up arms over unfinished business from the Revolution) is an apt place to begin digging into the complexities and paradoxes of this enduring American creed. There are compelling reasons, after all, to see the Civil War as a four-year rite of passage that anointed and galvanized emergent sympathies for meritocracy, self-making, and upward mobility. The ambitious individualism that was already in motion, that indeed one could trace back to the Revolution or the Reformation, the war seems to have kicked into high gear.17

It was in the Civil War that Americans first began systematically identifying soldiers’ corpses and paying tribute to fallen individuals with discrete identities.18 In New York, the

Francis Adam Jr., consciously set out to do what his own father and others could not do in fulfilling the promises of the Revolution. Wanting to outpace one’s father does not necessarily translate into animosity or latent patricidal urges; instead it is manifested in the way one measure’s one’s own success, using a father’s accomplishments as a threshold for gauging one’s life performance, especially in the marketplace.


18 Drew Gilpin Faust and Kristin Ann Hass both argue that an emerging emphasis on the individual soldier and his identity took root during the Civil War. See: Kristin Ann Hass, Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Drew Gilpin Faust, "the Dread Void of Uncertainty": Naming the Dead in the American Civil War," Southern Cultures 11, no. 2 (2005), 7-32. Hass argues that, "until the 1860s, memorial traditions had remained relatively constant since the time of the ancient Egyptians. European and, later, American memorializers, drawing on a limited range of symbolic forms, remembered wars as triumphs of state or divine power, without paying particular attention to ordinary soldiers." During the war and virtually all wars before it soldiers did not carry personal IDs, as it was not thought of as essential to have ones body pulled out, identified, and separately buried. In the Civil War as the army began to try to identify bodies and make separate graves, they pilfered pockets to make connections to names---some soldiers wrote messages and put them in their pockets, or pinned their name to
home state of George Cole—the central figure in this narrative—wartime legislation was passed into law “making it a duty” of the Bureau of Military Statistics to “collect and preserve in a permanent form an authentic sketch of every volunteer from this State.” Cole’s hometown newspaper announced that a circular was making its way around “calling for biographical sketches of the living and the dead, as well as photographic and other likenesses. Every person having a friend in the army is requested to send at once to the Bureau and account of his life or services, and especially if he has died in the field or camp.”

During the war, the dead soldier’s body would decreasingly be reduced to an anonymous sacrifice, rolled into a mass grave without marker and subsumed into the state’s war effort. The Union administration felt increasing pressure to create a system to gather personal effects, report the names of the dead, and either provide an individually marked grave or allow family to retrieve bodies and carry them home.

Even as the war emphasized the individual, the Republican Party somewhat unwittingly flipped the American mental map on its side—changing the orientation of their uniforms before going into combat. Gettysburg marked the first time during the war the Union made earnest and systematic efforts to give each body a grave and a name.

It is interesting that Mary Ryan argues that during this same period just before the war, the reproduction of the Middle-Class correlated with modes of child rearing where parents no longer looked to crush the wills of children, but to foster and persuade them, and cultivate a benignly ambitious personal will. See: Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, Eng.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 158-9.

19 *Syracuse Journal*, July 27, 1863; The announcement goes on to say that “These objects are too important to be neglected. Every soldier deserves and should have his name thus inscribed in the archives of the State.” It isn’t clear if the public ever responded with like enthusiasm. The Bureau did publish some books on military statistics but nothing like one would expect to find given the legislation.

conceptions like “opportunity” and “mobility” from horizontal to the vertical. In his jeremiad against American meritocracy (in which he strains to let Lincoln and his party off the hook) Christopher Lasch admits that the Morrill College Land Grant Act of 1862, passed by an unconstrained Republican Congress and signed by Lincoln, was a watershed moment. Though its backers hoped the Act would encourage stable farm communities and dignify manual labor, it did more to “exalt the professional status,” fulfilling the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal even as it choked it to death.

But when Lasch struggled to push back the origins of Americans’ lust for upward mobility and wealth to the Gilded Age, he was nearly going it alone. The works of Joyce Appleby, Gordon Wood and Stephen Watts convincingly show a steady rise of status-mad, self-made men casting about for ways to get ahead in the early Republic. In fact, as George Forgie argued in his much forgotten classic, it was Lincoln and his generation that came to

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21 The Morrill Land Act was first passed by congress in 1859, but was vetoed by the Democratic president, James Buchanan. When the amended Morrill Act was passed again Abraham Lincoln signed it into law. The Act essentially gifted large tracts of land to individual states which could then be sold or used for the creation of learning institutions, primarily colleges and universities. These institutions would be required to teach agriculture, military or engineering sciences. See: Lasch, "The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy", 77-9; Phillip S. Paludan, A People's Contest: The Union and Civil War 1861-1865, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 129-30.


see the Civil War as a seductive outlet for pent-up ambitions. As Forgie told it, the Civil War provided a release from the collective sense of shame for not having lived up to the heroic deeds of the revolutionary generation.

Parents from the “post-heroic generation” endowed (and saddled) their children with names of revolutionary notables. A deluge of contemporary advice manuals encouraged parents to read to their children moralistic narratives taken from the hallowed lives of the revolutionaries. Before infants learned to call for mother or father, their “first lisps,” parents were instructed, should be the name of George Washington, the national father. According to Forgie this prescriptive literature took hold of young minds. The flood of hagiographic juvenile literature went to the heads of young readers and by mid-nineteenth century a nation of young and middle-aged men groped in the shadows of an earlier generation. With a grave and seemingly imminent sectional war on the wings, northern men would back Lincoln and soon take up muskets so they could, among other things, escape the ghost of General Washington.24

While southern boys, too, cut their teeth on patriotic books by Mason Weems, men below the Mason-Dixon Line developed substantially different ideas about manhood, and how to make good on the promises of the Founding Fathers.25 It is hardly an exaggeration


25 Mason Locke Weems published *Life of Washington*, one of the most widely read books in antebellum America, from which almost all legends about Washington originated. For two of the most important works on manhood in white antebellum South, see: Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Marks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). For a healthy dose of the complexities of
to say that the war was fought over two incompatible ideas about manhood and merit, inherited from a common revolutionary past. By Lincoln’s election many southern apologists boasted how no southern white man could ever occupy the lowest rung and that in this way all southern white men were capable of rising to higher ranks. Slavery provided the bedrock below which no white man could ever be buried. Slavery, it was argued, made good on the Revolution’s promises of equality by erasing class distinctions. It created a world where all white men could become masters of themselves by first collectively enslaving others.26

While the cult of self-making was not the preserve of Northerners, as the two regions squared off over the spread of slavery, heated debate pushed self-making into the cultural bailiwick of Yankees. Over the second third of the nineteenth century the respective regions contracted into increasingly hostile domains with incompatible visions of how white antebellum manhood (north and south) see the classic articles: Elliott J. Gorn, "'Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American': Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (1987), 388-410.; Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (1985), 18-43. Gorn’s work reminds us how violent and fractious manhood could be among backwood southerners or males who walked the same streets and frequented the same bars in New York City.

26 The degree to which the South was a “herrenvolk democracy”—a place where a master race of white men experienced significant equality—is still debated by scholars. See: George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). For our purposes though, there were many prominent spokesmen for the South who made claims that slavery opened up careers for the talented. While doing so, these men usually railed against the class divisions in northern cities, where so called free-labor pitted classes of white men against one another, relegating an entire class of white men to slave status (without the cradle-to-grave social care that southerners disingenuously attributed to slavery). The defense of slavery often claimed the moral highroad by emphasizing the ways in which southerners did not compete against one another but instead were united by slavery which benefited all white men. Emphasizing that deserving white men never had to scrape like hirelings in northern factories, George Fitzhugh claimed: “Actual liberty and equality with our white population has been approached much nearer than in the free States. Few of our whites ever work as day laborers, none as cooks, scullions, ostlers, body servants, or in other menial capacities.” See: George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South Or, the Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, Va: A. Morris, 1854), 253-5.
men could best get ahead. For many southerners the lash kept the world aright. For a wide variety of northerners, though, an imagined world free from coercion (from father or master), and open territories unsullied by competing slave drivers, promised the truest equality. As these cultural contractions took place, antebellum men, particularly in northern

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27 Ironically, it was a southern Whig from Kentucky, Henry Clay, who first coined the phrase “self-made man” in his defense of the “American System” in congress 1832. Clay argued that internal improvements and strict tariffs would create a robust, interdependent economy in the North, South and West. His crusade for internal improvements and industrial strength did not win over President Jackson or his party; but it made him a darling among many Whigs and proto-Republicans. Lincoln idolized Clay, referring to him as his “beau ideal of a statesman,” in a eulogy for the deceased “Harry of the West” delivered in 1852. Of course, the South also produced the iconic self-made man, Andrew Jackson. But while Jackson had enormous traction in both the North and South, the vitriolic split between Clay and Jackson augured their respective cultural legacies. While Lee Benson has dismantled the idea that Jackson represented the masses, and Whigs like Clay, the classes, Benson also pointed to deeper divisions based on religion and ethnicity. His broad categories of “Puritan Whigs” versus non-puritan Democrats may shed light on the diverging conception of how white men defined success and getting ahead, especially if we think of Puritanism as code for a certain sensibility about work and leisure. Charles Sellers, on the other hand sees class tensions, and in particular “subsistence folkways” versus entrepreneurial “money power,” as central to understanding Jacksonian America. Interestingly, Sellers divides the populace between “arminian” capitalists and the “antinomian countryside.” Sellers loosely applies these religious modes (the first denoting that one can earn one’s salvation through development and doing all the right things, and the latter, a sensibility more given to familial allegiance, loyalty, and undeserved bounties) as a way to understand political affiliation in the age of Jackson. The use of “arminian” suggests a religiously informed sympathy for the self-created individual. Finally both Clay and Jackson were from the West, an area particularly important to Republican ideology as a sort of safety valve, a critical space for cramped urban white men to obtain the dreams of mobility and independence that eluded them in the East. See: Lee Benson, The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961); Charles Grier Sellers, The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Harry L. Watson, Andrew Jackson Vs. Henry Clay: Democracy and Development in Antebellum America (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998); Foner, "Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War", 14, 26-8

28 Jim Cullen argues that slavery and self-making existed only with great tension among southerners; “being ‘self-made’ through slave labor was a wobblier construct.” Cullen, ”The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation”, 73-4.

But it is what slavery did to party politics that seems to have played a crucial role in the migration of self-making into northern circles. Both Whigs and Democrats, because they were national parties, muted their respective critiques of northern mobility and slavepower's version of white equality. When the Whig party gave up the ghost, and when Bleeding Kansas and Stephen Douglas helped sever the Democrat Party into two, the northern political remnants (the embryonic Republican Party) and the southern wing of the Democrats sharpened their already pointed criticisms
towns and cities, navigated a shifting meaning of manliness—one that was more competitive, individualistic, muscular, yet self-controlled. David Leverenz describes this shift as going from patrician and artisan models to an aggressive entrepreneurial type he calls “men of force.”

Even as northern men envisioned themselves in vertical motion, their ideal of manhood evolved into one with indispensable attributes for making the climb: aggressiveness, grit, and outward ambitiousness. Men of force willingly wagered their savings and familial intimacies in the hopes of outpacing competitors. But competitive entrepreneurs, and white men looking for work, could hardly hope to compete with a slave system that paid nothing to a permanent work supply that reproduced itself. When the crisis over slavery threatened to disrupt this new vision of manliness, throngs of these “men of force” rushed to war—not merely to safeguard the myth of unrestrained mobility, but to obtain within the army the elusive ascent they could not find without.

of one another’s labor system. The emergence of an entirely northern party (Republicans) led to an unrestrained critique of slavery which contrasted bondage with the free market. It is in this simultaneous celebration and demonizing of respective systems that the image of the independent, ever-rising self-made man achieved its grip on many northerners’ minds, especially in Lincoln’s party. For more on the ramifications of the break down of the Whig Party, see: Don Edward Fehrenbacher and Don Edward Fehrenbacher, Sectional Crisis and Southern Constitutionalism [South and three sectional crises], Louisiana pbk. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 45-65.; Foner, "Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War", xx-xxii


30 Winkle, "Abraham Lincoln: Self-made Man", 6 Winkle argues that the myth of the self-made man “smoothed the potentially acrimonious transition from families as the basis of American society to the new economic order based on individual achievement.”

31 Many others, for similar reasons, stayed home. Earnest soldiers in both the North and South addressed the prospects for gain in entering the war. They might openly admit the chances for promotion, or ensure loved ones that they stood less to gain by enlisting: See a southern soldier’s
It was the master of the Union war, Abraham Lincoln, who after the bloodiest summer of the conflict stood before returning troops to remind them of the “nature of the struggle.” “Nowhere in the world is presented a government of so much liberty and equality. To the humblest and poorest amongst us are held out the highest privileges and positions. The present moment finds me at the White House,” continued Lincoln, “yet there is as good a chance for your children as there was for my father’s.”

Earlier in that month Lincoln addressed two others regiments bound for home. “I wish it might be more generally and universally understood what the country is now engaged in,” Lincoln told the soldiers, “We have, as all will agree, a free Government, where every man has a right to be equal with every other man.” And again, four days later Lincoln stood before more uniformed men, and trod down the same rhetorical path.

I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen temporarily to occupy the big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father’s child has. It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright….The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.


33 ibid., 623-4
Lincoln produced these distillations of the American Dream in the wake of Grant’s bloody offensive in late spring of 1864. Between May and mid-June General Grant’s army alone suffered over 60,000 casualties. Americans gasped at the butchery. When Grant’s deadly campaign devolved into a stalemate in the fields around Petersburg and Richmond, even Lincoln’s staunch supporters began to wonder.\textsuperscript{34} Lincoln, no doubt, had his improbable reelection in mind when he begged the soldiers to remember all that was at stake. But Lincoln wasn’t pandering so much as repeating what he always believed was the best justification for the horror. Amid confusion, and in the preceding calm, Lincoln believed this to be the brightest ideological North Star, the single common ideal that attached men to the Union. In 1859, roughly a year before being elected, Lincoln held forth before a humongous crown in Cincinnati, assuring them that free labor promised that no man would ever have to “remain through life in a dependent condition.” Unless given to “vicious habits,” or “singularly unfortunate,” every American could rise as Lincoln had. The “great principle” for which the government had “really” been formed, Lincoln assured the crowd, was to protect “The progress by which the poor, honest, industrious, and resolute man raises himself.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{34} Paludan, "A People's Contest: The Union and Civil War 1861-1865", 307-8

\textsuperscript{35} Lincoln, Abraham. Fehrenbacher,Don Edward and Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana (Library of Congress), "Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865", 84-5
With the war just underway, and the bloody costs only half-imagined, Lincoln addressed Congress in the summer of 1861 and dilated the war into a grand struggle for nothing less than “maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object it is, to elevate the condition of men—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.” While it is striking what Lincoln is arguing here—that mass annihilation would be a fair price for self-creation, a death wish for what Lincoln called the “race of life”—his following comments are equally important. “I am most happy to believe,” he continued, “that the plain people understand and appreciate this.” That is, this was not some ethereal defense of the war. Common folks, Lincoln seemed to suggest, understood that Union soldiers would be killing their southern counterparts so that men would have a “fair chance” to channel private ambition into careers and social rank. And to prove it, Lincoln then went on to make what now seems like an absurd claim—that up to that point, July 4, 1861 not a single common soldier had deserted the ranks of the Union army.

But even if Lincoln generally had it right at this early hour, the Union would soon receive its first licking at Bull Run and from that point on increasingly become what one

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36 Roughly 600,000 soldiers died in the war; Yet such an estimate does not take into account the tens of thousands of deaths precipitated in southern society due to disease, dislocation, malnutrition and gunfire. See: James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63. n.53.

37 Lincoln, Abraham. Fehrenbacher, Don Edward and Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana (Library of Congress), "Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865", 259-60
scholar has called “a deserter nation.” Within a year and a half Lincoln would grow frustrated with the massive numbers of stragglers, sick, and missing soldiers. In December of 1862 he admitted to an associate, “It would astonish you to know the extent of the evil of ‘absenteeism.’ We scarcely have more than half the men we are paying on the spot for service anywhere.” In a pressing letter to General McClellan he questioned how the Army of the Potomac, which had been sent 160,000 soldiers, could report only 86,000 remaining. Even if the death tolls and hospital reports were taken into account, there were still some 45,000 soldiers still alive who slipped from the ranks. Lincoln queried impatiently to McClellan “Have you any more perfect knowledge of this than I have?”

Lincoln, then, revealed his significant confusion about the dedication of his “self-made” soldiers. As his dismay suggests, as the Civil War anointed the American creed of self-making and meritocracy, it simultaneously exposed the myth’s explanatory weakness—and its fragility. The war was a time of flux which, on one hand seemed to ratify the pervasive northern faith in mastery over national and personal identity, while on the other, displayed before millions stark examples of how the innocent (or meritorious) pointlessly suffer—how through dysentery or gangrene the body can turn on the self, how a single minie ball can turn a trained craftsman into an invalid, or how depression and confusion close in on young soldiers’ minds. “The chaotic violence of war,” Jackson Lears reminds us,

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38 Joan E. Cashin, "Civilians and Draft Resistance in the North" In The War was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War, ed. Joan E. Cashin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 263-285. The U.S. Provost Marshall did not begin collecting numbers of desertions until 1863. After the war he estimated that there were over 200,000 deserters from the Union Army living in the country, Canada and the territories.

“has always put schemes of cosmic order to the supreme test, and the Civil War may well have been the most violent, the most destructive armed conflict the world had ever seen.”

Yet, ironically, the carnage that challenged individual soldiers’ belief in a partly controllable providence, piled so high that many Americans insisted God had created the mayhem for a reason—and that this reason could be deciphered.40 The decipherable universe that was undone in a million private experiences, ironically led to a renewed belief in a bolstered providentialism that was both transparent and patriotic. Only God could have ripped such a great nation to shreds. And he would not have troubled himself in such a way for a backwater republic. And surely words of wisdom fell from his lips as he tore the Union limb to limb.

Strangely—self-made America survived the war in spades: Horatio Alger began spinning the first of his many best-sellers in 1867; Frederick Douglas would continue to deliver his speech entitled “self-made Men” nearly fifty times; in 1872, Harriet Beecher

40 Jackson Lears argues that the antebellum alliance between religion and rationalists— the “noontide of providence”—“ushered in the era of self-mad manhood.” At no time before or since has this alliance been unquestioned or left alone from the margins. But during the decades before the Civil War mainstream Protestants developed faith in the common cause of religion and the sciences. For them God no longer worked through “special providences” to secure his ends. In other words all of God doings fit within a system of rationally understood rules of the universe. Even Emerson seemed to backtrack on his earlier denunciations of rational religion when in his essay “Self-reliance” (1841) he celebrated the victory of will over chance: “In the Will work and acquire, and thou hast chained the wheel of Chance, and shalt sit here after out of fear from her rotations.” In 1852 he argued that the “instinctive and heroic races” were “proud” acolytes of destiny. But this is because they themselves made destiny work in their hands. “They conspire with it” wrote Emerson. For other races or peoples destiny was an opiate: “But the dogma makes a different impression when it is held by the weak and lazy. ‘Tis weak and vicious people who cast blame on fate.” In a suggestive passage Lear’s writes that although the war pushed common soldiers to the brink of disbelief in rational providence. “…the soldiers festooned themselves with charms, turned to the stars for clues about the future, and took to gambling obsessively.” Lear’s, “Something for Nothing: Luck in America”, 140-5; Mark Noll has referred to this alliance as the “evangelical-Enlightenment synthesis,” though Noll argues that it came under significant attack in the decades preceding the war. See: Mark A. Noll, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 90-4.
Stowe would publish *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-Made Men*—which was considerably made up of tributes to Union war heroes.\(^{41}\) And despite his professional roots in West Point and his eventual association with corrupt magnates, Ulysses Grant, with his legendary wrinkled private’s jacket and mud-spattered boots, would become the embodiment of how the common man could take control of his and the nation’s fortunes.\(^{42}\) How providentialism and self-making seemed to make it out of the war unscathed, how this cultural and intellectual hat trick took place—is a monumental history that will not unfold below.\(^{43}\) As another historian has argued about the disturbingly interconnected and seemingly incompatible strands of sexual repression and intense eroticism within Germany’s Nazi

\(^{41}\) Frederick Douglass, *Self-made Men: Address before the Students of the Indian Industrial School, Carlisle, Pa.* (Carlisle, Pa: Indian Print, 1855-1860); Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Lives and Deeds of our Self-made Men: Including Grant, Greeley, Wilson, Brown, Summer, Coffuss, Beecher, Sherman, Sheridan, Farragut, Garrison, Stanton, Andrew, Buckingham, Phillips, Chase, Lincoln, Howard, etc.* (Hartford, Conn: Worthington, Dustin & Co, 1872). Perhaps Alger’s most popular books came immediately after the war: Ragged Dick (1867); Luck and Pluck (1869); Tattered Tom (1871). Alger’s works are often oversimplified as stories about young men going from rags to riches. But many of his stories admit to the importance of fortune in conjunction with dedication of will. Also many of Alger’s characters do not seek enormous wealth so much as a stable place in middle-class society. Also see: Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 136-56.

\(^{42}\) For a recent work that depicts Grant as the embodiment of yeomanry, versus Lee the aristocrat, see: Thomas B. Buell, *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997), 494.; Paludan, "*A People’s Contest: The Union and Civil War 1861-1865*", 294-315.

Party, “ideology works through, not despite contradictions.”44 Perhaps, then, in the era of the American Civil War, the belief that men could manipulate fate while depending on only themselves, gained traction within the Republican Party and elsewhere, not despite of, but because of the apparent contradictions at every turn.

While Christopher Lasch was too eager to recover an Edenic America where men longed for “competence” more than rank, he may have been on to something when he insisted that the American obsession with upward mobility grabbed hold only after such ascension became less possible. It is as if the overwhelmingly evangelical populace, during a half-century of religious paroxysms, grew accustomed to mining certainty from the muddled and unseen. If God’s shrinking mysteriousness helped etch out the “self-made man” before 1861, the “shallowness of providential reasoning that was everywhere” during the war, as Mark Noll put it, perhaps made the self-made man an irresistible fantasy. It could be that our own lack of appreciation for the ways that war inverts reality keeps us from taking seriously that Americans came to believe most deeply in the same things that were seemingly proven to be untrue by experience—or that as Americans stared into the fog of war they saw what they most wanted to believe.45


45 Writes Lasch: “Yet the fact is that the promise of American life came to be identified with social mobility only when more hopeful interpretations of opportunity had began to fade; that the concept of social mobility embodies a fairly recent and impoverished understanding of the American dream; and that its ascendancy, in our own time, measures the recession of the dream and not its fulfillment.” Lasch, "Social Mobility", 632 Also see: Noll, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis, esp. 92 If Noll is right that the “shallowness” of wartime providentialism led to the loss of Protestantism’s cultural power in the second half of the century, it would be interesting to contrast the two trajectories of American faith in transparent providentialism and faith in self-making. While these
The war did not merely provide yet another alternative for men to make themselves in a century of great mobility; neither did it simply serve as a refuge for laborers and businessmen, slow to rise, caught in a bottleneck. The impending crisis promised to purge the Union of the same materialism and excessive ambitions that free labor had fomented. Decades ago Daniel Aaron argued that Americans viewed the war as “an ordeal devised by God to purge the Americans of their materialism; or as a struggle to make the Union what the South had prevented it from becoming—a nation in the European sense of the word, a country to be proud of.” One of the ways that major wars become a vortex is through the dire search for purpose that follows massive death counts and expenditures of other depleting resources. Once encountered (that is, constructed) and promulgated, the purpose fans the war’s flames, producing more corpses, which, in turn redoubles the search for meaning. Confederates insisted that the war would purge the “chosen people”—and keep the blessed South from joining Yankees’ decline into godlessness and frenzied trading. At

Concerning the ways in which providentialism and self-righteousness fanned the war, Harry Stout writes: “What began as a political war was being transformed, in effect, into a moral crusade with religious foundations for which martyrs would willingly sacrifice themselves on their nations’ altars. Inevitably, such language absolutized the war on both sides and reinforced the demand for self-righteous blood revenge.” Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War*, 82-3
the same time, Union supporters claimed the war could purge northern souls all the maladies of which Southerners reliably accused them.\textsuperscript{47}

When divines in Boston or New York compared the dying Union soldier to Christ, as some of them did, they at once attached moral meaning to the troubling lists of the dead, and promised that Union disciples would have their sins erased.\textsuperscript{48} For Walt Whitman the sacrifice of American soldiers for the Union cause would become sacrosanct. In 1862, Whitman left New York for the battlefields and nervously hunted through hospitals for his brother George who had been wounded at Fredericksburg. It was here that Whitman first experienced the scope of carnage, of body parts and disembodied soldiers. One man’s face in particular penetrated his heart: “Young man,” he would write, “I think this face of yours is the face of my dead Christ.” Whitman wasn’t kidding. The war for him, as it would become for many, represented the best, last hope for an increasingly atomized, materialistic society to eradicate its evil spirits and restore human relations. A trail of blood led Whitman and others to the foot of a national cross where an army of boys hung for the wicked. The war, he hoped, would cleanse the sins of the 1850s: the loss of love between men; the ceding of passionate friendship to competitiveness; the putrid corruptions of politics; what he called “the materialistic and vulgar American democracy”; the string of sectional compromises

\textsuperscript{47} ibid., 86-90, 372-73

\textsuperscript{48} Fredrickson, “The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union”, 82-3
which merely postponed resolution; widening class divisions; and capitalistic sloth.\textsuperscript{49} The war promised to be the great panacea for America’s ailments.

A body of medical experts claimed that the war was actually curing Americans of insanity—especially the kind induced by ambition. It had become a commonplace by the 1860s to claim that northern “civilization” caused the frightening rise of insanity in the cities. As one contemporary guide for the mentally ill phrased it, “the demon of unrest, the luckless offspring of ambition haunts us all…. A sizable number of well-read Americans believed that Lincoln’s war, with its call for total sacrifice, its reduction of the political rat’s nest into two opposing forces, and its claim to moral superiority over slavepower—could calm the restless mind. Though many called for an apocalyptic execution of the war, few relished the blood that lapped against their doorjambs. But even as northerners choked down the incomparable death toll, many could at least quietly echo Whitman’s words. “I welcome the menace—I welcome thee with joy.”\textsuperscript{50}

This dissertation is not so much about the relationship between self-making and providentialism, as it is about the undercurrent of confusion that pulled at “self-made men” who attempted to ford the war’s raging waters. Though many of the characters that run through this story came from pious households, there is strangely almost no talk of God in


the sources they left behind. But they did share a general belief upon entering the war that their will could be imprinted upon the world about them—a gut-instinct bequeathed to them by American Protestantism. Yet as most of them found, the war would be imprinted onto them instead. Our coming to grips with the chaos of the war can help us appreciate how Americans caught in its vortex came to grips with it themselves. It can help us make sense of the ideological acrobatics Union citizens performed in order to become the kind of people who, while bodies still rotted in shallow graves, began depicting the war as a place where men made themselves, and where manhood was established.

Even more, recovering the confusion can actually cast light on the ways in which the war magnified, crystallized, or destabilized various tensions within antebellum culture. By examining the mental templates that soldiers used to make sense of the war, the narrative scope necessarily widens geographically and temporally to include the home front and antebellum culture. While men who fought literally felt the ground tremble beneath their feet, the war exacerbated cultural ruptures that preceded Fort Sumter. As Union soldiers, for example, adjusted to the widening gap between ideals and reality, the war magnified aspects of nineteenth-century culture already under strain: manhood; politics, sex, race, coverture, work, and disability. In other words, soldiers simultaneously juggled unstable identities as fathers, husbands, businessmen, volunteers and killers, while the war, in turn, blurred the

51 George Cole would have some sort of a religious experience when he was on the cusp of suicide in his jail cell; but he did not bring it or God up again. Benjamin Butler would reference God for literary flair or effect, but once admitted to his wife, “If I could believe I would become a member of the church, but alas! I haven’t faith. You may have.” Butler quoted from: Robert S. Holzman, Stormy Ben Butler (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 135.
meaning of each of these. In short, a good narrative about the war is necessarily about the ways in which massive violence jolted a world already out of kilter. By letting the chaos, miscommunication, smoke and mirrors, lies, deception and desperation return to the center of the narrative, we can better attend to the contradictions that shaped those caught in the tumult.

History, like a kaleidoscope, never repeats itself for those who look on. The interwoven narratives that follow are not meant to be taken as normative experiences, or tell us what a “typical” soldier saw and felt. But by closely following Cole and the force fields around him, a handful of peculiar men (and women) cast light on central pressures and expectations felt by the many. This dissertation peers at a convulsing world through a series of pinholes. It follows “men of force” into the American Civil War. With the help of these pinholes—though it sounds counterintuitive—I hope to escape the “tunnel vision” that George Rable has argued plagues the vast majority of Civil War histories. There is an unfortunate historiographical chasm with military historians on one side and social and cultural historians on the other. The former tend to depict a totalizing war, obscuring the fact that nine out of ten Americans never donned a uniform or fired a shot. Many social and cultural historians, on the other hand, have scanted the ways in which “the one” soldier altered the thoughts and actions of the nine civilians. In general the rich and textured

52 One of the unintended results of frequent use of the war as a marker for stopping or starting historical studies is that it reifies the impression that the Civil War was a sort of violent blip, or half-time show during the history of nineteenth-century politics and culture. Something of a détente has been reached where Civil War historians and scholars of the nineteenth-century have agreed to not read one another’s scholarship. When Civil War histories do open their scope and include antebellum American, they often do so in a tendentious way looking for those things that bespeak imminent conflict.
relationship between “the one” and “the nine” remains a relatively under-examined aspect of the war, though, as Rable reminds us, this was an “era in which political and military activity constantly impinged on social and economic life, in which families and regiments became intertwined in complex networks of communication, anxiety, fear, and death.”

This narrative is centered in George Cole, a relatively obscure officer who gained some distinction in his home region of central New York for leading a black regiment under (the wildly famous) General Benjamin Butler during the war, and murdering his wife’s lover after his homecoming. George Cole might be described as a self-made Lincoln man, formed from the cultural and religious ferment along the Erie Canal Corridor where he grew up on his parent’s farming plot. Like many men in the antebellum North, he was primed through familial strategies to enter what one historian has called the “new middle class” of professionals and merchants—produced by parents on farms who scraped to send their children to regional academies in preparation for college or professional schooling. Before Fort Sumter, Cole tried his hand at medicine, pharmaceuticals, and trading in lumber along the Erie Canal. When he enlisted to fight the war, it was just one more attempt to distinguish himself from his similarly driven peers.

This dissertation is not a biography but instead uses Cole to draw together a wider, seemingly all-male world of war and politics in the Civil War Era. The natures of self-making and manhood, and their connections to women, only become apparent when subjects like

53 George Rable, ""Missing in Action": Women in the Confederacy" In Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 134-35. Rable argues that studying gender in particular must have a broadening effect on Civil War studies.

54 Ryan, "Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865", 321
Cole are woven into various lives, structures, and events above, below and beside them. Thus the story actually begins, not with Cole, but with two young comrades, junior officers, who followed him into the African-American Cavalry. Because of their lowliness within the officer chain of command, these two men daily negotiated the boundaries between white officers and black soldiers. Various other chapters will attempt to locate Cole within a textured and layered world of male hierarchy, violence, and military patronage. In this way of telling the story, black soldiers and soldiers’ wives are not just a cast of characters, on the margins, supporting Cole’s quest for manhood but an integral part of the story about how white men believed they could remake themselves—and how this fantasy depended on leveraging intimate relations for power. By laying these strands down one at a time and weaving Cole into them, I hope to provide a more accurate, if complex story about the interactions between men, between soldiers and families, and between home front and the frontline.

Most histories depict a the Civil War as a world of male relations that wholly or substantially departed from what soldiers experienced before the war. That comrades experienced bonds with other men in ways they could not have before the war.

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unquestionable. But at the same time soldiers brought with them antebellum templates for male relations—with other men and with women. All the bonds and frictions of male relations that they had known before the war continued but with more profound intimacy and vexation. In the narrative that follows, the tense, violent relations between black and white soldiers is certainly about nineteenth-century race; but the race trouble is not simply a function of black versus white, but man versus man—and most crucially, about how men thought about their relationship with peers, women, family, and dependents.56 Racial animosity and misunderstanding, in this telling of the story, is to a large degree a product of how men thought about gender roles and the relationship between a “man” and those with whom he serves or fights—or those women he copulates, loves or fathers.

Cole’s story forces us to revisit Mary Ryan’s claim that self-made men were built on the backs of wives and mothers.57 Through the stories of his fellow officers, like Charles Francis Adams Jr., or General Butler, the relationships between self-making and hearth become apparent. This narrative also tries to evoke the disorienting impact of the wounded

56 Joseph Glatthaar’s watershed work tells the story of Civil War relationships between white officers and black soldiers from the basis that all the trouble began with American racism, until through war and manly sacrifice these two groups—for the most part—overcame these mutual antagonisms. Joseph T. Glatthaar, Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers (New York; London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1990), 370.

57 Michael T. Smith, ""the Enemy within: Corruption and Political Culture in the Civil War North."
body for both soldier and home front. It likewise touches upon the ways in which millions of young men who joined the Union army, instantly entered a rigid, hierarchical fraternity based on violence, authority and rank. For men like Cole and his comrades, the pursuit of authority and rank was especially vexatious when they accepted commissions over black soldiers. Together, Cole, fellow white officers, and black troops experienced first hand what Scott Sandage has called “the changing double face of American Freedom.” Cole served much of his time in the Army of the James, which was simultaneously the most “Yankee” of all Union armies, and home to the vast majority of mostly Southern black soldiers. In other words, Cole served in an army that was paradoxically the most Yankee and southern black at the same time. Between Fort Sumter and Appomattox the Janus-face of freedom—of citizen & slave—was replaced by a new double face of success & failure, and in the Army of the James—more than any other place—free-labor men and erstwhile slaves grappled with this new duality.

Whether Lincoln made emancipation a central part of the war due to principle or pure military expediency, on the battlefield the war unanchored Americans from the way they had understood both freedom and themselves. Some seven thousand white men accepted commissions in the United States Colored Troops (USCT), binding themselves to nearly two hundred thousand freedmen who, together with their officers, experienced the possibilities and limitations of American emancipation in immediate ways. The narratives that follow, to a large extent, try to unpack this moment of great hope and volatility.

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Finally, the chapters that follow try to limn the vital but often diffuse connections between self-making and Civil War Era corruption, and gauge how free labor ideology affected the ways in which Union soldiers viewed promotion, fellow soldiers, money, and the purpose of “friendships.” Race and gender informed the ways that men understood and participated in corruption. Because republicanism equated dependence with corruptibility, white men exhausted great energy masking their dependence on other men, blacks, or women. The officers in this story spend much of their time dividing up the world between networks of cronies and webs of adversaries—“friends” and plotting foes.

If the way we think today about freedom, merit, intimacy, dependence or manhood was in any way informed by the American Civil War, we might benefit from looking closely at how soldiers, slaves, and the home front experienced this watershed in American history. We might return to the so-called “birth of a new freedom,” if for no other reason than to appreciate how from the beginning, it was fraught with enormous contradictions. Doing so will not recover some “world that has been lost.” Instead, it reveals a world that was falsely believed to be created. Cole and others—when caught between reality and this imagined “fair race of life”—bridged the gap by duplicity, wire-pulling, and violence. Cole’s layered history can help us come to grips with an American creation story with no Eden—and the regrettable, sometimes tragic construction of American manhood. Shedding a little light on these vexed origins may enrich a larger discussion of what was really gained—and at stake—in the conflict that made modern America, the war that made you and me.
CHAPTER 1:

TEARS FOR UNCLE TOM

Cole’s Boy Major

When Robert Dollard served out his initial ninety-day service in the first months of the war, he “could not stay out.” In the fall of ’61 he and some of his comrades joined up with the 22nd Massachusetts. But when the 22nd stalled in filling its ranks, Dollard’s pack ditched the organization for the 23rd Massachusetts, which was “nearly ready for the field.” Dollard lied about his age, inflating it by at least two years to twenty-one, to meet the regiment’s age requirement.¹ As a young boy he felt drawn to the “magic influence” of uniformed firemen and soldiers and eagerly awaited initiation into military life. Well before manhood he joined a local militia. He studied battlefield tactics. No surprise then that for him the Civil War proved his main chance for martial action and distinction. When in late 1863 Lieutenant Dollard heard rumors that General Butler approved the formation of two regiments of black cavalrmen, Dollard and his comrade—hoping to obtain a commission—approached the tent of the newly anointed colonel, Jeptha Garrard. Dollard and his war “chum” brought in hand a recommendation from their own Lieutenant Colonel, assuring

Garrard that the two young officers were “capable and deserving men.” They offered themselves as suitable candidates as line officers. Garrard snubbed them. Around the same time, though, a second regiment of cavalry began to take form and Dollard got his break when “an impulsive, warm hearted and dashing” officer, George W. Cole came calling in Dollard’s camp, looking for some captains for his newly authorized Second Colored Cavalry.

Dollard would develop a deep affection for the “dashing” officer who gave him a shot at being a line officer. Years after the war, Dollard would publish a book of recollections primarily about his Civil War experiences. He dedicated it to Cole, enclosing a war portrait of his “old commander” the “brave and generous soldier.” Though written four decades after the war, Dollard’s strikingly candid account, along with a trail of military records, help us glimpse inside Cole’s regiment. What Dollard and fellow soldiers’ stories tell us is that racial hostilities that plagued Cole’s regiment—and other African-American units—took on ritualistic forms where men and officers negotiated conflicting ideas about manhood. While deadly trouble percolated from the early formation of many black regiments, every unit experienced unique frictions owing to the various regional origins of the officers and enlisted men, and the timing and theatre of the war. What Dollard’s story makes clear is that while white officers and black soldiers came to fight along side one

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3 Dollard, "Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country", 8-9, 98

4 There are three pictures in the book: one of General Cole in a military jacket; a clean-faced portrait of Dollard as a young officer; and a picture of Dollard taken after the war, with his mustache similar to Cole’s.
another in a common cause, this shared mission was chronically ruptured by misunderstanding and violence. Dollard’s experiences leading to and in the Colored Cavalry betray the brutality and resistance in the African American regiment.

Even decades after the war, Dollard’s autobiography shows that he remained fascinated, if not haunted, by the increasing presence of African Americans during his time in the army. Raised in a small village of New England, Dollard likely had little prolonged experience with African Americans prior to the war. In Dollard’s account of the war, however, African Americans continuously agitated—from the margins—the central story that he wanted to tell about himself.

Dollard’s encountered contraband slaves very early in the war. He began the war in a regiment that occupied Fortress Monroe, Virginia and, soon after, helped drive rebels from New Berne, North Carolina. Both Fort Monroe and New Berne quickly became regional magnets of refuge for runaway slaves and beyond. They arrived in such large numbers that General Benjamin Franklin Butler, the commanding officer at Ft. Monroe felt obliged to write his superiors for instructions. By July of 1861 there were roughly nine hundred runaway slaves in Butler’s stewardship. Understanding that many of the men had fled from confederate projects, Butler reasoned that because the refugees were confederate property they were therefore “contraband” of war. Almost immediately Butler put the “confiscated” contraband to work. Thus, in the early months of the war at Fort Monroe, Dollard found himself rolling baled hay alongside a runaway slave “as black as night.” Dollard assured his readers that he was dressed in his “nice militia uniform” while his partner donned “linsey

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woolsey.” He took note of how his co-worker addressed him “with so much respect” that Dollard couldn’t help but associate the runaway slave with Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel. In his telling of it, Dollard would continuously make sense of this new contact with African Americans by refracting it through Stowe’s novel.

Whenever “contrabands” or later, black soldiers demonstrated obedience, obsequiousness, or loyalty to whites (southern or northern), Dollard interpreted such actions through the dutiful and longsuffering figure of Uncle Tom. He claimed that sometime before the war, while he was not much more than a boy, he read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and shed “bitter tears” over its pages as Uncle Tom was beaten into his grave. Dollard, of course, may have not cried over Beecher Stowe’s prose. He may never have read the book at all, but simply said he had done what many of his contemporaries claimed to have experienced. In the nineteenth century Americans, caught in a transatlantic “mania” of reading and related minstrelsy shows, bought more copies of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel than other book, save the Bible. Whether Dollard read and wept, or just wished that he had, he almost certainly entered the war cognizant of mounting affective sympathies for the plight of slaves.6

Yet Dollard’s actual wartime experience flew in the face of Stowe’s sentimental depictions of forgiving, duty-bound black slaves. His war narrative is chock full of white

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6 Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 332. Meer demonstrates how the novel served as part of a larger web of minstrelsy and theatrical appropriations in the 1850s. Blackface interpretations of Uncle Tom often fomented as much pro-slavery as abolitionism. The point here is the ways in which regardless of the Beecher Stowe’s original intentions, the novel provided an elastic framework for imagining African Americans, one where derision and sympathy coexisted.
soldiers’ intimate violence and cold-blooded relations with black men and women; in all of this, though, Dollard paints himself as only a part of a larger problem that pervaded the army. In this Dollard was spot on. But even if he never fully implicated himself, it is clear that as the war ensued, he increasingly became trapped in a paradoxical relationship of hostility and cooperation with black soldiers. If at first Dollard had to toil beside runaway slaves, his ascent within army ranks both bound him to black men and promised that he would be commanding them, not sweating beside them in a ditch.

His earliest contact with “contrabands” at Fort Monroe augured trouble. At night Dollard and his comrades would “get squads of them” together and “encourage” the runaways to dance, “perspire and kick up dust” for white soldiers. As another Massachusetts soldier reported home, “There were five negroes in our mess room last night, we got them to sing and dance!” Implying that he had paid money back home at minstrelsy shows, he continued: “Great times. Negro concerts free of expense here.” After capturing New Berne

7 Henry Warren Howe, Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe, Consisting of Diary and Letters Written during the Civil War, 1816-1865. A Condensed History of the Thirtieth Massachusetts Regiment and its Flags, Together with the Genealogies of the Different Branches of the Family .. (Lowell: Mass., Courier-Citizen Co., Printers, 1899), 93. Kate Masur points out how during the Civil War the term “contraband” was an enormously elastic term that allowed abolitions, northern blacks and pro-slavery folks to discuss the unstable category of southern African Americans during the upheaval of war and emancipation. Masur argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, Americans still used the contraband in literature, theatre and music, but that the image of the contraband was flattened to one of docility, laziness, torpidity and other themes of minstrelsy. We should read Dollard’s recollections of freedmen, keeping in mind that his descriptions of “contrabands” jibed with what many of his contemporaries wrote at the turn of the century. On the other hand, this distinction can be grossly overstated as many soldiers during the war viewed blacks through the lens of minstrelsy. What is interesting about Dollard is that he remembers “contrabands” through the dual image of minstrelsy and the anti-slavery bible, Uncle Tom’s Cabin—suggesting that these two lenses were not just available for different folks to debate emancipation, but that many Americans looked through various lenses at the same time. See: Kate Masur, ”'A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation': The Word 'Contraband' and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States,” Journal of American History 93, no. 4 (March, 2007), 1050-84, especially, 181-83.
in the spring of ‘62, Dollard’s troops moved into an evacuated camp of the enemy where a
destitute “army of negro women and children” were scavenging sheets, quilts and tobacco.
While marching by one woman who had a quilt draped over her body, one of Dollard’s
comrades slipped from the ranks and inserted himself between the hanging quilt and the
woman’s backside as the regiment of soldiers responded with merriment. Dollard’s
comrades would recall that the soldier tried to take the “coveted bed spread” from the “tall
mulatto” tugging away until the Colonel interfered on her behalf. Interestingly, this invasive
prank drew laughter from a line of soldiers who just hours before weathered brutal warfare,
where Dollard himself watched an errant shot from a Union gunboat smash the intestines of
a comrade “to jelly.” The butchery got so bad some of Dollard’s regiment had to fix their
bayonets to keep fellow comrades from bolting.\(^8\) These stark images of jellied guts and
collective humiliation of the dispossessed, of death and malicious ridicule, would converge as
African Americans increasingly insinuated themselves into the center of the war.\(^9\)

A few months later, Dollard and his regiment spent the summer on provost (police)
duty in New Berne, where the soldiers occupied opulent homes abandoned by wealthy
North Carolinians. Dollard took note of the well “behaved” blacks and once again saw

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\(^8\) Dollard, “Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country”, 61-67;
1861-1865" (Boston: W. Ware & Co., 1886), 95.

\(^9\) There is a hoary but still relevant debate about the degree to which slaves made their own
freedom by running to Union lines, stepping up demands on weakened masters and working for
Yankees as laborers or soldiers. For starters, see: James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?"
Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 139, no. 1 (1995), 1-10. Also see a rejoinder: Ira Berlin,
"Who Freed the Slaves?: Emancipation and its Meaning" In Union & Emancipation: Essays on Politics
and Race in the Civil War Era, eds. David W. Blight and Brooks D. Simpson (Kent, Ohio: Kent State
University Press, 1997), 105-22.
Uncle Tom wherever he looked. While Dollard was guarding a main road to New Berne, morning brought a “stream” of refugees which included a black mother in a “one-horse tip cart” with a “half dozen little pickaninnies that might all have been born at the same time, judging by their size.” If the children were indeed of the same age, Dollard did not openly speculate on the kind of mayhem that would lead a woman to assume motherhood over several children during wartime. But he did recall how he had them hauled away to a vacant house where a comrade “removed the tail board of the cart, unhitched the box in front and gently raised it so as to slide the whole family out behind.” Dumped on the ground, this family was left “in full possession of their new found liberty.” But the soldier drove off with the cart, leaving the reader to wonder, if the horse and cart were ever returned to the destitute mother. In another incident while drilling with unloaded rifles, Dollard’s comrades were commanded to take aim at any object; one soldier who “overlooked unloading” his piece “blazed away” at the head of a black man hundreds of yards away. The “old darkey” had his hat shot off but the “the wool was only scorched a little.” In another experience Dollard happened upon a “middle-aged contraband” selling tobacco and wares from a rough board shack, where Dollard discovered that a fellow soldier had paid him with a sticker from a painkiller bottle, passing it off as a North Carolina bank bill. The duped man laughed when Dollard informed him of the counterfeit, leaving Dollard to wonder how it was that he was not indignant like “most white men would have been.”

10 Dollard, "Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country", 69-71

Dollard’s narrative reads like that of a proud soldier who was never able to come to terms with the centrality of African Americans to the war experience. They were exotic, comedic—a strange race of often affectionate, loyal beings requiring repeated reminders of their essential lowliness and to be put in their place during a time of wild upheaval. Whether replacing a black man’s felt hat with one of straw, taking aim at blacks during drill, or dumping them on the ground, Dollard’s comrades began the war with antipathy for and widely shared insensitivity to the dislocated thousands who increasingly crossed Union soldiers’ paths.

Despite its New England composition, and the fact that many of its soldiers eagerly took up arms in the first year of the war, Dollard’s regiment was no hotbed for abolitionism. If anything it was just the opposite. Earlier Dollard claimed that only one man in his entire company confessed to being an abolitionist and he was taken prisoner back in the regiment’s first battle at New Berne. In early 1863, perhaps in response to the Emancipation Proclamation, Dollard’s fellow soldiers exhibited unusual cruelty by fighting with a black swindled out of money by their “liberators.” As military governor of South Carolina, General Rufus Saxton reported that while lands had been auctioned off, and “many freedmen had by industry and thrift acquired considerable property,” freedmen often suffered at the hands of sharers and speculators. The army of occupation, according to Saxton, was guilty of insult, abuse, depredations to blacks’ plantations, stealing, destroying crops, and rape. “The morals of the old plantation life,” Saxton continued, “seemed revived in the army of occupation.” About swindling blacks out of their wares, by exploiting their illiteracy, and inexperience with a wildly confusing nexus of bank notes and bonds, Saxton continued, “There was a general disposition among the soldiers and civilian speculators here to defraud the Negroes in their private traffic, to take the commodities which they offered for sale by force, or to pay for them in worthless money.” See: ibid., 38 United States. War Dept 1901 For a purported incident where Union soldiers in Louisiana traded soap wrappers for African-Americans’ precious metals, see: A. J. H. Duganne, "Camps and Prisons", Subscribers’ ed. (New York: S.N., 1865), 103-07.
settlement, cleaning out the camp, and setting it to flames. For this he and his comrades were “exiled” on St. Helena Island, South Carolina.\textsuperscript{12}

At the same time, Dollard soon discovered the ways in which white soldiers “ostracized” those men who trained black men to fight in uniform. As Dollard’s comrades described it in the regimental history, serving in the USCT “was not popular. It required no little moral courage to gratify ambition by way of a commission in the ‘nigger regiments.’”\textsuperscript{13} And while antagonism toward officers in the black army (who were all white) could galvanize their commitment to black soldiers, it could also cause them to internalize the shame—transferring some of it into violent acts upon subordinates. Because violence between white officers and black soldiers in a given regiment largely transpired between illiterate soldiers and conflicted officers who though in varying degrees felt committed to emancipation also felt constrained by a certain culture of silence and collusion, it is rather difficult to obtain clarity about what exactly happened within the ranks.

Within Cole’s 2nd Colored Cavalry, though, it is clear, even through the patchy records, that regimental relations were plagued with violence that lay somewhere between arbitrary and systematic. Within the first few days of organization, in January 1864, the regiment’s Lieutenant Colonel issued a general order that “No officer will be permitted to use under any circumstances an enlisted man as a servant nor will he be permitted to draw pay for a servant unless he had one actually employed.” Some of Cole’s officers evidently

\textsuperscript{12} Between February and March of 1863 the regiment experienced its own series of mutinies and harsh punishments. One must wonder if these tensions had anything to do with the burning of the refugee camp. See: Emmerton, “A Record of the Twenty-Third Regiment Mass. Vol. Infantry in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865”, 137-38.

\textsuperscript{13} ibid., 139-40
looked to draw extra pay without employing a servant while coercing one of their soldiers into servitude.¹⁴ Before joining the black army, Dollard—as he put it—“captured a big black boy about six feet tall and two hundred pounds” to “tote” his (Dollard’s) blankets and bags. Many private writings and photographs from the war reveal glimpses of the widespread use of erstwhile slaves as body servants.¹⁵ Peppered throughout war correspondence or just off to the side in a camp photograph, one finds African Americans waiting on officers, hauling wood, or standing off to the side with tea kettle in hand. Most camp cooks and servants were taken from the “contraband” population, though it appears that white officers poorly distinguished between civilian servants and black soldiers.¹⁶ Either way black servants could increasingly be found alongside Union officers. For white enlisted men black servants in camp were an agitating reminder of the chain of hierarchy in which white privates served as the bottom link. As one New Yorker griped to his parents, “Each one of them [officers]” had a “Nigger servant…whom they generally feed out of our Rations, it is a well known fact that they are treated better than we are…”¹⁷


¹⁵ For instance in a letter from a wife in a “freedmen’s village” in Virginia to her husband in the army one African-American mother wrote that both of her sons were personal servants for officers: “William is living not very far from me he is waiting on an officer at Fort Woodbury and Matthias is waiting on an officer at Fort Smith…” Ann C. Butler to husband William Butler. Jan 30, 1865. This letter was found near the dead body of William after a battle. Ann Butler, "Ann Butler Letter, 1865", 1865).

¹⁶ George Cole brought his servant home once the war ended.

¹⁷ New York soldier quoted in: Wiley, "The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union", 109-10
In short, long before emancipation inflamed racism in white Union camps, soldiers had come to see black bodies as integral to the trappings of authority and power. Body servants reminded common white soldiers of their own destitution, while intimately binding young officers to blacks whom they depended on, yet despised. As one Massachusetts soldier wrote home, “every private wants & Every officer has his colored servant who he feeds scantily, clothes shabbily, works cruelly & curses soundly & his curses includes the whole race.”

The first night after being “captured,” Dollard’s servant (in his narrative Dollard gives him no name) went to sleep in the camp, where white soldiers “bent on mischief” pelted him with clods. Dollard doesn’t tell us so, but the pelting probably stemmed from hatred towards black men in a “white man’s war,” and hostility toward Dollard as an officer. If they could not pelt their superior, they might get away with molesting the symbol of promotion. Of course these two forms of animosity fed on each other. Perhaps out of pity, Dollard allowed his “boy” to sleep beside him. In the middle of the night Dollard awoke with a “ponderous” leg thrown upon his body for which he promptly rebuked his sleeping partner. Dollard claimed that like other plantation slaves, his “boy” was infested with “graybacks” (lice). Perhaps Dollard battled his own infestation (as many Union soldiers did)

18 One Indiana colonel complained about General Buell’s soldiers lacking scruples in taking property, and that “some of the regiments seem to have as many servants as soldiers.” This same officer, right before assuring his wife that he was well known in the ranks for “preaching and practicing abolition,” wrote, “I have the promise of a Negro that he will run off from his master tomorrow night and come and attend me as a servant. He is thirty one years old and will be a faithful servant.” See: A.T. Volwiler, ed., “Letters from a Civil War officer,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review Vol. XIV, No. 4, March, 508-09. Massachusetts soldiers quoted in: ibid., 109-10
and cavalierly traced it to his sleeping mate. Dollard soon “gave him up” to a superior, perhaps as a way to unload the servant and cement relations or promise future promotions.19

Thus, roughly a year later when Dollard began his service in the USCT, the lines between servitude, hostility between officers and rank-and-file, and racial friction, had already been muddied by the presence of contraband servants. In Cole’s regiment, these same tensions tended toward a two-way struggle between officers and enlisted men where blackness became synonymous with the lowest of ranks, and whiteness with promotion. As every man fully understood, the blurry, constructed boundary separating whiteness from blackness was sharpened by military rank. Blackness correlated with the line beneath commissioned officers and everything below.20 Black soldiers could not be promoted above the line, and just as importantly, white officers within the USCT could not be demoted below it.

19 Dollard, "Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country", 80-1. In 1861, Hampton Virginia, soldiers from another regiment led an officer’s servant by a rope around his neck, drumming him about the camp at the point of a bayonet. See: Wiley, "The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union", 114.

20 Please note that with only a handful of exceptions African Americans could not receive a commission for promotion. This means that no black soldier could obtain a promotion above sergeant; In the USCT the non-commissioned officers were black. Non-commissioned officers received the same pay as the rank and file. Therefore, when discussing the black army any mention of corporal, orderly, or sergeant means the person in question was not considered white. By the same token, it should be assumed that any lieutenant, captain, major and general was deemed a white man. Because of this hard-and-fast division between non-commissioned officers and all higher ranks—along racial lines, the border between blackness and whiteness was between the ranks of sergeant and lieutenant. When penalized corporals and sergeants could be “reduced” to the ranks, guilty white officers would be forced to leave the black army as they could not be reduced to the status of private or non-commissioned officer.
This conflation of race and rank immediately led to trouble. Dollard claimed that while the black soldiers were at first “submissive and obedient” during training, there was a “hitch” in the commissary department, leaving the black soldiers “short of rations long enough to get quite hungry….” When bread and straight coffee did arrive, the half-starved soldiers made a rather “interesting study” as they huddled in the company street, shivering in the falling snow, devouring the victuals. The regimental records, though, would suggest several months later that food shortages had not been a function of some logistical “hitch.” In July Colonel Cole issued an order to the regiment stating that he had received a complaint by the enlisted men about “scanty rations.” But because not a single complaint had been issued by Dollard or any of the company officers to the Regimental Commissary (where rations were distributed), or to regimental headquarters, Cole “presumed” that such scarcity was “caused by Officers eating the rations of enlisted men.” In a war where victuals were of uneven quality and distribution, Cole’s lower officers, it seems clear, had a habit of stealing food from their black privates who, apparently famished, endured grueling days—keeping guard, digging ditches, building fortifications.

In August 1864, several weeks after Cole prohibited officers eating their men’s rations, Dollard was brought before a military tribunal for a number of charges. One

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charge—the least serious—was for drunkenness on duty the previous May. The soldiers accused Dollard of getting drunk during an operation along the Chickahominy River. It turns out that Dollard himself had stolen his soldiers’ rations of whiskey. Instead of dividing it into portions to slake the thirsts of soldiers on fatigue, Dollard seems to have kept it in his own canteens for personal use. (One soldier testified that he remembered another one of Dollard’s “boys” hauling the canteens on a march.).

With hard drink (and probably easily enough without it) Dollard’s racism came to the fore. Several black soldiers testified that on a dusky May evening in 1864, Dollard swaggered up to a supply depot and insisted that the black sergeant, Richardson Watson, who was from another company, allow him to use two of the black sentinels to help carry ammunition. Watson refused, saying that “his men” were not under Dollard’s charge, reminding the captain that sentinels could not leave their posts. Outraged, Dollard belched some jumbled curse about “not giving a damn” about any “black niggers,” and that he didn’t care if the regiment procured its ammunition as the rebels were just up the river. While saying this he surged toward one of the guards “just walking up and down his post,” slapped

23 2nd USCT Cavalry Regimental Order and Letter Book: General Order No. 19. April 22, 1864, from Fort Monroe, Va. Record Group 92, NARA, Washington, DC.

24 Major General Benjamin Butler stated that “drunken officers are the curse of our Colored soldiers and I will reform it in this Department, if I can, in spite of… the Devil.” Butler quoted in: Edward G. Longacre, "Black Troops in the Army of the James, 1863-65," Military Affairs 45, no. 1 (1981), 3.

25 There seemed to be a fair amount of tension over the degree to which blacks felt compelled to obey the orders of a white officer who was not their immediate superior. As Dollard’s actions seem to suggest, some white officers seemed to believe that all black soldiers were interchangeable and because they commanded some black enlisted men, their authority simply extended over any and all black soldiers. See Dollard’s Court Martial where witness suggests this is a problem among the black troops.
him with an open fist, and kicked him amid a storm of profanity. This, at least, is how the black comrades told the story at Dollard’s court martial. Dollard and fellow officers, however, told a different story; and though one white officer broke ranks and sided with the soldiers, Dollard was fully exonerated on all counts.

But Dollard’s memoirs and regimental records reveal another conflict which makes his “innocence” doubtful. As the old soldier recounted it, sometime in late spring or early summer he attempted to break up a heated tiff between two privates about a fallen horse. Dollard asked one of the men, Isaac Worrell, how he knew that the other was responsible, to which Worrell responded with his own question. “Don’t ask me a question but answer the one I have asked you,” barked Dollard. “But I will ask you a question Cap’n” returned Worrell. Dollard ordered a company sergeant and two others to arrest Worrell, but—as Dollard remembered it—Worrell responded, “no damned nigger could arrest him.” This exact language merits some doubt. It would not have been unusual for a black private to protest being arrested and bound by a black non-commissioned officer. Black companies, like white ones, experienced a sizable amount of gun waving and fisticuffs between men of the same race. But these tensions seemed to emerge later in 1865, only as the war drew to an end.26

26 Some of the most violent threats during a future ship mutiny would come from angry common soldiers toward their black superiors, who were charged with enforcing the orders to force the men on board for Texas. At least one soldier from another regiment on the boats warned his officer that he better “lay low” and that he better not “stray off by himself on this boat tonight.” And several other privates threatened to hurt or kill their black superiors as the ships embarked. See court martial of soldiers from other brigades: RG 153, OO1394. William Holmes, Moses Woods, 36USCT.
Instead of violence between black soldiers the conflicts in Cole’s regiment acquired a sort of ritualistic order where black soldiers snapped the moment white officers attempted to bind them with cord. Even if Worrell did swear that no black man would tie his wrists that statement may have been made solely out of disgust with the ways in which promotion pitted black men against one another—and created unsavory fractiousness that replicated white/black relations. Regardless of why the private resisted, when he did, Dollard drew his revolver and ordered Worrell to disarm. The cowed soldier feigned like he was going to drop his carbine and, just as Dollard turned his eyes, pounced upon his captain. Dollard shoved Worrell’s revolver toward the ground, squeezing it between his knees to prevent Worrell from firing lead into Dollard’s leg. Then, like a *deus ex machina*, in the middle of the melee, Dollard’s “faithful” corporal, Allen Pierce bolted toward the confusion, grabbed a loaded carbine, and as he shoved the muzzle into Worrell’s guts, fired.

Nothing happened.

As Dollard would recount it, anyway, the carbine misfired. The sergeant who originally resisted arresting Worrell, “following the example” of Corporal Pierce, then fired his revolver twice at Worrell. But these shots misfired as well. Dollard assured his readers that these mysteriously thwarted acts of bravery by his non-commissioned officers could be explained by the newly issued revolvers that had too much oil on the caps to ignite the powder. Though Dollard felt justified in killing Worrell on the spot, he resisted and, without trial, subjected Worrell to some unnamed physical punishment that “did him some lasting good.” Dollard justified his swift punishment by explaining how the camp began to break out into a general mutiny, some eighty soldiers against two officers. Dollard was able to disarm most of the men by rallying the most obedient, and ordering them to arrest the emergent mutiny’s ring leaders who Dollard summarily subjected to the same physical
punishment as Worrell’s. Whatever the explanation for the misfiring guns, or the subjugation of a group of soldiers who outnumbered their commanders forty to one, Dollard hoped his wild narrative would convey “the intense loyalty of the colored soldier to his white commander.”

Maybe excessive oil saved private Worrell. But it’s more likely that Dollard only wished that his “loyal” black officers, like Corporal Pierce, had blazed away at insubordinate comrades, like armed Uncle Toms ready to defend their master. The hazy records left behind by the 2nd Colored Cavalry, as it turns out, sketch out a story that Dollard could only partially shape with his literary desires. In the same court martial in which he testified that he did not steal whiskey or kick a black sentinel, Dollard had to explain his own mysteriously malfunctioning weaponry. As several black soldiers’ testimony agreed, in July (three days before Dollard allegedly horded the whiskey rations) as Sergeant Washington King gathered boards for an anticipated move to another camp, removing them from the summer rain, 2nd Lieutenant John Jones (the lowest rung of white commissioned officers) commanded King to let the boards alone. “These are our boards, we hauled them out of the swamp,” protested King. “Let them alone or I’ll tie you,” snapped Jones. The Lieutenant ordered King back to his quarters three times and when King ignored the warnings, Jones ordered the Orderly Sergeant to tie King up. But the Orderly refused, insisting he would only take such an order from Captain Dollard.

Dollard arrived amid this chaos and dismounted his horse ready to stamp out the insubordination. Some of the soldiers thought he had been off drinking again. Others talked

27 Dollard, “Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country”, 111-12
of arming themselves for trouble. Waving a gun, Dollard lined up the company, attempting
to get them out of their tents before they grabbed their own arms. Once in line he laid into
Sergeant King, who perhaps in a half taunt allegedly told Dollard, “If you think I’ve done
wrong, tie me up.” “I’ll blow your brains out,” Dollard barked. “Well sir, if you think it is
right you can blow them out,” King replied.

Repeating Lieutenant Jones’s orders, Dollard commanded Sergeant Henry Williams
to tie up King. But Williams refused as he did before, not only believing Dollard to be
intoxicated, but responding that King had not done anything to warrant being tied up.
Probably directly following this, Dollard growled that he would “rather kill a God damned
nigger than a rebel and if I had known as much as I do now I would have run you all into
the rebel lines long ago!” He raised his loaded pistol to King’s chest and throat area and
pulled the trigger. As several black witnesses attested, they heard the cap go off—but
strangely no discharge followed. Perhaps rain that day dampened the caps. Or maybe the
black witnesses were wrong about the gun being unloaded, and Dollard only wanted to feign
murderous designs while still being able to feel the piece snap in his hands while pointed at
King, the unruly sergeant.

King would testify that when brought to Colonel Cole’s tent he overheard Dollard
admit that it was loaded and that he could not tell Cole why it failed to fire. (In his
testimony, Dollard claimed that his Colt revolver frequently went off at half cock. Why an
officer in the cavalry, who would wear it on his belt, would settle with a handgun that went
off at half cock was an issue left unparsed.) As with the other accusations, Dollard’s fellow
officers banded together to ensure acquittal. But Dollard’s alleged loyal soldier, Corporal
Pierce betrayed him. This corporal who in Dollard’s narrative supposedly forsook racial
allegiance and tried to shoot the soldier who jumped on Dollard, testified that his captain
“popped a cap at Sergeant King,” because, among other things, Dollard “was a little intoxicated.”28 Pierce could not swear to hearing everything that Dollard said; he did recall the officer saying something like, “I’ll kill one of you—if you don’t mind; I’ll kill you, you damn black nigger.”

Dollard would later claim that his failing health had forced him to drink whiskey and quinine to keep his malarial fever in check. Given that he had served in the South Carolina Sea Islands and remained in the tidewater regions of Virginia and North Carolina, it would be mildly surprising if this weren’t true.29 Hard drinking plagued the army. Out of some 80,000 recorded general courts-martial in the Union army, over fourteen thousand listed alcohol as an inciting agent in the alleged crime. Drinking took the edge off of pain, depression, and guilt. It played a vital role in the bonding rituals between comrades who desperately sought conviviality—to temporarily ameliorate collective suffering and drown out the longing for home. But hard liquor also brought tensions, urges, manias, and

28 Court Martial of Robert Dollard, NN2543, NARA, Washington, DC. The Court Martial took place August 1864. Colonel Cole and members of the tribunal tried Dollard for various infractions at once: intoxication, stealing rations, abuse and nearly shooting a soldier. In all of these Dollard obtained a “not guilty” verdict. Except for a few exceptions where white officers came forth and gave damaging testimony, the court record reveals a near perfect split between black soldiers and white officers. Strangely Colonel Cole was actually a witness and he more than any other officer gave damaging testimony about Dollard’s intoxication. But when Cole was asked to attest for Dollard’s character and gallantry he gave unqualified praise for Dollard. After admitting that while drunk Dollard was “sleepy, very stupid, and dull,” Cole then described his military character as: “Excellently good. I don’t know a better officer in the service. I have not seen a better officer since I have been in the service--except when under the influence…” It is also curious that the defense did not ask Cole anything about the misfired gun as some of the black soldiers claimed that Dollard confessed what happened to Cole in the latter’s quarters; ibid., 122-24

29 Dollard experienced a somewhat similar geographic exposure, as did Charles Francis Adams, Jr.—who also imbibed whiskey and quinine to abate the pangs of malarial fever. Both of the army corps making up the Army of the James (X and XVIII) had been particularly plagued with respiratory illnesses, malaria and typhoid fever. See: Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 46-9
vendettas into the open, leading comrades into naked, mutual animosity.\textsuperscript{30} Though
drunkenness varied from regiment to regiment, wherever it happened it brought on the
simultaneous possibility of profound communion and violence. In Cole’s neck of the war,
liquor lubricated the cycle of body-breaking labor, inconsequential military expeditions, and
the racial tensions that magnified misery.

A Good Deal of Trouble

In regards to drinking and danger, Dollard had plenty of company. For example, on
a boiling day in June 1864, Dollard’s fellow captain, William Perrin supervised the building
of Fort Wisconsin by Point of Rocks, Virginia. After draining one canteen of whiskey during
a rough morning, he filled out a second order for the commissary and signed another
officer’s name to it. (Perrin would argue that he and his Lieutenant had an understanding
that they could sign one another’s names.) By afternoon Perrin’s boisterous manner even
began to worry some of his fellow officers. Though he testified that Colonel Cole refused to
approve whiskey orders “since we came from Camp Hamilton,” Perrin and comrades
seemed to experience little want. Within four months of the regiment’s formation, Colonel
Cole (who was actually a teetotaler) had already surrendered to his junior officers’
predilection for the cup: “Officers of this Regiment, “ Cole capitulated, “who feel the
necessity of getting drunk will notify the Adjutant and he will designate a suitable time, but

\textsuperscript{30} For more on alcohol and courts martial, see:Thomas P. Lowry, "New Access to a Civil
War Resource," \textit{Civil War History} 49, no. 1 (2003), 52-63. Also see: Wiley, "The Life of Billy Yank, the
Common Soldier of the Union", 252-55; Robertson, "Soldiers Blue and Gray", 96-101
not on march or move.” How Cole grew so seemingly powerless in enforcing his prohibitions is unclear. He may have feared facing down his subordinates, not wanting to jeopardize the shoulder-strap fraternity. He may have also been sporadically and ( unofficially) out of commission, remaining close to his quarters due to chonic spells of illness. In his testimony, Major Dennison, claimed that before evening there had already been “several complaints” brought to Cole’s quarters with regard to Captain Perrin. Colonel Cole heard the “complaints” earlier in the day but apparently did nothing to address them until his subordinate, Major Dennison, returned to headquarters in the evening. Cole ordered his major to go and see about the trouble. Dennison soon returned, convinced that Perrin was unfit for duty.

Perrin, like Dollard—like hundreds of thousands of their comrades—drank too much in the army. But what is strange about Perrin’s indiscretions is the ways in which they served as a sort of code for abusing black soldiers. Though he would be brought before a military court, the strange thing about his ensuing court martial was that though on its surface it had nothing to do with the treatment of black soldiers, it was apparently on everybody’s mind. The trial revealed how entangled racial tensions were with all other unrest. While the formal charges were for drunkenness and falsely representing himself, Major Dennison and others mentioned other vague terms like “complaints” and “trouble.” At the close, Perrin requested a final statement and made a somewhat convincing justification for why he forged his comrade’s signature, and why he and his fatigued men needed more whiskey.

31 2nd USCT Cavalry Regimental Order and Letter Book: General Order No. 19. April 22, 1864, from Fort Monroe, Va. Record Group 92, NARA, Washington, DC.
But then Perrin defended himself from what no participant had explicitly accused him. About the so-called “complaints” mentioned by Major Dennison,” Perrin admitted before his appointed jurors,

perhaps you are aware that there has been a good deal of trouble among the officers and men of the Colored Cavalry. But I can say for my men and myself, that I have never struck a man a blow in earnest for eight months. And so far as that matter about complaints applies it does not apply to Company “G” 32

In this regiment, and probably more widely spread throughout the Union army than historians have allowed, the common sins of soldiers, the “complaints” of army life, became snarled with—and euphemisms for—race trouble.

The Charming, Bright, Healthy Boy

As Cole’s most intimate comrade would come to believe, only threats of violence could postpone the trouble, and only for so long. Captain Cole and Sergeant Edwin R. Fox had fought together in the 3rd New York Cavalry way back in late 1861. Nearly fifteen years Cole’s junior, Fox had served as Cole’s orderly before the latter recruited him as a line officer for the Colored Cavalry. When Captain Cole fell from his horse in 1862, Fox nursed Cole’s wounds, helping him convalesce in the privacy of his quarters.33 Before enlisting, Fox had

32 Court Marital of William H. Perrin, NN2543, NARA.

33 In his memoirs Dollard suggests—but does not give names—that it was Company C (Fox’s company) that ruined one of Dollard’s charges after the officers lost control of their troopers, turning an organized charge into murderous mayhem. There is no direct record of it between Dollard and Fox, but clearly many lower officers vied for their Colonel’s favor. See: Dollard, "Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country", 101-04
been a student and had trained as a machinist: he clearly expected a bright future. His family would claim that the war ruined him. He returned from war disillusioned, an exonerated murderer, with a blown out cardrum from Bull Run, bloody hemorrhoids, and a torn shoulder. As his aunt would plaintively testify in a pension affidavit, “one thing is certain, he came from the war with a broken constitution, sickly, nervous and irritable.” “As different as day from night,” she grieved, “was the charming, bright, healthy boy who left home and the wreck, he returned.”

When Fox began his service in the black cavalry, he and fellow officers were “ordered to treat the men with kindness and punish them lightly.” But as Fox would testify, he “soon learned the mistake in that.” In the middle of April 1864 Cole’s regiment boiled over with discontent concerning the unequal pay received by black soldiers. The previous summer, the War Department had announced that black soldiers would not be paid the same rate as their white counterparts. Instead of receiving $13 per month plus clothing, black soldiers would only earn $10 per month minus $3 to cover their clothing. (Blacks, of course, quickly wore out their uniforms hauling lumber and carving out breastworks after which they would be charged an additional $3.) Even black non-commissioned officers would receive this decreased pay, which was made to match the minimum wage earned by government laborers. The highest paid black non-commissioned officer, in other words, made roughly less than half what the lowest white soldier made, when costs for clothes were

34 For claim that he was a student see various papers in Pension File, Edwin R. Fox, NARA.

35 General Affidavit by Addie Mitchell, Dec. 10, 1884, in Edwin R. Fox’s pension file, NARA.
taken into account. Outrage and resistance mounted until black units verged on mutiny during the first half of 1864. Tens of thousands of men had enlisted with the explicit promise that they would receive the pay of white soldiers. Though Cole’s Regiment had been organized six months after the War Department backed out of its original commitments, it suffered similar bouts of violence and resistance. In response to the unequal pay; they too intermittently refused to obey orders.36 In the spring of ’64, Fox tried approaching the incensed soldiers and using cool reason to “persuade them to do their duty.” After quickly realizing that preaching to them only fomented unrest, Fox dragooned one soldier up to a tree and ordered him tied by another. Following what had become a sort of regimental ritual, this soldier too refused to tie up “one of his own color.” Fox ordered another soldier. He refused as well. Scrambling to recover the hard edge of authority, Fox retrieved his gun and repeated his orders. Finally, at the end of a muzzle, Fox’s soldiers followed orders contrary to their will.37

But Fox’s muzzle only temporarily muted, while compounding the problem. Fox noted a general increase of insubordination. In May he confronted a trooper who refused to mount his horse. With profanity, the soldier dismissed Fox’s orders to climb in the saddle. Now that recourse to arms was established as the baseline for suppressing the will of an enlisted man, Fox pulled his pistol on the trooper and threatened to kill him. But the soldier pushed Fox to where he had hoped the precedent would not lead, by daring Fox to “Shoot


37 Court Martial of Edwin R. Fox, NN2550, NARA.
and be God damned.” Fox’s bluff had been called. He froze and backed off in defeat, explaining later that he “didn’t like to shoot a man who was looking right into the muzzle of my pistol.”

His power had departed him. From that day forward, whenever Fox ordered his men to do something they especially despised, Fox would have to grab his pistol, each time with equal ineffectiveness. And so in early August, months after the protests over unequal pay, the various violent, often inebriated tirades, and “hitches” in rations, Fox called on Henry Edwards (who Fox claimed to have seen up and about earlier in the day) to guard duty. Edwards lay in his tent claiming he was too sick for the task. Some believed him to be one of the many men troubled by illness; others thought him to be malingering. Fox ordered Edwards to be taken to the guardhouse to which the soldier responded that the man who took him there would be a “son of a bitch.” Later Fox summoned Edwards back to the quarters and ordered him to lug a large beam or log on his back and walk a beat through the company street. Edwards reportedly hauled the beam for an hour and a half, while liberally cursing his superiors. When Fox returned from supper, where he could hear Edwards’s cursing, he found the soldier resting on the beam he had cast to the ground. Enraged, Fox ordered him “bucked and gagged.”

Though more than one soldier claimed that up until this fallout Fox and Edwards had a mutually supportive relationship, Fox’s preceding troubles seemed to have cast a pall over any connection he had with his soldiers. When Fox went to tie Edwards, the private

38 Bucking and gagging was a form of corporal punishment widely used throughout the military where a soldier’s limbs were tightly bound, knees drawn up between arms, and body locked into a painfully hunched posture upon the ground by running a pole under the folded knees and over the arms. A rag or rope was usually tied into an open mouth.
insisted that he had done nothing wrong and would not let Fox tie him up. When Fox became excited another officer convinced him to let fellow troopers bind Edwards. But when one of the soldier’s tied Edwards’s wrists too loosely, Fox insisted on cinching the ropes himself. (One of the soldiers tried to convince Edwards to just submit to a little pain to avoid the escalating trouble.) When Edwards defied him again, Fox scurried to his tent to grab the last bit of authority he had left. In front of a gathering crowd he brought his gun to the level and declared that he would give Edwards three chances to submit to his officer. “Very composed and surly,” Edwards repeated that he would let others tie him, but Fox never.

“Will you let me tie you?” Fox queried.

“No, but the others can,” responded Edwards, with arms wrenched behind him.

When Fox asked a second time, Edwards begged to have a word. “Lieutenant will you allow me the privilege of speaking three words?” “I will,” consented Fox. Looking at his officer, Edwards warned, “It is your time now and it is my time hereafter. My carbine never tells a lie.”

39 This was not an uncommon threat that relatively powerless enlisted men would make. No doubt this worried unpopular officers who entered battle with soldiers behind them who nursed old grievances. While it was not highly unusual for angry men to make such threats in the heat of dispute, it is impossible to know how often this happened during the chaos of battle. There are were many cases of “friendly fire” during the war; and a significant number of incidents of soldiers killing fellow soldiers. Hundreds of murders, of civilians and fellow soldiers, are on record within the Union army alone. One must conclude that the two categories of “friendly fire” and homicide overlapped, and that soldiers realized the dark possibilities. Death and destruction on the battlefield defied description, surveillance and honest retelling. When one Union general was evidently killed by his own man (it was claimed to be an accident), the orderlies kept the cause of death a secret for twenty one years. See: Webb B. Garrison, Friendly Fire in the Civil War: More than 100 True Stories of Comrade Killing Comrade (Nashville, Tenn.: Rutledge Hill Press, 1999), 91-2. Also see: Thomas P. Lowry, Tarnished Eagles: The Courts-Martial of Fifty Union Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels, 1st ed. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 226.
Fox then asked the third, and final, time, and just as Edwards turned his back to Fox, desperately (or defiantly) gesturing to his comrades that they could refasten the ropes, Fox blew out Edwards's brains from the back of the head. One of the soldiers standing at Edwards’s side wrenched away and heard Edwards collapse face-forward to the ground. Lying beneath the boughs of two plum trees, Edwards let out a parting groan. Fox backed away. Probably to avoid immediate revenge, another officer rushed Fox off to Colonel Cole’s quarters. As the murderer departed, men began “crying” and “hallooing” from their tents and throughout the camp.40

The once “charming” student crossed a line that his regiment—both officers and enlisted men—had fitfully etched out through harrowing negotiations. They had been precariously walking this line for nine months. Of course, these cycles of violence could be found in white regiments throughout the military. From tying up privates, to thumb screws, to (although quite rare) killing an insubordinate soldier in order to set an example—Union officers frequently exploited the vague and seemingly boundless powers of wartime authority. They often did so with limited repercussion. But corporal brutality within the black units was too close to recent suffering. Certain forms of violence within the USCT had the explosive possibilities of a powder keg. Some black soldiers could not peacefully brook acts of white on black violence that smacked of the very brutalities of slavery they were risking their lives to end.41 Abusive officers seemed hardly better than cruel plantation

40 Court Marital of Edwin R. Fox, NN2550, NARA.

41 Berlin, Reidy and Rowland, "The Black Military Experience", 23-4
masters, if not worse. As slaves knew, masters had monetary incentives to limit violence
towards what they deemed as property. And while owning slaves served as a badge of honor
in the antebellum South, for white officers, leading erstwhile slaves into war raised eyebrows
in many circles throughout Lincoln’s loyal states. Scholars have written about the “double-
edged sword” where black soldiers from northern states had to fight against southern slavery
and northern racism. In Cole’s regiment, though, runaway-slaves-turned-soldiers felt both
edges in particularly striking and intimate ways. A black soldier might be recaptured by his
old master; or—as we have seen—mauled by a drunken officer.

The cruelty suffered by white and black troops was less different in kind than
informed by significantly different motives. Where white officers everywhere had to prove
they merited superior rank, officers in the black army had an especially pressing need to
prove their merit, particularly to white outsiders. Cole’s fellow white officers lived under a
“double edge” as well—though more psychological. Not only did they have to establish their
authority over their enlisted men; they had to shake the stigmatization that accompanied
leading ex-slaves into battle. Through alternating acts of battlefield heroics, fatherly
concern for subordinates, and continuous discipline, all officers had to convince
subordinates of the distance that separated those who wore shoulder straps from those who

42 For a analysis of Frederick Douglass’ struggle with northern racism in the context of
recruiting black soldiers see: David W. Blight, Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee
War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers”, 1-33

43 General Edward Wild, one of the fiercest advocates of arming the blacks claimed that
because of his involvement with black troops he had “nothing but prejudice, jealousy,
misrepresentation, persecution and treachery, to contend against….” Wild quoted in: Longacre,
"Black Troops in the Army of the James, 1863-65", 5
took orders. An officer in the USCT, however, had to establish this distance, while also convincing whites in and out of the army that his promotion over blacks meant something. To obtain the first objective, white officers commanding black soldiers often had to oppose the freedmen’s struggle to assert manhood, while to obtain the second, they simultaneously needed to tout the manliness of their subordinates to others.

Appreciating the incompatibility of these ends can help us better make sense of the schizophrenic words and actions of USCT officers who in one letter praise the loyalty, bravery and skill of black troops, but then in another confess their repugnance, or even reveal violent racial ruptures in their camp. What we find among officers in the black military is not so much the benevolent and ideologically committed on one side, and racist mercenaries on the other as histories of the USCT often suggest. Instead, many of these officers wore various masks. Their own patterns of ferocity and sympathy were not so much hypocritical but reflective of their uniquely stigmatized promotions, which hitched power to shame.

44 Mitchell, "The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home", 39-54

45 For example, in a passage that argues that white officers were often the best advocates of equal pay for blacks, Joseph Glatthaar uses Colonel James Montgomery’s missive in which he vouchsafes for his black soldiers’ “loyalty and fidelity.” A reader, however, may be surprised to learn of the vicious relations that existed between Montgomery and these so-called “loyal” soldiers. Roughly a half year earlier, Montgomery callously had one of his soldiers killed, and wanted to kill others for sneaking away from camp to check on and visit their families. The point here is that sweeping narratives of black/white relations in the army have a tendency of glossing over the deep ambivalence, and inconsistent behaviors of white officers. See: Glatthaar, "Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers", 1-33; Christian G. Samito, "Proof of Loyalty: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Redefinition of Citizenship during the Civil War Era" (Ph.D, Boston College), 334-35.
CHAPTER 2:

THE USHER

George W. Cole developed a complicated affection for his black soldiers which would become impossible to separate from his lust for rank. The arming of black men brought him decorated shoulder straps. While he rose above his subaltern counterparts (junior officers) before joining the USCT, by 1863 he feared he had reached a plateau as a major in the 3rd NY Cavalry. For Cole the buildup of black armies directly affected his chances at obtaining higher rank. After General Butler offered him a colonel’s commission Cole immediately set out to form his regiment from the tens of thousands of souls who took refuge in and around Portsmouth and Norfolk Virginia, and in New Berne, North Carolina. In late December and January of 1864, Cole led the recruiting of some 1200 refugees and freedmen. Under the direction of General Butler black laborers constructed “freedmen’s villages” on abandoned farms of confederate notables like Henry A. Wise (former governor of Virginia who signed the death warrant for John Brown).¹ Most of Cole’s black soldiers began their service by constructing a place of refuge for family members, thus further cementing in their minds the connection between military service and care for one’s family.

¹ The Christian Recorder, February 13, 1864.
Meanwhile, for Cole, this extraordinary moment vindicated his prior military feats while signaling greater things to come.

While his letters usually consisted of dour predictions of failure and rants about cronyism, in February 1864, Colonel Cole penned a jaunty missive to his brother about his new regiment. (Though even as he relished the opportunities before him he couldn’t resist grousing new fears about unfairly won promotions.) After the soldiers constructed cookhouses and stockades their greenhorn colonel bragged that the enormous project had cost the Government only “two kegs nails and two thousand feet roofing.” “Not one [black recruit] has needed a reprimand yet, nor is there want of discipline,” he added. Cole expressed disapproval of how the men squandered their $10 bounty on “a looking glass” and “buckskin gauntlets”—suggesting Cole’s belief that black soldiers had not earned the right to relish military accoutrements. But Cole made it clear that before they purchased fine riding gloves, the soldiers crowded in line to purchase spelling books. “Their tireless & persistent efforts to learn to read, shame me into about six hours a day study, which is long enough for me.”

But while the soldiers filed into line looking to make themselves anew with military accoutrements and books, there was a part of their past they carried with them. When the recruits were stripped for examination “nearly all” had “awful whip scars.” Cole approached one old soldier with a particularly “horrible back” and asked the senior freedman if he was

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2 Of course many white troopers wore buckskin gauntlets while mounted; just recently a pair of like gloves, finely embroidered, were auctioned off by a collector in Newbern, N.C., that were worn by one of Cole’s white subordinates in the 3rd NY Cavalry, Corporal William C. Barber. (Pictures and sale listing in author’s possession.)

going “to settle” for the cruelty. Just then Cole realized that this was the same runaway slave who had guided Cole’s comrades during a march through Kinston and Goldsboro. The unnamed soldier, submitted Cole, had “piloted me to that battery that my company took by assault, where I earned my leaf.”

“Another burly chap kept looking at me,” he continued. Cole looked closely into the chap’s face. “And to my astonishment I recognized a once skeleton, that was attracted by my firing to the edge of a swamp, and suspiciously gave himself up. After being fed he returned and brought out four more wretches—all that were left of some sixteen that had been escaping for four months, the balance having been killed by dog and gun.” Within the regimental camps he found “lots of contraband I have picked up in raids and they know me but they all look the same to me,” Cole contradictorily added. He recognized some of them but most remembered him. When he stopped to read their scars or peer into their eyes, however, Cole discovered himself, or rather, his exploits—and promises of future glory. For those who weren’t going to “settle,” torn up backs augured future military operations of revenge. A face led him to the place where he earned his “leaf” (referring to the gold oak leaf that adorned a major’s shoulder straps). Behind the burl he glimpsed a skeleton at swamp’s edge begging to be rescued. In their reading primers he discovered a flagged teacher in a colonel’s jacket (himself). “I expect trouble to restrain these men when active duty comes, there is bitter & vindictive feeling in nearly all.” These soldiers, Cole wanted to believe, joined the regiment for vindictive warfare. “I think few better [regiments] than this will prove itself to be in time. I am confident & hopeful for I know this colored cavalry will be a success,” he confided. Cole apologized for going on at length about his past and future
connection with the ex-slaves. “But it attaches these fellows to me,” concluded Cole, “to know I was their usher into liberty.”

Cole, and many of his junior officers, had truly played the part of freedom’s “ushers.” In the first year of the war, while Union troops began capturing port cities throughout tidewater Virginia and North Carolina, many slaves broke for federal lines. Even before Union troops established pockets of refuge, many slaves escaped from Confederate officers who recently impressed bondsmen to erect rebel fortifications in anticipation of looming war. A substantial number of local masters moved their slaves deeper into the Confederacy, while some slaves remained on the land abandoned by masters who cut and ran. But for thousands, the movement of Union troops signaled a slowly expanding (if sometimes contracting) haven.

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4 In February, Congressman Cornelius Cole of California (George’s older brother) read a large portion of this letter during a speech encouraging the further arming of slaves. This was doubtless a treasured moment for George as his words were used by Cornelius to challenge Abraham Lincoln to move towards a more aggressive war. But Cornelius left out some of the more objectionable portions like the soldiers’ spending habits and the fact that they “all look the same.” The Congressman also took liberty to polish some of the prose and to rearrange some of the sentences. Cornelius also emphasized the black soldiers’ ability to work on the cheap (while leaving out the part about them reading voraciously). Perhaps the politician was playing to the dual fear that freedmen would not work or that they would eventually elevate themselves above drudge labor and compete for white men’s jobs through education. Compare the texts: Cornelius Cole, Speech of Hon. Cornelius Cole, of California, on Arming the Slaves, Delivered in the House of Representatives, February 18, 1864 (S.L.:, 1864), 11., George W. Cole to Cornelius Cole, February 15 and 16, 1864, Cole family, “Papers”.

From inside this imagined haven, soldiers looking for military glory grew restless because very little ground was permanently gained after initial victories in the war’s first two years. In fact, Union forces would not gain complete control of the region until the final hour of the war. Instead of major campaigns, soldiers in the area participated in intermittent skirmishes and raids on small towns. For example, in the summer of ‘63 Cole participated in what became known as “Potter’s raid” or the “Tarboro raid.” Under the command of Brigadier General Edward Potter, the fairly recently promoted Major Cole led a battalion of cavalry, in conjunction with other battalions, into the interior of North Carolina to lay waste to several strategic towns and mills. They also were charged with tearing up railroad track and burning bridges to prevent sorely needed supplies from reaching General Lee’s pummeled army, still recuperating from Gettysburg. Over several days, Cole’s unit—many of which came from the same region in upstate New York—took the war to the parlors and bedrooms of southerners.

Early in the raid they captured the confederate official in charge of distributing relief funds, stealing over $6000 appropriated for desperate families of soldiers. The Union raiders were accused of breaking into homes around midnight, turning citizens out of their beds, leaving “many a lady & her helpless little children” to sleep in the woods. Throughout the expedition Cole’s comrades pilfered as many southerners’ horses and mules they could handle, sometimes shooting the rest. In and around the town of Rocky Mount troopers


7 “Another Raid on the Wil and Weldon Railroad” in Western Democrat, July 28, 1863.
seized tons of bacon and ammunition, burnt railroad cars, and ran the engine off the tracks. Others looted confederate homes, taking mounds of cash, and removing earrings, breastpins and watches off their victims. Water tanks, warehouses, bridges, and thousands of barrels of flour, succumbed to the torch. Some of Cole’s fellow soldiers busted into homes and forced wedding bands from contorted fingers, and lifted “petty trinkets,” jewelry, children’s clothing, and loads of liquor. One southern newspaper emphasized, “both officers and men stole and plundered.”

In Tarboro, Cole personally destroyed huge quantities of cotton and a stockpile of medical supplies badly needed in confederate hospitals. Raiders donning blue smashed their way through a Masonic lodge, stealing the “fine regalia,” jewels, the gavel, and sacred emblems. When the majority of the forces began their return to New Berne, Cole and his men remained in Tarboro to keep “a party of citizens” from salvaging their burning bridge.

On their return to New Berne, Cole’s Union raiders got cornered. As it happened over and again during the length of the war, it was an African American who provided the Union soldiers with life-saving information. When Cole’s forces were ambushed while trying to cross a creek and surrounded by sharpshooters, a local black man told the Union soldiers about a ford where the Union men would cross and elude the enemy. While Cole had been

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“piloted,” just six months earlier by a black man, which culminated in a battle victory and in Cole’s promotion to major, now the “ushered” freedman helped Yankees escape capture or death. Over and again, African Americans provided Union soldiers with crucial knowledge of the region and the enemy by pointing out shortcuts, revealing imminent ambushes, feeding famished soldiers, or tipping Union soldiers off about where Confederates were hiding.¹¹

At its best the relationship between Union soldiers and African-American Southerners functioned as a loose alliance, alternating between soldiers “ushering” slaves into freedom by dint of rifle and cannon, and local blacks imparting knowledge to “guide”


In letters, reports and diaries, one frequently finds brief mention of the ways in which blacks served as guides to confused, endangered, or outmatched Union soldiers. For a few examples see: Wiley, "The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union", 116; United States. War Dept and others, "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies", Series 1 - Volume 46 (Part II), page 243; Berlin and Rowland, "Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era", 32, 58. For an example of how a black boy rescued a white officer who was shot point blank by a rebel and left for dead, for having served in a black regiment, see: Hollandsworth Jr., James G., "The Execution of White Officers from Black Units by Confederate Forces during the Civil War" In Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War, ed. Gregory J. W. Urwin (Carbondale Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 59.

One fellow officer in Cole’s 3rd NY Cavalry, Lieutenant Enoch Stahler, reminisced that his “colored boy, Banquo” who had “taken a fancy to my personal company.” When Stahler was shot off his horse and in danger of being captured, “I was wondering where that little darkey of mine could be with my other horse, when whom should I see galloping toward me with the stateliness of a prince but Banquo on my dark sorrel.” Stahler’s reminiscence may be a product of white americans’ early twentieth-century nostalgia for loyal African Americans; but no doubt the story also reveals how amid the chaos of war and injury white men depended on the “dependent.” Ironically, after Banquo saved Stahler’s life, another white soldier rushing to get away from the enemy, caught Stahler by the stirrups and flipped him on his back, to be captured by Confederate soldiers. Enoch Stahler, Enoch Stahler, Miller and Soldier: The First Lieutenant Third New York Cavalry, Member of the Loyal Legion (Washington, D.C: Hayworth Pub. House, 1909), 2, 5.
these same armies to safety. Just as often, though, the parties assumed more complicated relations. For example, while the mere presence of the federal army in the region encouraged many slaves to bolt from masters, the slow, plodding movement of the Union forces gave many masters ample time to sell or transfer their slaves into the Confederate interior. Meanwhile, significant numbers of slaves held deep reservations about the intentions of Yankee soldiers. For example, soon after Cole’s comrades forded the creek (which they found thanks to the sympathetic freedman), some of the soldiers set fire to the home of a confederate militia colonel only to watch as his loyal slaves swiftly put out the conflagration. In Tarboro, a judge reported to his wife that during the raid his slave, Jane, was “faithful, not only in staying” but in coaxing the Yankees into not pillaging her master’s hotel. While passing through Greenville soldiers sprang twenty-five African American prisoners who had been nabbed in route to join a Union regiment in New Berne. Yet it was reported that Union soldiers also attempted to hunt down a free black man named “Jackson” who had reportedly enlisted in the Rebel army. Though they offered $500 for his head (after ferreting through bedroom bureaus, Cole’s comrades suddenly had deep pockets) they had to resign themselves to only destroying his clothes.12

12 Example of slaves putting out fire and Judge George Howard quoted in: Norris, ““the Yankees have been here!”: The Story of Brig. Gen. Edward E. Potter’s Raid on Greenville, Tarboro, and Rocky Mount, July 19-23, 1863”, 13-14, 19; Berlin, "The Destruction of Slavery", 59-61. A North Carolina weekly reported that the raiders “even robbed” two slaves who apparently could not be coaxed into running off with Union soldiers. See: “The Yankees in Tarboro” Aug 12, 1863—Weekly State Journal. Clearly exaggerating as many soldiers did, one soldier from a North Carolina regiment claimed that the raid “has made every true soldier, who was forced to take part in it, blush with shame.” But actually it made many of them rich, freed hundreds of slaves (which among other things brought back a fresh labor supply into Union lines), and played a part in a broader shift toward a hard war. See: Walter Clark, Histories of the several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina, in the Great War 1861-65 (Raleigh: E.M. Uzzell, printer, 1901), Volume III, p.176.
Cole certainly helped “usher” some slaves into Union lines. But in this particular raid, at least, he abandoned many of them to an uncertain fate. As his comrades scrambled for their lives through enemy territory back to base in New Bern, Cole commanded the rear guard. With “double charge” of grapeshot and canister he kept Confederates from taking retribution. As the massive column trudged toward New Berne, marching at its tail end was a swelling group of fugitive slaves. Assigned to the rear, Cole’s battalion protected hundreds of fugitives who rode mules and horses, or who piled into farm wagons that Union soldiers encouraged them to steal from their masters. A nearby North Carolina paper reported that the raiders carried off some five hundred blacks—some willingly, others by force.13 As the enemy drew closer, though, Cole received orders from his superior to “pass the negro column.” Cole followed orders and later admitted in his report that the cumbersome cavalcade of men, women and children were left at the mercy of embittered rebels. The “usher” left them to defend themselves with nothing but recently stolen tools—spades, axes, and scythes—which they were bound to put to back-breaking use within Union lines.14

A soldier from a confederate infantry reported that firing canon at the fleeing slaves produced chaos. In a confederate regimental historian’s words:

This utterly demoralized the “contrabands” who, in their mad rush to keep pace with their erstwhile deliverers…who were now fleeing for their lives, failed to discover us. The shock was so sudden and unexpected that the effect was indescribable. The great cavalcade, composed of men, women, and children, perched on wagons, carts, buggies, carriages, and mounted on horses, mules,
whipping, slashing and yelling like wild Indians, was suddenly halted by our fire upon the bridge…

As various refugees attempted to halt their march, wagons apparently jackknifed amid a din of confused cries. The march to freedom devolved into harrowing panic as spooked horses pulled wrecked buggies and carts into the woods. A group of the lucky and swift somehow kept up with Cole’s soldiers, crossing bridges about to be set on fire as Potter’s soldiers tried to rid themselves of their attackers. One southern paper reported that more than 160 contrabands were recaptured and brought back to Kinston for an unknown future. Cole ordered two of his lieutenants to remain behind and burn crossed bridges. As Cole reported to his superior, they waited for “at least an hour” for the stragglers. But “all that were black” were “gobbled up by the rebel squadron in our rear, and unable to come up.” The next morning a few who were able to elude the rebel captors crossed what was left of the wasted bridge, or braved the waters. But even then, Cole reported, about “one-third or one-half the whole number of negroes and mules were lost at this place.”

If it pained Cole and his fellow Union soldiers to abandon the column, they did not report it. For them, it was part of war and in this particularly harrowing escape, a life-or-death strategy. Cole’s comrades purposely scattered booty “throwing away every incumbrance” in the path of their attackers. They upturned carriages and slit the throats of

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the horses they could no longer afford to drive to base. As one southern correspondent recounted it, “The raiders were obliged to disgorge much plunder in this retreat to facilitate escape.”\footnote{Carpenter, “War Diary of Kinchen Jahu Carpenter: Company I, Fiftieth North Carolina Regiment...”, 13Weekly State Journal, July 29, 1863, several places; also see: “Movements of the Yankee Raiders” in Western Democrat, July 28, 1863.} The jettisoned plunder and abandoned runaways were part of the same calculus: to lighten the march and distract the enemy by tossing back some of its stolen “property.”\footnote{Norris, “"The Yankees have been here!": The Story of Brig. Gen. Edward E. Potter’s Raid on Greenville, Tarboro, and Rocky Mount, July 19-23, 1863”, 1-27}

The Union soldiers had an interest in ushering back certain kinds of black bodies that could dig, lift logs, wash clothes, and increasingly by 1863, fill the ranks of the growing black army. As a result, the freedmen’s families were further strained and broken. One southern correspondent reported several days after Cole abandoned the refugees, that “40 other negroes mostly women and children have been captured near Greenville, that were left behind by the Abolitionists on their hasty retreat from the Rocky Mount [Tarboro] raid.”\footnote{Weekly State Journal, August 5, 1863.} Another rebel soldier reported that his company “scoured” the nearby woods and “gathered up several hundred Negroes.” Among them the Rebels found “several infants and small children who had been abandoned to their fate.”\footnote{Clark, "Histories of the several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina, in the Great War 1861-’65", Vol. III, page 175} One confederate soldier followed tight on the heels of the raiders for “some miles after crossing the creek and finally commenced to press them, when perhaps a wagon load of meat and negroes would be dropped.” The
rebels unit pursued Cole’s men “occasionally capturing women and children and vehicles of various kinds with carried supplies.”

From these terse descriptions and military reports, a grim image emerges of the cavalcade for freedom. Most of the refugees were probably frightened; many yearned for freedom and could almost taste it. Others came only because soldiers forced them off their master’s property. Many hoped to never see their masters again, especially because it would now bring a punishment for running off with horses and foodstuffs. After getting “gobbled up” by rebel soldiers, though, hundreds returned to unknown fates. And because healthy, black male bodies were in demand (by southern whites and the Union army), a large portion of these abandoned refugees appear to have been women and children. When the rebels began firing on the refugees, some frantic mothers and fathers perhaps abandoned their children; others may have left them there hoping Union soldiers would rescue them. The children found in the woods may have also been recently orphaned as some of the papers reported that both “Yankees and negroes” had been killed.

Southerners needed male slaves badly; not just to work in the fields, but to protect vulnerable towns. A local paper that reported the raid extensively also announced that a nearby rebel city had just begun requisitioning “able-bodied male slaves, between the ages of

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21 One paper from Wilmington, North Carolina published a scathing report of the raid, actually suggesting that Rebel forces by incompetence and greed, allowed the Union forces to just barely escape, thereby ensuring that loads of booty would be dumped in their paths. The paper reported that when civilians showed up to recover the jettisoned items, the rebel soldiers made them wait their turn: “No wonder that raids are successful, and therefore popular among the Yankees, if the history of their escape from Tarboro be a specimen of how things are managed in that section.” Wilmington Journal, August 27, 1863; Also see: ibid., Vol.IV, page 81

18 and 45, to fortify this city against the possible raids of the enemy.” Local militiamen
canvassed the area to collect one bondsman from every household owning ten or more
slaves.23 North Carolina papers listed set amounts that the confederate government would
compensate owners for anything from shoes, cotton, food, to of course “laborers.”
Especially after raids like Tarboro and others, slaves would be needed to rebuild bridges and
repair miles of wasted rail tracks.

For Union soldiers, to steal or liberate a slave was to rob potency from the
confederate effort, while reducing Yankee soldiers’ own toil in the camps and along the front
lines. The male black body carried within it the potential to literally heave the war endeavor
backward or forward through sweat and menial toil. But it is clear that ex-slaves also played
vital roles in the actual raids as well. Perhaps as much as white soldiers, freedmen became
ushers to those in bondage. Some of the reports mentioned that fifty or so black soldiers
accompanied the Union raiders.24 These soldiers had just been recruited from the
surrounding region and formed into the all-black First North Carolina Volunteers.25 Noting
that a “faithful” servant was “compelled” to drive off with his master’s wagon loaded to the
brim with foodstuffs, one North Carolinian admitted that “The negroes they [the Union

23 “Let Justice Be Done” Weekly State Journal, July 29, 1863; list of monetary compensation
found in Weekly State Journal, Aug 12, 1863.

24 “Another Raid on the Wil and Weldon Railroad” in Western Democrat, July 28, 1863.

25 Norris, “”the Yankees have been here!”: The Story of Brig. Gen. Edward E. Potter’s Raid on
Greenville, Tarboro, and Rocky Mount, July 19-23, 1863”, 4
raiders] had with them were busy the whole time of their stay corrupting and seducing away slaves, many of whom left with them.”

In some reports, black soldiers seemed to take the lead in sifting through personal possessions of southern elites. Maybe black soldiers had a personal stake in turning up the intimate spaces of masters as well as knowledge of where to find hidden valuables. That black soldiers played a significant role in “seducing” slaves to join the departing soldiers, suggests a lack of trust and authority that white Union soldiers shared with slaves in the area. In the middle of the night and early morn, the small company of black troopers who “piloted” their white counterparts to prominent citizens’ homes in this reportedly “prosperous section,” persuaded reluctant slaves to run, and in doing so brokered the tumultuous clash of thievery and liberation.

When the escaping raiders got pinned against a creek (the day before the local African American told them where to cross, in a similar predicament) General Potter reported that he eluded the approaching rebels “by taking a very intricate path through a plantation.” Potter does not mention it, but one wonders how he exploited the intricate paths of a plantation and found his way to a hidden “piney-woods road” leading back toward Newbern. Perhaps one of his black cavalymen, who had fled from this region, knew the haunted ground from corner to corner. A northern correspondent reported that on the

26 “Account of the Late Raid on Rocky Mount and Tarboro” in Western Democrat, Aug 11, 1863.

27 Carpenter, "War Diary of Kinchen Jahn Carpenter: Company I, Fiftieth North Carolina Regiment ...", 12-3

return, “At one time it seemed as if our men would be entirely cut off, but they were saved by colored guides, who conducted them by bridle paths to safety.”

Cavalrymen more than other soldiers depended on topographical knowledge, especially familiarity with back trails and hidden roads, as they rarely exited on the roads previously taken. In the previous summer of ’62, Cole’s Colonel, Simon Mix, stood before swarms of New Yorkers and assured them how vital blacks were to the Union effort in North Carolina. Justifying the de facto use of blacks in military operations he declared, “I would take the negroes of the South and put muskets in their hands, for nowhere in the swamps of North Carolina can you find a path where a dog can go that the negro does not understand. There are gentlemen here who will bear me witness when I state this fact, that in all our expeditions in North Carolina we have depended upon the negroes for our guides; for without them we could not have moved with any safety. [Applause]” Black guides pointed white Union troops where to go, and Cole’s next commanding officer, Ben Butler, would even plant two black spies (a gardener and a cook) in the Confederate White House,

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31 John Austin Stevens, *Proceedings at the Mass Meeting of Loyal Citizens : On Union Square, New-York, 15th Day of July, 1862, Under the Auspices of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York, the Union Defence Committee of the Citizens of New York, the Common Council of the City of New York, and Other Committees of Loyal Citizens* (New York: Published by order of the Committee of Arrangements, George F. Nesbitt & Co.), 1862), 89-90.
where they reporting on gatherings, table conversations, and other dialogue overheard in Jefferson Davis’s parlor.  

Though the actions of these black troopers is hardly acknowledged in the official Union reports, we know something about their role because indignant white southerners made sure to detail how the “abolitionist” raiders were turning the rebel world upside down, with race central to the inversion. But when the lucrative and destructive Tarboro raid nearly ended (for the second time) in capture, the Yankee liberators were willing to dispose of their pilots. While official Union reports mention nothing of the sort, one North Carolina regiment recalled that the accompanying black soldiers remained with the column of refugees even after Cole and his men abandoned them. When Confederates shot towards the column of frantic refugees, they intended to hit “negro troops who were in the rear of Potter’s column”—who were evidently trying in vain to rush the refugees over a bridge. Why some of these soldiers remained behind is unclear. After being fired on, “one negro captain” charged into the teeth of the attacker, standing in his buggy, firing into three nearby rebels. He was “shot dead” and “many others” were “either killed or wounded in attempting to escape through the woods nearby.” It is uncertain if Cole abandoned some of these black

32 Longacre, "The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History." (Vol. 1-4), 143

33 By the end of the raid, as the Union forces edged closer to safe territory, much of the valuable knowledge and work that black troopers initially offered became less critical.

34 Clark, "Histories of the several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina, in the Great War 1861-'65", Vol. 3, page 175 In the official report only one of the Majors, Floyd Clarkson, mentions the black troops as playing a part in the expedition. At Tyson’s Creek, where General Potter claims he found an “intricate path” on a plantation, Clarkson ordered 30 black cavalrymen off of their horses to skirmish in the woods. Potter’s men would leave many of their refugees behind a few days later; it is not clear if these dismounted black soldiers were a part of the abandoned United States.
soldiers on the wrong side of a destroyed bridge, or if they decided to remain and protect the refugees. The chaotic march revealed the various internal strains inherent in many liberating expeditions. In this massive column one could certainly find privateers with stuffed pockets, anti-slavery men who believed they had helped unravel rebeldom, ex-slaves with scores to settle, confused soldiers who wondered if they were thieves or warriors, and black refugees, including devastated fathers (and a few mothers), who made it out of Egypt, filled with a poignant blend of ecstasy and shame for having abandoned their own to Pharaoh’s army.

Behind the jarring images of burning bridges, corkscrewed rail track, flourmills reduced to rubble, charred trains, there was a softer, material aspect to the raid, though just as insidious. One of the telling signs of the expedition was that among the jettisoned booty and slit-throated horses, confederates found “all sorts of ladies’ wearing apparel” strewn behind the departing army. Southern reports claimed that black soldiers had helped take these clothes from “the helpless, unprotected women at the plantations…” Of course, white soldiers pilfered women’s clothes as well. Along with lifting jewels and liquor, many of Cole’s comrades ran off with dresses and children’s attire with partly benevolent intentions. As they knew from experience, women refugees and their children would sorely need raiment.

35 Clark, "Histories of the several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina, in the Great War 1861-'65", Volume III, p. 175

36 This interpretation borrows from Jim Downs’ fine article about women refugees during the war: Jim Downs, "The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among
From the first months of the war this became evident as thousands of refugees flowed into Union lines in Virginia and North Carolina. As *Harper’s Weekly* reported in the first weeks of 1862, while women only made up around a third of the fifteen hundred contrabands at Fort Monroe, the government only partly supplied “the men whom it employs with coat, trowsers, shoes and hat; but furnishes none for women and children, and no underclothing for any.” The army supplied much of the clothing for male refugees by handing down the threadbare and discarded uniforms of white soldiers. One report of conditions in the refugee camps pointed out that “clothing is their most pressing need, especially for women and children, who cannot wear the cast-off garments of soldiers.”

In the early months of the war Union officials—prodded by General Butler—allowed “able-bodied” refugees to cross into Union lines in exchange for labor. The term “able-bodied” served as code for men who were not crippled or timeworn. And it rarely denoted women. Butler and other Union generals agreed to pay these laborers, subtracting money to pay for their clothes. In October 1861 Major General Wool from the headquarters of the Department of Virginia ordered that all male servants be paid at least $8 per month and women servants half as much. From these earnings clothing money would be subtracted and the remaining balance would go to a fund to feed and clothe refugee dependents—“for

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Freedwomen and their Children during and After the Civil War” In *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 78-103.


38 Report quoted in: Downs, "The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and their Children during and After the Civil War", 80
the support of the women and children and those that are unable to work.” 39 In July 1862 Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act which in effect ratified General Butler’s exchange of raiment and sustenance for labor of the “able-bodied.”40 And as long as “able-bodied” meant those who could heave and drag large loads, women and children took on the stigma of dead weight, dependent and undeserving.41 As one historian explains: “While former enslaved women certainly worked in Union camps as washerwomen, cooks, and domestics, there was no policy that provided for their employment; their labor was often impromptu service, neither regulated nor systematized. Women instead were to gain rations

39 The next month Wool issued a similar order, but created categories between men, boys, “sickly,” and the “infirm”—each dictating different levels of pay. He also permitted workers from each category to keep one or two dollars for themselves. Finally he implemented an incentive program (also scaled to the bodies of workers) where a laborer could earn $.50 to one dollar for “unusual” amounts of labor. Special Order 72 and General Order 34 in United States. War Dept and others, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 2, Vol. I, pp. 774-5

40 Downs, *The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and their Children during and After the Civil War*, 79-80

41 The official records of the war are replete with officers discussing the gathering, protecting, relocating, and exploiting of “able-bodied” refugees which almost always meant strong male contraband. As General Howell Cobb reported after Wilson’s Raid in Alabama and Georgia, “I also directed the column to be cleared of all contraband Negroes, and such of the able-bodied ones as were able to enlist to be organized into regiments…”; After the fall of Vicksburg just weeks before Potter’s Raid, General U.S. Grant ordered “All the able-bodied negro men in the city will be immediately collected and organized into working parties, under suitable officers” One dismayed Confederate complained to the C.S.A. military, “that slaves should be impressed for service in the army as wagoners, pioneers, sappers and miners, &c. Our able-bodied negro men are now being conscripted into the army of the enemy.” See, respectively: United States. War Dept and others, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, Vol. 49, part I, p. 362; ibid., Series 1, Vol. 49, part I, p. 362; ibid., Series 1, Vol. 49, part I, p. 362
and shelter, and to receive medical care through the support of their husbands’ or fathers’ employment.”

As one sympathetic officer wrote his superior in fall of 1861, “Contraband negroes” were coming into the Union camps in South Carolina “in great numbers. In two days 150 have come in, mostly able-bodied men, and it will soon be necessary to furnish them with coarse clothing.” If the “able-bodied” men got first priority for (coarse) clothing, they were merely first among the last. In late 1862, in a response to a major general’s inquiry about sending supplies to captured cities in Virginia, Lincoln’s Assistant Secretary of War, P.H. Watson warned the general not to send excessive goods which might fall into the hands of Rebels. “Care should be taken,” Watson explained, “to scale [the shipments] down so as to limit the supplies imported to the actual necessities of the inhabitants.” When supplying places with large African American populations like Norfolk, Portsmouth, or Suffolk, Watson suggested that an estimate of the respective populations be obtained by “counting four children or Negroes as the equivalent of one adult citizen.” The general could then use “clothing tables” to obtain the proper quantities of articles “required by the inhabitants.”

By the end of the war, little had changed. After the fall of Richmond, Cole’s own commanding officer, General Ord, wrote the Secretary of War to suggest “making use of the captured old tents, canvas, &c., what little there is, to make clothing for the Negroes, their

42 Downs, “The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and their Children during and After the Civil War”, 80


44 ibid., Series 1, Vol. 18, p. 453
women to make it up. There is quite a lot of old tents, wagon covers, &., condemned.” Yet Ord was not concerned so much with clothing women as he was with eliminating dependents under his command. He suggested in another communication that if he couldn’t cut off the rations of black soldiers’ children and wives, he could “gather [them] into buildings and open a grand general washing establishment for the city, where clothing of any one will be washed gratis. A little hard work and confinement will soon induce them to find employment…”45 Only the bodies of the independent merited clothing, while the able-bodied deserved to have their shirts scrubbed by parasitic children and mothers.

Cole’s comrades pilfered women’s closets and bureaus for other compelling reasons. To steal or destroy a confederate woman’s garments was a way to bring the hardening war into the lap of rebellion. All over the Confederacy, and particularly in blockaded regions, women brought spinning wheels down from the garrets, carded wool and cotton, and mended old shirts and trousers. Many wives could not afford black mourning attire because the war that turned them into widows also pushed them into penury.46 Days after the raid, another paper in North Carolina lamented the plight of women who were left alone to support themselves by sewing uniforms for rebel soldiers. “The winter is approaching, and [the women left at home] must starve or freeze, unless they are allowed more for their


work.”47 Yankee soldiers blamed confederate women for causing and supporting the rebellion. If good republican mothers made a more virtuous society in the North, then white southern women spawned the traitorous generation now at arms.48 To prevent them from clothing themselves and their children was a direct attack on their roles as mothers and caretakers.

So while raids in the Piedmont region produced reports of white soldiers carrying off dresses, or ransacking a store and making “the negroes clothe themselves with the best of clothing….”; in many other reports soldiers ripped or burned the garments in front of mothers and wives.49 Perhaps tellingly, one story of how clothes were taken instead of destroyed (presumably for dependents in refugee camps), was also one of the reports where a witness noted that black soldiers participated in or led the ransacking. In one detailed report readers learned how raiders broke into a home and “took” bed-clothing, personal garments, “including children’s clothing,” and “even…the tooth-brushes.” Then, after adding that the raiders also robbed nearly $20,000, the narrator claimed that “Two negroes

47 “Who Loses and Who Gains by the War, and How to Equalize its Burdens,” in *Wilmington Journal*, August 27, 1863

48 Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*, 89-113

49 For white soldiers making blacks put on fine clothes, see: “Yankee Raid” in *Western Democrat*, July 14, 1863; When raiders ransacked the home of “Gov. Clark” they reportedly stole many personal items and “her own children’s clothes, and every variety of articles.” See: “The Yankees in Tarboro” *Weekly State Journal*, Aug 12, 1863; In a similar raid a few weeks later other soldiers dashed mirrors and slashed paintings, then “tore up the ladies’ and children’s clothing.” See: “Further Particulars of the Recent Yankee Raid in the Direction of Weldon,” in *Weekly State Journal*, Aug 12, 1863.
were with the Yankees, their pilots we presume, and while at Mr. Pope’s they were the leaders in ransacking and turning things up side down. Nothing seemed to escape them.”

If what the witness meant by “nothing seemed to escape them” was that together, the black and white soldiers left with anything from jewels in their pockets, to fistfuls of meat, to children’s toothbrushes, he may have been (correctly) sensing the wide range of motives that inspired this intimate destruction. In the same report that suggested black soldiers stole children’s clothing, followed an illuminating story. Some soldiers in Cole’s regiment captured a confederate official, Henry A. Dowd, in charge of the clothing bureau for the State Commissary Department. He was apparently in his buggy with his wife trying to flee the region. When the soldiers found a colonel’s uniform and sword in one of his bags they brought him to “see their Major.” The author does not tell us the name of the major, but because there were only three majors operating the Tarboro Raid, it had to be either George Cole, or one of his two counterparts. The soldiers took Dowd’s sword, not knowing that it had “actually [been] captured from the Yankees” in a previous battle. When the raiders demanded to see the contents of one of the chests, Dowd opened it up and showed them—“a pile of small children’s clothing lay uppermost on the tray.” Dowd held up some of the articles in his hand and directly asked the Major “what he thought of them.” The major responded that the contents looked “all right,” and as Dowd feigned to dig deeper into the chest, the major communicated that he had seen enough.

What “the Major” and his soldiers didn’t know was that Dowd had strategically hidden below the baby garments “a pile of many thousands of dollars” entrusted to him,

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probably, for his labors as head of the clothing bureau. Dowd certainly had insight into the minds of his attackers thanks to his experience in the state commissary and his management of the clothing crisis in the Confederacy. He stashed his fortune beneath “unmentionables” and bet that a Union soldier would either be struck with some guilt as he fumbled through an infant’s clothing, or, more likely, lose interest and redirect his efforts to digging beneath things that he associated with personal gain. Dowd was lucky that “the Major” was not a black man with a half-naked family hovelled in a camp. And he was fortunate that this Yankee officer either had young children at home, or more likely treasure on the brain.

When the fleeing Union soldiers tossed aside a trail of blouses, chemises, dresses, and aprons, they revealed their knowledge of exactly who they were leaving behind—and the kinds of bodies that merited freedom. The dumping of female clothing was as calculated as the jettisoned loads of meat or worn down weapons. These were things that Union soldiers could part with, and just as importantly, items that confederates would be tempted to stop and retrieve. Confederate men had their own gender crises—psychological needs to maintain their idea of manhood and thus wives and mothers to clothe, feed and protect. In many of the accounts, Cole’s soldiers forced themselves into homes only to find the wife or servants waiting to witness and hopefully limit the destruction. Upon hearing news of the raid, one confederate “immediately” thought that Potter’s men would surely make Tarboro their “first

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52 For the ways in which the breakdown of the Confederate war effort was a function of confederate men not making good on their time-honored obligations to the opposite sex, see: Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (1990), 1200-1228.
point of attack, or rather destruction, for there was nothing to attack but women and children.”53

Even raids on industrial targets seemed to immediately weigh on the confederate household. Besides torching thousands of barrels of flour the Tarboro raiders destroyed a cotton factory which produced the yarn “people of Eastern North Carolina and the south side of Virginian” used to make “clothing for home consumption.”54 While Tarboro burned, Cole’s fellow major reported that in the nearby town of Rocky Mount, besides laying machine-shops and bridges to waste, his men decimated a cotton mill that employed “150 white girls.”55 When Union soldiers made southerners feel the war, they did so through disruption of the quotidian: pilfering a threadbare blouse; burning flour; stealing and then abandoning a female slave who could no longer be trusted since she departed, temporarily, with her mistress’ clothes.

Six months later, when Cole walked through the camp of his freshly recruited Colored Cavalry, he expressed only pride in how they would surely bring battlefield glory and how all recognized their “usher.” Most northerners back home had little reason to question Cole’s claim to military bravery and humanitarianism. After the raid, the local Syracuse paper reported that a train of contrabands “picked up by our cavalry” along with a

55 ibid., Series 1, Vol. 27, part II, p.968
few white soldiers “fell into the enemy’s hands” after “taking the wrong road.” As Cole and his comrades knew, however, local African Americans never took the wrong road. The Syracuse paper did not mention the inebriated Union soldiers found senseless on the roadside or Union soldiers burning bridges between them and their refugees—or how alcohol and violence served as stimulants for a grueling five-day operation where many of the soldiers slept only a handful of hours. And though it is impossible to know where it came from, or the explanation offered by George Cole to his spouse, some time during the war Mary Barto Cole received $15,000 from her otherwise unmoneyed “man of force.” Not every southerner was wise enough to pack her fortunes below a baby’s unmentionables.

56 “Capture of Contrabands” in *Syracuse Journal*, July 27, 1863. In other New York papers there is no mention of how the contraband were lost to the Confederates. But in one account it is mentioned that gold and some $40,000 in North Carolina scrip was taken from southerners. See: “Operation in North Carolina” in *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1863.

CHAPTER 3:
BELOW THE BEAST

Even if Cole took pride in his problematic ushering of blacks into freedom, or making southern civilians feel the war, the impersonal structures of the military—the ways in which soldiers’ identities were informed by and subsumed into the unstable groupings of companies, regiments, brigades, divisions, corps, and finally armies—dictated much of Cole’s story. He began his service in the 12th New York Infantry but before the end of his first term, appealed to the Chief of Cavalry to be transferred with some of his men to the 3rd New York Cavalry. “[We] volunteered our services in May 1861,” Cole reasoned, “& cavalry not being at that time accepted, have since acted as infantry, under the assurance from the State military authorities that we should be mounted & used in our proper place….” Captain Cole confessed that his company felt “very much demoralized & we believe we can be of much more service in the [3rd NY Cavalry].”¹ In other words, Cole’s men wanted more action—“much more service”—and to witness it from the saddle. No doubt, Cole and his soldiers

¹ Letter to Brig Gen. Stoneman, Chief of Cavalry, Aug 26, 1861 in Cole’s Compiled Service Record (CSR), 12th New York Volunteers, NARA.
wanted to leave the infantry because of the nineteenth-century’s alluring symbolism of the mounted soldier, lifted upon a stallion above the plebian dirt.²

Cavalry soldiers did tend to see “more service,” but as troopers soon found out, it was not the kind that commanded real estate in the newspapers. Mounted soldiers infrequently participated in pitched battles, but instead were called to make quick assaults on limited targets, destroy property, and, in general, tease the enemy with minor skirmishes.³ Cole’s transfer to the cavalry, then, secured for himself an aristocratic, gallant image, while in fact placing him outside many of the grand battles that would generate a torrent of headlines, fiction and memoirs.

Whatever prestige riding a horse through war brought Cole, the transfer placed him at the crossroads of military impotence and army politics. Notwithstanding its aristocratic connotations, for the first half of the war the cavalry branch proved an embarrassment to the Union, as it was outgeneraled by southern men who felt more comfortable in the harness than shopkeepers from the North, knew the lay of their own land, and had better horses.⁴ At

² Historian of the Union Cavalry, Stephen Starr, writes of northern men’s conceptions of the cavalry, before the war: “Glamor was the word for the cavalry when the Civil War broke out. The middle years of the nineteenth century were a time of overripe romanticism. Otherwise sober men, a generation or two removed from an utterly unromantic frontier, saw the cavalry through the eyes of Sir Walter Scott and themselves in the role of the mailed knight wielding a saber…the true weapon for man-to-man combat, unlike the impersonal, unwieldy, plebeian, musket of the lowly infantryman.” Stephen Z. Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Vol. 1 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), xi.

³ Longacre, "Mounted Raids of the Civil War", 11-18

⁴ Starr, "The Union Cavalry in the Civil War", xii; Longacre, "Mounted Raids of the Civil War", 16-17
the same time, Cole’s transfer brought him into the Department of North Carolina which would continually fail to significantly enlarge any of the Union footholds since initial victories along the lower North Carolina coast under General Burnside in early 1862. Most of the soldiers in the department ground their days out on garrison duty with occasional skirmishes against confederate guerrillas, or raids upon towns. At the end of 1863, six months after the Tarboro Raid, the pro-Democrat New York Herald summed up the exploits well enough: “what has been accomplished in this command…in a military view, is not of much importance.”

Into the Army of the James

In the fall of 1863 the War Department consolidated Cole’s corps with other underused or poorly performing commands. He found himself within a military structure that would leave its imprimatur on him as a soldier and man. This time, though, he would reach rock bottom as his regiment was absorbed into the “Army of the James”—a hodgepodge cobbled together from various timidly commanded or ineffective parts from Lincoln’s sputtering war machine. Though fighting adjacent in the same theater, the Army

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6 What follows draws heavily from the scholarly work of Edward Longacre, military historian extraordinaire. Longacre has dug deeper than anyone else into the social and cultural makeup of the Army of the James. Longacre is a military historian, yet his work points to the enormous possibilities of marrying military history (guns, regiments, official orders, etc.) with cultural history—gender, political ideology, home front studies, etc.

7 Some historians place the origins of the Army of the James (not the official name, yet widely used) as late as the spring of 1864, though its formation began in 1863. For our purposes the
of the James was destined to play second fiddle to the darling of the newspapers, the Army of the Potomac. Throughout its existence the lesser-known and smaller army lingered in the shadows of Generals Meade and Grant’s massive forces that opposed Robert E. Lee while protecting the nation’s Capitol. The Army of the James shared Virginia’s war “theater” in a literal sense, providing props and supporting characters on the national stage. An army of understudies, it got second grabs at allocations of troopers, horses, and supplies.  

The foremost expert on the Army of the James, Edward Longacre, writes that the army “lost virtually every campaign, battle, and engagement it fought, earning it a reputation for futility matched by no other Civil War command and perhaps by no other fighting force in American history.” Its marginal reputation did not cement a brotherhood of the vanquished so much as compound the vexed relations already within its command. From the highest brass to his boy officers Cole served with a striking cast of troubled, anxious,

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Army of the James is term used to describe the evolving military structures in southeast Virginia and coastline North Carolina from 1863 until 1865.

One of its earlier parts was the VII Corps which, Edward Longacre writes, until the spring of 1864 “saw mostly garrison duty, firing few shots in anger except when repulsing guerilla raids or meeting challenges from Confederate coastal vessels.” Another Corps (IV) had seen more action but only during McClellan’s aborted run for Richmond, after which it was assigned to garrison duty in the peninsula. See: ibid.1-7

8 In another article about soldiers who served in southeast Virginia, where Cole would soon serve in the Army of the James, Edward Longacre writes “unlike comrades in Northern Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, Middle Tennessee, and other larger theatres of operations, they saw their contributions go largely unnoticed by the civilian public: they might have been fighting in Siberia for all the national attention they received.” See:Edward G. Longacre, "''would to God that War was Rendered Impossible": Letters of Captain Rowland M. Hall, April-July, 1864," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 89, no. 4 (1981), 448.; Longacre, "The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History." (Vol. 1-4)”, 13, 115

9 While Longacre is a terrifically prolific and thorough historian, he may be the only “expert” and serious scholar of the ill-starred Army of the James. The Army still gets lost in the deluge of histories written about more “important” organizations. Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", xi
incompetent and scheming soldiers. For instance, his first commander in the 3rd New York Cavalry, Colonel Simon H. Mix, had lost the respect of his own soldiers because of patent incompetence. His men spread rumors that his crumbling marriage fed suicidal tendencies and he was believed to have finally thrown himself into enemy fire to end it all. Captain Rowland M. Hall, also from the 3rd NY Cavalry, would later complain that his regiment had been taken over by unqualified men and copperheads. The Harvard student didn’t care much for Cole’s fellow cavalrmen either: “Would to Heaven that our Government had good Officers. These cavalry Officers here are a wretched set of fellows & must be whipped in[to] fighting with gentlemen from the South or elsewhere.” About the officers like Cole who recently left the 3rd New York for commissions in the black army, Hall vented, “I should think the unfortunate black troops would become demoralized. Their officers are generally of a wretched class.”

And of course, many soldiers and officers deplored being led by Butler. Several officers tried to have Butler removed for illegal or unethical behavior. General “Baldy” Smith, one of Butler’s highest ranking officers, finally pressed Grant for an accounting of Butler’s commission as a major general: “I want simply to call our attention to the fact that

10 When it was reported back to camp that Mix was mortally wounded on the battlefield and taken prisoner one of his captains “laughed long and loud in derision.” Mix’s “mulatto servant” revealed to the regimental chaplain that Mix acted as if he wanted to be shot. Edward Wall, "The First Assault on Petersburg," New Jersey Historical Society III, no. 4 (1918), 201-02.; Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 13; Longacre, "The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History." (Vol. 1-4)”, 21-2, 115

11 Longacre, ""would to God that War was Rendered Impossible": Letters of Captain Rowland M. Hall, April-July, 1864", 452, 455

12 Holzman, "Stormy Ben Butler", 126-27
no man since the Revolution has had a tithe of the responsibility which now rests on your shoulders, and to ask you how you can place a man [Butler] in command of two army corps who is as helpless as a child on the field of battle and as visionary as an opium-eater in council?"\(^{13}\)

All armies, North and South, suffered from blundering along with chronic biting and stabbing of backs. But the Army of the James brought the vitriol and incompetence to extraordinary levels. The friction, however, seemed to arise from similarities—the “narcissism of small differences”—more than diversity. Compared to its counterparts, the Army of the James was a homogeneous group, a true legion of Yankees. A higher percentage of its units hailed from northeastern states than any other Union army. While other armies had units from New York or Massachusetts, none could boast of such overwhelming numbers of men drawn heavily from New England and New York villages and towns. Not surprisingly, Cole served within an army predominantly made up of free labor men with deep Republican loyalties—many of whom were either connected to or a generation removed from the plow.\(^{14}\) If they had moved into storefronts or into the trained professions, many—like Cole—did it in smaller cities and towns, not New York City or Boston. Politically, the Army of the James was Lincoln’s armed citadel. For those who


\(^{14}\) Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 45
believed in Lincoln and his war, soldiering not only protected Lincoln’s government and “race of life,” but promised opportunities to rise like Lincoln from obscurity to national notice. Though the majority of soldiers in all of Lincoln’s armies would back their president for another presidential term, when Lincoln fretted over his reelection in 1864 he correctly entertained no worries about the Army of the James where some of its regiments voted better than nine to one for the rail-splitter turned president.\(^{15}\)

In short, if Cole’s fellow soldiers bought into Lincoln’s touting of merit over privilege, they were in the right army. The Army of the James, a throng of Yankee amateurs, embodied Lincoln’s depiction of the war as a “People’s contest”—a death struggle by civilians, not professional soldiers and mercenaries, to “clear the paths of laudable pursuit.” While many Americans had come to embrace the ideal of self-made manhood, Lincoln’s supporters particularly relished the vision of a society wide-open for talent. And just as the Army of the James bled Republican, it was also the bastion for army amateurs—politicians

\(^{15}\) In general, Lincoln was reelected by the same folks who elected him the first time—native-born farmers, skilled workers of some success, and urban professional men. Because these types of men made up the Army of the James, it is not surprising that Lincoln had this army well in pocket for the 1864 election. Each state had its own policy concerning the suffrage of soldiers. Some, like New York, made it impossible to tell how soldiers voted as a group. What we can tell is that soldiers heavily supported Lincoln over the ex-general McClellan. While there were reports of voting irregularities (Republican soldiers voting twenty five times, Democratic agents registering dead soldiers and forging votes for McClellan) many other units reported an unremarkable election day. Oscar O. Winther, "The Soldier Vote in the Election of 1864," *New York History* 25, no. 4 (1944), 440-58.; United States. War Dept and others, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, Vol. 42, part III, pp. 562-69; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 544-45.; Longacre, *The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History.* (Vol. 1-4), 100-01; John C. Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997), 339-43.

The fact that Captain Rowland M. Hall complained to his father that Copperheads were taking over his regiment in 1864 shows how Republican soldiers, at least earlier, felt they had control of their units and how the appointment of Democrat officers threatened to disturb their grip on regimental power. See: Longacre, ""Would to God that War was Rendered Impossible": Letters of Captain Rowland M. Hall, April-July, 1864", 452
and businessmen turned officers. Few of its officers—30 percent—had prior military experience or training from West Point. By contrast, in 1864 nearly 80 percent of the officers in the Army of the Potomac had military experience or West Point training.\footnote{Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", xi-xii; Lincoln, Abraham. Fehrenbacher, Don Edward and Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana (Library of Congress), "Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865", 259}

What this meant for Cole and his comrades was that they served in a civilian army that dragged unusual amounts of home politics into the war. Cole’s comrades could boast of fighting in a corner of the war relatively untarnished by West Point careerism; but they could not deny the ubiquitous presence of political generals and officers—or the paralyzing tensions between outnumbered West Pointers and volunteer officers. In what Longacre calls “the most highly politicized army in American history,” Cole found fellow travelers lusting for rank, longing for fame, and embittered by (as well as implicated by) the encroachment of home front politics into their own camps.

From its origins the Army of the James was a pastiche formed from failure. When Major General John Dix and his subordinate officers proved indecisive and timid against Lee’s forces in Virginia, the War Department finally dissolved Dix’s command in the summer of ’63 and merged the men into Major General John Foster’s Department of North Carolina (to which Cole had transferred); Washington named the combined command the Department of Virginia and North Carolina, which came to be known as the Army of the James. But Foster soon proved to be poorly suited for field command, and thus little better.
than his predecessor, Dix. What he did achieve seemed trifling. In the words of his successor’s wife, Sarah Butler, the conquered areas were little more than “little villages many miles asunder…taken merely to give éclat to Gen. Foster.”\textsuperscript{17} By the fall of ’63, Lincoln and the War Department were on a hunt for a general who would drive into Lee’s forces and make a violent push for Richmond.\textsuperscript{18}

The Beast

When the War Department came knocking on Benjamin F. Butler’s door the anxious soldier had been out of military command since the administration put an end to his seven-month stint as military governor of New Orleans. When he was canned at the close of ’62, Butler had galvanized the nation’s political extremities, giving hard-war Republicans a taste of punitive war while kicking a hornet’s nest filled with southern despisers and seething copperheads. Few could claim a better track record of forcing black emancipation into the center of the war. In the first months of the war, when black refugees began flowing into Fort Monroe, it was Butler who began calling refugees “contraband” as a way to justify absorbing the human “property” of confederates into Union lines.\textsuperscript{19} And though the term


\textsuperscript{19} Masur, \textit{"A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation': The Word 'Contraband' and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States"}, 1050-1084
connoted a less-than-human status, it pushed the administration to allow blacks to flee into Union army camps while destabilizing the slavery regime.

Butler’s mixed military record in Virginia was good enough to get him transferred to the Army of the Gulf where he would command an expedition to take New Orleans in May of 1862. After New Orleans fell into Union hands, he assumed command of the Crescent City where he wasted no time in dropping his gauntlets. His brash actions astonished confederates, Europeans, and moderate Republicans alike. He suppressed rebel papers, without authorization raised three black regiments, confiscated property, corralled conspicuous secessionists into prison, and, just after arrival, executed William Mumford for removing the Union flag from the mint building and dragging it through the streets. In response to southern women spitting at, sneering at, or rebuffing Union soldiers, Butler issued the notorious “Woman’s Order.” Any female secessionist who affronted or snubbed a Union soldier would be treated as a prostitute: “when any female shall by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation.”

Despite his significant accomplishments of reducing yellow fever and ameliorating poverty (especially among African Americans), when Butler further antagonized much of Europe by confiscating cargo and money from foreign consuls and ships, or shut down church services, silencing clergy, his impolitic actions landed him back in Massachusetts. Americans either feted him as the anointed answer to Lincoln’s guardedness, or maligned him as “the Beast”--

Over the next several months Butler fished in vain for a justification from the Lincoln administration for his sudden dismissal. A shelved general with no troops, Butler turned to writing letters and barnstorming at the pulpit, cashing in on his enormous popularity for waging hard war. Northerners knew that after Butler’s regime ended in the largest city of the South, confederate president Jefferson Davis had called for Butler’s neck to be fitted with a noose.\footnote{Part of the presidential proclamation reads: “Now, therefore, I, Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, and in their name, do pronounce and declare the said Benjamin F. Butler to be a felon, deserving of capital punishment. I do order that he be no longer considered or treated simply as a public enemy of the Confederate States of America, by as an outlaw and common enemy of mankind, and that in the event of his capture the officer in command of the capturing force do cause him to be immediately executed by hanging; and I do further order that no commissioned officer of the United States taken captive shall be released on parole before exchange until the said Butler shall have met with due punishment for his crimes.” General Orders No. 111: December 24, 1862. Davis goes on to state that officers under Butler had earned similar treatment upon capture. See: United States. War Dept and others, "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies", Series 1, Vol. 15, pp. 905-08.} At war rallies in New England and the Mid-Atlantic States, Butler crafted his public image as a ferocious enemy to traitors of the Union. Before the war Butler displayed unwavering commitment to the Democratic Party (he cast fifty-seven votes for Jefferson Davis at the Democratic Convention in 1860), but by 1863 he had come to embrace the main tenets of Republicanism, and as some saw it, moved beyond them. His pre-war sympathies for ethnic immigrants and Massachusetts working poor made him a notable attorney and politician. With the war, Butler expanded his commitment to the
downtrodden to southern African Americans, and in doing so, once again parlayed his humanitarian sympathies into immense political capital.\(^{22}\)

For a man with towering ambitions like Butler, the timing could not have been better. After Lincoln sidelined “the Beast,” and Butler responded by showcasing his hard-nose credentials at war rallies, over the stretch of ’63 many Republicans began turning sour on their president,\(^{23}\) keeping watch for a leader who would rattle sabers, bully copperheads and rebels, and most importantly, go for their throats. Lincoln replaced Butler with his Massachusetts political rival General Nathaniel Banks.\(^{24}\) This further tarnished Lincoln’s reputation within hard-war circles, especially when Banks immediately set out to undo the legacy of Butler’s radical regime. Banks attempted to squeeze out remaining Butler men, conciliated secessionists, and brought the raising of black regiments to a halt while purging them of all their African-American officers.\(^{25}\)

\(^{22}\) Louis Taylor Merrill, "General Benjamin F. Butler in the Presidential Campaign of 1864," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33, no. 4 (Mar., 1947), 538.; Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 3-8

\(^{23}\) Actually, non-conservative Republicans began losing faith when, after Lincoln had finally purged the army of two of the most conservative, West Point generals (McClellan and Buell) the president replaced McClellan with yet another Democrat and West Point graduate, Ambrose Burnside. When Burnside immediately turned things from bad to worse with an ominous December whipping at Fredericksburg, Lincoln could feel the rug under him move. See: McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, 569-74; Harry James Carman and Reinhard H. Luthin, *Lincoln and the Patronage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 162-63.

\(^{24}\) Banks like Butler was a first-rate political general; both were promoted to Major General in the first year of the war. For an account of Banks’s Butler-like political ambitions see: Fred Harvey Harrington, "Nathaniel Prentiss Banks: A Study in Anti-Slavery Politics," *New England Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1936), 626-654.

\(^{25}\) Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers*, 8-9, 36 Also see: George S. Denison to Salmon P. Chase, February 26, 1863 in Butler, *Private and Official
After Butler was forced out, anxious letters from New Orleans apprised him that Banks was making things “uncomfortable” for those who had once enjoyed alliances with Butler. One of these allies, General Shepley, informed Butler that Lincoln and Banks had spies afoot, digging up dirt on the shelved general. Butler learned that Lincoln sent one of his confidants, a Jewish podiatrist, Dr. Isachar Zacharie to New Orleans. Zacharie removed corns from Banks’s feet, but was suspected to be there to help pluck the thorny Butler from Lincoln’s heel. “A retired corn-doctor, Jew, by the name of Zachary,” Shepley cautioned Butler, “is here as a spy, said to be directly under the appointment of the President, but the intimate associate and confidential advisor of Banks.” One of Banks’s “employees,” continued Shepley, “approached various persons with the assurance that it they could communicate any information that would tell against Gen. Butler, it would be highly appreciated….”26 In the spring of ’63 a New Orleans port collector and admirer sounded the alarm that Butler was badly needed back in the Crescent City—which, it was argued, teetered on the cusp of returning back to rebel control. But the administration would never risk such

26 General Shepley to General Butler inibid., 14-15. For another letter claiming spies in New Orleans see, J.A. Griffin to General Butler, February 26, 1863, ibid., 18-20.

Benjamin’s brother who garnered substantive accusations of corruption, especially with circumventing Union approved trade and dealing in corrupt contracts, had his own personal reasons for his anti-Semitism. In the same letter Shepley added: “The Christ killers, as Andrew calls [Jews], have it all their own way.” Butler too raised some hackles when he repeatedly reported that his men had captured Jews, as if Jewish men were somehow a rebel commodity or automatic union enemy. Holzman, "Stormy Ben Butler", 130 For more on Butler’s record of anti-semitism, see: Bertram Wallace Korn, American Jewry and the Civil War (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951), 164-66.
a move, he predicted, because “if placed in a high position, [Butler] might possibly become dangerous as a candidate for the Presidency.”

Lincoln and his supporters had good reason to watch Butler with caution. Butler returned home to enormous fanfare among erstwhile Lincoln supporters. He proclaimed within the walls of Boston’s Faneuil Hall that he had not been too harsh toward rebels and that there was “no middle ground between loyalty and treason.” Radical Republicans like Charles Sumner had already begun to press the ears of Secretary of War Stanton, and the president, asking them when Butler would be returned to New Orleans or at least put to good use in the Union cause. Other friends began canvassing the populace and disseminating his speeches through pamphlets.

In April, ex-Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, flattered the crestfallen general, by emphasizing Butler’s “usefulness” and “unprecedented labor and success.” Cameron claimed to have been astonished by Butler’s dismissal: “for a long time” he believed the general would be rightfully “offered the War Department or the command of the army of the Potomac.” Like Butler, Cameron had been ousted by Lincoln after mounting accusations of


28 Butler quoted in: Taylor Merrill, "General Benjamin F. Butler in the Presidential Campaign of 1864", 540


corruption and cronyism, especially in the handling of war contracts. (Butler was widely accused but never categorically proven to have been similarly guilty of corruption; a Congressional committee, on the other hand produced report over 2,700 pages long, detailing Cameron’s use of contracts to enrich cronies and create political capital.) And like Butler, Cameron had endorsed the arming of escaped slaves before the administration officially did; and in so doing exposed Lincoln’s hesitancy. In the close of ’61 Cameron—without Lincoln’s approval—authorized using black soldiers, and to Lincoln’s dismay, issued a report to Congress recommending the formation of an army of freed slaves. By doing so, Cameron was able to deflect Radical Republicans’ criticism of his corruption, and instead channel their angst toward the president’s feet dragging. As with Butler, Cameron’s advocacy for arming erstwhile slaves served ulterior motives.

“I never dreamed that your services were to be lost to the country,” Cameron gushed to Butler, “when everybody believed you to be the only man in arms who had been equal to the position in which Providence had placed him.” After signing off as “your friend, truly” Cameron added a blandishment that Butler would grow accustomed to hearing from his “friends.” “Remember,” Cameron wrote, “the next President will be a military chieftain, and may save his country or destroy it.” Butler had already come to that conclusion and he

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31 Carman and Luthin, "Lincoln and the Patronage", 147-50


33 Carman and Luthin, "Lincoln and the Patronage", 130-31

34 Why Butler suddenly opened up to the idea of arming blacks when he had consistently doubted and dismissed the possibility of arming African Americans is hard to answer. He certainly
believed his war record qualified him for the job. After hearing initial reports of McClellan’s drubbing at Antietam in September ‘62, Butler wrote his wife from New Orleans predicting that the nation would soon turn to a hardliner.

If the news [about Antietam] is true, we are all required to look a sterner reality in the face than has yet been done. This war must then be carried on as one of extermination until any white man not a United States soldier, or openly and fully acting with the Government, is exterminated. Indeed, I don’t see but we must fight for our own existence. It is coming—a “Military Dictator.”

“God grant the man may be one of power and administrative capacity,” Butler added, in a poorly veiled reference to his own administrative acumen. “Let it come—the man has not developed himself yet—but he will—in the field too, before long.”

In case Sarah Butler had showed unusual sympathies for the plight of fugitives but on numerous occasions voiced deep skepticism over black soldiers. But as Dudley Cornish suggested, Butler’s own wife’s assurance that backing such a venture would place one at the forefront of public approval, certainly tempted him to reconsider. “The administration will assent to it just as fast and as far as the country will sustain it. It has taken a step or two in advance, and been obliged to draw back. But events may give the opportunity. They will be seized as fast as they arise.” After making this striking proclamation about the nature of the war, Sarah Butler immediately switches into a more domestic voice, talking about her lonely home, and letters. Sarah provided rich descriptions of the private matters of hearth and affective love, but also, at times, spurred her husband onto the public stage, encouraging his political ambitions. Sarah, though, tended to spur and soothe at the same time, often mixing affectionate phrases with charges for Benjamin to grasp for more, and push on in the “game of life.”


any doubts about the sum of her husband’s grandiose visions, in the preceding paragraph he cast doubt on the Army of the Potomac’s ability to protect Washington D.C. But even so, New Orleans, he pledged, would never fall. “Indeed I think they had better move the Capital here as the safest place,” he added. Butler had dreamed of using New Orleans to secure himself the presidential mantle. Now he played with the idea of the Capital coming to him. With such political momentum, when the War Department unexpectedly cut its iron-fisted general loose, Butler, Radical Republicans and all those of anti-Lincoln persuasion questioned the timing.  

After significant pressure, and over strong opposition from his Secretary of State, William Seward, Lincoln halfheartedly offered to reinstate Butler to his post at New Orleans. Butler refused, however, because as he saw it, accepting would mean sharing command with his nemesis, General Banks. Butler also claimed that Banks’s reversal on helping African Americans had all but ruined the delicate relationship between the government and those on the threshold of freedom. Butler, of course, mentioned nothing about how earlier in his


36 Butler also believed he would be sent back to New Orleans as a sop for Radical Republicans, but in fact be a general with no real power. He felt this had been done to him in the beginning of the war, and would not suffer it again. “Let something be done or let me see that something can be done except pitiful intrigues be which I am removed from command, and the arrow shall not leave the bow with a swifter flight that I into the service. But with the expectations of the country roused into a belief that I can achieve something like success, I cannot of my own will be sent into that honorable exile again to which [Gen. Winfield] Scott banished me at Fortress Monroe, without men, without means, and without support, as a punishment for taking Baltimore without his column of 12,000 men.” See: General Butler to Salmon P. Chase, Butler, "Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War. Vol. 3, February 1863-March 1864", 24-27a
tenure at New Orleans he actually crushed a similar effort to arm blacks. When his subordinate general, abolitionist John W. Phelps, tried to force the hand of the War Department by enlisting African Americans, Butler sided with Lincoln and Seward, quashing the experiment and pushing Phelps out of the military. With impeccable timing, the day after Phelps resigned, Butler issued his own proclamation to raise black troops.\(^{37}\) Shortly after refusing Lincoln’s offer, Butler penned a letter to Salmon Chase, Secretary of Treasury. Like Butler, Chase had presidential ambitions; he also operated under a cloud of suspicion for awarding questionable contracts, especially for cotton. In the letter, Butler complained that in a short time General Banks had spoiled Butler’s grand project of employing and arming blacks. (Banks also attempted to clean up the tarnished image of contract scandals.) Then, somewhat disingenuously, Butler bemoaned his “idleness.”

\[
\text{All past political associations broken up, no new ones formed; idle at home, no prospect of serving my country in the cause to be useful to which I had given up everything; eating unearned bread which I have never done before; asked a hundred times a day, “when are you going into service?” or “why are you unemployed?”}^{38}\]


When he turned down a second stint in New Orleans, Butler had already lifted his sights to loftier spheres. Since the gnawing losses at Antietam and Fredericksburg at the close of ’62, divisions in the Republican Party manifested themselves through internal machinations within Lincoln’s cabinet. With many Radical Republicans behind him, Salmon Chase positioned himself as the aggressive answer to Lincoln’s soft handedness. By casting William Seward as the whip hand driving Lincoln’s bungled war, Chase was in effect painting himself as the last best hope. Blaming Butler’s dismissal on Seward—who it was argued controlled the president—was part of this inner game. 39 In this stratagem of divide and conquer, and tarnish by association, Butler and Chase found a mutually useful friendship. In his letter to Chase, Butler confided his own comprehensive plan to overhaul the entire Union war strategy. He would consolidate the many armies into two or three Union juggernauts that would descend swiftly and mercilessly upon helpless confederates. “Let them [the juggernaut armies] be overwhelming. Above all, let us have one pitched battle in this war.” Butler confessed, “I have dreamed of such an army.” No doubt he dreamed himself standing close to the helm.40


40 There is a small but rich literature about the ways in which the war hardened and Americans grew more comfortable with—indeed often pushed for—a vengeful, apocalyptic war with visions of one massive battle. The literature finds this ratcheting up of violence in personal leaders like Stonewall Jackson, U.S. Grant and William T. Sherman. Or the cause is traced to evangelical yearnings for biblical purges and bloody apocalypse. Others claim the facile conflation of religion and state—burgeoning civil religion—helped to underwrite the dark final half of the war. Yet there has not been enough emphasis on how opportunism, in a war of “volunteers,” in a time where the standard of manhood was anchored in upward mobility, helped push race onto center stage. For every committed abolitionist in the field, the war created race mercenaries ready to outstrip, outdo, and capitalize on the convergence of wartime imperatives and home front sympathies for emancipation. Royster, "The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans", 523; Stout, "Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War", 552
That spring, Butler’s friend, James Parton, set out to puff the general’s military career (and play down accusations of corruption) in a well-timed biography that would surface by election year. Meanwhile admirers and hangers-on showered Butler with letters and suggestions of future military exploits and political possibilities. On one hand Butler served the interests of Republicans. If a devout Democrat like Butler supported the war and emancipation, so should his fellow party members. Yet Butler continuously pressed his vision of the war forward, often making the War Department appear hidebound. For Lincoln, Butler presented a dilemma, as the general had the power to command pro-war Democrat votes along with the support of radicalized Republicans. Lincoln could not win a second term without first reversing the Union army’s fortunes, and therefore needed aggressive officers like Butler in the field to execute a harder war. But by putting Butler back in the harness the president ran the risk of creating his own political nemesis, and providing him with a presidential launching pad. Thus, when the War Department reconfigured various hapless forces into the Army of the James, Lincoln turned to a general he thought would galvanize the soldiers, and yet be slightly hamstrung by the assignment.


42 Longacre, "The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History." (Vol. 1-4)", 12-14
By the fall of ’63 the prospect of returning to command in New Orleans was all but dead. He had been a commissioned officer with no command for roughly ten months, and could hardly refuse the administration’s offer to assume command in southeast Virginia and coastal North Carolina. And though the Army of the James was to play a supporting role to the Army of the Potomac, it was not ridiculous to imagine the new command thrusting Butler into the public’s consciousness once again. He could not fault his admirers for not pulling wires hard enough. They had barraged the administration and fellow politicians with suggestions for Butler’s rehabilitation since his fall from grace. A friend, Senator S.C. Pomeroy, soothed Butler’s pride, counseling that,

It is not a department in a military sense, such as you ought to have. But in a political sense, and as being able to settle there even the great conflict of opinion now likely to ruin us, I hope I may advise you to go. I tried to get a more promising field. But if you can do there what you hoped to do in Louisiana, the results will not be less gratifying.43

With this “political sense” in mind, Butler took command of the Army of James and immediately set out to finish what he had only begun in New Orleans: the raising of a massive black army. He also had his eye on what would be perhaps the greatest of all political windfalls, to capture nearby Richmond.

When Butler launched what would be the most aggressive effort to arm black men, he opened up new chances at promotion for soldiers like Cole, Dollard, Fox and hundreds of men looking for rank. Cole’s story cannot be separated from the high-stakes political game above him that placed Butler at the helm of a relatively lame army, and the volatile,

often violent experiment just below him, of militarizing the lowliest of Americans (who Butler hoped to use for political ends). Interwoven between the politics of would-be presidential candidates and the hundreds of thousands of black soldiers who at times created (and at others were blown about by) political winds, were middle men like George Cole, mediating between the most and least privileged men in America—between patronage and the collapse of bondage.

Laying Pipe, Pulling Wires

Over the seven decades since the Revolution a new, widely shared understanding of manhood had emerged primarily in the northeastern states. This new ideal of manliness did not replace older forms, which were more defined by rationality, civic duty, and piety, but instead became enmeshed with them—modifying men’s relationships with other men (fathers, sons, and peers), wives and mothers—and with money, work, democracy, and their own bodies. What Gordon Wood referred to as “new men” challenged an anemic and unstable aristocracy in the early Republic. “New men” spent less time polishing their Latin, were less cosmopolitan, and less well-bred. In the 1820s the term “businessman” emerged as a way to talk about this emergent set of men who were by and large traders, speculators, and restless merchants “busy” getting money.44 Antebellum elections were increasingly physical,

44 David Leverenz argues for the emergence of an entrepreneurial set of men looking to get ahead, compete, grow rich, and avoid being shamed by their rivals. Other scholars like Gail Bederman have argued for a significant shift in manliness that took place in the later nineteenth century—from manhood anchored in self-control and character, to a masculinity defined by the raw power of the muscular body. No doubt, though, antebellum men experienced the volatile nature of gender, and negotiated its competing forms. From “muscular Christianity” to the rise of sporting culture, urban prostitution, bare-knuckle boxing, dueling, evangelical restraint, self-made men of
where at the polls it would not be uncommon to witness fisticuffs, yelling matches, and even a bludgeoning. This bodily experience of American democracy cannot be dismissed as the preserve of intoxicated Democratic Irish in New York City; instead it was part of a collective male rowdyism that cut across region, class and party. Supposedly mild-mannered Whigs, Illinois men, and southerner gentlemen participated in what a historian has called “the manly sport of politics.” It isn’t that every soft-handed Whig wrestled his way to the polls, so much character, artisan men who took pride in craft, and Harvard boys—white males in the North wrestled with multi-faceted gender norms. Yet on the whole, the center of gravity was shifting toward a more competitive, individualistic, ambitious and physically robust ideal across class lines in the North. This is what makes mid-nineteenth century conceptions of manliness so difficult to pin down—and fascinating. Many men still subscribed to older ideals of rationality, piety, patriarchal kin networks, and civic duty while at the same time entering a wildly competitive workplace where these older priorities made less and less sense. Amy Greenberg reminds us that the “primitive” masculinity so dominant at the end of the century was only part of a group of competing forms of manliness at mid-century. Greenberg pares down the various types in what she sees as the two dominant, competing forms: restrained versus martial. Greenberg concedes the ways in which men could draw from different categories of manhood simultaneously; yet, she argues these two forms go a long way in describing how men viewed manhood. “Restrained” manhood was grounded in family, evangelical piety, and business success; while “martial” men rejected feminizing restraints, drank heavily, were more aggressive and sympathetic to violence; they also tended to identify with chivalric knighthood. What is often frustrating about gender histories is that constructed categories often drive the narrative more than the subjects who inhabit them—and whose personal lives regularly failed to conform to such boundaries. What men’s studies needs more than anything are narratives that show how individuals played these ideals off one another, and cobbled together various manhoods through lived experience. What I hope to do with the narrative of Cole and those around him is show how war blurred the lines between these categories created by historians. Cole was both martial and restrained; A man of violence and a teetotaler with Republican roots. He was a family man, and a jealous, vindictive placeman—at the same time—always on the hunt for station, yet longing for a moral center located in the wife and mother. He at one time wanted to live in the country, yet he gave up being a physician to trade in lumber in the city of Syracuse. And he talked about money just about as much as he did honor, or merit. Leverenz, "Manhood and the American Renaissance", 372; Amy S. Greenberg, Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire (Cambridge, UK ;; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8-11.; Axel Bundgaard, Muscle and Manliness: The Rise of Sport in American Boarding Schools, 1st ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 223.; Elliott J. Gorn, The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 316.; Gail Bederman, Manliness & Civilization : A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 307.; Clifford Putney, Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11-44.; Rotundo, "American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era", 382; Anne S. Lombard, Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 170-80.; Wood, "The Radicalism of the American Revolution", 325-27
as the fact that, in the two decades before the Civil War all men were forced to grapple with the ways in which manhood was increasingly anchored in the aggressive body. Because these turbulent elections occurred in public spaces, and because voting was the preserve of white males, antebellum democracy, in effect, helped create a new version of manhood irresistible to any boy who wanted to be a citizen, and thereby set himself apart from women and African Americans.45

Cole’s attempt to claw himself upward through performance and by exploiting intimate networks, reveals an essential component to nineteenth-century manhood among white northern men. Since Andrew Jackson adopted the “spoils system” or rotating offices, many less notable American men came to believe that they could win appointments and posts in return for party loyalty. Loyal “ordinary” men believed they could make claims on all sorts of politically appointed posts. After an election a small-town merchant or lawyer might write the newly elected official, providing a list of works done for the party (i.e. merits), and ask for a preferred position, with maybe a list of second and third choices.46

45  David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 181-217.. This does not mean that African Americans did not subscribe to similar, overlapping ideals of manhood. And of course, many white men denounced the coarse, animalistic behavior on election days and in politics in general. Yet, even as they denounced it they were testifying to the changing winds, and the ways in which democracy and manhood played off one another. For a narrative that uses this aggressive manhood as a way to understand American politics, westward expansion, and relations with Latin America, seeGreenberg, "Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire":

46  Wood, "The Radicalism of the American Revolution", 302-04; Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1963), 167-71. Wood points out that this new spoils system was at least ostensibly different from the patronage of past monarchies. First off, ordinary men could and regularly did receive appointments. These posts though would be purged of careerism and corruption—apologists believed—through a regular rotation, and stifling, bureaucratic rules, bookkeeping and crosschecking. In other words, while patronage informed the lives of many
After Jackson’s eight years in office governmental patronage increased until it peaked with Lincoln’s election in 1860.\(^{47}\) When the war broke out there were only some 16,000 regular soldiers in the Union; thus the dire need to radically expand the army created a windfall for placemen—especially for those beaten down by competitive marketplace relations, or for party wheelhorses still waiting for their rewards. Lincoln did—writ large—what was done in all previous American wars: he used the military to not only win war, but to help friends win in the political realm. On a much smaller scale, President Polk had appointed more than a dozen “political generals” during the Mexican War—all of them loyal Democrats. But the Civil War turned a dozen appointments into several hundred. Lincoln’s meager forces lost over 230 professional officers who cast their lots with secession.\(^{48}\) Lincoln, of course could not shake that many professional soldiers out of the northern population, which gave him added reason to fill the gaps with amateurs who had proven to be loyal Union men. As Stanton summed it up, the spoils were “to be bestowed on persons whose only claim is their Republicanism— broken-down politicians without experience, ability, or any other merit.”\(^{49}\)

Several members of Lincoln’s cabinet secured for their own sons coveted commissions (some of these far from the heat of battle). Lincoln, too, made sure the sons of men in antebellum America, contemporaries could (not-so--convincingly) argue that unlike European patronage, this system did not create dependence and corruption.

\(^{47}\) After the election of 1860, nearly 90% of federal positions changed hands, most of them going to Lincoln’s disciples. Thomas Joseph Goss, *The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 4.

\(^{48}\) Polk’s own secretary of war actually popularized—and brought into full bloom--the phrase, “To the victors belong the spoils.” See: ibid., 5, 15

old allies, or of important newspapers editors, started their service in officer’s jackets. Seventeen congressmen alone used their own influence to secure commissions, almost all of them colonel or higher.\textsuperscript{50} Frederick Douglass, the apotheosis of black self-made manhood, decided to don the army uniform but when he found out he wouldn’t be sporting officer’s stripes, as was promised, he scrapped his plans.\textsuperscript{51} So many political friends entreated Lincoln for an appointment to major general, that Lincoln famously quipped that “major generalships in the regular army are not as plenty as blackberries.” Less than a year into the war, Senator James Grimes, who deemed the false promotions a danger to the Union, called for a moratorium on spoilsmen becoming generals unless they could first point to a meritorious military record. Grimes complained that the War Department had appointed nearly twice the number of brigadier generals than the army’s size actually dictated. Senator William Fessenden concurred with Grimes, but turned the blame on his fellow congressmen. The problem begins, he submitted, “in part with us, and it arises from the fact that we are so ready to lend our names and our influences to certain gentlemen because they belong to our States, who desire to be brigadier generals.” But fellow Senators found war-time patronage too sweet to abandon. Grimes’s crusade fizzled almost immediately, and within a week

\textsuperscript{50} ibid., 114, 123-25.

\textsuperscript{51} After visiting D.C. and talking with Lincoln and Stanton, Douglass believed that he had secured an appointment as an officer. This reminds us of the limits of patronage and how, in the end, the spoils were reserved for networks created and exploited by white males of a common ideological bent.Blight, “Frederick Douglass’ Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee”, 169-71.
Lincoln submitted to the Senate another list of nominations for “deserving” men—more than a dozen for brigadier general.52

The war created a spoils system that tossed thousands of bones to un-appointed office-seekers while giving men a place to channel various modes of manhood—bounded in merit, aggression, honor, hierarchy, and male-male intimacy. But the majority of bone tossing came from local male networks, not from Washington. Because the relatively decentralized Federal government was unprepared to mobilize such a massive army, the War Department relied heavily on state governments to raise men and appoint officers. Thus the bulk of military spoils did not flow so much from connections to Washington, as they did from smaller webs between men of local accomplishment and state and county politicians.53

Butler, for example, first used his own service in the Massachusetts militia—where his “experience” amounted to leading a handful of encampments every year—to obtain the duty of raising local troops for the war. He then wired Secretary Cameron “through” a Massachusetts Senator, with the rather cheeky statement: “You have called for a brigade of Massachusetts troops; why not call for a brigadier general and staff? I have some hope of being detailed.” Not satisfied that this connection would suffice, during his train ride to Boston, Butler convinced a bank president from that city to offer an immediate loan to Governor Andrew for mobilizing the state’s troops. Butler knew that sufficient funds could not be appropriated in time for the looming war, as the state’s constitution required such

52 Lincoln, Grimes, and Fessenden quoted in: Carman and Luthin, "Lincoln and the Patronage", 155-58

53 Goss, "The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War", 18
funding to be approved by the legislature—which had already adjourned. After securing a letter promising such a loan, Butler shrewdly asked for the banker’s written recommendation for him (Butler) to lead the brigade in question into war. Knowing that the recommendation would accompany the pledged loan, Butler was able to approach the governor with something of a political inducement. When Governor Andrew—no fan of the acerbic Democrat—resisted Butler’s request to be made brigadier general, pointing to the fact that two other militiamen had higher rank, Butler divulged his newly won financial commitment, which all but sealed up his generalship.54

Cole, like his commander, had a history of obsessing over promotion and merit; if he was singular in his mania, it was only by small degrees. As he grew increasingly hostile toward his fellow officers, he did not feel left behind so much as outdone in a game he well understood. The corruption and cronyism that propelled some men above him, was what Cole had used to distance himself from others below—a confidence game where men presented themselves as independent agents rising upward, while behind the scenes they scoured networks of kith and kin for any advantage over ostensibly “independent” rivals.55

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55 However much colonial pamphlet writers and editors denounced men appointed by the British crown as “favorites and flatterers,” as “tools,” or as fops dependent on parliament and thus less manly, by the Age of Jackson, American men aggressively competed for the spoils of party triumph. As Mark W. Summers has argued in the context of Gilded Age politics, political patronage and its accompanying begging for appointments actually created an illusion that position correlated with merit—and that talent was rewarded in America. The letters that piled into the offices of recently elected officials always included a detailed list of the merits of the writer, and as Summers notes, the few letters from women instead emphasized pity and male protection (thus further reifying
Long before Butler arrived, Cole began scrutinizing army regulations and writing his commanders to establish his rank. While Cole had begun the war as a captain in May of ‘61, when he transferred into the 3rd New York Cavalry, his date of becoming a captain was pushed back in regimental records to September. Other captains now outranked him within his new regiment, though Cole had officially been captain before any of them. He argued that this regimental system was unfair. “I find the usages of other [regiments] would make me senior,” he wrote General Foster. Cole admitted that the official regulations were “somewhat obscure,” but asked for Foster’s opinion. “Having had much more & longer service than any of our officers, I naturally wish whatever I may be entitled to in position.”


After his election in 1860, Lincoln was overwhelmed by the great number of letters sent by placemen and officeseekers. Lincoln’s party continued the tradition of patronage and spoils so abundant in antebellum politics; but because of the exigencies of war, and the need to cement alliances and foster support, Lincoln and his inner circles actually made a decided effort to advantageously hand out massive amounts of federal appointments in the postal system, foreign consuls, customs, gubernatorial posts in the territories, and of course commissions for officers. Butler, who was not shy about asking for a commission, was one of Lincoln’s key political appointments. For more on the office seeking, letter writing, nepotism, and officeseeking, see: Carman and Luthin, "Lincoln and the Patronage", 375; Goss, "The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War", 24-50.

For more on war era patronage and accompanying corruption, see: Sanford J. Ginsberg, "Corruption and Fraud in Government Contracts during the Civil War" (MS, M.A. Thesis, Columbia University), ; Summers, "The Spoils of War", 82-89; Surdam, "Traders Or Traitors: Northern Cotton Trading during the Civil War", 301-312; Carman and Luthin, "Lincoln and the Patronage", 375; Smith, ""the Enemy within: Corruption and Political Culture in the Civil War North."", 3069-3070-A. DA3187563

56 Captain George W. Cole to General Foster [undated] found in Compiled Service Record of George W. Cole, 3rd New York Cavalry. NARA, Washington DC.
command of a brigade of darkeys,” he wrote Cornelius, “is the height of my ambition, for I know how they fight….” He would get his promotion to brigadier general if only other men would take notice and confess Cole’s merits. “Our regiment [3rd NY Cavalry] has a good name & I have made it!” Though we have only a dozen or so letters from Officer Cole, the surviving missives portray a frustrated soldier working his way though the maze of male networks and favor seeking. He was looking for a patron to help him parlay his war record into deserved promotions.

I want to get out of this, where I can have the credit of what I do & be robbed as I have been, no more…. I have never since April 1861 been off duty an hour, unless wounded or sick, in the year 1862. I with my company took prisoner & killed more rebels than the whole number of my company, (over a man each)….ask Smith for the particulars of my rescuing with my own hands the regimental flag of the 12th [New York regiment] at Bull Run…. Ask Henry J. Raymond of the Times if he recollects on the 18th of July 1861 that I alone in the 12th Regt rallied my company at Blackburn Ford. Describe my tall black appearance & swearing some & see if he will remember it! [Cole, added “with my company” after writing the sentence, as an apparent afterthought.]

Cole wanted to shake loose a repository of memory that bore record of his exploits—lodged in medical records, lists of the captured and killed, and newspaper men’s purchasable memories. “Smith” almost certainly was a reference to Vivus Smith, a paper editor from central New York; Raymond, of course, was the editor for the New York Times. Two and half years after Bull Run, though his exploits in North Carolina were crowded out by reports of major battles, Cole continued to believe that newspapermen, for whatever reason, kept heroic narratives about Cole from entering public discourse. The way Cole writes, it is as if from the beginning of the war he saw his own battlefield exploits from the vantage of an onlooker, jotting down “particulars” and taking notes of the way he (Captain Cole) looked and sounded in battle. His own memory of events had come to resemble what his exploits would have looked like in a newspaper. Even if Raymond or Smith had buried it all in their
minds, if someone—a friend—could just jog their memories and “describe” Cole’s “tall black appearance,” for example—the almost forgotten deeds could still be salvaged and applied to Cole’s “credit.”

Yet while Cole gloried in his having “alone” rallied his company at Bull Run, and in rescuing the flag “with his own hands,” his letter was part of a nineteenth-century ritual where publicly “independent” men begged for other men’s help in private. Though Cole had just admitted that the height of his ambition was to lead a “brigade” of black soldiers he felt compelled to (almost) directly ask his brother for it once more.

Now I think you know my very desires, if you can properly assist me. I’ll do the fighting for both of us meanwhile, for I like soldiering….The reason I said I might prefer a commission as [colonel] now in a darkey regt is that [it] would come at once & cost nothing to get it up, for you must know the loss from my business (by hasty leaving when war broke out) has left me nearly poor again, but I count it gain in self respect.

If his brother would just help him obtain a colonel’s commission it would suffice—for a while. Cole made sure to emphasize his financial troubles brought on by the war, because, as he believed, his counterparts had loitered at home for personal gain. He wasn’t asking for a favor—only justice. “I am mortified to see many a man less capable, by staying home & pulling wires, has outstripped me because I staid back to fight on principles,” Cole fumed.

57 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, November 29, 1863, Cole family, "Papers".

58 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, November 29, 1863, ibid.
Though principles “don’t pay in public,” he argued, as if he almost believed it, “it makes a man respect himself.”

To Cole’s mind, his superiors and peers had worried more about cementing deals at home than winning the war. “They don’t know the first thing, but to pipelay and hang around home.” Laying pipe. Pulling wires. Cole used terms that any antebellum American man on the make would have recognized—and seen in others (not themselves). These colloquialisms evoked images of men tugging at webs of relations, dependents, and allies to further personal ends. By manipulating connective networks, wirepullers used chains of friendships to make seemingly out-of-reach functions move or bend to their will. While the term “laying pipe” supposedly originated in a shady election bargain where plumbing jobs were traded for votes, the term at once denoted political corruption and evoked an image of hidden, buried connections. Water found its way into arid climes, miles from the spring.

59 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, November 29, 1863, ibid.

60 From the late 1830s on the term was used by various political groups to denounce corruption, particularly in politics. The term supposedly originated with electoral fraud wherein a plumber from Philadelphia promised to send nineteen plumbers to vote for a Whig candidate in 1838 election in New York City. See: Grimsted, "American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War”, 195

In many cases “pipe-laying” was explicitly presented as the antithesis of merit based promotions and station, or a direct threat to free labor. All parties used it. Democrats wielded the term to denounce Whigs, Henry Clay, and the “black tariff” of 1842. In an anti-Whig diatribe, defending the patriotism of Irish-Americans, one antebellum editorial denounced “internal improvements” and “canal enlargement” as ways to buy working-class votes, and in particular Irish men’s loyalties. Here laying pipe meant trying to court Irish-Americans with chicanery and double talk in an election year. See: “A Letter to Farmer Issachar,” The United States Democratic Review 15, no. 76 (October, 1844), 388.; "Whig and Fogy Pipe-Laying: Free Trade and the Irish Vote ," The United States Democratic Review 31, no. 170 (August 1852), 105-11.; By the end of Reconstruction Henry Dana (Charles Francis Adams’s legal mentor before the war) used the term to denounce the spoils system that followed elections. Pipe-laying created political “body-servants,” dependency, and worst of all pitted patronage against merit. See: Richard Henry Dana, Points in American Politics (New York: , 1877), 19-21. See too how in the Gilded Age “laying pipe” in labor unions, supposedly destroyed personal ambition, individual motivation and the Lincolnian system of merit over family
Laying pipe and wire pulling, most essentially were what others did. When similar actions were used to achieve one’s rightful station, merit triumphed, even if it needed a little finessing from bosom friends. For example, at the close of ’62, General-in-Chief, Henry W. Halleck wrote Brigadier General, John Schofield to complain of what lay beneath a recently bumbled campaign in Missouri. “But it seems there were too many private axes to grind,” groused Halleck.

If you could be here [military headquarters, D.C.] a few weeks you would see how difficult it to resist political wire-pulling in military appointments. Every Governor, Senator, and Member of Congress has his pet generals to be provided with separate and independent commands. I am sick and tired of the political military life. The number of enemies which I have made because I would not yield my own convictions of right is already legion.

A professional army man, trained at West Point, Halleck felt that handing soldiers over to “political generals” like Butler, Banks, and others “seems little better than murder.” But as Cole’s and Halleck’s letters suggest, political wire pulling was often decried in the first part of letters and then perpetrated in the back half. Tellingly, after denouncing “pet generals,” in the very next paragraph, Halleck promised Schofield that personal pipes were being laid.

Rest assured, general, your services are appreciated, and will not be overlooked. I have already presented your name to the Department, and will again urge it on the first opportunity. There are, however, only a few vacancies to fill, and

connections."A Tyranny that Cannot Live in America"," The Century 33, no. 3 (January 1887), 488-89.

hundreds of applications backed by thousands of recommendations. Under such circumstances results are always uncertain.\(^{62}\)

Thus antebellum men continually worried that other men were laying pipe inches beneath their own.

After Cole had been colonel for about four months his military crony and family friend, Asa Biggs, wrote Cole’s brother, Cornelius, to apparently keep the latter informed of George’s promotions (or, more likely, pester Cornelius about the lack of progress on that front). Biggs speculated that Cole’s cavalry would be brigaded with the other Colored Cavalry regiments, but, unfortunately another colonel had taken temporary command, and yet another, Jeptha Garrard, outranked Cole. Biggs reported that General Butler’s “opinion of your brother’s merit is very high”—something about which George Cole regularly fretted. “I think your brother’s chances are very good. He has many friends and his service merits them.”

But as might be expected in such letters, men writing on behalf of friends figured that the pulling hand could just as easily tug two at a time. Biggs massaged the discussion of Cole’s merits into one about his own. He asked Congressman Cole about the chances of a bill in the House that would reorganize Butler’s Army of the James. “I want to be appointed

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Just more than a year later, realizing that he was soon to be replaced by Grant, Halleck wrote a letter to Grant’s ally, General Sherman, to thank Sherman for his “kind allusions” in a speech he delivered in Memphis. Halleck wrote in the letter begun with, “My Dear General,” that the armies in the west did not suffer from the epidemic in laying pipe and infighting: “There is less jealousy and back-biting, and a greater disposition to assist each other. Here we have too much party politics and wire-pulling. Everybody wants you to turn a grindstone to grind his particular ax, and if you decline he regards you as an enemy and takes revenge by newspaper abuse.” See: H. W. Halleck to Maj. Gen. W. T. Sherman, February 16, 1864 in ibid., Series 1, Volume 32, Part II, pages 407-08
chief of the 8th Division to take charge of the Inspection Dept,” he wrote with anxiousness.

“Can you help me in the matter?” Biggs queried.63

Just over two weeks later Biggs wrote Cornelius again—about the same time George Cole’s regiment began flaring up with violence between the officers and enlisted men. Biggs had procured more letters of recommendation, but “without having a friend to attend to the request” the efforts would be “useless.” Biggs enclosed a note from General Butler and expressed hope Butler’s word still carried weight among senators—given his various recent debacles in Virginia. “It may be rather immodest for me to bother you with an account of my services but I see no other means of getting promotion, so please permit me to inform you in few words what I have been at.” Biggs listed his exploits and merits and suggested the promotion could be realized if two key senators were persuaded and an enclosed letter handed to the Secretary of War. “I don’t wish to blow my own horn,” he demurred. But if “promotion comes of course I shall be very glad to receive it & will be under many obligations to you.”64

Cornelius apparently complied. Biggs obtained his promotion to colonel with an Inspectorship in the Army of the James. “I am much indebted to you for your good wishes & kind assistance,” Biggs closed his follow-up letter; returning to what was supposed to be his primary purpose for writing Cornelius in the first place: “I wish you would help your deserving brother to get [appointed] as Brig Genl. He has worked himself nearly out &

63 Colonel Biggs to Cornelius Cole, May 22, 1864, Cole family, “Papers”.

64 Cornelius evidently kept these obligations in mind as some time during the fall, he asked Biggs to help out with some sort of “inspection” in Cornelius’ home district in California; Biggs declined citing his own health problems —adding that he needed to “attend to some business of my own.” Colonel Biggs to Cornelius Cole, June 10, 1864 and October 21, 1864, ibid..
should have had [command] of the Col[ored] Brig of cavalry….” Biggs, though, had not
“worked himself” completely out. In January of ’65, he penned Cornelius a final letter to ask
for one last favor. Cornelius must have seen it coming as similar letters trickled in from
George as well. “I believe you are familiar with the service I have rendered during this
rebellion,” Biggs began his letter, this time rushing to the point. He had again enclosed two
letters which he seemed to use as seed-letters for sprouting new ones. “If [in] your judgment
I merit promotion,” went the letter “I would be under many obligations to you” by
“securing a Brevet Brig Genl appt for me.”

I know it is not a very modest thing to ask for promotion, but I know that it
seldom comes except through some political friend or friends….I would prefer
at [the] close of this war to be called [General] to the title of Col[onel], though I
am proud of the latter. I of course would prefer that no one should know I had
requested your assistance.65

Biggs is an example of the volatile business of having friends have friends do favors. He
started off ostensibly on an errand for George Cole and ended up begging for his own
generalship.

“The Test of Rewards…."

For Officer Cole the entire process of obtaining higher rank at once consumed and
disgusted him. He suspected that Butler had it in for him, or that “the Beast” had made up
his mind to give the sweetest promotions to fellow Bay State soldiers. When Butler first took

65 Biggs along with hundreds of lower officers made efforts to obtain the title of general
before going home. For more on this desire, see: McPherson, "Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War
Era", 327-29 Colonel Biggs to Cornelius Cole, January 29, 1865, Cole family, "Papers".
command of the Army of the James he immediately crossed Cole in the wrong way. In the
fall of ’63 Cole obtained a twenty-day furlough from Butler’s predecessor, General Foster, to
return home to Syracuse, on sick leave.66 While home Cole defended himself in a civil
lawsuit brought against him by a fellow Syracusan. Cole claimed that the plaintiff had
actually delayed, hoping that Cole would be forced to return to the fields and not be able to
fight out the case. Cole stayed beyond his allotted furlough and when he returned to camp
nearly a week late was court martialed for “absence without leave.” Cole argued that he had
been “subpoenaed” to testify in his own case, and that his evidence “saved [him] at least
$600.” “I should have been pecuniarily responsible for not appearing as a witness in
the…court as summoned,” Cole testified to a tribunal made of fellow officers. His peers
must have sympathized with Major Cole’s story that a civilian was actually attempting to use
Cole’s war-time sacrifices as a way to defeat the soldier. The tribunal found Cole guilty—as
he certainly was—but added that it was without any “criminality,” advising that Cole be
immediately returned to duty without punishment.

What was probably Butler and Cole’s first crossing of paths, the proceedings of the
trial, were reviewed by the Major General who had just been given command of the Army of
the James. Butler approved the proceedings but not the verdict, stating that “the accused
cannot be guilty without criminality.” Perhaps one of the brightest legal minds of his
generation, Butler—a soldier mired in accusations of bending the war for personal gain---
took Cole to task for flimsy reasoning and putting private interests before the nation’s.

66 Cole obtained several furloughs for home by citing familial needs or health problems. In
his compiled service record, this particular furlough was recorded as a sick leave. Compiled Service
Record of George W. Cole, 3rd New York Cavalry, National Archives (NARA), Washington DC.
Major Cole staid at home over his leave to attend to personal business. His
defense that he caused himself to be summoned as a witness in his own case by
himself so that he would be liable to himself for not attending...is an evasion not worthy of an officer and a gentleman. Who could have moved for
an attachment for not attending the court but Maj. Cole and who would have
been punished for non attendance but Maj. Cole by Maj. Cole?

Butler mocked Cole’s defense, and then questioned his manhood. In the first hours
of the war, while trying a case in Boston, someone passed Butler a note charging him to
prepare a regiment from his militia brigade to move to Washington by the morrow. Butler
immediately interrupted the trial, asking the court to postpone the case. As he rushed off to
become a soldier, Butler created a public spectacle that would play well in the local papers.
For him, cutting loose from a civilian courtroom meant military glory, and a claim on early
war heroism and lore. Probably holding Cole to this patriotic image of manhood, Butler
couldn’t help but make a personal dig. “The more manly course” he added to his review of
Cole’s trial, would have been to seek out permission from his “Commanding General.” “As
Maj. Cole was about his private business during his absence he should at least not ask the
United States to pay him...” while he was at home doing his own bidding, violating the
terms of his furlough. Butler seems to have even considered “relieving” Cole from duty but
then inked out this harsher judgment. Even so, he cast opprobrium on an already jealous
soldier for “attending to private business” and taking a less manly course.

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Butler", 170; Goss, "The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War", 28

68 Court Martial of Major George W. Cole. Record Group 153, NN 916. NARA, Washington DC.
Cole would never completely mend fences with Butler, though he soon was forced to approach Butler if he hoped to be promoted. Cole’s method of asking for favors, though, was less begging and more about asserting merits. We don’t have any letters from Cole to Butler, but Cole claimed that he refused to approach superiors with hat in hand. As the year wore on, though, Cole came to believe he had been boxed out from his just deserts. Later in the fall, he complained to his brother, “I shall not be commanded by my juniors & inferiors much longer.” He then suggested that his lack of promotion could be traced to his unwillingness to scrape before patrons. “I am the equal to any man I know of & not much given to begging or fawning.”

Concerning an opening of a command over an African-American brigade, Cole later wrote, “the position belongs to me, even by rank, had I not earned it over and over.”

Several weeks earlier Butler submitted a list to Secretary Stanton, recommending three of Cole’s fellow colonels for promotion. Because of “gallant and meritorious” action in a charge at Spring Hill (Virginia, not the notable battle of the same name in Tennessee), Butler recommended they be brevetted to the rank of Brigadier General.

When the promotions went through Cole vented that “Others who have laid off at home and in rear, are distancing me in promotion & grown wealthy on government spoils.”

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69 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, October 22, 1864, Cole family, "Papers".

70 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, October 24, 1864, ibid..

71 Colonel Ludlow, who eventually obtained the desired full promotion (not just brevet) had also shown composure under fire as he and his black troops were picked apart at Dutch Gap Canal, as we will see, an ill-informed project of Butler's to dig a massive canal between the curvy bends of the James River. See: United States. War Dept and others, "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies", Series 1, Volume 42, Part III; Jones, "Historical Dictionary of the Civil War", 442
He again half-convincingly assured his brother that “my conscience is clear I have done my duty.” “Still,” he added, “history will carry names of gen[erals] Paine, Ludlow, Draper, Duncan and lots of others, who were home and making money while I was fighting the hardest two years of the war.” Cole had tried to get his deserts by pushing his promotion through military channels. Though he claimed he never fawned, he did send letters to General Butler asking his commander to pass along accounts of his (Cole’s) merits to the appropriate authorities. And at the same time that Biggs made a last push to return home with the title “general,” Cole edged toward self-destruction in pursuit of the same. He had recently hounded Butler to send a letter to Secretary Stanton. Butler assured Cole that he had. Cole, weak from waiting, wrote asking the Secretary of War if he had received such a letter from Butler. Stanton responded that he “received no such thing.” After some investigation Cole came to believe that Butler had actually sent the letter, but for some reason it never made it to Stanton. He speculated to Cornelius that the letter had been “suppressed” by one of his rivals, recently promoted General Ludlow or General Farrar, in order to “oust me.”

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72 It is not clear how much money any of Cole’s counterparts made while at home. And while it is true that none of these men enlisted as early as Cole, all of them began their service before the close of 1861, placing them in the army during Cole’s “hardest two years of the war.” Cole wrote letters and probably asked around to find out when his fellow officers began their service. Ludlow, who got the brigadier generalship, was cousins with Cole’s fellow colonel Jeptha Garrard, and a brother-in-law to Salmon Chase, Secretary of Treasury. John H. Eicher and David J. Eicher, *Civil War High Commands* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 214, 217, 356, 412-13.; George Cole to Cornelius Cole, no date [approximately fall of 1864], Cole family, "Papers".

73 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, January 2, 1865, ibid.; Though Butler may have grown tired of Cole’s pleadings for promotion, he seems to have made some effort to work on Cole’s behalf. If letters were intercepted they must have been cut off by officers below Butler. As early as the spring of 1864, Butler was already trying to find a way to get Cole promoted in some way. To Secretary Stanton, he wrote, “Sir as you are aware I have two (2) regiments of cavalry and a battery of
Cole finally sent a vitriolic letter of resignation to the Army of the James headquarters. The letter, though, was intercepted by Brigadier General Edward Wild, perhaps the most radically abolitionist, vengeful and controversial officer in the entire Union army. Wild—concerned where Cole’s vitriol was heading—returned the letter to the outraged colonel with a word of warning. The letter has not survived but Wild believed the “present shape” of it would lead to Cole’s dismissal instead of honorable discharge. “But that is a grievous error,” warned Wild, who had struggled to maintain his own manhood after having lost one arm and half of his remaining hand in various battles, and had been regularly court martialed and demoted by his superiors.74 If Cole was dismissed, Wild wrote, he “would learn in few months only. The stigma of a dismissal can never be washed out by any amount of explanations—it gives food to all enemies…it travels faster and further than horse artillery, colored. I wish to get a Brigadier General for them and yet I do not desire to add to the list of Brigadiers. What is the difficulty under the Act of Congress of giving brevet rank? May I ask therefore that you will give the brevet rank of Brigadier to Colonel George W. Cole, 2nd US Colored Cavalry, although second in rank, yet he ought to be first in command and I see no other way to do it. Colonel Cole is the brother of the Hon Mr Cole, member of Congress from California and is a Cavalry officer of fifteen years experience…” To this Butler received a response from Stanton’s assistant secretary, Colonel James A. Hardie: “letter is referred….The Secretary of War is not to make any special recommendation for brevet in advance of the general list.—Jas Hardie.” There is no reason to doubt that this rejection aligned with Stanton’s wishes, but Colonel Hardie certainly had his opinions about the race for generalships as his own commission to brigadier general was revoked a year earlier in January of 1863. Hardie was a veteran from the Mexican War and an ex-professor from West Pointe. See: Benjamin Butler to Secretary Stanton, April, 21st 1864 & response, April 26, 1864. M1064, in Letters received by the Commission Branch of the Adjutant General Office, 1863-70. Microfilm #B640CC1864, National Archives, Washington DC. About Hardie, see: Eicher and Eicher, “Civil War High Commands”, 279.

74 The one-armed General Edward Wild fed racial and gender fires by his brash actions like taking confederate wives prisoner and publicly lynching dubiously accused Confederates. In one raid into rebel territory he urged slaves to whip the backs of their recently captured masters. Wild out-Butlered Butler, often making the Beast appear rather tame in comparison. Wild had been sent to the Invalid Corps but pushed his way back into the regular Army. Frances Harding Casstevens, Edward A. Wild and the African Brigade in the Civil War (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2003), 325.
all of a man’s good deeds put together.”\textsuperscript{75} Cole was not looking to supply his “enemies” with anything, as they seemed to already be on the increase. Later that week he wrote his brother again, bemoaning the promotion of Ludlow to full Brigadier General. Cole had lost the scramble to return home a general, claiming to have grown “tired of the ‘you tickle me & I’ll tickle you’ sort of business.”\textsuperscript{76} As this comment suggests, he had become weary of---if dependent on-- a system where men traded on intimacy, and helped only those who could help back.

In the winter of ’65, with the collapse of the Confederacy only a matter of time, Cole began to question his future. Like Biggs and many comrades, he began mulling over the implications of returning home with a military title, and worrying how a soldier might again become a civilian, father, or husband. Some of his comrades had no intention of laying down their guns. Referring to his subordinates like Dollard and Fox (though Fox was discharged from the army for killing Henry Edwards he apparently returned to the regiment anyway to be with his comrades) Cole informed his brother, “Several of my officers wish to go to Mexico on my leaving. What are the chances? Write what you know about it, couldn’t a man make money soldiering there? I would cut for Mexico filibustering if I thought I could make it pay, for I am rather poor to suit me.”\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Enclosed letter from Wild to Cole in George Cole to Cornelius Cole, January 3, 1865 (private), Cole family, "Papers".

\textsuperscript{76} George Cole to Cornelius Cole, January 7, 1865, ibid.

\textsuperscript{77} George Cole to Cornelius Cole, January 2, 1865, ibid. Why Cole wrote “on my leaving” must mean that he had told his officers that he planned on resigning from the army.
Cole, too, expressed an eagerness to drum up an investigation of General Butler for wartime corruption. He wanted to push further the accusations of stealing private possessions from Southerners’ homes (thus the nickname “spoons”), taking kickbacks from competing contractors and trafficking in illegal trade with confederates. Though Butler

78 Soldiers and civilians have always made a killing out of killing. Enemies have traded with one another to various degrees in every American war. But more than the Revolution, or the War of 1812, the Civil War provided lucrative possibilities for enormous numbers of Americans, from both sides. Due to the Union embargo, southerners suddenly found themselves with unimaginable excesses of cotton and shortages in foodstuffs, clothing, salt, medicine, shoes, etc. Meanwhile northerners began paying several fold more for cotton and had also lost previous southern markets for foodstuffs, clothing, etc. Thus along the borders and especially in occupied territories scads of soldiers and speculators took advantage of the distorted supply and demand caused by the war. Because New Orleans was cut off both from transatlantic trade and by blockaded rivers, the occupied city was dry kindling for corrupt trade. Not all trade with the enemy was illegal however, as the administration believed that trading with occupied regions would create allegiance to the Union and reduce civilian suffering. The problem, though, arose in preventing “legal” trade with locals from spilling over into “illegal” trade with rebels who posed as loyalists and locals. Trading with or purchasing cotton from them often meant providing the rebel forces with uniforms and guns. It was never proven that General Butler abused his administrative powers in this regard, but it is highly likely.

Even George Denison, who would become an admirer of Butler, admitted as much. In a letter to Salmon Chase, Denison testified that General Phelps (whom Butler squeezed out of the service) was well respected for his “integrity and disinterestedness.” “This is not strictly true of Gen. Butler,” Denison confessed, “for while all admire his great ability, many of his soldiers think him selfish and cold-hearted, and many soldiers and citizens—Union and Seccessionists—think he is interested in the speculations of his brother (Col. Butler) and others.” “Sometimes circumstances look very suspicious, but if I happen to hear his explanation of the same circumstances, suspicion almost entirely disappears. I have never been able to discover any good proof that Gen. Butler has improperly done, or permitted, anything for his own pecuniary advantage. He is such a smart man, that it would, in any case, be difficult to discover what he wished to conceal.” Butler’s own brother, Andrew, grew extremely wealthy from the so-called legal trade. Union men and speculators regularly purchased “confiscated” goods at rock-bottom prices. Speculators were also allowed (by greasing palms) to pass into enemy territory to secure cotton at advantageous prices. Butler never denied growing rich off the cotton trade, but instead claimed that it was a necessary part of reconstructing New Orleans. But the cotton he did purchase—legitimately or otherwise—was overwhelmingly sold back to his home region where Butler created a dependent clientele which promised political advantage for Butler after the war. Any Union soldier knew, or had heard stories, about cotton corruption. As Charles A. Dana described the problem from his vantage point in Tennessee, “Every colonel, captain, or quartermaster is in secret partnership with some operator in cotton; every soldier dreams of adding a bale of cotton to his monthly pay.” Dana quoted in: McPherson, "Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era", 620-25; George S. Denison to Salmon P. Chase, September 9, 1862, in Butler, "Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War."
received Lincoln’s permission to trade plows and agricultural equipment to friendly farmers in the occupied regions, Butler created new suspicions about his trading with (and abetting) the enemy in the North Carolina and Virginia—while relatives and Massachusetts men reaped enormous profits. Yet Cole had his eye on his own main chance. He meanwhile began scouring the papers, cutting out announcements of government posts and sending them to Cornelius. He especially wanted a post in the Treasury Department in Savannah, supervising the cotton trade, the very thing that had supposedly corrupted Butler. “Write me the political prospects etc etc,” Cole closed another letter to his brother, “as I have small chance to learn any, outside as I am.”

By February Butler had been dismissed from the Army of the James, yet Cole must have sent him one more letter asking the Major General for a recommendation. From his home in Lowell, Massachusetts, Butler responded,

My Dear Colonel, I sent forward on one occasion a report through the usual channels in which you were named for meritorious services and your promotion urged. I also wrote a letter upon the same topic to the Department….I trust you will yet receive the promotion which is due you. If you desire to press the matter I will give you such certificate of services as you have justly and nobly earned.

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79 Holzman, "Stormy Ben Butler", 142-46

80 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, January 1865, Cole family, "Papers"; George Cole to Cornelius Cole, written on paper with letterhead of “Inspector General's Office,” estimated to be January, 1865, ibid.. As Biggs had received an Inspectorship, Cole may have obtained this paper from Biggs’s office.
Butler, though, ended the letter with something he must have known would eat at Cole—as it would any soldier frustrated between the lack of correlation between merit and rank:

“Alas! Services are not always the test of rewards--- your truly, Benj Butler.”81

81 Benjamin Butler to Colonel Cole, Feb 28th, 1865. M1064: Letters received by the Commission Branch of the Adjutant General Office, 1863-70. Microfilm # C1545CB1865, NARA.
CHAPTER 4:
BOTTLED UP WITH THE BEAST

What is not apparent in Cole’s letters, but was the backdrop to his frustrations, is that over the course of 1864, as Cole grew increasingly agitated, and as white officers and black soldiers below him edged into mutiny and murder, General Butler flirted with a run for the presidency while miring his troops in one military debacle after the next. For anybody paying close attention, the Army of the James certified itself as the template for military incompetence. Ironically, though, even as Butler muffed almost every military endeavor, the larger war brought so much blood without decisive victory—sending erstwhile Lincoln men scrambling for a redeemer—that Butler came close to stealing the presidency from Lincoln.\(^1\)

It is true that had Butler toppled Richmond, he might have stabilized Lincoln’s political future, while securing his own political fortunes. Yet Butler’s military troubles seemed to add to the malaise that many northerners felt about the war effort. Paradoxically, then, Butler’s own failures somehow kept his presidential hopes afloat.

Butler lusted for Richmond. In late January, one of his indefatigable allies—the eccentric Lincoln hater with colored glasses, Count Adam Gurowsky—urged Butler to take the prize. Gurowsky advised Butler to slowly build of his forces, and then without orders,

\(^1\) Taylor Merrill, "General Benjamin F. Butler in the Presidential Campaign of 1864", 537-70
effect a coup on Richmond, notifying the War Department mid-endeavor. “Strike the blow without letting out your secret,” he continued. “You know better than I, that if the administration would wince and smart to find Richmond in your hands, on its shoulders the people will carry you into the White House….A great action, a great bold action, and Lincoln chances vanish as nightmare,” Gurowsky concluded his confidential letter.²

In February Butler bought into a one of his subordinate’s proposals to sneak into Richmond with a small force and free Union captives from Libby and Belle Island prisoners, destroy key properties, and capture confederate leaders. Butler believed local intelligence that the southern rim of the city had been left nearly unprotected. When the forces sent by Butler found the enemy waiting, with bridges torn up and fords obstructed, Butler’s men slumped back to base. Undaunted by the embarrassment, Butler took no blame, instead firing off telegraphs to Lincoln and Stanton about the “brilliantly and ably executed movement” that would have succeeded had a union soldier—condemned to death for killing his own lieutenant—not been allowed to escape prison days before Butler’s operation. Butler believed southern papers which reported that the escapee found his way into confederate lines by Richmond and revealed Butler’s secret plan to raid Richmond. (How this prisoner came to know of the secret plans, Butler was unable to convincingly explain.) Butler then transferred the blame to Lincoln by suggesting that had the president not suspended capital punishment in the Army of the James, the escaped prisoner would have been in a wood box,

² Count Gurowsky to General Butler, January 30th, 1864, in: Butler, "Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War. Vol. 3, February 1863-March 1864"
and Butler’s men national heroes.3 “Everything worked precisely as I expected,” Butler telegraphed Lincoln, before cutting to the chase. Referring to a newspaper report he forwarded, about the escaped prisoner, he added, “I send it to you that you may see how your clemency has been misplaced.”

The Army of the James suffered from chronic miscommunication between Butler and the newly installed Lieutenant General Grant, and Butler and his subordinates. When Grant attempted to take Richmond in May, he and Butler began the campaign with almost perfect misunderstanding in fundamental tactics, especially timing and purpose. Making things worse, Butler disregarded warnings given him by seasoned Navy officials, who despite their warnings that ships with fifteen-foot drafts could not navigate a river with ten-foot shoals, Butler commanded to transport troops up the James.5 Even more, Butler’s two corps commanders shared deep doubts about his strategy for taking Richmond. During the operations, they stalled, and all but ignored some of Butler’s orders. (This tension was part of a larger rub between professionally trained officers and “political generals” who claimed that character alone qualified them for the work.)6

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6 Goss, "The War within the Union High Command: Politics and Generalship during the Civil War", 300
Butler’s soldiers had a shot at taking both Richmond and Petersburg had they not endlessly stalled and been fooled by various bluffs. Instead of playing a vital role in the fall of Richmond, Butler’s men were pushed back by rebel forces half their size. Butler retreated through a narrow neck into a horseshoe of land formed by the James River, where he and his troops would find safety from attacking rebels. But with the river to their backs, the same neck that provided safety, also allowed rebels to keep Butler’s forces trapped. As Grant disapprovingly put it, “[Butler’s] army, therefore, though in a position of great security, was as completely shut off from further operations directly against Richmond as if it had been in a bottle, strongly corked.” Butler had “hermetically sealed” his own army from the war at hand, so that it only required the smallest of rebel forces to keep it in the bottle.7 From Fortress Monroe, Sarah Butler wrote her stifled husband that she had already purchased a carriage hat of “straw, white velvet, and a long white feather,” in order “to grace the taking of Richmond.” With the sudden reversal, though, she promised to immediately send it back to Massachusetts and order it “put in the darkest closet in the attic.”8

Much of the rest of ’64 was spent defending (or as some saw it, cowering in) the bottle while Grant siphoned off forces from the Army of the James. Butler’s wife argued that the slow bleeding of Butler’s forces ordered by Grant was at root, a political move. Grant had always shown a desire to remove Butler, but left him untouched perhaps at the


request of the president. (Or perhaps because no right-minded officer would dare get in a
public feud with such a silver-tongued attorney.) \(^9\) Meanwhile Butler began purging his
highest officers whom he felt had sabotaged his generalship. Butler made uninvited visits to
Grant’s headquarters, pressed the War Department, and had an agent in Washington read a
letter to nine key senators, asking them to quash the nominations for promotion already
afoot for Butler’s subordinates-cum-enemies. The agent also told them that Butler would
“esteem it a personal favor” if they would remove “the nuisance” altogether—that is demote
or transfer Butler’s insubordinate Corps officer. \(^10\)

By the close of the year Butler would dig his own military grave. The War
Department hoped to capture Fort Fisher, a key, and seemingly impregnable coastal holding
that allowed rebels to smuggle in supplies from confederate blockade runners. Butler
hatched a plan to float a ship loaded with 300 tons of powder and detonate it as it drifted
toward the fort. Although the plan was initially dismissed as quixotic, one of Butler’s

\(^9\) Robert Holzman suggested that Grant feared Butler would mercilessly re-open the debate
about Grant’s purported alcoholism. When Grant first came east to assume command of the army he
wanted to rid the army of Butler. But despite Grant’s resistance, Lincoln convinced his top general to leave
Butler at the head of the Army of the James, because Butler had a strong following among Radical Republicans.
See: Holzman, "Stormy Ben Butler", 118-19; Smith, "The Enemy within: Corruption and Political Culture in the
Civil War North.", 39; Donald, "Lincoln", 498.

By the summer Major General Halleck (the chief of staff for the army) and Lieutenant
General Grant bandied about ideas of how to get rid of the troublesome Butler. Butler particularly
vexed Halleck because though the latter was an experienced soldier, trained at West Point, Butler
actually outranked him as major general due to Lincoln’s rush to promote Butler for political
expediency in the first hours of the war. Butler---a man of no real military experience--actually
outranked every single officer in the army save Grant who was given the long-retired rank of
Lieutenant General. Halleck and Grant discussed sending Butler to Kentucky but feared he would
clash with Sherman. Halleck also suggested paring away Butler’s army size as a way to weaken
Butler’s leverage. See: Halleck to Grant, July 3, 1864, in United States. War Dept and others, "The
War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies", Series 1,
volume 40, part II, p.598; Holzman, "Stormy Ben Butler", 131-32

\(^10\) ibid., 118-21

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schoolmates convinced the military brass to mull it over. Though skeptical, Grant eventually agreed to the plan, appointing General Weitzel (not Butler) to lead the troops in pace with the powder ship and an accompanying naval fleet. But because Fort Fisher fell within Butler’s geographic command, Butler suppressed the order, and at the last minute, installed himself as the expedition’s ranking commander. Grant had heard the night before that Butler would be accompanying the expedition, but incorrectly assumed that the ambitious general was only going along to witness his grandiose scheme.

Ending his military career in the Army of the James, just as he had begun it, Butler and his fellow officers suffered from an inexcusable lack of communication—partly because Butler and the other commander, Admiral Porter, despised one another so much that they had to communicate through intermediaries. Because of confusion or ambition, Butler embarked with his men ahead of the naval portion, including Porter, who was supposed to take the lead. After a series of miscues, and several days waiting, Porter’s fleet caught up with Butler and convinced him to move his ships further from the fort. Butler took them so far out of range that they would arrive tardily on the shores, after the ship’s explosion. When the ship, filled with open-topped powder kegs and a Gomez Fuse, detonated, though, it did little more than wake sleeping soldiers inside the fort. (Butler would argue, with some justification, that the navy detonated it prematurely so that Butler’s forces would not be part of the glory.)

On Christmas day, when Butler’s men went ashore (some of them led by his own son-in-law) they captured a number of under-aged rebel soldiers before digging in for a siege. Butler watched anxiously from his tugboat; when general Weitzel (the officer who was supposed to be in charge) informed Butler that the fortress incurred no damage, and it would soon receive reinforcements, Butler sank into a defeatist funk. As if he had no fight
left once his dream of pyrotechnical warfare sunk with the ship, he ordered immediate withdrawal. Because of Butler's panic and an unusually stormy shoreline, the general stranded many of his men on the beach. While Butler would instantly try to spin the fiasco into a Sisyphus-like struggle against stormy weather and naval grandstanding (he had some merit in his claims), War Department memos, newspaper coverage, and letters from soldiers, roundly denounced Butler for yet another embarrassment to the Union.

Incredibly, Butler managed to pull off one last fizzle—even as his enemies were lowering his military career into the grave. On New Year’s Day, he called together political notables and curious onlookers to witness what Butler hailed as one of the greatest military engineering feats in the annals of war. Four months earlier Butler had persuaded Grant to approve the plan of digging a massive canal between the thin gap of a horseshoe formed by the James River (just north of the “bottle” that the Army of the James called home). Butler believed by digging out some 167,000 cubit yards of earth, and then dynamiting the bulkheads holding the river back, he would form a crucial river pass whereby Union vessels could circumvent rebel shelling and dramatically hasten any attack on Richmond. Grant thought the project fantastical, but allowed Butler to engage in it, if for no other reason than to keep him out of the frontlines. Butler originally estimated that the Dutch Canal Gap could be finished in ten days. Roughly four months later, on New Year’s Day a crowd of onlookers and journalists gathered to witness the tarnished general’s parting—and much delayed--feat. The explosives detonated as planned, but the tons of earth that shot to the sky
crashed back into the void, damming the river all over again. By the time the rubble would be removed, Butler would be out of uniform and the war all but over.\textsuperscript{11}

Except by loyal hard-war Republicans, Butler was denounced as a coward who abandoned his own men. The crew from Porter’s flagship made Butler a leather medal with “in commemoration of his heroic conduct” written on one side, and a pair of legs in the act of running on the other.\textsuperscript{12} And now Grant finally had his ironclad case for Butler’s removal. Soon after, he asked Stanton and Lincoln to release the “unsafe commander.” The Massachusetts general believed his removal was spearheaded by a cabal of West Pointers who could no longer brook a citizen soldier outranking them. (In this he was right, though he would not own his spotty record.) In his first executive order of ’65, Lincoln axed his longtime potential rival and sometimes political helpmeet, ordering him back to Lowell, Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{13}

As Butler chuffed toward his hometown with his family secluded on board the steamer, Grant designated Major General E.O.C Ord to assume command of the Army of the James. Ord tried to stop Butler’s final act of propaganda, by asking Grant for permission to suppress seven hundred copies of his farewell speech to his soldiers, in which Butler defended his overcautious record, claiming the “wasted blood of my men does not stain my garments.” Grant ordered Ord to not interfere. But officers, newspapers, and sizable

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Longacre, “Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865”, 193-95, 258-59
\item \textsuperscript{12} McPherson, “Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era”, 819-20; Holzman, “Stormy Ben Butler”, 149-53
\item \textsuperscript{13} Longacre, “Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865”, 245-59; Holzman, “Stormy Ben Butler”, 152-53
\end{itemize}
portions of the population would ask questions about the bright star whose ambitions led him to ignominy. Soon after Butler’s exit, Porter and a more cooperative general moved on Fort Fisher again, this time successfully doing what Butler had already begun arguing could never be done.

The newly successful operation was used by his many military adversaries as a sort of proof of his falsely won promotions. And within the army Butler’s manhood was questioned. To Grant, Admiral Porter quipped, “I hold it to be a good rule never to send a boy on a man’s errand…” In a letter to Admiral Porter, Sherman would rub in the salt: “The best part of the taking of Fort Fisher was the killing of Butler. He has had no blood on his skirts and judging from the past, it will be long before his blood stains anything.” Butler had no blood on his “skirts.” The timid soldier had finally been buried. Denouncing Butler’s final speech as a “bombastic order designed as a fling at Grant,” Sherman promised that even Butler’s greatest source of power could not redeem him. “[Grant] has quietly and completely laid him low forever. Even the nigger cannot resurrect him.”

Actually, Butler still believed in such a resurrection through African Americans. Butler claimed later, that even after Fort Fisher, he “retained the full confidence” of Lincoln. While in Washington just before the close of the war Butler called on the president who voiced concern about what to do with nearly two-hundred thousand black men who had learned to march and fire guns. Butler claimed that Lincoln, fearing a “race war,” suggested the black soldiers be shipped off to a more hospitable, fertile country. Butler returned the

next day, telling Lincoln that the entire black population could not be exported to the island of San Domingo “half as fast as negro children will be born.” But as for the soldiers, Butler reminded Lincoln that most of them still had over a year left on their original three-year enlistment, and that because the war had not been officially declared over, the president could order them anywhere. “Now I have some experience in diggings canals,” Butler recalled telling Lincoln, only hinting at the fiasco at Dutch Gap. He maintained that because black soldiers had spent “a large portion of their time in digging in forts and intrenchments” they would be well suited to dig a thirty mile canal across the Columbian isthmus. “If you will put me in command of them, I will take them there and dig the canal.” Butler promised that it would cost the government nothing but food and military pay. Once there Butler would create a colony by setting a third of them to dig, another third to building, and the remaining portion to agriculture. Once established they would petition the government “to send down to us our wives and children.” The colony would “protect the canal and the interests of the United States.” According to Butler, Lincoln took it into serious consideration but was murdered days later before he could act on the plan.15

Whether or not Butler embellished this incident (or even if he made it up as a way to argue that he never lost Lincoln’s approval) it shows how the defeated general continued to see a symbiotic relationship between his organization and stewardship of black men, and his wildest, manliest ambitions. Like any good convert to free labor, Butler had come to believe that his own personal interests did not run crosswise with the interests of others. What

might make Butler a president, war hero, or famous Latin American colonizer, could also teach blacks the protestant work ethic—placating white fears of violence and laziness. Black men—controlled, uniformed, regimented and made to sweat—were the key to rescuing their own race, while helping a few, like Butler stand atop his own. Butler was not alone in believing that his dedicated, if tainted, humanitarianism and voracious appetite for power, somehow could be harmoniously negotiated. It was part of a larger vision where men could “make” themselves, mostly by standing atop the shoulders of the unmade.
CHAPTER 5:

NO LONGER “THE PLAY-THING OF FATE”

During Butler’s tenure in the Army of the James he aggressively secured permission to raise new black regiments, and at the same time traded white units to other armies in return for black soldiers. The war experience of Charles Francis Adams Jr., can best be understood within the larger gravitational pull of the black military into Butler's charge. When Adams finally quit the war in the spring of ’65, his regiment, which had been consolidated into a massive black army, would be absorbed into George Cole’s cavalry brigade. Like Cole, Adams was cut from Free Soil and Republican cloth. He was raised with a gut hatred for the moral and economic system of slavery. Before the war, Adams and his father toured with William Henry Seward across the West on his presidential campaign trail. When Seward bowed out of the race, the Adams’s backed Lincoln who when elected, rewarded Adams’s father with an appointment as ambassador to Britain.¹

While Cole left behind few written documents, Adams provides a rich trove of personal correspondence, memoirs, and selectively preserved diary entries. Between the age of fifteen and twenty-five, Adams, like his ancestors, religiously kept a diary. From his days in Latin school up until the fall of ’62 when he boarded a steamer headed for the battlefields

of Virginia, he spilled his mind into nearly twelve volumes. Around the time he embarked, news broke about the battle of Cedar Mountain and the death of one of his closest friends, Stephen Perkins (one of the few men about whom Charles openly admitted feeling inferior). It is unclear why, but before stepping to shore, Adams made his final entry, not to confide to his diary again for twenty-six years.

Some time after the war, Charles wrapped and packaged these volumes with directions that they should be destroyed in the event of his death. As told in his autobiography, some three decades after sealing the volumes—crestfallen, humiliated by recent financial failures, the more-mature Adams “exhumed” his journals. Perusing his own record he found “the revelation of myself to myself was truly shocking.” Up until this time Charles “had indulged in the pleasing delusion that it was in [him]…to do, or be, something rather noticeable.” Blushing and groaning over its immaturity, ineptitude, and conceit, Adams trudged through each “dreadful” volume. Then, as he finished them, one by one, he laid them into the fire. In the orange glow, he stood over the hearth “until the last leaf was ashes.” He had finally seen himself squarely in the looking glass. “I felt that no human being who, between fifteen and twenty-five, so pictured himself from day to day could, by any possibility, develop into anything really considerable.”

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2 ibid., 29, 144

3 Adams did cull together some portions from his diaries that he deemed worthy of preservation. He uses these snippets throughout his autobiography. We have no way of knowing if the quotations that he pulled from his diary are unaltered. Subsequent use of his preserved quotations, therefore, reflect only what Adams chose not to destroy and are dependable only so far as Adams did not substantively alter them.
As an old man, Adams reflected upon these disturbing glimpses into his own soul. His dairy lent razor sharp detail to his many limitations. “I was by no means what I in youth supposed myself to be.” After thanking fortune that he somehow got through the rest of life without “making a conspicuous ass” off himself, Adams still could not put his shortcomings to rest. He had been born with such promise. “I might have been anything, had being it only been in me.”

Having destroyed the record of his formative years, strangely—or perhaps not—Adams would later dedicate nearly three quarters of his autobiography to recreating roughly the same years. The rest of the autobiography dashes through his postwar years as a railroad reformer, land speculator, president of the Union Pacific, and president of two prestigious historical associations. Because he had his hands in the railroads and speculation, was a prolific historian regularly grafting positivism into his interpretations, and produced several strident articles about American imperialism and race relations (all of them laced with Darwinism) historians have looked to Adams as a way to peer into the Gilded Age and early twentieth century. But to Adams everything after the Civil War was more of the same; the crashes of failure that haunted him in his later life were mere echoes of his experiences before and during the war. Throughout his autobiography Adams pushes the reader to look closely at his earlier years; He laced his narrative with Wordsworth’s maxim “the child is the father of the man.” If Adams came to reflect the boom and bust, clang and huff of the

4 ibid., 27-8, 110-111, 144
Gilded Age, he learned its cadences in his troubled adolescence, and most especially in the
cavalcades of war.\(^5\)

For Adams, the war brought into high relief a new kind of manliness that gave
increasing importance to the athletic body, and aggressive individualism. Examining Adams’s
youth and role in a violent, physical war can help us appreciate the ways that white men of
various stripes, throughout the north, incorporated new models of manliness into their war
experiences. His entire life Adams felt like the unannointed child in a remarkable line of
American prophets. His great-grandfather was the nation’s second president; his grandfather
the sixth. His father, twice elected to congress, was appointed by Abraham Lincoln to serve
as ambassador to Great Britain during the crisis of confederate rebellion. Adams came to
consciousness as his dad and grandfather fashioned the final chapters of the family’s
mammoth political legacy. The accomplishments of his grandfather, John Quincy Adams,
perhaps more than others, haunted Charles, not just the magnitude of his grandfather’s
political stations, but the ways he talked about the acquisition of such power. John Quincy
Adams (like his father and son) regularly decried political ambition, though all three wrestled
with their own mounting desires for the immortality of fame. Instead, they believed, men
should cultivate their virtues, and in the process qualify themselves for the unsought reward.
The Adams family, in other words, insisted that high office was properly obtained, not by

\(^5\) Here I follow Charles’s suggestion to his brother Henry that the art of biography requires
that the historian “let a man tell his own story and reflect his own character in his own words.”
Adams quoted in Edward Chase Kirkland, *Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, the Patrician at Bay*
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), vii.. Of course this does not mean a facile regurgitation
of Adams’s perception of himself and his life, but it is interesting how much Adams uses the first
third of his life to flesh out all that would follow.
aspiration, but as a moral reward. Rank and station should be the natural, if undesired, fruits of the ordered soul. Even as a schoolboy Charles sensed how the ancestral “light was reflected” on him. “I was the grandson of John Quincy Adams; and not quite as other boys. This I felt.”

According to Adams his youth and education were “a skillfully arranged series of mistakes.” “It was just the sort of bringing up I ought not to have had.” He would always feel that Boston bred a sort of parochialism into its inhabitants, and Quincy, though much preferred by young Charles, still had not shed its colonial skins. His parents failed to provide the tools he would need to become a man of gravity. Charles Sr., “hereditarily warped,” never taught his sons to appreciate raw nature, to ramble, to bloody their lips in athletic games; Charles complained years after the fact that his Harvard education had cut him off from modern life. He never came up to the scratch. Stultified by Harvard’s “Scale of Merit” (the dominant pedagogical system at Harvard in the 1850s where points were awarded for class recitation) he graduated at the bottom half of his class.


7 Adams, *The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams*, 17. Charles would come to realize that his own father felt similarly about being the son of John Quincy Adams. In his biography of his father, Charles Jr., claimed that his father did not feel he had been accepted by his own merits until after he was fifty. See: Charles Francis Adams, *Charles Francis Adams* (Boston: New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1900), 28-9.


9 Years later Charles would compare the diary he kept while attending Harvard with his father’s similar record—realizing that “I then was not half the man he was at the same age.” Kirkland, *Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, the Patrician at Bay*, 10-12; Adams, *The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams*, 4-5.
In the years between his graduation and his entrance into the war, Charles groped for purpose. He yearned to set out on his own, but found it difficult to cut the ties of dependence to his father, “the governor.” Charles had already begun to deflect the oppressive parental urgings to marry. His father believed that a young man should “get to work as soon as he could scrabble through college, begin to make a living, marry, and become...a useful member of society.” Yet, at the age of twenty-four Charles still lived on the fourth floor of his family home. He monthly siphoned off an allowance from his father’s funds (in the form of an advance on Charles’s inheritance) And to their father’s chagrin Charles and his older brother John had taken to staying out until the small hours among Boston’s “party-going, dancing set,” after which Charles, at least one time, had to ring his father out of bed to be let in the home.

After graduation, Adams, as he often put it, could never find his true “aptitude.” Even though he had not attended law school, and perhaps looking to pacify his parents, he followed his father and older brother John “almost as a matter of course” into practicing law. Through his father’s connections he secured himself a sort of apprenticeship in the distinguished law office of R. Henry Dana and Francis E. Parker. Just how Adams passed the bar he could never tell—though he had his suspicions. His family had intimate contact with that of Judge Bigelow, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth. Apparently tired of some twenty months of aimless study, Adams prematurely sought out

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10 ibid., 19.

Bigelow. All too quickly Adams found himself anguishing over a set of legal questions about which he “knew absolutely nothing.” Days later, Bigelow asked Adams to come to the court room to be sworn in. “I was no more fit to be admitted than a child,” Charles would confess in his latter years.¹²

Never taking to the profession, Adams festered. He immediately left the office of Dana and Francis, tried to set up office with his brother John, and later relocated into a “gloomy, dirty den” in his father’s building. “Still, my father was satisfied,” Adams would admit, implying some resentment. In the spring of 1859, Charles bragged to his brother Henry, “I am becoming a Croesus.”¹³ With the help of his father, Charles had his hand in plans to develop a granite front building on Washington Street—with stores, offices and a large hall. Soon though Charles complained that he had become little more than a “real estate agent.” Then in early 1860 Charles’s family relocated to Washington DC, where Charles Sr. began his second term in the House of Representatives. Charles remained in Boston to wait on clients and manage his father’s real estate. He detested the endless haggling with tenants and employees. “For this work,” he wrote, “it is possible God may have made me, but if he did, I would almost rather that in my infancy he had taken me to himself.”¹⁴

¹² ibid., 38-43

¹³ Croesus was the last king (560-546 B.C.) of Lydia, known for expanding his kingdom to the Halys on the east and the Taurus on the south.

¹⁴ Kirkland, "Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, the Patrician at Bay", 18
Such was Adams’s world when the nation’s mounting regional crisis came to a head in the winter and spring of 1861. After confederate batteries fired on Fort Sumter and “minute men” soldiers like Robert Dollard or Benjamin Butler had already marched from Boston’s streets, Adams reasoned in his diary “war is no plaything, and, God knows, I have no wish to trifle with it. I, therefore, shall not volunteer, or expose myself to unnecessary service.” But he could not put the question to rest. Though he served in the Massachusetts militia, and had experienced garrison duty at Fort Independence (at Boston Harbor), Adams spent months anguishing over his flickering desire to join the volunteer army.

After observing a ragtag throng of soldiers march through the streets of Boston and off to war Adams felt “a rising in the throat,” and with wet eyes came to feel “little of the soldier.” This convinced him to enlist. Almost. Within days, if not hours, his burning conviction smoldered into excuses as the pageantry and “elements of the heroic” faded from his brain. In early May, though, after his militia battalion was ordered to do garrison duty at Fort Independence, Adams became convinced that he “loathed” his profession and needed change.

Even more compelling, he came to believe that the war could actually remake him. While meeting with his friends at the Parker House after his battalion was relieved in late May, Adams glimpsed a strange form in a mirror. His chums had urged him to survey the physical metamorphosis in the looking glass. What Adams saw “amazed” him: “I had in every respect the aspect of a prize-fighter,” he wrote in his diary. “My face was brown and tanned, my hair was cut close to my head, my loose coat and blue shirt gave me a brawny reckless bearing, and I had thought I had never looked so rollicking and strong…in all my
life.” At this time, “Muscular Christianity” was making significant inroads into American male culture, especially in aristocratic circles in New England. Young men like Charles borrowed from British counterparts, rethinking what it meant to be manly and assigning morality to brawniness. Both Charles and Henry were familiar with Thomas Hughes’ recently published book *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*—the literary cornerstone for the burgeoning movement. For Charles, the glimpse of himself as a sun-weathered pugilist seduced him into imagining how war might convert his scrawny figure into a “brawny reckless” specimen.

Charles felt (and would continue so until death) that his genteel upbringing did not prepare him for the increasingly rough-and-tumble world of male politics, business and competition. He resented his father for not allowing him to attend boarding school where he would have been “compelled to rough it” with his male peers. Always a bit bookish, Charles

15 Adams, "The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams", 118. It is interesting that Adams preserved this passage from his diaries, among a handful of others, and chose to include it in his “autobiographical sketch.”

16 Oliver Wendell Holmes, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Henry Ward Beecher—all contemporaries of Adams—are often mentioned in conjunction with American Muscular Christianity.


was “not by nature daring…having a positive inaptitude for games and athletic exercises.”

Roughening up through combat would, in effect, allow Charles to break free from the hold of his soft-handed father. But Charles Sr. looked to keep his children in tow, and alive. To his diary Charles Sr. confessed, “no man who dips his hands in this blood will remember it with satisfaction. And I confess my aversion to see any of my blood either a victor or a victim in this fratricidal strife.” “With the coldness of temperament natural to him,” Charles later recalled, my father, “did not believe in any one taking a hand in actual fight.”

Notwithstanding his longing to assume a new form of manliness, Charles could never bring himself to flout the counsels of his parents. Just after graduating from Harvard, after reading a letter where Henry tried to elicit praise for their mother, Charles quashed the sentimentalism, responding that she was little more than a weak woman eclipsed by her own children. “I am now too old,” he added, “and too independent to be ruled.” But Charles greatly exaggerated his liberation. Despite his epiphany in the Parker House mirror, where he saw how military life transformed him in ways that his father and Harvard could not, the conflicted twenty-five-year-old soon convinced himself to toe the line drawn by his parents. When Lincoln appointed his father to England’s Court of Saint James, Charles Sr. asked his son to remain in the Boston and Quincy area to ensure “proper conduct” of family affairs.

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19 Adams, "The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams"

20 Kirkland, "Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, the Patrician at Bay", 256; Adams, "The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams"

21 Adams quoted in Kirkland, "Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, the Patrician at Bay", 5

Yet the young man had grown increasingly convinced that the war promised his best chances.

And soon enough he began chafing at his profession and the “empty escort duty” required by the militia; he hungered for “some outside stimulus.” His incompetence in law was undeniable.\(^{23}\) Even more, things had changed between him and his older brother John—Charles’s erstwhile partner in late night exploits. John had recently taken a wife, and Charles suddenly found himself in his parent’s home sharing quarters with two newlyweds. In the summer of 1861, Charles could only half-heartedly assert his freedom to his father: “I am twenty-six years old and of course have the right to do as I choose; but I acknowledge, as I have done all along, that great regard is due in this matter to you and your feelings, and now, as heretofore, I shall not go without your consent; but I think you ought to give that consent….”\(^{24}\) He claimed that the family property would be better off in the hands of a competent business man. But, if indeed Charles’s services were “necessary,” he would “give up the idea still.” Then, finally, in the closing passages of the same letter, Charles tried to make his father see how little would become of the Adams’s legacy if the fourth generation did not adjust to winds of the day. The war promised a way for Charles, at least, to stop the slide:

For years our family has talked of slavery and of the South and been most prominent in the contest of words, and now that it has come to blows, does it


\(^{24}\) C. F. Adams Jr., to C.F. Adams, Boston, June 10, 1861, Ford and others, "A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865", Volume 1, p. 9
become us to stand aloof from the conflict? It is not as if I were an only son, though, many such have gone; but your family is large and it seems to me almost disgraceful that in after years we should have it to say that of them all not one at this day stood in arms for that government with which our family history is so closely connected. I see all around going, but I sit in my office and read the papers....I see great events going on, and a heroic spirit everywhere flashing out, and you ask me for no sufficient cause to stifle my own and, when sitting here at home, I am convinced of my failure as a lawyer, to quietly sink into a real estate agent. I hope you will let me go, for if you should, and I return, it will make a man of me.\textsuperscript{25}

In July, still awaiting his father’s approbation, Charles heard newsboys below his office window hollering about Union troops fleeing at Bull Run; pushed inches closer to defying his father, Adams again reasoned through what he would later call, “the whole gamut of self-deception.” He felt he should enlist, but…

I do so because I am carried away by the enthusiasm of those around me, or in the desire of a new and exciting life, with a chance of military distinction...but these possible advantages, though they weigh heavily enough with me, will not justify my leaving the manifest duties which ought to keep me here. My father has entrusted me with the care of the bulk of his property so difficult to manage as it now is...and these considerations of real duty must outweigh the possible advantages to result from novelty, excitement and activity. Yes! This chance is gone by, and I feel that I shall not take part in the war

This back-and-forth soliloquy would soon come to a head. Other voices—ones that had already prevailed in the heads of thousands of young men throughout the Boston area—would eventually draw Adams away from his commodious (yet in his view increasingly emasculating) life and into war. Interestingly, not until Adams visited his chums in the Massachusetts Twentieth, and bid them farewell, did he truly resolve to join. His well-positioned friends made up a large portion of the regimental officers, and after witnessing

\textsuperscript{25} C. F. Adams Jr., to C.F. Adams, Boston, June 10, 1861, ibid., 9-11
them march to join the Army of the Potomac (upon which so much of the national gaze was
directed), Adams felt the pull. “I tried to feel satisfied with Quincy and myself. I might have
commanded the right line of that regiment; and, instead, I am scolding tenants, auditing bills,
discussing repairs, rendering accounts, and so—doing my duty!—Psh!”

Jealous of his friends, angry at the stultifying effects of duty, witnessing the ways in
which the national war drew from intimate webs, and how it transformed a pack of cronies
into a celebrated fighting machine, Adams finally began to snuff out the voices in his head.
In late September Charles Sr. finally approved of his son’s personal call to duty. Charles
stewed over his plans for another month, and then, in late October, accepted a commission
in the First Massachusetts Cavalry.26 Yet, as if still trying to shake guilt, he continued to
justify his chosen path to his family. His legal practice had brought in virtually no income
over the summer. “I have completely failed in my profession,” Charles vented, “and I long
to cut myself clear of it.” “The Army,” he continued, “must cover my defeat.”27

Poised to join his regiment, Charles, in one of his final letters from the home front,
openly relished this new manhood, boasting that he would soon “rough it and fight it out
with the rest, sleep fifteen in a tent with stable-boys, groom horses, feed like a hog and never
wash…. ” He would soon send off missives boasting of his having become like an ox,
sleeping in mire, and living off whiskey and tobacco to chase away malarial fever. After
Charles’s first Thanksgiving in uniform he rebuked his older brother John for having chosen
a life of ease. “I hope you yesterday remembered us at home in your cups,” Charles wrote,

27 C.F. Adams, Jr., to C.F. Adams, Quincy, November 26, 1861, ibid., 73
after painting a bleak holiday of “mud and mire and rain.” Then, in response to criticisms that the army was not accomplishing enough Charles laid into his brother, “I may be wrong and hope I am. But Lord! How it vexes and amuses me to think how easy it is, after a full dinner, to sip your wine in the gas light, and look severely into a fine fire across the table, and criticize and find fault with us poor devils, at that very time preparing to lie down before our fires, mud to the middle, wet through, after a fine meal of hard bread and water….”  

Later, in the winter of 1863 Charles would defend himself against Henry’s suggestion that Charles’s life in the army might not be so “profitable.” “I feel within myself that I am more of a man…and I see in the behavior of those around me and in the faces of my friends, that I am a better fellow.” Then Charles addressed his hiatus from the life of letters. “You may say that my mind is lying fallow all this time. Perhaps, but after all the body has other functions than to carry round the head, and few years’ quiet will hardly injure a mind warped, as I sometimes suspect mine was, in time past by the too constant and close inspection of print.” Though he never would have believed it before the war, Charles felt at home sleeping in the wet fields. Again, tying this transformation to escaping his father’s control, Charles continued:

After being a regular, quiet, respectable stay-at-home body in my youth, lo! at twenty-seven I have discovered that I never knew myself and that nature meant me for a Bohemian—a vagabond. I am growing and developing here daily, but in such strange directions. Let not my father try to tempt me back into my office

28 C. F. Adams, Jr., to brother, John Quincy Adams, Potomac Bridge, Virginia, November 28, 1862, ibid., 197-98
and the routine of business, which now seems to sit like a terrible incubus on my past. No! he must make up his mind to that.\textsuperscript{29}

He certainly knew that his unvarnished descriptions of army life would cause his family to wince, and perhaps respond in kind. In a letter that must have felt like a slight dig, Henry from his cushioned parlor in London, decried the regrettable stories about soldiers succumbing to dirt, whiskey, and the vulgar spirit of “getting ahead.”\textsuperscript{30} But this was the world that Charles embraced by pawning off the one inhabited by his father. Feeling no aptitude for walking the (narrowing) path opened to him by birth, Charles thrust himself into the dark theatre of war—a place that disproportionately awarded muscularity, grit, and force over the life of the mind.

Early on Charles revealed other traits that more significantly parted from the course of his forefathers. Come April, while occupying an old slave plantation in Port Royal, South Carolina, Charles bragged that he commandeered a local “gang of niggers.” “I had ten slaves and drove by example.” With horse tied to a tree, pistols and coat thrown to the ground, “I, in heavy boots and spurs and my shirt sleeves, handled a spade by the side of my sable brethren…” “You wouldn’t have known me,” jested Charles.\textsuperscript{31} His family most certainly wondered how well they did know their son and brother. Letters flowed from the fields of Virginia to London, revealing young Adams’s attempt to remake his fortunes in the roily

\textsuperscript{29} C.F. Adams, Jr., to Henry Adams, Potomac River, Va., January 23, 1863, ibid., 237-42

\textsuperscript{30} Henry Adams to C.F. Adams, Jr., London, May 22, 1862, ibid., 151-52

\textsuperscript{31} C.F. Adams, Jr., to Henry Adams, Milne Plantation, Port Royal Island, Monday, April 6, 1862, ibid., 124-25
world of violence and promotion. But when Charles began sending extended, often vitriolic commentaries on the capabilities and prospects of black soldiers, the Adams kinsfolk—cut from abolitionist and anti-slavery cloth—found one among them was no longer with them—so far as sensibilities about African Americans went. Later in the war, with Adams-like concision, Henry articulated these personal sea changes brought on by the war. Responding to Charles’s promotion and reflecting on how both of them had come to learn in different ways that “promotion is not progress,” Henry wrote, “If we manage to get back to Quincy, we shall find that this scattering of our family has left curious marks on us.”32 For Charles, at least, these “marks” would never quite wash clean.33 After trading his fountain pen for a saber, and forsaking his staid life as a lawyer and an agent for his father, Charles’s three-and-a-half-year service would give him new eyes, and imprint itself on his succumbing body.

In the spring of 1864 Charles confided to Henry his truest ambitions and fears. In two months, Charles noted, he would turn twenty-eight, his father’s age when little Charles was born to him. He no longer had the luxury, as Henry did, to travel the world and mull over possibilities for the future. “My plans are altered little if any; it is only my way of

32 Henry Adams to C.F. Adams, Jr., London, September 25, 1863, Worthington Chauncey Ford and others, A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865, Vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920), Volume II, 87-88.; Henry’s experiences during the war were also life altering as he continually lapsed into self-loathing for not having enlisted in the Union army; He played with the idea of abandoning his position as his father’s secretary in London, and taking obtaining a commission; later he even toyed with the idea of heading up black troops, though Henry’s seemed much more sympathetic with emancipation and the arming of blacks.

33 For Henry too, though this is not within the scope of my paper, the war seemed to make deep impressions; he did not enlist, though he frequently expressed guilt for not having followed his older brother Charles into the ranks.
coming at them.” Charles claimed that his true calling was that of literature and politics; “I would be a philosophical statesmen if I could, and a literary politician if I must.” Charles just needed to find a way to “command attention” and secure a position of his own, a sort of stepping off point. He had already squandered one chance through his inglorious stint as a lawyer; “I must look for another.” “Why should not the army serve my turn—if I hang to it?” asked Charles. “Here is my support, leisure for reflection and promotion—two years would make me a Colonel almost surely and my very faculty with the pen will give me reputation as such, besides my chance of distinction as a soldier.” These are the kinds of ambitions that would later cause Charles to condemn his diaries to the fireplace. And though he descended from men who constructed their manhood through politics and erudition, Charles understood how manhood, politics and warfare cross-fertilized with one another in the antebellum mind.

But between 1863 and the fall of 1864, Adams came to realize that the war would likely not serve as his stepping stool into statesmanship. The way things had taken shape the military hardly promised to “cover his defeat.” Not only had Charles fruitlessly tried to make a name for himself through the army, he also began to feel like he was at the mercy of external forces—some of them benevolent, others deadly, all of them seemingly arbitrary. Some weeks after Gettysburg, when his division was engaged in “some futile movements” along the Rapidan, Charles’ regiment received orders to make themselves conspicuous to the enemy troops across the river. In other words Charles and his comrades were “designedly exposed and made to maneuver in the open, as a target” for Confederate artillery. As enemy

batteries “practiced upon” Charles and his comrades, he came undone. Hour upon hour they
sat on their horses, playing the target for the sake of gathering information on the enemy’s
whereabouts. One shell whizzed directly toward Charles’ face, missing him by a few feet,
hitting his comrade instead. Momentarily overcome by the blinding flash and burning
nostrils, he turned to see the unfortunate trooper who had just tumbled from his horse a
“mere lifeless bundle of clothes and jangling accoutrements.”

The randomness of destruction rattled him. The following afternoon Charles lay
demoralized in his tent—trying to pull his “shattered nervous system together.” As he dwelt,
not on the pride and pomp of war, but “its actualities and the vicissitudes” of exploding
shells and such, Charles was suddenly rescued from his depression by the unexpected visit of
his Harvard friend, then army officer, Theodore Lyman. This visit, Charles claimed later,
provided “fresh water” for someone sinking under the heat of the desert. And months later,
Lyman rescued Adams again. This time Adams’s camp had been captured by the enemy who
drove the Union soldiers off into the December cold without winter supplies. Adams nearly
froze during ensuing nights, sleeping without his blankets or overcoat, having only his
summer blouse. But he pulled a few wires and obtained permission to visit Army

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35 When Charles recounted this story nearly thirty-five years later he likened the afternoon to
the biblical story where the ancient prophet Joshua commanded the sun to stand still in order for the
Israelites to defeat their enemy. This is striking, not just because it is coming from a man who
claimed to have totally shed religious superstition and entered into a purely scientific phase, but also
because it again attributes certain qualities and strengths to his confederate enemies that he believed
no longer possible for modern Americans.
Headquarters where he sought out Lyman again, and through him secured (for himself, not his comrades) two heavy English blankets and a sleighing coat.\textsuperscript{36}

But if friends rescued Adams, he felt powerless to do the same. He had recently learned how suffering and death randomly picked off his closest comrades. Three weeks before Gettysburg he witnessed hell. Hoping to ascertain the whereabouts and intentions of Lee’s army, General Hooker sent his cavalry forces toward Aldie, Virginia where they unexpectedly clashed with enemy forces guarding a critical mountain gap. In the mayhem, confederate soldiers secured a stone wall, allowing them to pick off Adams’s regiment at will. His company, in particular, suffered staggering losses. Adams received orders to march into the teeth of the enemy, but soon realized he was leading his comrades to the grave. He ordered them to dismount and take cover in a small patch of woods, which ultimately pinned them in the crossfire.

Out of the fifty-seven active soldiers in his company, Adams lost thirty-two. “My poor men were just slaughtered and all we could do was to stand still and be shot down, while the other squadrons rallied behind us. The men fell right and left and the horses were shot through and through, and no man turned his back, but they only called on me to charge. I couldn’t charge, except across a ditch, up a hill and over two high stone walls, from behind which the enemy were slaying us….” When Confederate soldiers rushed in to crush Adams’ stunned soldiers, and at the same time decimated the Union regiment protecting Adams’s flank, Charles mounted his horse and darted from the slaughter. “Here I lost my

\textsuperscript{36} Lyman also probably pulled strings to secure Adams his promotion into the staff of the Army of the Potomac. See: Kirkland, "Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, the Patrician at Bay", 28; Charles Francis Adams, "December Meeting in 1897," Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, 1897-1899 (Second Series) XII (1897-99), 62-65.
missing men….In twenty minutes and without fault on our part I lost thirty two as good men and horses as can be found in the cavalry corps. They seemed to pick out my best and truest men, my pets and favorites. How and why I escaped I can’t say, for my men fell all around me…”37 Even in this small clash that would soon be totally eclipsed by Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Adams found how little control he had over the results, and the cruel lack of correlation between survival and being “true” or “favored.”

**Sleeping through Antietam**

Adams continually found himself at the cusp of momentous battles but rarely in the fray. In both Antietam and Gettysburg—arguably the two most famous battles of the war, then and now—Charles came within inches of taking his place in history. But, as he freely admitted in his final years, he did not take part in “the fierce agony of battle at its height”; instead he waited on the sidelines until he was lulled into “two exceedingly refreshing naps.” He snoozed through Antietam, “that veritable charnel-house,” where he lay on a hillside staring into the “furious artillery duel” thundering above. The deadening thumps slowly turned into lullabies. The next summer, Charles again found himself dismounted with his

37 This quote comes from a penciled letter from Charles to his brother John back home in Massachusetts. Charles Frances Adams, Jr., to John Quincy Adams, Middleburg, Va., 10 A.M., Friday, June 19, 1863, Ford and others, "A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865", Volume II, 37-37

comrades as they listened with anticipation for the impending clash at Gettysburg. It was midday July 3 when cannonades suddenly broke the tension; it was the artillery fire that covered Pickett’s immortalized advance into Meade’s forces. Just then, “lulled by the incessant roar of the cannon, while the fate of the army and the nation trembled in the balance, at the very crisis of the great conflict,” Charles “dropped quietly asleep.” He was merely a cog in the wheel (as Adams would come to view all officers not involved in central planning); Paralyzed by the rationalized and often inert sprawl of large-scale military operations, he waited for his chance. But in Gettysburg, just as Antietam, “orders never came.”

The battle of Fredicksburg in the winter of 1862 had played out in similar ways. Though Adams stayed awake, he found himself just on the outskirts of the conflict, reading the poetry of Browning by his campfire. Weeks after Fredicksburg, in the final days of 1862, Adams received orders to head up a small detachment along with another group of “carefully armed” men, and select horses. Clearly, Charles thought, “something was on foot.” While advancing to his unknown destination Adams learned from his Major that they were heading directly for Warrenton, Virginia where they would find and capture two unsuspecting companies of rebel cavalry. Adams winked at his Major and then darted to the rear where he immediately swapped his mare for a “heavy old working brute.” As Adams


rode through the freezing rain he rejoiced: “for once I really believed we were going to do something and my spirits rose accordingly.”

But that especially dark night, after the moon had sunk below the timberline, Adams’s detachment lost their trail, losing the advance guard—forcing the column to retrace its steps back to the Junction. Unable to make up for lost time, the union soldiers reached Warrenton well behind schedule. Adams’s men followed close on the heels of the advance forces as they raced toward the town. But as they drew close, Adams began to “smell a rat.” In vain he waited for the first shots to be fired between the approaching union troopers and the surprised rebel forces. The confederate cavalrymen, though, had long since departed. Charles missed his chance, and with humiliation galloped through the town through flocks of curious civilians who looked upon the tardy soldiers like a traveling circus show. Charles confided to his mother that the troopers felt like fools as they sloped back toward their camps.40 Making things worse Charles learned soon after returning that some two hours after his men fruitlessly searched and then abandoned the town, the elusive forces of Jeb Stuart and Robert E. Lee temporarily converged in the same streets.

Just a week later Charles found himself once again in the saddle trudging through marshes in the frost and moonlight. This time Adams’s men had orders to find and destroy some confederate bridges. Again, Charles’s column got lost in the dark. He groped aimlessly until he heard the sound of axes hacking away at the bridge. “This was,” Charles groaned in his letter to his mother, “the greatest humbug of all.” The confederate “bridge” turned out to be nothing more than a “miserable little culvert about three yards long, on which some

40 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his mother, Potomac Run, Va., January 2, 1863, ibid., 225-28
twenty destroyers were at work.” “We had come with artillery and cavalry and infantry, through rain and snow and ice, without shelter or forage, all the way up here to cut up a miserable little culvert which ten men could rebuild in five hours.” In “amused despair” Charles watched from his saddle as the men fumbled over themselves with fine-tuned incompetence. After heading back to camp the party chanced upon a “real bridge”; it dawned upon all that they had just destroyed the wrong structure. This time the men made quick work, but Adams, as he confessed to his mother, “felt like a fool. It was a small job and badly done; slight resistance would have turned us back and I haven’t as yet gotten over an old prejudice against going round destroying property which no one tries to protect.”

Charles then suggested that the bridge fiasco would be manufactured into a “newspaper success—‘dashing raid’ and all that….” He had grown disgruntled with the ways in which paper reports braided the war in ways that pandered to the clamors and romantic visions of the home front. Charles imagined himself as a pawn in a sweeping drama that was authored and largely altered through the collusion of incompetent generals (in this case Joe Hooker) and journalists hunting for headlines. Adams estimated that the same mission could have been accomplished with half the men, and in half the time:

But no! that wouldn’t answer for political effect, and so the sledge is brought out to crush the fly, and infantry, artillery and cavalry are paraded out in the depth of winter to burn a bridge which no one used or means to use….The thing amounted to nothing, was very badly done after no end of blunders and mismanagement, and was and is intended solely for political effect and about as

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41 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his mother, Camp of 1st Mass. Cavalry, Potomac Run, Va., January 8, 1863, ibid., 229-31
much bearing on the ends of the war as would be burning a Neponset Bridge or our barn at Quincy…\textsuperscript{42}

It was no accident that Charles dedicated such an inordinate amount of space and spleen to the seemingly trivial bridge incident. It perfectly symbolized his frustration with a war that had become a performance for the press and that smothered the talents of the up and coming. At that moment it was “Joe Hookerism and wire pulling.” Later it would be the politically motivated and equally murderous bungling of Ben Butler, who along with other officers Adams referred to as the “drunk-murdering-arson dynasty.”\textsuperscript{43} Locked into the relatively low rank of captain, Adams grew jealous of his superiors. Not only did their incompetence snuff out lives and mask potential genius, their rank empowered them to almost literally write the story of the war.

This kind of frustration had been building for some time. No less than a year into his service Adams first glimpsed the ways in which, as he saw it, the war would be told and remembered. In a minor skirmish around Sharpsburg, Adams and his troopers galloped into the town, thinking they were backing up fellow Union troops under fire. As he and his men rushed in along side the troopers of the Illinois cavalry, Adams excitedly drew his pistol. But then, to his disgust, he immediately caught on to the ruse. Far from rebels resisting tooth and nail, he found streets lined with sympathetic civilians. Women waved handkerchiefs, “hailing us with delight as liberators,” as they helped slake thirsts by hurrying water into the

\textsuperscript{42} C.F. Adams, Jr., to his mother, Camp of 1\textsuperscript{st} Mass. Cavalry, Potomac Run, Va., January 8, 1863, ibid., 232

\textsuperscript{43} He personally blamed General Butler for the death of tens of thousands of soldiers; Other generals he mentioned were Joseph Hooker, Daniel Sickles, and Daniel Butterfield.
soldiers’ hands. Though Colonel Farnsworth and his men were “cracking away” with their carbines, giving “the idea of a sharp engagement in process,” the whole thing had been a “newspaper battle”—engineered to seize real estate in local papers throughout the Union under headings like “a cavalry charge” or a “sharp skirmish.” “Lots of glory,” fumed Adams, “but n’ary a reb.”  

44 His father worked daily to mold opinion in Britain, while his younger brother regularly published articles about the war in prominent papers in New York, Massachusetts and London. Yet Charles came to feel like a prop in the hands of unprincipled journalists and their military accomplices.  

Significantly, it is in the handful of letters addressed to his mother that Charles released all this spleen about the false face of war. And it was his mother whom Charles first reprimanded for apparently buying into the romantic newspaper reports. He complained how civilians knew so little about “non-fighting details of waste and suffering of war.” He once dismissed the accounts of “dashing celerity” of cavalry raids under the famed General Stoneman and others, and then spun into an unusually long letter, graphically depicting the ways in which he was forced to methodically grind his horses into their graves. The nastiness of war required it. Later on he warned her not to believe the stories about general Pleasonton: “He is pure and simple a newspaper humbug. You always see his name in the papers, but to us who have served under him and seen him under fire he is notorious as a  

44 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his mother, Sharpsburg, Md., September 25, 1862, ibid., 185-87  

45 If it is the case that CFA, at first, only revealed this side of war to his mother it is worth asking why this might be. It couldn’t be that she alone in CFA’s family imbibed the newspaper reports with perfect credulity; Henry seemed to believe what he read as well; and so did Adams’s father, as neither of these men had military experience. What this does suggest is that CFA seemed to be more comfortable telling his mother how reputations of great men were often a product of artifice.
bully and a toady. He does nothing save with a view to a newspaper paragraph. At Antietam he sent his cavalry into a hell of artillery fire and himself got behind a bank and read a newspaper.... 

Some weeks later, Henry wrote Charles in response to the crushing news of Hooker's defeat at Chancellorsville, charging his brother and the Union army to respond with action: “We want continual, feverish activity, and that is all. Worry them with cavalry raids!...Let them have no rest, no hope!”

From Charles’s end of things, though, this kind of public lust for continual action only compounded the problem of “newspaper battles” and generals plotting deadly clashes even as they played to a national audience. Not until late ’63, when, evidently, Adams, Sr. queried why his son’s regiment never made the papers, did Charles grouse to his father about his invisibility in the papers. “As for looking for this regiment in the papers—God forbid you should find it! Certain regiments are always in the papers.” Assuring his father that seasoned soldiers uniformly scoffed at the yarns in the papers, he disingenuously claimed that, “for myself I do not care ever to see my regiment’s or my own name mentioned outside of the official documents of the Army.”

Yet, by the summer of 1864 Charles yearned to be noticed and felt he had sacrificed too much to exit the war unrewarded. Rank would give Charles the leverage to shape and

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46 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his mother, Camp of 1st Mass. Cav’y, Potomac Creek, May 12, 1863, Ford and others, “A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865”, Volume II, 3-8


48 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his father, Picket near Warrenton, Va., November 22, 1863, ibid., Volume II, 103-05
oversee battlefield heroics. It would allow him to lay down colossal wagers—betting everything on a few moments of battlefield prowess. Such bets made American legends from common clay. And such bets, he believed, could help an undistinguished soldier live up to his august family name.

Adams originally drifted toward war after weighing issues of commitment to cause, desire for stimulus, hunger for status, and duty to family. He also wanted to break loose from his father’s sway and the profession that was killing him by degrees. Images of his own physique transformed before the mirror and capturing glory in the midst of his peers had originally pulled him into the fray. With time however, the desire for military distinction brought his divergent reasons for joining into focus as his hunger to “command the right line of a regiment” forced Adams to shelve certain allegiances.

Though he entered the service with the modest commission of First Lieutenant (the second lowest Army commission), he would return nearly three-and-a-half years later a brevetted Brigadier General. Though Charles later downplayed his desire for improved rank, his letters suggested otherwise. Evidently in the first days of the war Governor Andrew and R.H. Dana promised Charles significantly more important commissions; it is not clear, then, why Charles later accepted such a lowly starting point.\(^4\) Perhaps he burned bridges by passing up the first crop of patronage. His letters to Henry, in particular, betrayed Charles’s desire for promotion: “I shall get mine…” he once wrote, referring to how some of his

\(^4\) C.F. Adams, Jr. to his father, Quincy, May 27, 1861 and Boston, June 10, 1861, ibid., 6, 9-10
comrades gained promotion through battlefield heroics. In 1862, after watching his first summer come and go with little glory, Charles groused that he had nothing to show for his sweat at Hilton Head: “thus ends my first campaign, and hasn’t it been a failure!—a failure personally and publicly….Here I am just where I started. I have seen nothing but the distant spires of Charleston and have not been promoted.”

Though he did achieve the rank of captain in his first regiment (First Massachusetts Cavalry), Charles ultimately skipped rungs by strapping himself to a regiment of black soldiers—something that would require ideological acrobatics for Adams—as he tried to harmonize a heart part sympathetic to his anti-slavery roots, part overcome by increasing “anti-negro” sentiment within his ranks. The Union did not use black soldiers in earnest until the last half of the war. Like Adams, the vast majority of officers in the colored regiments had been initiated to war alongside white soldiers who often hailed from a common region. And like Adams, many chose to leave old comrades for higher rank. Thus, thousands of white officers, like Adams—or Cole, Dollard, Fox—ended their service for the nation separated from their regional comrades—with significantly elevated rank, commanding and fighting alongside ex-slaves and freedmen.

It wasn’t until the summer of 1864 that Adams admitted to his brother he was entertaining the idea of heading up a black regiment. Some weeks earlier, for the first time,

50 C.F. Adams, Jr., to Henry Adams, Boston, December 10, 1861 and December 19, 1861, ibid., 80, 86

51 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his father, At Sea, Steam Transport McClellan, August 22, 1862, ibid., 175-76.
he laid eyes on colored troops around Petersburg, probably from the Army of the James. Though they had just finished participating in another of Butler’s botched attempts to take the city, Adams assured his father that “the darkies fought ferociously.”52 But Charles’s sentiments towards African Americans had not always been so generous.

During the early stages of war, when Henry suggested that Charles was an out-and-out abolitionist, Charles mailed off three articles that he had recently written, adding that “I imagine they will not meet your and my father’s views….”53 Apparently the articles did not make his case as clearly as Charles hoped. The next summer (1862), Major General David Hunter, a driven abolitionist, declared the emancipation of slaves in Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida. He then rounded up ex-slaves in the Carolina islands, some at gunpoint, and armed them for combat against their rebel masters. When Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War, demanded a full explanation, Hunter responded with a somewhat provocative report that he was not conscripting fugitive slaves so much as helping the poor abandoned souls find their “fugitive masters.”54 Elated by the letter, Henry wrote Charles, “I congratulate your general Hunter on his negro-army letter. We all here sustain him….” In the next letter to his father, though, Charles expressed deep reservations: “Our ultra-friends, including General Hunter, seem to have gone crazy and they are doing the blacks all the harm they can…. General

52 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his father, H.Q. Army of Potomac, Before Petersburg, Va., June 19, 1864, ibid., Volume II, 128-56

53 Henry Adams to C. F. Adams, Jr., London, October 15, 1861 and C.F. Adams, Jr., to Henry Adams, Boston, November 5, 1861, ibid., 58, 64

54 Glatthaar, "Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers", 6-7; Berlin, Reidy and Rowland, "The Black Military Experience", 50-53
Hunter is so carried away by his idea of a negro regiments as, not only to write flippant letters…but even to order their exemption from all fatigue duty.”

That same day he fired off a more barbed response to Henry. “General Hunter is very unpopular—arbitrary and wholly taken up with his negro question. His one regiment is a failure, and becoming more so, and I have no faith in the experiment anyhow.” Charles claimed he laughed at Henry’s passing suggestion that Charles take a commission over black soldiers. After Charles’s untiring “assertion of principles,” and his diatribes against slavery, he asked incredulously why he would then “become a ‘nigger driver’” in his old age. In other words, why would he command a band of soldiers who could not fight efficiently, or for the right reasons, given that many of them, like slaves, were cowed into obedient toil? Adams’ principles informed his belief that blacks must first be taught to work willingly, for—and for Adams, this was its worst crime—slavery leached from southern society its vital supply of skills, motivation, ingenuity and work ethic. Slavery stultified all parties involved because it allowed a society to take the guise of an open market without providing the cleansing agent of unfettered competition.

The same principles that led Charles to condemn slavery, then, led him to decry the excusing of black soldiers from fatigue duty. “No! Hunter and you are all wrong,” he continued, “the Negroes should be organized and officered as soldiers; they should have arms put in their hands and be drilled simply with a view to their moral elevation and the effect of self-respect, and for the rest they should be used as fatigue duty.”

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Charles’s response reflected the general sentiment within the union ranks. When Lincoln’s administration forced Hunter to abort his experiment, Charles reported that the news was “hailed here with great joy, for our troops have become more anti-negro than I could have imagined.” Like many of his comrades, Adams thought that blacks should be used to help in the war, but not at the cost of pushing ex-slaves beyond their immediate abilities and inflaming the enemy in the process. For some time he had preached that the experiment of arming blacks was doomed to fail. It was the inattention to the “the education of these poor people” that Charles most regretted. “But, for myself, I could not help feeling a strong regret at seeing the red-legged darkies march off.” \(^{56}\) Adams looked to reform the race but believed it could never happen through militarizing them.\(^{57}\)

As the war dragged on, however, and the unsatisfied soldier began casting about for ways to make something of himself, he willingly bet his military career on the very idea that once repulsed him. When Adams came to see how impossible it had become to fashion his own future just as he willed it, he set his gaze on the lowliest of Americans hoping to remake them, and himself in the process. Yet, for Adams, as for most officers among the African-American regiments, race both provided and complicated the ascent. For Charles, race would make his military climax play out like ruination. In his final moments in uniform, he found himself flush with the accoutrements of promotion, yet surrounded by black soldiers who confounded the logic and measure of his military advancement.

\(^{56}\) C.F. Adams, Jr., to his father, Hilton Head, S.C., August 10, 1862, ibid., 174-75

\(^{57}\) He would later claim his decision to enlist was “the time when I resolved to burst the bonds, and strike out into the light from the depth of the darkness.” See: Adams, *The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams*, 126
After the autumn of ’63, Adams’s letters grew increasingly despondent. With the growing list of failed attempts to take Richmond, he doubted that the confederate capital would fall. Comparing the Union army to a man fighting for his life with one hand tied behind his back, he claimed the army could not protect Washington and take Richmond at the same time. The war had reduced the cavalry horses into a “collection of crow’s bait.” His superiors were wholly inept, and all too ready to commit troops to needless danger.58 In early 1864 he took a leave before reenlisting; he visited his family in England and returned to uniform in April. But soon old vexations returned. When bad blood boiled over between Adams and his regimental superiors, Charles used connections to extricate himself from impending clash of wills.

It is likely that Charles sought out his Harvard crony, Theodore Lyman, in order too get his (Charles’s) company detached from the First Massachusetts Cavalry. After Charles “made one little effort, just pulled one little wire,” Lyman (who served at the time as a special assistant to General Meade) secured for Adams and his company escort duty at the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac.59 There Adams rubbed up against the most dignified names in the Union army during the drive through “the wilderness” and the Petersburg siege. But still Charles held the rank of captain, and though close to the brain of Union planning, often felt like the last to know. Adams had also begun to feel the effects of


59 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his father, Camp of the 5th Mass. Cav’y, Point Lookout, Md., December 31, 1864, ibid., Volume II, 239-40
years of incessant feeding on hardtack, poorly prepared meat, and daily portions of black coffee, often by the quart. Of greater consequence, that summer Adams encamped with his soldiers in low, wet grounds where malarial mosquitoes feasted off his blood. All the while his company tarried along the Appomattox riverbanks where rotting animal carcasses poisoned the waters.\textsuperscript{60}

Sometime during his service as an escort to Meade, Adams learned that Massachusetts, in order to fill its federal quota, had begun recruiting ex-slaves and freedmen in order to form the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry. From one side of his mouth he muttered how he had grown tired of war; from the other he confessed his greater hope that by harnessing black soldiers he could secure “as much of a future before [him]” as he was equal to. He had grown tired of orderly duty and, though he claimed he did not seek promotion, he thought commanding a colored regiment would “prove an interesting study.”\textsuperscript{61} In July 1864 Adams accepted the “unsought” offer to be Lieutenant Colonel in the Fifth—two full grades above his current rank. Doing so brought him into General Butler’s controversial army, and made him fellow colonel in the Colored Cavalry with George Cole. When his commission came to hand in August, Adams—on the mend after a bout of malaria and jaundice—buoyantly proclaimed to his mother, “I shall join my colored brethren.”\textsuperscript{62}

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\textsuperscript{60} Kirkland, "Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, the Patrician at Bay", 28-9; Adams, "The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams", 156-57
\textsuperscript{61} ibid., 163
\end{flushright}
What ultimately made Adams consider leading armed black men is not perfectly clear. As he claimed, his old regiment had become “embittered and poisoned.” It is also probable that Charles felt he could not secure a higher rank under superiors who inspected his every move. And despite his repeated claims to the contrary, Charles cared deeply about rank and reputation. In their cycle of missives, Charles, Henry, and their father, regularly penned scathing or adulatory summaries and assessments of war generals and their battlefield exploits. For example, later that fall, after Sherman’s march to the sea, Henry—who could boast of a prodigious grasp on history and literature—confided “I have as much faith in Sherman as I have in any individual of ancient or modern history or mythology....” And when Charles wrote his father about Sherman’s conquest of Atlanta, the son claimed to be on the verge of tears when he read daily reports about the general’s “boldness, the caution, the skill, the judgment, the profound military experience....” He admitted that while Sherman’s strategies and brilliance paled compared to what had transpired at Vicksburg, Atlanta’s fall had all the attributes of poetry: “with its unheard lines of supply and unceasing opposition, it rolls along like a sonorous epic.” Though he read some early criticisms in the papers about Sherman’s tactics, Adams reasoned, “I only look at the campaign in an artistic point of view, as a poem. So viewed, to my mind it is perfect.”63

Adams certainly craved this power to orchestrate war violence. He came to see that promotion alone could pacify him so long as climbing ranks was also accompanied by danger and glory—and the power to control his own fate. He made this clear when after

finding that his black regiment would neither have horses, nor move to the front (the Fifth kept guard at Point Lookout prison), he exploited personal connections to secure private meetings with Union dignitaries like Grant, Meade, Halleck, and Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Adams knew that the government would not supply his troopers with fresh horses so he entered “the holy of holies” to beg for worn animals. He argued that his men could rehabilitate the horses while they continued their guard duty at Point Lookout. As the unseasoned soldiers “built up” the horses, Adams would build up his men for combat. Just two summers earlier Adams dogmatically opposed using black soldiers for anything but digging and hauling; now they deserved to siphon horses from a shrinking supply; now they deserved a crack at military distinction.

Though the war clearly pushed toward its end, getting his black soldiers mounted and into the front would allow him to compose a few final stanzas in the American Iliad. This is partly why, when a Major General from another corps offered Adams the position of Assistant Inspector General, “generally considered the highest on the Staff—in a Corps it carries with it the rank of Lieutenant Colonel,” Adams eventually declined, though he originally decided to accept the offer. He claimed it was a position he “formerly greatly coveted” and in his letters he half-convincingly spun it as a “new and more influential life.”65 He would be closer to the brain of military activity than ever before. But when Adams unexpectedly received a letter in February 1865 informing him that the colonel of the Fifth had resigned (possibly to salvage a broken marriage), making Adams a full colonel, the

64 See various letters in ibid., Volume II, 182-189

65 C.F. Adams to his father, Boston, January 30, 1865, ibid., Volume II, 249-52
grandson of John Quincy Adams opted to stick with his regiment. As he later described it, “I was rising surfaceward, corklike.”

Perhaps because of this windfall, and as a way to reconcile his thoughts with his new duty, Adams temporarily cast off many of his earlier doubts about black soldiers. When he first took command of black troops he fantasized setting up a model for reengineering the black race. And during the final winter of the war he schemed up a “philanthropic plan for the race” where besides being a war machine, the army would become a “school of skilled labor.” Every year fifteen to twenty thousand black citizens would be sent to army camps where they would learn from master craftsmen.

Adams, though, quickly grew frustrated. His plans to make his soldiers both artisans and warriors proved to be somewhat quixotic. He could not perfectly reconcile his own camp experiences with his new mission to remake the race. He occasionally ridiculed blacks’ skills as craftsmen, complaining one time that he could not find a “tolerable” blacksmith though he had seven hundred horses. By winter, though, he soured considerably—succumbing to darker ideas. Still stationed on the Maryland peninsula where his men kept guard, built houses, and dug wells, Adams complained of the “low, sandy, malarious, fever-smitten, wind-blown, God-forsaken” land where he and his men “stagnated.” Vicksburg, Gettysburg, Shiloh—these words commanded reverence at pulpits and over broken bread. Point Lookout, Adams realized, amounted to little more than an overcrowded stockade that

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drew haggard prisoners—not glory—from battles like Gettysburg. And while he oversaw the remaking of men this was scarcely what he imagined.68

The prison pens of Point Lookout—one of the worst Union prison-of-war facilities—held young men, old soldiers, some men of refinement, and “pure white trash,” converting them all into “one cut-throat throng.”69 Instead of leading troopers into battle, his men stood atop fifteen-foot fences, guarding pitiable rebel prisoners at rifle point, occasionally picking off the “deluded” who wandered too close to the line. His new assignment caused his mother to wince when, in one letter, Adams described the eighty to one hundred coffins that formed a pile at the main entrance, ready to facilitate the prison’s rapid turnover. Somewhat out of indignation, he told his mother that her “sympathies were unduly excited….If the sight of a pile of coffins is going to shock a man he’d better keep out of the Army.” This was not the poetic violence that periodically moved him and his family. It fell pathetically short of his plans to recast the black race, or even himself.70

In this state he confessed his mind increasingly gave way to “inborn convictions” that were admittedly “not the result of reflection.” Slaves, he concluded, must have been relatively happy. As slavery countered “the spirit of modern progress and civilization,” black men, who Adams came to believe possessed the spirit of the lowest order of animals, must have found relative fulfillment under the lash. Perhaps revealing darker scenes within his

68 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his father, H.Q. 5th Mass. Cav’y, Point Lookout, Md., November 2, 1864, ibid., Volume II, 212-19

69 Lause, “Turning the World Upside Down: A Portrait of Labor and Military Leader, Alonzo Granville Draper”, 196-98

70 C.F. Adams, Jr., to his mother, Camp of 5th Mass. Cav’y, Point Lookout, Md., January 8, 1865, Ford and others, "A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865", Volume II, 244-46
camp, Adams argued that they “cannot be tortured into resistance to oppression.” The eviscerating hand of slavery had left “the race, as a whole, not overworked, well fed and contented—greedy animals!”

It is essential to understand, though, that when Adams cast judgment on his soldiers, he envisioned himself similar to a physician taking the pulse of sick men. Adams believed that in time, ex-slaves could be rehabilitated, if rescued from slavery and inculcated with the work ethic that supposedly undergirded free labor ideology. Anything that could be said about the black race had to be understood as the product of two centuries of slavery. Slavery had made the race, but freedom, education and labor would remake it.

It was Adam’s earnestness in assessing the damage of slavery (along with the increasing American belief in rigid, stable racial categories) that made him pen letters with crosswise conclusions. Adams conceded that blacks made fierce soldiers when they marched in hordes; but they lacked the individuality to excel as cavalrymen. Left alone, he argued, the black soldier folded. “A sick nigger, for instance, at once gives up and lies down to die, the personification of humanity reduced to a wet rag. He cannot fight for life like a white man. In this regiment if you degrade a negro who has once tried to do well, you had better shoot him at once, for he gives up and never attempts to redeem himself.” Yet Adams constantly hedged his condemnation of black soldiers, often fumbling or contradicting himself within the same letter. In one paragraph blacks lacked a sense for craftsmanship, in another, he praised them for engineering well-water pumps and evincing “no little ingenuity and skilled labor.” In one passage black soldiers evinced the supine nature of animals or logs. Lines later, “you cannot realize the industry, versatility and ingenuity called forth…every blacksmith, every carpenter, every shoemaker, every tailor and every clerk is constantly busy, and those who can do nothing else dig and carry until they can do something better.” In one
letter blacks personified wet rags, in another, he praised them, claiming that as soldiers they “were inferior to none, if indeed not the best in the world.”

Adams believed blacks, crushed by slavery, operated outside the channels of progress, industry and merit. For this alone he despised them. Yet he alone secured them horses and pushed to send them into the teeth of combat. He at least partially believed that they could be molded and taught to follow the script written by their new colonel. Because remaking black men had become enmeshed with the making of himself, he wrote schizophrenically, swinging widely from cursings to praise. Their behavior in battle would reflect light on the merit of their leader—and offer him the distinction he prized. But when Adams sensed he himself had drifted from the orbit of progress and merit and that his contribution to the epic’s ending would be reduced to footnotes (or ridicule), his scornful humanitarianism devolved into naked malice.

Richmond at Last!

In the first days of April, with confederate defeat imminent, Adams for the first time received orders to move his regiment to the front. His men suddenly needed to slough off the stasis of camp life and form a limber fighting line. Chaotic scenes ensued as the regiment cut loose surplus baggage, drew new arms, and trudged toward the front (just outside Richmond) knee-deep in mud. It must have seemed providential when Adams found himself positioned on the cusp of the falling confederate capital. The day before, on April 2, rebel

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71 To see Adams’s often contradictory assessments see various letters in: ibid., Volume II, 190-91, 194-95, 199, 205, 153, 215-16, 218, 233
lines finally stretched to breaking points, forcing General Lee to pull troops out of Petersburg and Richmond. That day a message from Lee reached Jefferson Davis while the latter sat in Sunday worship, warning him that it was “absolutely necessary” to immediately flee the falling capital. The prior evening, many from the Virginia Legislature had fled Richmond via the James River and Kanahwa Canal. Knowing he would need to follow their lead, Davis gathered his cabinet, some half-million dollars in gold and furtively fled to Danville by rail. Just as confederate directives ordered, fleeing armies set flame to warehouses all along the river in the southeastern corner of the city; from across the James River one could see the cotton and tobacco warehouses pulsing with fire. By nightfall, Confederate deserters and criminals who sprung themselves from jail crowded the streets where winds sent scraps of burning paper and red embers swirling overhead; mingled with smoke, one could smell the vast quantities of liquor poured into the streets (because of a last minute order by the city council to avoid mayhem).

In the early morning hours of April 3, rebels blew up their own ironclads anchored downriver, sending them to the riverbed where loads of artillery were dumped days earlier. Meanwhile on the north side of the city an exploding powder magazine sent off a jolt; these concussions pounded the city just around the time the first rays of daylight gave shape to the black plume hanging over Richmond, through which the sun shone like an “immense ball of blood.” Fleeing confederate troops set fire to the bridge over the James. Before the eyes of approaching soldiers the symbolic center of confederate order and rule—the center of its
government, armies and production of munitions—plummeted into mayhem. Adams, one of these soldiers, was now poised to make a grab at glory.72

In the early morning of the third, with his guts in a knot, Adams began leading some of the first troops into Richmond. He feared his men were not up to the task. Cramped parade grounds at Point Lookout had forced the Fifth to unnaturally compress its regimental drills. Though it drilled with hurdles and practiced “running at heads” (slicing off simulated heads of hay), the regiment’s sabers arrived only three months previously. Neither did the entire regiment have horses. Most troubling, the Fifth’s troopers continued to have guard duty at the prison every other day. His “cavalrymen” had spent equal time off the horse. When Adams did push to tighten up the regiment through intense drilling, his troops and fellow officers soon resisted, complaining of his condescending “catechizing.”73

Along with his greenhorn regiment Adams inherited command over an ad hoc body of detachments, a “miscellaneous brigade” that lacked staff and organization. Chaotically forging forward in early daylight, he led more than a thousand mounted men, galloping four abreast, toward the prized city. They swept past the final deserted trenches, forts and earthworks—many of them built with the sweat of slaves. Meals still simmered over fires. At a frenetic pace the soldiers crossed the river and cut into the city. They trotted through Richmond’s streets toward the town square, thronged by huge crowds of blacks “frantic with


73 Warner, “Crossed Sabres: A History of the Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry, an African-American Regiment in the Civil War,” 380-89, 411
joy” as they shouted hallelujahs, planting kisses on the horses and legs of the mounted soldiers. In the background, Richmond’s business sector and more than a dozen city blocks burned into the sky as tens of thousands of shells exploded inside the burning arsenals. The Petersburg and Danville rail depots, various foundries, flour and paper mills, all the banks, some of the hotels, many shops, and most of the government offices around Capitol Square burned to charred rubble. Risking the flames, some barely escaping, citizens hauled sofas, beds, carpets, baby toys, and European mirrors to the Capitol Square greens. Amid this chaos one confederate woman caught her first glimpse of an invading Union soldier. It was almost certainly one of Adams’s black troopers—atop his horse, yelling with swelled lungs, “Richmond at Last!”

Within hours, bells pealed and markets shut down throughout the North. Baltimore’s mayor ordered every bell in the city to ring. In Philadelphia fire companies raced the streets, clanging siren bells, waving banners, steam throttles screaming. In Washington, a massive crowd flocked to the War Department, brandishing captured rebel flags and cheering as Secretary Stanton announced the latest intelligence coming down the line. (When they really liked the news they hollered until he agreed to read it again.) Foreign ministers from all over Europe began telegraphing congratulations into the State Department.

74 Much of this information is drawn from, ibid., 403-408; Weitzel and Manarin, “Richmond Occupied: Entry of the United States Forces into Richmond, Va., April 3, 1865”, 52

75 Warner, “Crossed Sabres: A History of the Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry, an African-American Regiment in the Civil War.”, 406-08
Throughout the Union, public revelry and emotional displays crested into the night and small hours of the next day.\footnote{The Evening Post. April 3, 1865.}

On the morning of April 3, Adams marched into Richmond and onto a national stage where the final act had been anxiously anticipated.\footnote{It has been debated ever since whether black soldiers actually were the first Union soldiers to set foot in Richmond; there are compelling reasons to believe both sides of the story. Some accounts claim that blacks (perhaps Adams's men) were about to enter the city first when at the last moment they were forced to yield to a white regiment. See: Weitzel and Manarin, "Richmond Occupied: Entry of the United States Forces into Richmond, Va., April 3, 1865", 10; Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 298-300; Irvine, "The Fall of Richmond: Evacuation and Occupation", 76-77} To his father he gloriéd “to have led my regiment into Richmond at the moment of its capture is the one event which I should most have desired as the culmination of my life in the Army.” In the eleventh hour, Adams felt he had finally “rounded” and “completely filled out” his war record. He would no longer have to suffer the occasional jokes about the thinning talents of John Adams’ posterity. Both Charles Jr. and his father had for too long endured the occasional comments about “sharp decline” and the accompanying “sneering laughs.”\footnote{“Sharp decline” quoted from Charles Francis Adams, Jr., in Daniel J. Boorstin and Ruth Frankel Boorstin, Hidden History, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 44.} His father proclaimed it a “singular circumstance that you, in the fourth generation of our family, under the Union and the constitution, should have been the first to put [his] foot in the capital of the Ancient Dominion, and that, too, at the head of a corps” which symbolized the demise of slavepower and its policies. For a heady moment Charles and his generation became redeemers, the revolutionary generation mere forerunners: “It is literally the third and fourth
generation which is paying the bitter penalty for what must now be admitted were the shortcomings of the original founders of the Union,” bragged Charles.\textsuperscript{79}

Though general mayhem persisted and buildings burned as poor whites and slaves “pillaged freely,” the Fifth helped restore order for the next three days, arresting rebel soldiers and fanning out to picket Richmond’s roads. “All through the occupation” bragged Adams, “the behavior of our Army has been wonderful. I have not seen or heard of any riot, blood-shed or violence.” Soon after though, Adams learned that though he was “in just the right place and at just the right time,” he had yoked himself to the wrong people. Being black, or associated with it, invited sudden reversals in fortune. Windfalls often led to a swift kick to the teeth. Two weeks after the Richmond “culmination,” Adams received notice of his arrest for “allowing [his] command to straggle and maraud.” Adams indignantly obeyed orders and departed for headquarters where he found himself “utterly forgotten,” waiting two weeks for trial at Fort Monroe as the war came to an end. He hurried off letters of protest. He received no replies. He growled to his kin that he was “in fact, buried alive.”\textsuperscript{80}

After Adams obtained release in late May he immediately returned to Richmond. Upon arrival he discovered that his accusers “had all gone off at half-cock on a parcel of verbal complaints of citizens against my regiment, and now they only had blind wrath to show, and lots of it, but neither facts nor evidence.” He demanded facts from his soldiers; they insisted the accusations were groundless. Adding salt to his wounds, Adams learned that


\textsuperscript{80} C.F. Adams, Jr., to John Quincy Adams, H.Q. 5\textsuperscript{th} Mass. Cav’y, May 2, 1865, ibid., Volume II, 267-69
the day before his release the Fifth had been thoroughly investigated “with a view to
smashing it and me generally.” It was here perhaps that Adams’ eyes partially opened; his
sudden plummet from grace gave the lie to the very myths that lured him into the army. The
war controlled him, not the other way around. Paradoxically, the war at different times both
magnified and subverted his elite connections in civil life; he had pulled wires, only to find
they pulled back. Despite his best efforts to convert his presidential bloodline into battlefield
heroics, or his desire to shape or compose the war to his designs, the converging whirlwinds
of race and war had set his imagined world on its head. He had become a marked man.
“Gradually a noticeable change took place in my position,” he noted, “I became an ill-used,
injured man to whom redress was due.”

Sometime in late April, Adams received orders to encamp his soldiers along the
James, probably as a way to keep his accused soldiers away from the city. And in early May,
just as many black soldiers feared, the Fifth along with much of the Twenty-Fifth Corps
(consisting entirely of black soldiers) received orders to encamp at Light House Point,
Virginia (Camp Lincoln), in preparation for a new assignment in Texas. Once in garrison, the
screws tightened—the soldiers endured what must have seemed like meaningless drilling and
enforced uniform codes. They had to wear dress jackets, keep boots blackened, polish brass,
and keep their beards trimmed. But the increased discipline was not a way to prepare the
haggard black soldiers for the approaching grand review in Washington, D.C.—the Twenty-
Fifth Corps and the Army of the James would not be invited. Instead, they moved to City
Point in late May where Adams’s men baked in sweltering tents, awaiting word to move to the ships.81

Though he once glowed about his regiment’s behavior in Richmond, he came to believe that the whole difficulty arose from “certain horse-stealing propensities of my men. They stole horses at just the wrong time.”82 And Adams felt he too was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Had he accepted the offer to be inspector-general of General Humphreys’ Corps, Charles would have had his hand in defeating Lee at Appomattox. In one of his final war letters Adams lashed out at his soldiers, ending on a note he would carry for the next fifty years. “They can only understand the sternest discipline and must be punished to enforce discipline in a way I never heard of in my old regiment.” His closing invectives would become the keynote for the rest of his life. “I no longer wonder slave drivers are cruel. I am. I no longer have any bowels of mercy…”83

Adams washed his hands. He tried to reform the forlorn children of slavery. Then came the “wretched breaking down.” Crestfallen, and perhaps because of his depression, his recurring bout with malaria and diarrhea returned with vengeance. Over the next few weeks Adams’s body shrunk to nearly one hundred and thirty pounds. Continuous doses of opium wracked his nerves while his soldiers, unwilling to be shipped to southern Texas, edged toward mutiny. In this state of affairs, Adams, “a confirmed invalid,” was forced to “crawl

81 Warner, ""Crossed Sabres: A History of the Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry, an African-American Regiment in the Civil War."", 413-15

82 Many of the Fifth’s troopers were without horses when they moved into Richmond: See ibid., 404, 411-12

ignominiously home.” The infections and malarial poison had corroded his intestines. His swollen joints robbed him of sleep. The war had unraveled his mind and body. If, in these days of disillusionment and opiates, Adams reflected on the reasons he joined the army, his distant vision of that bronzed prizefighter in the hotel mirror must have seemed like cruel mockery. Throughout his service he had walked in the shadows of greatness, but in the end he missed his “ripe reward.” And although he came to the war as a way to take on a new mode of physical manliness, he left it a victim of his own broken body.

A Foot-ball of Passion and Accident

During the harrowing experience of war, if Adams ever yearned for the bosom of Jesus, he did not share it in his letters. One would be hard pressed to find even a partial foxhole conversion. Before he entered the war, he had already come to associate worship with what he sensed was wrong with his upbringing. Looking back on his childhood Adams rued the fact that his father “had the old New England sense of duty in religious observances.” Perhaps Charles’s ill feeling for his father’s personal piety tells us as much about his troubled relationship to his father, as it does his actual religious sensibilities. His carping about somber Sabbath mornings possibly reflects his unfulfilled desire to be a more

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85 Adams wrote: “All through my childhood how I disliked Sunday! I was glad when Monday came; for me it wasn’t ‘black Monday,’ for it was six days before another Sunday. I remember now the silence, the somber idleness, the sanctified atmosphere of restraint of those days, with their church-bells, their sedate walk and their special duties. We children had to be brought up strictly in the way we should go; for then we would not depart from it when we were old! Wouldn’t we! The recollection of those Sundays haunts me now.” See: Adams, ibid., 13-14
physical child, as much as it does any direct aversion for the doctrines of Christianity. But even after he created some distance between himself and his father, he continued to hack away at his religious roots—so much so, that a few years after quitting the war, when he attended the final sermon delivered in his old congregational church in Boston (which was about to be torn down) Charles exited down its familiar stairs, not with nostalgic reverence, but able to say to himself: “There, that is behind me. Never, never again shall I enter those doors, or sit in that pew.”

It is striking that while Adams wrote nothing in his autobiography about any religious conversion, he did claim that “in truth” the war was his true “salvation.” It hardened him for the modern world, and provided a vital education. He would later censure his father for failing to burst out of “two hundred years of ancestral swaddling clothes.” Charles, though, used the war to slit them to shreds. “Those New England Sabbaths actually embittered my youth,” he confessed. And “it required the drastic war education to emancipate” him from them. The war, however, may not be the place where he fled from his father’s unchanging God so much as it was the crucible where Adams, more compelled to dwell upon and perhaps yearn for the ordering claims of religion, came to believe that God could no longer hold the world still. Not only had Adams grown disillusioned by the

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86 ibid., 12-17

87 Though Charles Jr., would later grow fond of August Comte’s three sweeping chronological stages of human knowledge—theological, metaphysical, and then positive science—his own family actually ran the course somewhat backwards. It is always perilous to measure someone’s religiosity, but it might be helpful here to sketch out Charles’ religious roots. His father was certainly no religious zealot and he rejected the harsh God of Calvin, preferring instead to worship a more “cheerful” maker. But he may have been the most theologically and behaviorally committed to Christianity of the four generations between John Adams and Charles Jr. Charles Sr., put to rest the perplexing questions dealing with the historical reality of the Bible, Christ’s conception and birth, etc.
“newspaper battles,” the cronyism, and the lack of correlation between merit and rank; He came to feel that the world was passing him by. No matter how much Charles claimed he wanted to extricate himself from his father, he at least partially wished to repeat his father's

He bracketed biblical contradictions and claimed his intellectual qualms with Christianity to be eclipsed by the call for duty and obedience. As his biographer has written, “[Charles Francis Adams, Sr.] did not wish to question, he wished to believe; he desired not stimulation but certainty….But along with his own doubts and his permissiveness, he did feel strongly that religion should be the result of moderation rather than passion, leading men to virtue, not enthusiasm.”

John Quincy Adams was much more skeptical than his son—at least in the first half of his life. And he seldom wrote about religion or theology in his earlier days. He rented a pew at William Emerson’s church in Boston, but his attendance was perfunctory. In his youth he frequently engaged in pointed debates with his Uncle John Shaw, who unsuccessfully tried to convert John to Calvinism. Young John Quincy Adams came to detest the evangelical emphasis of passion over reason. But throughout his adult life, and especially after the death of his infant (and only) daughter, he studied the Bible each morning for an hour, regularly reflected in his diaries and letters about religion and his standing with God—and began attending two or three services on Sundays. Though he identified with Unitarianism, he occasionally attended other denominations and came to accept Original Sin, the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, and the final judgment. But it is important to note that John Quincy Adams and much of the Adams family regularly used language about religious sentiments and morals rather than specifying Christian dogma. And religious discussion, especially that of John Adams, had a utilitarian flavor, as it was only as good as it was able to hold society together, promise morality and prevent vice and passion. John Quincy Adams, though he evoked images of a messianic age where men were slowly perfected and prepared to meet God, often did so while discussing the nation’s advancing technologies and increased knowledge. John Adams, (who once referred to himself as a “churchgoing animal for seventy-six years”) in a letter to Benjamin Rush, called the Bible “the most republican book in the world” and for that reason alone he “revered” it. John Adams also thought religion was the one thing that preserved his own bloodline: “What has preserved this race of Adamses in all their ramifications, in such numbers, health, peace, comfort, and mediocrity? I believe it is religion, without which they would have been rakes, flops, sots, gamblers, starved with hunger, frozen with cold, scalped by Indians, &c., &c., &c., been melted away and disappeared…. It is interesting that Charles Francis Adams Jr.’s apparent faith in the Bible came to a crisis around the time the nation was on the cusp of collapse—somewhat true to his great grandfather's faith in Christianity as a means to nationalistic ends. John Adams never latched on to the belief of the perfectibility of humans—especially after the French Revolution—but he did believe that mankind, prodded by religion and education, was slowly progressing toward an extremely elusive perfect state. See: Martin B. Duberman, Charles Francis Adams, 1807-1886 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 36-37.; Robert Vincent Remini, John Quincy Adams, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 2002), 3-4, 43,121.; East, "John Quincy Adams: the Critical Years: 1785-1794", 90-91, 101-103; Lynn H. Parsons, John Quincy Adams (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1998), 105-06, 271.; John Adams and others, The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813 (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1966), 61-62, 65, 75-6, 83-4, 106, 127, 153, 160, 186, 192, 224-45, 228, 230, 239, 248-49, 255, 281-82.; John R. Howe, The Changing Political Thought of John Adams (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University press, 1966), 40-41, 157-59, 226-27.
successes and obtain a similar station in society. But his father, like some broken heavyweight, could only pass down yesterday’s secrets in a rapidly changing sport. Young Charles felt like the son born into a line of master ironworkers—in the age of steel.

For example, right before Charles enlisted he received a letter from his father, where the latter concluded that John Quincy Adams was the most complete statesman the nation had known. Jefferson, Webster, Hamilton, these men revealed greatness, but upon inspection from “the foundation to the apex,” none except Charles’s grandfather were guided entirely by principles. John Quincy Adams alone mastered “the whole theory of morals which makes the foundation of all human society.”88 Though the Whig party broke into pieces a decade earlier (mostly over slavery and the Compromise of 1850), Charles—at least through his father—still heard the party’s hue and cry about self-control and the debilitating effects of giving in to passion and popular whim. This letter gets to the marrow of Whig culture, so pervasive throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century, especially among certain New Englanders like the Adams family.

John Quincy Adams, after all, was a key architect and defender of this culture—with its belief in progress, forging state policies that intervened in economic and private affairs in order to promise prosperity and safeguard against collective vice, and (most importantly for our purposes), as Daniel Walker Howe has described it, a dedication “to the ideal that an individual could and should reshape himself and the world around him through the exercise

of willpower….”89 Not only did John Quincy Adams spend his waking hours deciphering between right and wrong, continued Charles Sr., he systematically applied his conclusions to his daily actions. Perhaps referring to Charles Jr.’s aimlessness and indecision, his father continued at length:

many men never acquire sufficient certainty of purpose to be able to guide their steps at all. They then become the mere sport of fortune. Today they shine because they have caught at a good opportunity. Tomorrow, the light goes out, and they are found mired at the bottom of a ditch. These are the men of temporary celebrity…. Other men, more favored by nature or education, prove their capacity to direct their course, at the expense of their fidelity to their convictions. They sacrifice their consistency for the sake of power, and surrender their future fame in exchange for the applause of their own day….In my opinion no man who has lived in America had so thoroughly constructed a foundation for his public life as your grandfather. His action always was deducible from certain maxims deeply graven on his mind90

But then, as if to remind his son that even his grandfather had fallen out of step with the nation, he added that these same attributes made John Quincy Adams “fail so much as a party-man. No person can ever be a thorough partisan for a long period without sacrifice of his moral identity.” Charles, even more than his father, had to come to terms with the ways in which American leadership drew less and less from traditionally accumulated powers (that is, hereditary distinction with its accompanying education) and instead favored those willing to harness the short gusts of popular sentiment. This perceived decline had been festering

89 Howe, ”The Political Culture of the American Whigs”, 11-22 As Lee Benson has argued, the Whigs espoused a “positive liberal state,” that is, one that would “promote the general welfare, raise the level of opportunity for all men, and aid all individuals to develop their full potentialities.” See: Benson, ”The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case”, 103

for some time in the family. John Adams, after all, failed to secure a second presidential term when by 1800, national political parties controlled the Electoral College. In 1824, his son John Quincy Adams ascended to the presidency under a cloud of suspicion—having failed to win a majority of the Electoral College votes. And in what many called a “corrupt bargain” he was chosen by the House of Representatives over the self-proclaimed champion of the common man, Andrew Jackson. But John Quincy Adams, like his father, failed to secure a second presidency—losing four years later to the roughcast Jackson, a son of plebian immigrants, and defender of majoritarian democracy.  

In short, the virtues attributed to John Quincy Adams and his father had become the tender Achilles heel of their grandsons. “[John Quincy Adams] leans on nothing external,” wrote Charles Sr., to his son who was about to enlist. “He derives support from every thing he can seize. But if the circumstances force it out of his hands, he is still standing firm and alone…. ”  

But what could Charles make of this over the course of his service? War would make it hard for him to believe in the unencumbered individual leaning on nothing but

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91 After his father lost to Jefferson in 1800, John Quincy Adams accused the latter of “pimping to the popular passions.” Quoted in: Richard Brookhiser, *America's First Dynasty: The Adamses, 1735-1918* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 67. John Adams insisted, “I have never sacrificed my judgment to kings, minister, nor people, and I never will.” Daniel J. Boorstin argued that “as democracy in America progressed, the capacity of the Adamses for national leadership declined. An egalitarian nation, motley with recent immigrants, no longer acquiescent to genteel New England leadership, left the Adamses behind. And with them, their Calvinistic morality, their belief in the battle of Virtue against Vice, their independence of popular whim, their noblesse oblige. By the late nineteenth century, John Adams’ talented but bitter descendants used all the apparatus of classical learning and modern physics to document their frustration, to justify their pessimism, to prove that what was wrong was not just with the Adams clan or with America, but with the forces at work in the universe.” See: Boorstin and Boorstin, *Hidden History*, 29-30

92 Charles Frances Adams to C.F. Adams, Jr., London, November 8, 1861, Ford and others, *A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865*, Volume I, 67-69 Charles Francis Adams Sr., also once wrote that “A natural rule must be followed or there is no security—It consists of those experiences as the best to produce happy effects.” Quotes found in: Duberman, *Charles Francis Adams, 1807-1886*, 36
principle. How could a soldier stand independent of external forces when promotion depended so heavily on webs of cronyism? And even heroics on the battlefield were only made possible by the seemingly arbitrary windfall of being at the right place at the right time—and even then, comrades had to play their part. Charles would learn too that his inability to compromise, to harness popular opinion, would cost him dearly in the eyes of those who could promote him.\(^93\) This presented a maddening paradox: one often had to surrender to the currents of popularity in order to gain control of one's future.

The war became for Charles the vivid last scenes of an extended passion play where he witnessed the slaughter of his father's maker—the God who promised individuals, after slow accretions of wisdom and character through study, reflection, and diligence, the power to effectuate desired change.\(^94\) Charles began to doubt that the world could be transformed or won through internal forces alone. Individuals were not unencumbered sovereigns, but instead strung together by their specific histories and the vagaries of experience. Worse, as many aspiring officers came to see, individuals were tangled in a massive web of institutional connections.

\(^93\) Adams revealed the ways in which he ignored building friendships as a way to secure support and promotion. He noted to his father how he had secured his men's respect and loyalty. But “they don't care for me personally. They think me cold, reserved and formal. They feel no affection for me, but they do believe in me, they have faith in my power of accomplishing results and in my integrity....” In short Adams tried to create loyalty through his “power” of effecting desired results, rather than becoming likeable, popular, or beloved. See: Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to Charles Francis Adams, January 16, 1864, Ford and others, "A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865"

\(^94\) This is not to say that Charles Sr., John Quincy Adams, or John Adams were providentialists. John Adams, in fact, admitted that there seemed to be little correlation between morality and God's actions. That is, hailstorms pounded chapel windows like they did the tavern. And he often claimed that the human mind could not make sense of the often mysterious ways of God. Yet John Adams insisted humans could chart a goodly course, with virtue and religion, and had the duty to persuade others to follow.
Coming to feel that life was a series of unforeseen contingencies that could only be escaped through some godless, and partially malevolent form of grace (understood as desirable accidents and having precious wires to pull) he necessarily viewed death as the absence of such grace. Though for most of the war he walked along the peripheries of major battles, when he did see action he took a psychological beating from the violence and carnage. Either sleeping on the margins, or witnessing the butchering of his friends in seemingly meaningless engagements, Adams lost hope in controlling the war.

No wonder, then, that throughout the war Adams felt drawn to men who seemed to shape their world through resolve. He admired fellow soldiers, who, like his depicted grandfather, were driven by “first principles.” He was so impressed with General Francis Barlow, for example, that Charles, in the summer of 1864, first began hinting he would serve in the African-American army should Barlow lead the way. “It’s pleasant and refreshing to meet a man like Barlow among the crowds of mediocrity,” Charles wrote Henry. “Here’s a man who goes into the army and in everything naturally recurs to first principles.” 95 A month earlier Charles read a letter from his father where the patriarch boiled the war down to a struggle of personal wills. Grant “makes himself felt” and not the other way around, Charles’ father insisted. “This is one of the most important elements of success in warfare.” The imagination provided the vast power in upholding human force. Overmatched Rebels lasted as long as they did only because of “self reliance.” Their determination crushed “the

95 C.F. Adams, Jr., to Henry Adams, H.Q. Cav’y Escort A. of P., July 22d, 1864, ibid., Volume II, 166-68

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feebler will” of northern commanders. Until Grant, that is. Confederate will did not shape
him; he instead etched his will onto his enemy’s mind.96

But Charles grew to admire Grant for significantly different reasons. Early in the war
Charles once lamented the removal of General McClellan, not because Little Mac was a
brilliant commander, but because his replacement would have to “learn by his own
mistakes” and unavoidably spill more blood. Adams wasn’t looking for a military genius; he
wanted a leader who, through the accretion of wisdom and experience, could navigate the
treacherous waters of war. Adams consoled himself that McClellan’s successor, General
Halleck (whose academic prowess earned him the nickname “old brains”) had earned the
reputation of a “very strong man” and “that his touch [was] already felt” in the western
theatre.97

As the war staggered forward Charles continued to place faith in experienced
commanders—but for radically different reasons. Far too many times Adams believed that
Union soldiers could take Petersburg or Richmond through dint of will or prescience. In the
summer of 1864, Confederates stretched themselves around the prized cities carving up the
Virginia landscape into fortifications, trenches and treacherous abatises. By then the war in
Virginia became a battle of attrition as soldiers from both sides slept, fired, and bled from
trenches. Maneuverings and charges into the enemy became synonymous with regimental
suicide. While assessing General Grant’s response to this new face of war Adams wrote:

96 C.F. Adams, Sr., to C.F. Adams, Jr., London, June 24 1864, ibid., Volume II, 156-57

97 C.F. Adams, Jr., to Henry Adams, Washington, D.C., November 19, 1862, Ford and
others, "A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865", Volume I, 194-95
“Grant is a man of such infinite resource and ceaseless activity—scarcely does one scheme fail before he has another on foot; baffled in one direction he immediately gropes round for a vulnerable point elsewhere….”98 The war, then, would be won by relentless groping, more than imagination, will, or “first principles.”

Charles proclaimed to his father that the world had never seen “fiercer or more determined assaults” on the cities of Richmond and Petersburg. But the war, for soldiers in the Armies of the Potomac and the James, had become a defensive endeavor. Great generals did not make themselves felt so much as they simply outlasted. He believed that “no possible vigor, or determination, or training” could overcome the decided advantages of the defensive position—unless aided by “skill or its equivalent luck.” Here Charles’s words are crucial. For him luck had become skill’s “equivalent,” because, as he was coming to view things, both were unwrought and not to be created through will. While antebellum Americans had substantially broken from predestinarian forms of Calvinism, replacing it with faith in the ability of humans to remake the world and themselves, Adams found himself swinging back to the powerless self. This time though, God had nothing to do with the forces dictating history. “I do not believe that training can do anything more for our troops,” he added. “The question is now one of pure skill and endurance.”99


Notice, though, that these somewhat fatalistic lines came from Adams just before he began commanding in the black Massachusetts Fifth Cavalry. Strangely, only a handful of letters later, Charles would begin scheming to remake the black race, get his soldiers mounted, and make a run at his imminent reward. He would, in other words, make himself felt. Thus, Charles’ last-ditch attempt to capture glory was something like the expiring man’s final hallucinations before giving up the ghost. Here, race made the grandiose images believable. It was through black soldiers that he saw a way to gain control of his own fate. With them, Adams wanted to wager his life for a chance to remake himself; But in the process he, perhaps unwittingly, leveraged—and lost—the collapsing worldview bequeathed by his grandfather. Charles sloped back to his home, the cradle of American Puritanism, with the cosmological equivalent of empty pockets. Luckless gamblers loose their shirts; Charles, though, returned home leaving his “two hundred years of ancestral swaddling clothes” scattered all over Virginia’s war fields.

Charles had rubbed up against the brutal, physical world inhabited by blacks, which he dreamed of remaking. Within their ranks he had glimpsed the unseemly side of the American myth of self-making, and learned that tugging at wires was the preserve of privileged white men—particularly those who did not conflate their fortunes with those of the oppressed. Early in the war, trying to make sense of his sudden exposure to ex-slaves in Port Royal, Charles had confessed to Henry that he worried about ex-slaves’ ability to deal with postwar society if they were not first nurtured and cared for. He knew that the war would bring “great blessings to America and the Caucasian race.”
But for the African I do not see the same bright future. He is the foot-ball of passion and accident, and the gift of freedom may prove his destruction. At war’s end Charles no longer asked “who would care for them?” but cursed his black soldiers while giving his blessings to the violence of slavery. His black soldiers exposed the very thing that Charles went into the army to conceal: that his life, too, was subject to the external forces of passion, accident—that he could not will away failure.

Adams came to doubt the centrality of the individual’s will in the making of the world. The individual was shaped from the outside in; one’s “skill or its equivalent luck” merely exploited the scraps gifted by the unforgiving universe. In other words, external systems, both institutional and natural, combed over the masses, rewarding those fortunate enough to have skills, or fortunate enough to have fortune, and punishing those with nothing inside to show. If this sounds like a mind upon which Darwinian ideas had been pressed, leaving their unmistakable impression—it is not. It is, instead, a mind in convulsion after cutting loose its original beliefs—a mind with all the approximate contours to prepare it for its future embrace of Darwin. As the gray haired Adams would be disposed to put it, Darwin “fiercely assailed the Mosaic cosmogony, including its origin of man, with all that implied of celestial or providential interference…” Since then “what had before seemed chaos has become order and law. No longer descended from angels—a son fallen from grace—the race of man upon earth has become like other kindred developments, matter for classification and systematic study. “Before,” Charles continued, “[man] was the plaything of

100 C.F. Adams, Jr., to Henry Adams, Milne Plantation, Port Royal Island, Monday, April 6, 1862, Ford and others, “A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865”, Volume I, 124-33
fate….”101 Now he was not. He was part of a comprehensible and transparent system of laws.

The new worldview that Adams would soon embrace after the war, promised order that not even his forefathers believed in, or needed. Years after the war, in the end of one of his historical monographs, Adams would write, “all is logical, all is necessary, all is the subject and outcome of law.”102 These are the words of someone who, after becoming incapable of believing the grand promises made by one God, latched onto a new order because it promised to both kill and mimic the original. Like a jilted lover, he found a new maker that would keep all the promises that the first could not. When right after the war he stumbled upon an essay about August Comte, his intellectual faculties, as Adams put it, “had then been lying fallow.” Moving closer to the truth, Charles confessed: “I was in the most recipient condition.”103 The war transformed him into a mendicant—begging for order. He yearned for an order that shed light on the forces acting upon the nation, and on the jarring experience of war, race, and frustration—an order that rescued him from becoming a “football of passion and accident.”

In the summer of 1863, Henry, who fretted throughout the war about not having followed his brother into the army, feeling he had squandered his chances, queried whether the war had undone him and his brother-turned-soldier. “Have we both wholly lost our


reckonings and are we driven at random by fate, or have we still a course that we are steering though it is not quite the same as our old one?" This was Charles’ question too—until he found a new belief system that prioritized experience over theology, and allowed him to restore order to the narrative of human experience. His plans to transform ex-slaves, his acquisition of horses, his depiction of battles as artistic expressions of generals, his hopes that the war would catapult him into the political echelons of his forefathers—all reveal how Adams imagined the war to be something he could operate, control, master. He soon learned to distrust such imagination. It was a fanciful myth that traced back to Moses, created ultraist abolitionists, led northerners to weep over *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and ratified radical reconstruction. It was this kind of imagination, after all, that Charles would turn to ashes in his fireplace.

When Adams exited the war his men were “almost in a state of mutiny.” Like many white officers, Adams accurately noted the swelling discontent of black soldiers while revealing nothing about its root cause. This not only suggested that blacks were naturally mutinous, but betrayed a fundamental disconnect, breakdown of communication. Since Benjamin Butler had been returned to Massachusetts, the Army of the James finally had its hand in celebrated victories like the fall of Richmond and Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. Black regiments, however, were often held back or pushed to the margins during the

mayhem of these symbolic victories. For those officers genuinely committed to equality, and the welfare of African Americans, the post-Butler regime was cause for concern. At the very period when Butler lost his job, his successor, Edward Ord, was in Washington paying visits to key friends in the senate and judicial branch in order to procure a recommendation for promotion to brigadier general in the regular army. Ord and Butler hated one another, partly because of the deep jealousies between political generals and West Pointers, and, more likely because of tensions over Butler’s aggressive acquisition of black soldiers. Officers with abolitionist leanings like General Wild accused Ord of being an enemy to the interests of blacks, and undoing the accomplishments of Butler. General Birney quipped that Ord “spelt ‘negro’ with two G’s.” Birney surely must have known, though, that Ord’s orthographic sins were army wide.

To get an idea of the state of affairs, and the ways in which race was both a lever for promotion and weapon for censure, in hopes of removing General Kautz (a fellow Negrophobe) from the service, Ord transferred Kautz from command over the corps cavalry, to lead an entire division of black soldiers. “Thinking that I would decline and thus get rid of me,” Kautz wrote a female friend, “[Ord] sent me to the niggers.” But Kautz, who would at times serve as Cole’s immediate commander, wrote that “I could not decline the niggers at this time as that would throw me out of a command altogether, just at the commencement of what may possibly prove the closing campaign of the war.” With

105 Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 289-90, 300, 309

Richmond on the brain, Kautz could imagine this short stint leading to coveted postwar appointments. Plus, the advantage to commanding black troops, Kautz added, was that he would “feel less regret over the slain than if my troops were white.” The disadvantage though was that “if I must fall myself I should prefer to die with my own color.” In other words, for many officers in the USCT, images of death—a central component to every soldier’s psychological makeup—were infused with racial fears.107

When General Ord assumed command he immediately began digging up Butler’s well laid pipes. He urged Grant to approve an investigation of Butler, while quashing the vibrant illicit trade channels that thrived under Butler’s watch, especially in Norfolk. But—and this would crucially undercut the condition of the many African Americans within his authority—Ord believed that Butler also used war-time humanitarianism as a way to funnel money into the hands of so-called teachers and charity workers among the black populace. He looked for and found ways to cut down on the daily rations distributed by the government. In this way, Ord’s eagerness to expose Butler’s corruptions fit nicely with his hatred for dependence, and his apparent loathing for African Americans. He had the populations canvassed, heads counted, and all “able-bodied” men forced into labor or into the army. Ord also replaced several superintendents (one was arrested) from Butler’s brainchild, the Office of Negro Affairs.108


Whether or not Ord had “good” intentions in cleaning up after Butler’s regime, as Cole’s story testifies, his “reforms” aggravated tensions between black soldiers and their white counterparts. Though Cole at times had served in close proximity to Adams and those who rushed into Richmond, Cole’s regiment, except for maybe a small detachment, was officially “unattached” doing garrison duty in various places in Virginia, away from the action. Finally, as the white officers began returning home, and thousands of agitated black soldiers were retained for postwar occupation of the South, Cole ironically obtained his coveted promotions while a volcano throbbed below.

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109 In his insistence of making African Americans exhibit sufficient work ethic, Ord actually fought to keep lands for them to work, bringing in horses and supplies used up from the war. Also, in the name of shutting down corrupt military agencies, once aided by Butler, Ord dissolved much of the military governments and allowed civil governments to take control of their respective spheres. But, as one southern Unionist complained to Butler, in Richmond this led to a quick return of secessionist in power, printing papers, running the courts. See:ibid., 150-55; Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 274-75; Burnham Wardwell to General Butler, May 21, 1865, in Butler, "Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War. Vol. 5, August 1864-March 1868", 623-24.

110 Longacre has Cole’s regiment listed together with Adams’s Fifth Cavalry, waiting outside of Richmond. But regimental reports have Cole’s men scattered at various locations in Virginia. Also, had Cole entered Richmond triumphantly, his attorneys, after the war, would have exploited such a thing. See:Janet Hewett and others, Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Pub. Co., 1994), Part II, Volume 77, pages 110-17.; Dyer, "A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion", Volume III, p.1720; Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 283-84.
CHAPTER 6:
THE “INFLAMMATORY STIMULUS”

The Un-Closing of War

Several weeks after Adams departed the war, in early June ’65, Cole received orders to prepare an entire brigade of black soldiers to “embark rapidly.” The destination, though, was not a battlefield. What was perhaps his most significant mission came when the war had already petered out in the fields, at home, and all around him.¹ Within a week of the order, Major General Henry Slocum would stand before Cole’s home town, promising Syracusans that returning veterans were “better men, physically and mentally” and the “mass of them uninjured in morals.”² Nearly two months had passed since the vanquished General Lee told his half-starved troops to “Go to your homes and resume your occupations.” Since then a string of rebel holdouts, one by one, gave up the ghost. First rebel troops evacuated the port city of Mobile; then in late April, General Joseph E. Johnston, commander over the remaining troops in the eastern theatre, submitted to Sherman’s recently stepped-up terms of


² New York Times, June 18, 1865.
surrender. By the end of May the confederate military fizzled out entirely—in Alabama, then finally in the trans-Mississippi.

As May closed General Sherman waxed nostalgic over his troops’ litany of victories. After warning his soldiers not to yield to the temptation of seeking similar adventures abroad, he informed them that most would soon “mingle with the civilized world.”3 Days later, General Grant promised the Union troops that “you will soon be permitted to return to your homes and families….”4 White soldiers from the Army of the James had recently given their counterparts from the Army of the Potomac tours of fallen Richmond, as the latter made their way home, towards Washington.5 Butler tirelessly continued defending his war record while he and his cronies busily made plans for his political resurrection. Charles Adams was home with his fiancé whom he met on a furlough, possibly making plans with her for the year long tour of Europe to recuperate his body and recover his mind.6

War bodies were coming to various levels of repose. In April, the Union army numbered over one million soldiers. By early August roughly two thirds of these soldiers would be mustered out; by rail and river nearly 700,000 Union soldiers would make their way

3 Richmond Whig, June 5, 1865, page 1.

4 ibid., Series 1, Vol. 49, part II, p. 948

5 General Turner to General Butler, May 7th, 1865 in Butler, "Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War. Vol. 5, August 1864-March 1868", 616-17

back to seventeen different states. Most city papers ran regular columns about the returning soldiers, listing returning regiments, officers, with battlefield credentials. In New York, debates about battlefield strategies had given way to questions of what to do with the thousands of veterans looking for employment, and the many disabled veterans wandering the city. In papers printed from Boston to Atlanta, one could read about war heroes who had already begun parlaying their military credentials into public politics—lecturing, giving interviews, glad-handing their way into political trenches. Meanwhile, with less fanfare, southbound trains delivered gaunt confederate captives who hobbled in from northern prisons into Richmond streets. As the broken, maimed, and militarily anointed drifted from the den of conflict, Abe Lincoln’s corpse, dressed in the suit he wore for his second inauguration, lay in a vault awaiting its grave and Jefferson Davis languished with manacled ankles between thick stone walls in his Fort Monroe prison.

Throughout the nation, and especially in Virginia, the pulse of war ceased. Signs changed. On June 10th, Union command warned ex-confederate soldiers in Virginia that sufficient time had elapsed to trade in their ragged uniforms for civilian clothes. Any sympathizer wearing military buttons, or any insignias of rank or rebel service would be

7 Ida M. Tarbell, "How the Union Army was Disbanded," Civil War Times Illustrated 6, no. 8 (1967), 1-9, 44-7-9, 44-47.
8 ibid., 44.
9 New York Times, June 16, 1865.
10 Richmond Whig, June 15, 1865.
11 Richmond Whig, June 6, 1865, page 3; Richmond Whig, May 30, 1865.
subject to arrest. As diehards were forced to scissor their confederate coat buttons, or cover them with cloth, the dismantling of war fortifications in the state moved into full speed: from Petersburg and Richmond alone Union soldiers heaved and dragged together acres of cannon, caissons, and ambulances. In Petersburg, local blacks led Union officials to the “graves” where retreating, embittered rebels buried more than a hundred cannons and marked them with soldiers’ headboards. In Richmond, auctioneers peddled tens of thousands of war mules and cavalry horses that had weathered the struggle.

In early May, Richmond’s post office opened its doors. Grocers stocked shelves. Halted printing presses swung into operation. Come June, military officials partially restored the Richmond police force. With the Confederacy now a relic, the Department of Virginia even established a Bureau of Public Archives in order to preserve the paperwork left behind by the defunct nation. By the end of summer, officials would send some eighty boxes of confederate war records to Washington. Ship- and trainloads of paper, steel and materiel rolled and steamed northward, while one executive from the Petersburg Railroad was journeying to New York to procure the needed materials for impending repairs. Another president of a local Virginia railroad began negotiations with the federal government to

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12 *New York Times*, June 17, 1865.

13 *New York Times*, June 17, 1865.

14 *Richmond Whig*, June 1, 1865.

15 Longacre, "*The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History.*" (Vol. 1-4"), 989

16 *Richmond Whig*, June 6, 1865.
replace the stretches of iron that confederates had taken up to patch together another rail
line more vital to confederate survival.\textsuperscript{17} As early as the closing days of April, the
commander of the Department of Virginia, General Ord, had authorized the resumption of
railroad and canal services in and around Richmond.\textsuperscript{18} By May all but one of Richmond’s
major tracks moved cars.\textsuperscript{19} Central Railroad laborers began rebuilding the fallen bridge over
Rivanna River; and owners of the Petersburg South Side Railroad hired hands, purchased
timber, and began fabricating bridge trestles. Within days Virginians would be able to travel
by rail from Lynchburg and Charlottesville, and from there to Richmond.\textsuperscript{20}

For ex-slaves in particular, and all those who had trained themselves to listen closely
to the war, soundscapes marked the biggest change of all. At war’s beginning the not entirely
imagined serenity of agriculture and slavery gave way to the thuds and ringing of armory; by
war’s end, not only had the din of artillery ceased, but white southerners were left with an
unsettling sonic irony. With many southern church bells melted into cannon, they could not
have rung in the victory had they won the war; and with empty belfries they could not
mourn with clanging bells the massive loss of life that came with defeat. Partially filling the
audible void, blacks flocked in town streets, laughing, singing, and talking loudly, publicly

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Richmond Whig}, May 31, 1865.

\textsuperscript{18} ibid.980

\textsuperscript{19} ibid.980

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Richmond Whig}, June 9,1865.
rejecting the controlled sounds and space of slave labor.\textsuperscript{21} And along the quieter, scarred landscape surrounding Richmond, locals might hear muffled scraping of plow blades, fallow soil, small stones, shrapnel and shell as Virginians reclaimed the earth by turning up the battlefields.\textsuperscript{22}

So much had the war’s winding down come to seem inevitable, that when Union forces first captured Jefferson Davis (dressed in drag in a camp in Georgia) the \textit{New York Herald} reported that New York locals “calmly” received the news. The \textit{Herald} attributed the lack of excitement to waning interest in all things concerning the rebellion. “The community,” the paper argued, “feel that the fighting is over and the Union restored, and therefore, care little for what may follow.”\textsuperscript{23} Increasingly the deluge of returning blue uniforms lost its novelty and romance. By early June, \textit{The Evening Post} admonished New Yorkers to rally the returning troops with cheering crowds as happened just weeks earlier. “Let them not pass in silence now, lest the earth should shout…”\textsuperscript{24}

The clothes Virginians wore (or couldn’t) on the street; the dual cacophonies of firepower and newly won freedom—the former building to a climax, receding, then giving way to the latter; the return of jaded animals into the market nexus; the trading of sabers for

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  \item \textsuperscript{21} Mark M. Smith, "Of Bells, Booms, Sounds, and Silences: Listening to the Civil War South" In \textit{The War was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War}, ed. Joan E. Cashin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 9-34.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} See: Longacre, \textit{"The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History." (Vol. 1-4)"}, 974
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Tarbell, \textit{"How the Union Army was Disbanded"}, 44; The Evening Post, June 7, 1865.
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plowshares; the increasing huff of railroads; these and a thousand other shifting cues and markers testified to most soldiers of the end to the national nightmare. For thousands of soldiers like Cole’s, who watched as the majority of soldiers departed for home, “peace” and the dissolving Federal Army intensified their deepest fears.

Mutiny

It was with the war’s curtains closing that Cole received orders to move his men. While lumbering steamers and railcars carried tired soldiers to northern hearths, Cole’s brigade would soon embark for the Gulf of Mexico. Cole would assume command of a black Cavalry Brigade in the Twenty-Fifth Corps. Just before the dozen or so steamers arrived at the docks at Fort Monroe and Portsmouth to transport the massive combination of soldiers and horses, many of the black foot soldiers from the Twenty-Fifth Corps—without much incident—embarked into the Atlantic, heading for the Gulf of Mexico.25 Before the disintegration of General Kirby Smith’s isolated Confederate resistance, west of the Mississippi, soldiers in the all-black Twenty Fifth Corps believed they were destined to strike the final blow.26 But soon this hope faded.

Army headquarters had formed the Twenty-Fifth Corps the previous winter, months before the war ended, by drawing together black soldiers from the entire Department of

25 *Richmond Whig*, June 17, 1865, page 2.

Virginia and North Carolina and from the Army of the Potomac.27 Most of the troops in the Twenty-Fifth had languished in the Virginia tidewater region since the cessation of combat. While some of them at first shared in the symbolic occupation of fallen Richmond and in the surrender of Lee at Appomattox in early April 1865, Army headquarters quickly transferred them to the outskirts of Petersburg to guard the South Side Railroad. In Richmond as in places all over the South, white and black soldiers clashed.28 The Richmond *Whig* reported mounting violence between white and black occupational troops in Richmond, and that white soldiers could not bear to see black men in uniform. “The real secret of the transfer” of the blacks troops, the paper claimed, was to avoid violence between the all white Twenty-Fourth and the all black Twenty-Fifth.29

After departing from Appomattox, one brigade commander recorded with pride in the spring of ’65 that “the long and fatiguing march was borne with patience and fortitude creditable to old soldiers, and should forever put an end [to] any doubt as to whether colored troops can stand a campaign, however severe it may be.”30 But there were other

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28 For examples of other tensions between white and black union soldiers see: Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union*, 121


30 ibid., Series 1, Volume 46, Part I, p. 143
reports of trouble brewing. Since the close of ’64, however, many soldiers from the newly formed Twenty-Fifth Corps had worked excessively long hours on fatigue duty, after which they climbed into “very dark, damp, and cold” huts. With fresh vegetables in short supply, they had survived off wormy hardtack, and beef from feverish cattle—washing it down with water from foul sloughs and “the washings of old, filthy campgrounds.” Some soldiers became despondent, and, with little firewood, lay listlessly in camp in wet clothes. Regimental surgeons began diagnosing the troops with rheumatism, unaware these were the first signs of what would become a scourge of scurvy.

By early summer the disease took its toll. Some of the soldiers slipped into a sort of listless, despondent trance, many of them with their teeth nearly enclosed by bloody, purple and black gums. Others suffered from sore bloated limbs which oozed serum—their bodies

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31 All official reports are suspect as they often reflect what an officer wanted superiors to think of his own leadership and execution of orders; yet it is strange how radically different these reports about the condition of black troops vary from depictions of harmony and health to aggravation and suffering. In April of 1865, Surgeon Heichhold from the 25th Corps reported that the regimental surgeons were discharging their duties faithfully and the command was then in “good sanitary condition.” Also, soldiers in his particular division endured a long campaign from Chaffin’s Farm to Richmond; in his three years experience, the surgeon claimed “I never witnessed greater powers of endurance. There is no straggling, and the men were constantly in the best of spirits.” Heichhold also suggested that the chaplains in the division were not meeting the needs of his troops See: ibid., Series 1, Vol. 46, Part 1, p. 1231

32 Whites in the Army of the James reported similar deprivations, due to weak supply lines to the front. Keeping in mind how white soldiers also suffered a great deal due to ineptitude and exigencies of war casts light on the problem of white officers stealing the food of their black subordinates. See: Longacre, "The Army of the James, 1863-1865: A Military, Political, and Social History." (Vol. 1-4)”, 154-55

Because some reports and papers maintained that black soldiers were well provisioned, and assuming we can believe some of these reports, it underscores the ways in which black soldiers’ experiences were dictated by the vagaries and whim of officers’ personalities, bureaucratic snafus, and constant transfers of commanders.
covered with foul ulcers. Some of the men would die from hemorrhaging after devouring freshly found rations like madmen. In this setting, Cole’s troops along with some 30,000 black soldiers converged in and around City Point, Virginia. With picketing and guard duty no longer a necessity, the soldiers spent their days in meaningless drills. And as the Union began demobilizing its white troops, and prepared for the “Grand Review” where only white soldiers were invited, Union officials began preparing the Twenty-Fifth for post-war occupation of the South.

Just as the scurvy seemed to be peaking, Union officers tightened screws. Non-commissioned officers were required to wear their chevrons; jackets had to be worn in the baking sun; boots were to be blackened, beards trimmed, clothes brushed, brass polished, and three drills a day. Many officers submitted their resignation papers, while common black soldiers had no recourse, but to wait out the rumors and swelter in their tents. Some black cavalry troopers began discarding their clothes, walking in camp nearly nude. Meanwhile, fearful rumors of where black troops would be transferred took hold of the camps.

As acting Brigadier General, Cole was charged in June with the duty of bringing an entire brigade of black cavalry to the southern Texas border via several steamships for the purpose of guarding against invasion from Maximilian’s imperial forces in Mexico. But Cole’s brigade had little intention of complying and fought this redeployment tooth and nail.

33 S. Hemenway, "Observations on Scurvy, and its Causes among the U.S. Colored Troops of the 25th Army Corps, during the Spring and Summer of 1865," The Chicago Medical Examiner 7 (1865, October), 582-86.

34 Warner, "Crossed Sabres: A History of the Fifth Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry, an African-American Regiment in the Civil War."

35 ibid., 412-16
As one officer put it, ever since the troopers gleaned from rumors in camp, that they would be shipped off for Texas instead of released from service, a “marked change came over them and they became sullen and disobedient.” As a correspondent for the Philadelphia Inquirer reported it, the officers paid “no attention” to the mutterings, which they regarded as “grumblings peculiar to the African race.”

The brigades that preceded Cole’s departed with only minor disturbances; one paper reported only “an outbreak or two.” But when Cole’s officers tried to force their black regiments aboard the ships, the men resisted, increasingly become unhinged. There may have been some premeditation, as thousands of rounds of ammunition and carbines exchanged hands from one regiment to the next sometime before the mutiny. Some time preceding the mutiny officers had distributed new Sharpe’s breech-loading carbines and accoutrements. Just before or during the ensuing struggle the black soldiers evidently got their hands on thousands of the withheld bullets. Some soldiers apparently tried to break into the steamer’s hold where the chief quartermaster, or the soldiers themselves, had stowed away 250 rounds of ammunition for each departing soldier, suggesting that there were plans to commandeering the ship once it embarked. One company alone stowed away nearly 1600 rounds.


37 See court martial of soldiers from other brigades: RG 153, OO1394. William Holmes, Moses Woods, 36USCT. NARA, Washington, DC.

several regiments recently put under Cole’s command—including Cole’s original regiment, and Charles Francis Adams’s—most broke out in violent protest.

Rain fell from darkened skies. Beside one ship, with most of the men boarded from a smaller transport boat, the remaining portion drew their new carbines, capped them, and while others brandished sabers, yelled that they would not be shipped to Texas. This spurred those already on board to draw their arms and fire into the air. The bugler from Cole’s regiment refused to march onto the ship. And hundreds already aboard refused to step down into the hold. Soldiers threatened to kill their superiors as the armed men “ranged themselves about the windlass” swearing they would shoot any man who weighed anchor. Some talked of imprisoning the officers and taking over the ship. One private warned, “I’ll sooner have my throat cut than leave this harbor!” From aboard a transport, William Carter, a soldier from Cole’s original regiment, defied his lieutenant’s orders to cease shooting; Carter caught sight of approaching white troops and took aim at white officers watching from mounted horses on shore. Looking to inflame his comrades he exclaimed, “What is those damned white officers coming down here for, they can’t scare me. We can whip them easy enough!” Carter squeezed the trigger but missed his targets—among them a colonel and a general. When other soldiers glimpsed the white troops approaching one of the ships, they too threatened to fire on the white detachment. Officers on another propeller boat, with the most mutinous soldiers beside them, unmoored the small craft from the steamship, taking the black soldiers back to the wharf where the white detachment eventually crushed the rebellion.

Aboard the ship some sixteen white officers held nearly seven hundred angry soldiers at bay after shooting a “big, pock-marked mulatto” who stood atop the pilot cabin, and while shaking his fists yelled “You damned white-livered sons of bitches, we will throw
you overboard.” On another ship a black soldier screamed, “Let us not go to Texas, let us die on the deck like men.” Some officers claimed that the men broke into the cargo hold and guzzled down whiskey—adding to their abandoned bravado; while one paper claimed they were perfectly sober. Amid another melee on another ship, a soldier protested, “I’ll be shot before I go to Texas, to Hell with Texas, it’s time for the colored men to talk and act too!” Once Major Van Shelling, who led the white soldiers sent in to quell the mutiny, obtained a ceasefire, he began taking the black soldiers back to the wharf, by groups of two or three, where they were forced to lay down their arms and placed under guard behind the military fort. Then next day when hundreds of equally mutinous men under Cole arrived at the port, they were marched through a gauntlet of white soldiers who stood armed and ready to kill. Before they were escorted in small groups to the awaiting ships, they were forced to surrender their arms. Readers of the New York Times were informed that “every sable face was distorted with pain as they unbuckled their accoutrements and laid down carbine and saber. Some ground their teeth in silent mortification, and tears rolled down the cheeks of others as they stepped in front of their fellows to lay down the honorable badges of their protection.”

It required Cole’s officers over two days to disarm the soldiers and ship them

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39 Browne, "My Service in the U.S. Colored Cavalry: A Paper Read before the Ohio Commandery of the Loyal Legion, March 4, 1908" What “really” transpired at the ships over the two day period is impossible to know given the laconic nature of ensuing court martial testimonies where a handful of ringleaders were singled out and somewhat summarily convicted—most of them offering no final statement. For a detailed report of the mutiny, see: New York Times, June 16, 1865. The Times reported that the white officers felt indignant after the rebellion; but it also depicted the ships as unusually comfortable and roomy and, contrary to what is documented in other medical sources, that the soldiers were furnished with the “best and freshest rations for the use of the troops.” See various Courts- Martial, Record Group 153: William Carter, Robert Allen, William Respers, MM 3144; John Carr, John Burkley, Henry Washington, Jacob Payne, Edward Spencer, James Linger, Henry Wilson, George Newtwon, William Holmes, Spencer Edwards, MM 1394; Cornelius Robertson OO 1395; James Linier, OO 1394, NARA. Washington DC.
to a god-forsaken land. Even after the steamer set for ocean waters, guns were periodically discharged from the deck.\textsuperscript{40}

No doubt, much of the resistance was a visceral response to being forced into the hold of a steamship bound for a distant land—somewhere in the deep South. Some of them believed they would be forced to pick cotton to pay off the war debt. Also, many of the leaders of the mutiny while trying to stoke the courage of others, appealed to the black soldiers’ sense of manhood. These soldiers—sick, weak, frightened—equated slavery with the loss of manhood, and what they saw and heard all about them, had all the markings of enslavement. But when a white artillery unit was rushed in to crush the mutiny, it was a soldier from Cole’s regiment who put the confusion and rage into perspective. Poignantly pleading into the teeth of loaded carbines and artillery, Private John Burkley cried the following: “I will not go on board that vessel.” “When President Lincoln was alive my wife drew rations, but now [that] President Johnson has been in office the Government don’t furnish [her] any rations and I am going to remain and work for a living.”\textsuperscript{41}

It is as if officers and reporters could not see the obvious: certainly these soldiers mutinied in order to assert unrestrained manhood; and clearly they feared being re-enslaved by a government and officers they did not trust. But for many freedmen, establishing

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There is significant evidence that the non-commissioned black officers experienced the brunt of the anger as they were caught between executing white officers’ commands and loyalties to fellow black soldiers. The non-commissioned officers tended to be free-blacks before the war started. In one instance, private Gordon Alexander threatened to cut his sergeant’s (Richard Johnson’s) guts out when the latter commanded Alexander to load rations onto the ship.
\end{quote}
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\textsuperscript{40} Dollard, "Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country", 149-51

\textsuperscript{41} Court Martial John Burkley, OO-1394, NARA, Washington, DC.
themselves as uncontested heads of their families was one and the same with rejecting slavery and certifying themselves as true men. As The Freedman and Southern Society Project attests, the vast majority of freedmen measured the extent of their own liberty, first and last, by the degree to which they could provide for and without challenge make claims on their family. Many of Cole’s soldiers enlisted, not because they wanted revenge on white masters, or because they bought into Frederick Douglas’s gender calculus that military service somehow proved one’s manhood, but because they were recruited with the understanding that their labor for the government was a contractual relationship where, in exchange for taking up arms, the government would provide sustenance for their recently freed wives, mothers, and children.

Of all black soldiers, those who came from confederate plantations, like the ones who fled to Fort Monroe and New Bern, tended to associate military service with familial obligations. Free black men who hailed from northern states, for example, had compelling reasons to remain home to exploit the demand for labor—and their motives often had less to do with slavery than frustrations with second-class citizenship. Black soldiers from Border States like Kentucky or Maryland, on the other hand, tended to associate joining the army with personal freedom, as their family’s slave status was not altered by the Emancipation Proclamation, and there were no federally sanctioned contraband camps to which they could usher their families for safety. In fact of all enlisted black men, Border-State soldiers risked putting their families in danger of violent retribution, even as communicating with a wife or

mother proved difficult, if not impossible. But refugees like those who showed up in Cole’s camps—in places like Virginia or North Carolina—did not need to join the army to obtain freedom under Union law. And there was significant opportunity for such soldiers to earn money as common laborers for the Union army. Soldiering, then, was one of many ways that a freedman in the Piedmont could leverage his services for the protection of his fragile, uprooted family.

Sometime before the mutiny, soldiers in one of the many regiments bound for Texas petitioned their general that though they had honorably served the US government, “our family’s are suffering at Roanoke Island, NC.” “When we were enlisted in the service,” the petition continued, “we were promised that our wives and family’s should receive rations from government.” After Cole’s brigade arrived in Texas, soldiers from the 1st Colored Cavalry would petition military authorities that “Wee present to you our suffering at present Concerning our Famileys wich wee are now informed that Commisserys has been Closed a gainst them as though wee were rebeling against U S.” The soldiers continued, “never was wee any more treated Like slaves then wee are now in our Lives.” Though the soldiers were

43 ibid., 79-80

44 In fact, as soldiers must have known, General Butler paid some laborers double what they could make in the Army when black soldiers only netted $7 per month. (Butler paid some laborers as much as $16 per month; and some blacks could earn as much as $25 per month working for one of the military departments, thanks to an omission in the pay limits listed in the Confiscation Act.) This suggests that black soldiers did not enlist for money alone—or for care and protection of heir families as laborers received many of the same protections and benefits. Under Butler enlisting did provide an instant bounty that may have been attractive to fathers looking for immediate relief. Longacre, "Army of Amateurs: General Benjamin F. Butler and the Army of the James, 1863-1865", 53-4; Berlin, Reidy and Rowland, "The Black Military Experience", 363-5

forced into drudge labor along the Mexican border, they considered themselves slaves for other reasons. “[We] well remember before the Closing of the war that men who was fighting a gainst the U S. how thir [their] wifes were pertected and if our wifes were half pertected as they were wee would be happy men.” These men in Cole’s brigade would feel they had been returned to slavery because they had not power to protect their wives and children from the arbitrary hand of white power. “Wee are said to be U S. Soldiers and behold wee are U S Slaves….Wee had rather pay for our next years serviss and be turned out then to stay in and no pertecttion to our wife.” Because of the deep connection between bondage and powerless fatherhood, black soldiers began to think of their military service as an extension of slavery. And so long as they could not shelter their families from hunger and misery, they dreamed of paying for their emancipation, and in the case of the mutiny, of revolting.46

When William Turner, a black sergeant was asked why private William Respers refused to duck into the hold during the mutiny, Turner testified that his comrade insisted he would not submit to being hauled away like a slave to Texas “without any money leaving our families destitute and I would rather die than go.” And when a comrade was asked why William Carter resorted to shooting at white officers, the private responded, “I heard

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46 Anonymous black soldier from Virginia to Unidentified Washington Official, in: Berlin, Reidy and Rowland, *The Black Military Experience*, 725-6; Soldiers from the 1st Colored Cavalry shared roughly the same geographic and cultural backgrounds, skills, and sensibilities as soldiers from Cole’s own 2nd Colored Cavalry. They were recruited and prepared at the same time under the orders of General Butler.
[Carter] talking about the woman he was leaving behind and he hated to go.” While some soldiers wrote letters, others voiced their grievances within earshot of their white officers.

It is Officer Cole’s own official report of the mutiny that is the most striking. Only after the ringleaders were shackle in Texas, set to be tried and sentenced for years of hard labor with ball and chain, did Cole submit his summary to headquarters. The majority of the black Cavalry, he explained, came from the near vicinity of Portsmouth and Norfolk—areas immediately surrounding the port. (These two areas were targets of General Ord’s crackdown on Butler’s supposedly corrupt system of rations and missionary programs). Discovering that their husbands and sons were set to embark for a dubious destination for an indefinite period, nearly one thousand family members—wives, children, and elderly—had converged on the wharf to inform the soldiers that the government was cutting off family rations, and to beg them not to go to Texas. Some of the soldiers had not been paid for nearly ten months, meaning most of their family members were living hand to mouth. “Consequently” Cole confessed, “[the soldiers] became excited and decidedly insubordinate.” Cole reported that some twenty soldiers had darted away with their families, though more certainly escaped. Cole confessed too that bringing in white troops to cow them onto the ships had only further aggravated the tensions. But after reporting the real cause of the mutiny, Cole contended that all of it could have been avoided had two of his officers hurried the soldiers onto the boats instead of allowing them to exchange words with loved ones: “for every man left Camp,” he claimed “as cheerfully as ever before.” (This may have been an accurate but perfectly misleading assessment of black soldiers’ morale).

The words Cole uses next are extraordinary: “I have mentioned the condition of the families,” he continued, “not as an excuse for the conduct of the men but showing the cause of the excitement and the stupidity of permitting them the inflammatory stimulus of free intercourse with the howling multitude.”\textsuperscript{48} We might ask what would cause an educated anti-slavery man, with two children at home, and who claimed to feel a deep attachment to his black soldiers—indeed there is some evidence that he risked his life to save several of them—what would compel such a man to describe a hungry family as an “inflammatory stimulus,” or pleading, nervous mothers as a “howling multitude”?\textsuperscript{48}

Even if Cole could not make out their words, the howling may provide clues. It may be that the “ethos of mutuality” that Jacqueline Jones uses to understand African American work patterns during Reconstruction, is the most useful way to get at what was going on in the black military.\textsuperscript{49} On the whole, black soldiers saw enlistment \textit{not} as a means to get ahead in the race of life, but as a way to provide for dependents and suture together families that had been regularly torn apart by the brutal commodification of families and selves in slavery. The violence laden record left behind by Cole’s men forces us to question the definitive work on black soldiers, Joseph Glatthaar’s \textit{Forged in Battle} which argues that, despite significant racism and violent flare-ups, white officers and black soldiers, as a collective, forged a deep alliance, “a mystical chemistry” through mutual sacrifice and bravery in

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{48} “Commander of a Black Cavalry Brigade to the Headquarters of the 25\textsuperscript{th} Army Corps” in ibid., 723-25

combat. Glatthaar’s important work claims that there was a significant anti-slavery sentiment shared by the bulk of white officers. And he is certainly right.

But no matter how many of these white men had wept as they read Harriet Beecher Stowe’s indictment of slavery—a book that depicted slavery as first and foremost a disruption of familial bonds—no matter what their responses to the evils of slavery before the war from a thousand-mile distance, many such white officers found both the poignancy and remove of literature, anti-slavery discourse, and sentimental letters to home about their commitment to blacks, to be more stirring than the heartbreaking realities that transpired under their noses. One of Cole’s most callous officers, Robert Dollard—who claimed to

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50 Glatthaar, "Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers", esp. 146-47. The fundamental flaw with the vast majority of writing on black Civil War soldiers is the understandable, if tiresome, attempt to restore manhood to black soldiers by emphasizing heroic battlefield exploits and sacrifice for nation. Of course, doing so measures black soldiers against gender constructions that prevailed then and now. Fine historians like Glatthaar admit to episodes of black soldiers running from battle, but then go out of their way to recount the various narratives of collective sacrifice and valor—at Fort Wagner, Milliken’s Bend, etc. What gets lost in this telling of the story is the ways in which officers reported such incidents as a way to make sense of their own promotions, doubts, racism—and the ways in which a debate about whether or not black men would stand up in battle was at the same time a way to reestablish tenuous connections between martial instincts, courage and the essentialized white male. So obsessed with rehabilitating black manhood are these histories that essential questions about the meaning of desertion, malingering, mutiny, and various forms of resistance fall by the wayside. We might ask instead why white men spent so much time writing about what blacks did or didn’t do in the heat of battle. What was on the line when debating martial characteristics of black men? To the extent that blacks were brave, valorous soldiers, why did they risk their lives in crossfire and screeching lead? Why shouldn’t they run from death, resist military exploitation, push when pushed upon, sleep when tired, or desert when treated like animals? By holding gallant militarism as the standard by which historians implicitly measure African Americans, they reify the same connections for white manhood—once again interlocking images of citizenship, manhood, and war. Just as for white soldiers the historiographical trend has been to look closely at desertion, draft dodging, malingering, self-inflicted wounds, a similar shift needs to enrich our understanding of the black military experience.
have freely shed tears over *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—played a central role in the mutiny. He ferried the men back and forth to the wharf, and actually called in the white troops.\(^{51}\)

It may have been that these white officers, so deep in the rut of making themselves and fashioning their own narratives about rank, promotion and manliness—fundamentally could not grasp a form of manhood anchored in mutuality instead of vertical mobility. They may have felt sorrow for the broken domestic lives of slaves as they read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but, it appears, they were incapable of such compassion when standing only feet away from the real thing. Ultimately, the demands and distinctive “manly” claims of the black troops did not square with the story Cole and his officers were trying to tell about themselves. One scholar has described anti-slavery groups who built movements around “imagined” realities of suffering as sentimental communities. Cole’s story suggests that imagined connections with the oppressed, and catharsis through literature and political tracts, often collapsed when so-called reformers rubbed flesh to flesh with authentic black selves. It may be that the most earnest and sympathetic of northern imaginations, in the end, preferred romantic literary relationships with blacks over the vexing and rich complexities of real contact.\(^{52}\)

In the turbulent spaces shared by Cole’s white and black soldiers, the relationship between them was anything but an alliance, forged in battle. Racism has always been created through storytelling, and as one scholar reminds us, in regards to race, “nineteenth-century


whites were probably the most creative storytellers of all.” But as all of this suggests, stories that many white soldiers insisted on telling about themselves—ones fundamentally grounded in self-making and their own obsessions with moving vertically while masking their own dependence—had an equally profound effect on race relations.

The kaleidoscope of motives and reactions surrounding the mutiny can be partially explained by a longer history of not only relations within Cole’s regiment, but by of deeply ingrained assumptions held by many of Cole’s fellow officers. Nineteenth-century self-made men were busy telling particular stories about their own families—stories informed by the Revolution’s aim of divorcing status from family: Who, it was asked, remembers the name of Virgil’s father or son? Lincoln and his party depicted the Civil War as a struggle for the ability to transcend one’s origins. The argument for ending slavery borrowed heavily from this ideal so precious to northerners. The measurement of manhood increasingly required that each son distinguish, if not distance himself from his father. Status, through merit, had to be reestablished with each generation: Making something of oneself meant doing so without lineage, without roots.

The self-made man’s wife was supposed to support and augment her husband’s rise above his roots. In short, the ideal self-made man of Lincoln’s generation used his wife’s hearth to magnify the distance he had traveled from his mother’s. No wonder, then, that a


54 Sandage, "Born Losers: A History of Failure in America", 218

55 Kenneth Winkle argues that the self-made man was a linguistic device to help ease the transition from a family-centered economy to one explicitly for the individual. In particular, in an era
self-made soldier like Cole could look into the faces of frantic mothers and children—begging for food, money, protection—and see in this little more than “inflammatory stimulus.”

Hearth-made Men

Charles Francis Adams, who used the war to set himself apart from his own father and mother, later condemned his black soldiers by emphasizing what he viewed as a lack of “individuality and self-reliance.”56 For the rest of his life, Robert Dollard would take pride that he was one of Massachusetts’ “Minute-Men.” He clipped stories from newsletters about them, attended reunions, and visited memorials for this group of soldiers who dropped everything to rush to war. Merchants, mechanics, business men—all darted immediately to the cause. Many of these “Minute Men” did not “have time to see their wives or children before hastening away,” Dollard proudly wrote in his memoirs.57 This sort of pride in “able-bodied,” independent manhood, and the belief that one’s deep love for hearth must cede to male duty, helps shed light on how otherwise decent men during the war forced black fathers or young boys into the Union army despite their victims’ appeal for the wellbeing of

of increasing geographic mobility and the opening up of new careers, the ideal helped young men cope with the fact that many of them would leave their fathers and mothers for economic reasons. Winkle, "Abraham Lincoln: Self-made Man", 1-16; Appleby, "New Cultural Heroes in the Early National Period", 163-88


57 Dollard, "Recollections of the Civil War and Going West to Grow Up with the Country", 16; Robert Dollard, "Family Papers, 1861-1918", 1861-1918).
their families.\textsuperscript{58} The primacy of the “able-bodied,” independent self—which the war did little to contest—helps us fathom the shocking disregard for black women and children that we have already seen: Ditching frantic children and wives on their path to freedom; Dumping a mother and several children from a cart. Many soldiers seemed to have a deep repulsion toward the most dependent of freed slaves. In a time in American history when the bonds between children and parents were becoming more affective and indulgent, a blue-blooded soldier in New Orleans wrote home to Boston, “As I was going along this afternoon a little black baby that could just walk got under my feet and it look[ed] so much like a big worm that I wanted to step on it and crush it, the nasty, greasy little vermin was the best that could be said of it.”\textsuperscript{59}

Paradoxically, the emergence of the ambitious “man of force” correlated with antebellum northerners’ increasing emphasis on affection, complementarity and intimacy within families. Consciously downplaying the family’s economic role, antebellum middle-

\textsuperscript{58} Of course, many such soldiers also hoped to get a portion of the bounty by forcing slaves to enlist in the Union army. But the concept of “self-making” with all of its underpinning ideals, like individualism, self-reliance, independence, vertical orientation over horizontal, etc., helped provide the ideological foundation for such actions. For a few examples of white soldiers knowingly forcing fathers, or young sons, into service in South Carolina, see: Rufus Saxton to Edwin Stanton, December 30, 1864, in United States. War Dept and others, "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies", Series 3, Volume 4, pp.1028-29

\textsuperscript{59} I do not mean to argue that the sharp racism one finds all over northerners’ letters and in war memoirs is merely an extension of free labor ideology or of long held beliefs about dependency and labor. As David Roediger has argued white folks hated, despised, brutalized, longed for, mimicked, and romanticized black men, sometimes all in one night—participating in minstrelsy shows and following it up with mob beatings. But if one begins looking, it is shocking how much the obsession of making able-bodied black men accept their role in the Free Market is brought up in letters and official communications. Accompanying this obsession is the not unusual commentary on the vexing question of what to do with black mothers, children and the aged. The “blue-blood,” C.F. Abbott quoted in Wiley, "The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union", 109. Also see, David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, Rev. ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 1999), 200.
class men and women increasingly associated the hearth with love and security within a brutal, male world beyond the doors. But the removal of families from the economy of agrarian households was not so much a withdrawal from the marketplace as it was a new strategy for allowing families to grab for larger portions in a changing economy. In Cole’s own central New York, mid-century families increasingly had fewer children (through birth control and abortions), discontinued family & son businesses where boys once automatically followed their fathers, sent boys to boarding schools, and preached abstinence to sons in hopes of catapulting them into the “new middle class” of merchants, lawyers, doctors and professional men. Whereas Cole’s great-grandparents had emphasized breaking the will of children, Cole’s generation emphasized using maternal love to nurture a son’s will to master himself. Mothers, sisters, and fathers took in boarders, or worked second jobs at factories to ensure the advance of promising sons.

Braided into the psychological fulfillment and real love that women and men often found in such families, ran a strategy for creating successful men through the work of household dependents. The “private” family was heavily engaged in creating public men of gravity. The relationship of wife and husband vis-à-vis the antebellum marketplace could be transferred to war. In this way, perhaps as much as nursing and home front fund raising, women informed the logic and pace of war. Even as they seemed to be turning inward to


61 Ryan, "Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865", 145-85
domestic or “private” concerns, letters to the front had a way of turning fathers and sons outward again. In her warm and plaintive letters to her husband, for example, Sarah Butler continuously knitted together intimacy and power brokering. General Butler was not simply playing the indulgent husband when he confided to an associate, “I have never done anything of any import without taking counsel of my wife…” 62 Sarah might smooth feathers and enflame her husbands’ ambitions at the same time by telling him, as she did after his failed attempt on Richmond, that she had bought a velvet hat for anticipated victory but was forced to send it back to Massachusetts. Woven into her rich, literary musings and reveries Sarah made sure to emphasize the tender connection between her private letters and her husband’s grand ambitions. “When you are triumphant, I am foolish enough to think that you forget me. Sometimes I know you love me. Do not forget me in triumph or danger. I shall prove better worth remembering than any other ever can be, to you.” In other words of all his connections, she was “worth” the most to him.

In May of ’64, when Grant began weakening Butler’s strength by draining off troops in the very hour that Butler planned to attack Petersburg, Sarah argued “with anger and disgust” that Grant’s orders were connected to a larger political conspiracy to keep Butler at bay in the upcoming presidential election. She had talked it over with sympathetic officers and newspapermen, concluding that Grant and Lincoln had decided “it would not be safe politically to leave a force in your hands by which you could capture Petersburg or attack Richmond…” She and others had believed for some time that Butler would be “so closely shorn of command that no possibility of distinction would be left you.” “How gloomy you

62 Butler quoted in Taylor Merrill, "General Benjamin F. Butler in the Presidential Campaign of 1864", 552
must feel,” she continued, sounding a bit like Job’s comforter, “stripped of command on the
hour of movement and in belief of success…”63

In June, with his army once again pared down she prodded him further. “You will
have to think very fast now. I cannot believe you will be allowed a great chance unless it
comes by accident.” Now Butler not only had to tame secessionists; he had to keep watch
for compatriots with daggers. “I would rather fight the rebels, an open foe, than encounter
the home enemy, who strike, assassin-like, under cover, and at the moment success awaits
you.” Then, grooming him to outdo other “men of force” and fellow patriots, she
continued:

Never yield an inch, or droop an hour, disheartened. It is the great game of life
you are playing. And it goes faster than a weaver’s shuttle. Your brain spins
swifter than other men, and you must weave while you spin. If the foe in front or
rear show a single opening, be ready to spring into it, all armed.64

63 Sarah Butler to General Butler, May 27, 1864, July 20, 1864 and May 29, 1864 inButler,
“Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler during the Period of the Civil War. Vol. 4,
March 1864-August 1864”, 276-77, 285, 521-22

64 What is extraordinary about Sarah Butler’s letters is the ways in which she seamlessly
shifts—often within the same paragraph—between these sorts of ambitious proddings and quotidian
matters about where she is staying, her night’s rest, the weather, their daughter’s newest adventures,
etc. Sarah Butler to General Butler, June 14, 1864 inibid., 362-63
I am not suggesting that Sarah Butler’s letter writing was a calculated interplay between
domestic matters and grandiose visions of her husband getting ahead. I do not believe that she
consciously set out to embolden her husband by linking ambitious visions to domestic security. But
this is what her letters, in effect, produced. I do want to suggest that many middle-class antebellum
women did not see these as unrelated categories—that the so-called “private” sphere was a place
where plans were made for public advancement—where husbands were reminded that they, not just
their wives, were the “spinners” and “weavers.” This relationship between hearth and public
ambitions has come to seem so natural that we barely notice even in ourselves today. In public and
written acknowledgments it has become part of professional etiquette to thank intimate relations for
helping win a Super Bowl or an election, or write an award-winning book in history. While naming
partners or intimate others can be an act of gratitude and humility, it is also a way to openly redirect
intimate relations into the service of professional achievement. “I couldn’t have written this book
Butler, Dollard, Adams, Fox, Cole and especially the tens of thousands of black soldiers who served under these officers, fought a war with multiple fronts: Rebels before them, men on the make beside and behind. Sarah Butler demonstrated a particular way in which the war had no front or rear—and how it was an extension of antebellum male politics. All the spinning, weaving, pipe-laying, wirepulling, and tickling in antebellum America came to roost in a war that was, in part, fought to purge the Republic of such sins, but was—in the end—waged to protect a nation of busy “weavers.” In a Lincolnesque way, Sarah Butler seemed to be suggesting that “the great game of life” justified the battles and deadly maneuvers, and that in peace and war one always had enemies to the rear.

Not one letter between George and Mary Barto Cole survives. And there are only two extant wartime letters in Mary’s hand. One—a hurried message really—she added to the bottom margin of a letter to Cornelius Cole which George had just composed. As she did several times during the war, Mary had recently relocated to be closer to her husband who was now a colonel in the Colored Cavalry. With her two daughters she secured “a miserable hotel” room about seven miles from George’s camp. For a short moment, the Cole family spent an evening together. George began the letter explaining how he had stopped in Portsmouth, Virginia to visit his “folks” after a recent raid where he captured two rebel captains. Cole also recounted how he revisited the site just outside of Suffolk where several without her,” is a kind gesture but rarely true unless the author’s loved one typed the pages and dug through archives. The point here is that in meritocratic societies intimate relations often obtain value only to the extent and measure that they enhance one’s station, or place in public life. Thus, when General Butler wrote that he had achieved nothing great without first consulting his wife, he was at once showing (or feigning) humility while at the same time divulging a fundamental truth about intimacy and power.
of his black soldiers had recently been cornered into an abandoned house and offered no quarter. In an area where confederate women waved handkerchiefs, calling out “kill the negroes,” rebel soldiers torched the structure. When one of the soldiers leaped from a window “a dozen bayonets pierced his body; another, and another followed, and shared the same fate,” one soldier boasted to a newspaper. A few of Cole’s men braved it to death and remained in the fire, “burnt to cinders.” The rebel soldiers had refused to bury the bodies.65

Cole assured Cornelius that his men were “crazy” with anticipation of getting back at the rebels, and encouraged him to keep watch for news of their retaliation. After passing on

65 Bruce Suderow, ""we did Not Take any Prisoners": The Suffolk Slaughter," Civil War Times Illustrated 23, no. 3 (1984), 36-39.; Weymouth T. Jordan Jr and Gerald W. Thomas, "Massacre at Plymouth: April 20, 1864," North Carolina Historical Review 72, no. 2 (1995), 152-53.; Brian Steel Wills, The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 213-19.; Ervin L. Jordan, Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 279. For the official reports by Butler, Cole and others where they emphasized the bravery of the black troops who were greatly outnumbered—and inflated losses to the enemy, see: various reports in, United States. War Dept and others, "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies", Series 1, Volume 33, pages 237-39. Cole was also reported to have killed the commanding officer on his horse. One southern paper reported that many of the soldiers who were killed were from Suffolk, dying “a few hundred” yards from their ex-masters’ homes. See: March 15, 1864, Western Democrat.Emmerton, "A Record of the Twenty-Third Regiment Mass. Vol. Infantry in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865", 162.

Black troops suffered various atrocities in Florida, Texas, Arkansas, North Carolina, Louisiana, and Virginia. Many of these atrocities involved black troops who in the process of surrendering were murdered by rebel soldiers. These murders at times were generated by high command, or popular sentiment among the rebel troops (sometimes in disobedience of officers’ orders to take black soldiers as prisoners). Not surprisingly, there were more than a few accounts of black reprisals, often with black soldiers yelling out slogans of revenge. For an example of one northern, African-American correspondent admitting to a reprisal by blacks in the Army of the James, see: “A Very Important Letter from Chaplain Turner,” July 9, 1864, The Christian Recorder. For a poignant account of white on black atrocities and ensuring revenge, see: Gregory J. W. Urwin, "we Cannot Treat Negroes . . . as Prisoners of War: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in Civil War Arkansas," Civil War History 42, no. 3 (1996), 193-210. The single best work that examines the various atrocities is: Gregory J. W. Urwin, ed., Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War (Carbondale Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 265.
some rumors about Butler, taking a jab at West Pointers, and fretting over Grant’s inclination to “dig up fossils” for promotion, he admitted “I am of course exceedingly busy all the time & can see my folks but seldom though I hope to be soon brought in camp….“ George ended the letter asking to be kept posted on “political prospects.”

In the remaining margin Mary added a short note to Cornelius’s wife Olive, confessing that her patience had been “exhausted.” “Unless I can be nearer my husband,” she wrote, “I may as well go home.” She added that if it weren’t for her daughters, she would have “gone some time ago.” “The children are enjoying their visit very much although they see their Father so little,” she complained.66 That this was written for more than just Olive to read there is little doubt. It suggests that Mary had tried in vain to directly communicate these anxieties to her husband—or that given the role that wives of men-on-the-make were supposed to assume, she feared to openly challenge his quest for station. In another letter she penned after finally returning home, Mary elaborated on her anxiety over George’s wellbeing in regards to the racial atrocities. Luckily, she had just received “a few lines” from him in the mail. “You can imagine,” she wrote to (then Congressman) Cornelius, “with what anxiety I devour the papers hoping to hear where they are and what doing.” Calling it miraculous that he had survived thus far, she continued:

I have suffered as much as I thought possible to bear, before he took command of a colored regt. But now since the rebels murder indiscriminately in cold blood and no notice is taken by our government his life seems to hang by a

66 George Cole to Cornelius written on “INSPECTOR GENERAL’S OFFICE” letterhead. UCLA has this letter dated as January 1865, but it was instead written probably sometime in April 1864. Cole family, "Papers"
thread. If he goes through this safely and is not promoted he must either resign or I shall die. I can’t endure such wearing anxiety.67

Along with the Suffolk murders, Mary was referring to recent battlefield atrocities like Fort Pillow, Tennessee where rebel soldiers murdered surrendering black soldiers instead of taking them captive. The previous year Jefferson Davis proclaimed that captured officers from black units would be handed over to State governments and tried as insurrectionists. And a few months later, the Confederate Congress passed a joint resolution stating that captured white officers would be “put to death or otherwise punished.” Though there was no systematic murdering of captured black soldiers, many of them were clubbed to death with rifle butts, lynched, or sold back into slavery. Though George had promised to apply for leave after the next campaign, she feared he was too determined to stay in the fields and obtain personal revenge for the murders of his men, as the federal government had balked and taken no action. This candid letter reveals that Mary, too, pushed for George’s promotion, but for different reasons. (“If he goes through this safely and is not promoted he must either resign or I shall die.”) If Cole obtained a general’s commission, she believed, he would be removed from the cutthroat circumstances on the ground between black regiments and rebels.68

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67 Mary Barto Cole to Cornelius Cole, May 11, 1864 in ibid.

68 The threat upon white officers and black soldiers also led to the cessation of prisoner exchanges, which created for both sides an epidemic of starvation and disease in the various prisons from New York to Georgia. See: General E.A. Hitchcock to Secretary of War, November 28, 1863, in United States. War Dept and others, "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies", Series 2, Volume 6, pp.595-600; ibid., Series 2, Volume 6, pp.595-600. It is unclear how many white officers were killed instead of taken prisoner, as one method used by rebels was to kill as they cowered or lay injured on the battlefield, thereby obviating handing them
Mary Barto Cole sank into depression sometime during the final two years of the war. On several occasions she attempted to transplant their “home” onto the sidelines of the battlefield, even bringing her two daughters. (She was actually holed up with her daughters somewhere on the flagship during the mutiny.) Her husband’s attempt to become a general through the commanding African-American soldiers not only brought her extreme bouts of anxiety, it also ruptured relations in her own family as her brother, a prominent Democrat, abhorred Cole for leading armed black men into war. If the papers were right—and they often were—Mary became so depressed during one visit to her husband in the fields that she tried to take her own life. Sometime around the fall of ‘64, probably the same month that Edwin Fox murdered Private Edwards, Mary was back in Syracuse. Lonely and depressed, and suspecting she was at death’s door, she called on her attorney—a family “friend” and rising politician—to help finalize her will. While at her bedside he sat her up, opened her blouse and either by force or mutual longing, initiated what would become a two-year sexual relationship conducted while Colonel Cole wasted away in Virginia and later Texas. Sometime during the final leg of the war Mary had an abortion, which was apparently over to state governments. See: Hollandsworth Jr., James G., "The Execution of White Officers from Black Units by Confederate Forces during the Civil War", 132-152

botched.\textsuperscript{70} And while she suffered from mental and internal wounds, curiously, her husband was cloaking his own chest and groin injuries from his superiors.

Though there are few sources showing how she weaved together or articulated the relationship between intimacy and power, it can be safely assumed that Mary’s letters to George did not read like Sarah Butler’s. She probably begged him to stop the weaving and spinning. If anything, Mary’s letters must have been more like the shipside “howlings” from black soldiers’ wives, an “inflammatory stimulus” calling her husband home.

\textsuperscript{70} See: \textit{Syracuse Journal}, January 24, 1868, page 2. The newspaper reports of Mary’s abortion were corroborated by George’s sister-in-law, Olive Cole. See: Olive Cole to Cornelius Cole, November 5, 1867 and Olive Cole to Cornelius Cole, November 7, 1867 in Cole family, "Papers"
CHAPTER 7:

HOME

Roughly two years after the mutiny, a concerned friend watched from his passing horse car as Brevetted Brigadier General George W. Cole stood lost on a Syracuse street corner. The recently returned soldier held a spot on a prominent city street, holding an abstracted pose for nearly an hour. He looked like he was waiting on someone who never came, staring into the streets of a town that had moved on without him. To many that knew him before 1861, Cole appeared out of place when he returned “home” to Syracuse. He often breezed by old acquaintances without salutation. Once a friend stopped Cole and asked him the matter. Cole apologized, explaining that he was not well, and that “the injuries he received while in the service hung over him and pressed him down.”¹

Shortly after the war he was frequently seen repairing a house his wife purchased while he was at war, which he apparently hoped fix up to turn a profit. There he worked side by side with a black “boy” who Cole brought home with him after his discharge (apparently he was Cole’s personal war servant—part friend, part war souvenir). A neighbor recalled seeing Cole sit silently inside his unfinished house, but noted that Cole came alive when he played with children: “the neighborhood boys were nearly always with him, in the back of

¹ Testimony of William C. Finck in Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868.
his house or in the barn,” Cole’s neighbor would testify. “There was a general conversation going on between them; [Cole] said he liked to have them around.”

A hardened war officer spending his days playing with children in a barn? Though surely Cole was disturbed, we would do well not to make more of his fondness for young boys than evidence allows, except to say that he probably felt less troubled or perhaps even more alive when frolicking with boys. Along these lines, we may even wonder if his frequent presence and “general conversation” with youth suggest that Cole actually came to feel something like a child, an inferior, among his male civilian peers. The things that consumed him most—a prominent appointment, his strange injuries, his frustrated quest for elevated rank—were at root a search for manhood.

Cole believed he could exchange his war decorations for a high position in civil society. Many veterans, as Cole was aware, returned home with magnified manliness. Scads of soldiers parlayed their war records, and their exposure to multiple regions during war, into post war fame and wealth. Some exploited military networks to catapult themselves into politics and corporate ventures. Between Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, not a single president, except Grover Cleveland, was elected into office who couldn’t brag that he had donned Union blue to help quell the rebellion. And the war too may have helped create a stable population of industrial working men. One historian has argued that the war eased millions of northern soldiers into the burgeoning industrial workplace. Many seamen from the war were quickly absorbed into the merchant marine that transported tobacco, cotton and wheat to the commodity starved European markets. And most Union soldiers returned

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to their pre-war occupations, overwhelmingly agricultural (though there were proportionately more soldiers from the northeast who returned to mechanic trades). In some of the major northeastern cities messenger services were established for the employment of war amputees. And for a brief moment after the war the Sanitary Commission created an employment service for veterans in need of connections. Some employers had promised to rehire workers who left to break the rebellion. A portion of the employers had even promised to send the families of their employees-turned-soldiers small salaries throughout the war.³

But employers on the whole were hardly prepared to absorb the massive influx of ex-soldiers looking for employment. Newspapers complained that employers, especially in the city, doubted that rough-and-tumble soldiers could suddenly walk the line for their bosses. More than a year after the war, The Soldier’s Friend, a popular monthly among veterans, published an anonymous letter from New Hampshire where a veteran cried, “There is no disguising it, boys; the people are afraid of us!” The letter reported that potential bosses, responding to the returning throngs of men who had adopted rough mannerisms or penchants for drink and gambling—asked, “Shall we admit them into our families, and allow them to mingle with our friends and our little ones?”⁴ We are only


beginning to appreciate the frustrations of veterans and the enduring tensions between soldiers and the home front: destroyed bodies; frustrated sexualities; quiet guilt about desertion; unspoken battlefield atrocities; self-mutilations for the purpose of obtaining a discharge; anomie; depression; and joblessness. These too were made by war. The return of George W. Cole casts flickering light onto the many strains that soldiers experienced during and after the conflict.


6 Most Civil War historians conclude that northern soldiers fought the war with their northern sensibilities intact: deep connections to individualism, self-control, egalitarianism, and democracy. Gerald Linderman, however has argued for a darker narrative where soldiers and civilians began with a common worldview, but soldiers returned with a bleaker, less romantic view of society and war. For Linderman, the war squeezed romanticism out of its soldiers—resulting in soldiers returning home, feeling out of place, out of step. James McPherson and others have dismissed Linderman’s claims and instead argue that soldiers prosecuted the war effort because of their retained northern ideologies. See:Linderman, "Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War"; McPherson, "For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War"; Earl J. Hess, Liberty, Virtue, and Progress: Northerners and their War for the Union, Vol. 10 (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 154.
A Soldier’s Reward

Immediately after his return “the General”—this is how his closest friends and family referred to him—looked to gain the federally appointed position of the New York Collectorship but the Republican Party cast its support for the Onondaga county newspaper editor, Vivus Smith. (Smith was one of the editors who Cole believed witnessed his heroics on the battlefield, but never reported them.) As he done in the war, Cole banked on his war record, and perhaps his connection to his brother, now Senator, to tap into the colossal system of nineteenth-century patronage politics. The war had interrupted (or perhaps bolstered) an era in American politics when from at least 1840 until the century’s final decade, white American men dedicated impressive portions of their energy and time to political parties, partly because of patronage. That is, white men actually believed that party victory led directly to personal advancement and security. Presidential election turnouts, for example, regularly exceeded seventy percent of eligible voters.

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7 See letter from George W. Cole to Cornelius Cole, February 11, 1866 in Cole family, "Papers", Vivus W. Smith was the editor for Syracuse newspaper Onondaga Standard.

8 Stuart Blumin and Glenn Altschuler have challenged the conventional narrative that holds that from the election of 1840 until the close of the century, enfranchised American men participated in politics at levels nearly double what we witness today. Blumin and Altschuler explain away the nearly 80% turnout for elections by claiming that partisan politics was merely a cosmetic part of male culture—having more to do with getting drunk, brawling, social gatherings, and of course patronage. These two authors contend that American’s concerns were much more consumed by grass-roots, personal, inward-looking concerns. The story I am trying to tell here depicts this inward-looking worldview and the manly rituals of drink and camaraderie as both private and deeply political at the same time. That men viewed politics as a way to cement relationships and jobs was at once an expression of male intimacy, while embodying a larger view about gendered politics, jobs for the talented, merit over blood, and personal and national “improvements.” See: Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 316. For works that see deeper connections between partisan politics and ideology, see: Richard L. McCormick, "The Party Period and Public Policy: An Exploratory Hypothesis," Journal of American History 66, no. 2 (1979), 279-298.; Foner, "Free Soil, Free
Votes and loyalties were at least partially understood as the price for professional advancement or coveted appointments. White men—from working-class to lower-class, to professionals and middle-class merchants—viewed their parties as a vital means of “getting ahead.” And patronage greased all the critical gears: judicial appointments, civil service posts like postmaster or an agent of customs, charters, franchises for banking, subsidized channels of transportation, hiring of law enforcement, and tariffs for, say, raw materials.9 Precisely because full participation in the political process was the preserve of white males, the accompanying party rituals and symbols, like torchlight parades, rallies, and especially patronage, served to express a particular vision of American manhood over and against the “private” informal webs of female domesticity.10


10 This is not to argue that women were wholly excluded from nineteenth-century partisan politics. As Rebecca Edwards has argued, increasingly after the war Republicans, in particular, maintained that men needed virtuous, maternal influence, and that their advocacy for widows’ pensions and pensions for soldiers’ families was a function of this central tenet. Edwards also maintains that gender identification (not simply looking for what was best for their husbands and sons) prodded women to engage in the political processes at rallies and partisan celebrations. I agree that questions about gender and family were central to political debates, yet, one shouldn’t downplay the ways in which women were excluded in the formal political processes, especially patronage. Rebecca Edwards, Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 232.
Cole had trained to be a doctor in his twenties but prior to the war moved about central New York for various business pursuits that apparently all came up short. He bought a lumber business in Syracuse a few years before the war, but sold his holdings and wagered his future on the wild possibilities of military life. Only partially placated by his wartime promotions, upon return he expected to step into the world of civilian patronage and white male politics, and at last grab for himself a reward commensurate to the price he had paid for his nation and party. A generation earlier, Andrew Jackson’s ascent to the presidency marked the permanent cementing of party professionals into national and state political machinery. Aristocratic “notables,” like John Quincy Adams and his kin, would be increasingly banished from the institutions of policy-making and administration, which gradually came under the sway of political parties that were heavily populated and permanently guided by middle-class lawyers, businessmen, and editors. The new political sensibility, one scholar argues, “made it possible for such men-on-the-make to live off politics by serving as agents for private interests in their dealing with government…by moving into and out of public office, and by making personal contacts and obtaining private contracts that were useful in their private careers.”

The war itself allowed Lincoln’s party to grab the lion’s share of political spoils (Democrats could only hope for scraps from the table), and the loyalty of millions of men

11 Skocpol, “Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States”, 72-76. For more on how patronage flowed from Lincoln and particularly down to locals through Congressmen—complicating appointments of war officers, or prized positions in civil service, see: Allan G. Bogue, The Congressman’s Civil War (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 35-42.. Lincoln once fretted to friends from the West, after sifting through an avalanche of letters from promotion, that Major-generalships “are not as plenty as blackberries.” Lincoln quoted in: ibid., 37.
through war-related patronage, including transportation and materiel contracts, the 1862 pension law that promised financial aid to wounded Union soldiers and their dependents, bounties, heavily sought commissions and promotions, and post-war appointments. One Rhode Island soldier remembered being assured by wartime politicians that after peace was won, “no one who had not been a soldier would be thought of for public office so long as a soldier was living, qualified to hold the place.” In the war’s final year Congress passed Section 1754 which decreed that capable, disabled soldiers would get preferential treatment for civil service appointments. And a little more than a month before his death, Lincoln promised the New York Bureau of Employment for Soldiers, to “recognize the paramount claims of the soldiers of the nation in disposition of public trusts.”¹² Once home Cole hoped both nation and party would finally shake the patronage web, and rattle loose his due reward for the taking.

But Cole may have been a victim of timing, as he spent three-quarters of a year in Texas and did not come home from the war until nearly a year after Lee surrendered. Soldiers like Cole who continued serving may have been able to obtain last-minute promotions, but found it harder to find work after their return. By the time Cole was discharged there was already a perceptible backlash against veterans in some urban areas and towns. Brief anecdotes peppered the papers about homeless veterans, drunkenness, rioting,

and ex-soldiers filling up the prisons. A disappointed Cole found employment that summer as Assistant Superintendent of a windmill factory. But Cole quickly ran into trouble there, making “wild and visionary bargains” with southern clients, many from North Carolina. Perhaps these were Cole’s black soldiers whom he recruited from regions around New Bern, and with whom he sometimes fantasized having formed a deep war bond. He mailed many letters southward hoping to sell windmills to a region where he had spent much of his time destroying property, and perhaps to his freedmen who were looking for a way to parlay their meager war bounties into economic independence. While Cole had once obtained permission during the war to help some of his black soldiers purchase Virginia land with their bounties, in the case of the windmills, he may have looked to translate his wartime paternalism into something more lucrative. Whatever his motives, and whomever the intended clientele, payment owed for the windmills never came. And by winter stockholders and treasurers voted to terminate Cole’s job, withholding some two thousand dollars the company owed him.

Still looking to cash in on his service to the Union, in the spring of 1867, Cole journeyed to Washington DC where his brother now served as a Senator from California. One of Cole’s neighbors, Joshua Rogers, accompanied the veteran to the Capitol, where

13 Marten, "Nomads in Blue: Disabled Veterans and Alcohol at the National Home", 275-76. A paper in central New York published a report of the Albany jail stating that right after the war “the disbanded army occasioned so many arrests.” See: Article clip from Albany Express, December[?] 8, 1867 in Cole family, "Papers".

Cole hoped to obtain a government appointment as Assessor of Internal Revenue. While in the Senate Chamber, though, Cole’s nagging war injury overcame his body. He confessed to his friends that he couldn’t make it back to his hotel; they helped him to a congressional committee room where he fell on a sofa (the resting place where men of gravity traded horses) and laid there for over an hour and a half, groaning with hands cupped between his legs. Rogers knew Cole was in trouble and where it had begun. The two men had exchanged letters throughout the war and when Cole came home from extended service along the Rio Grande, Rogers noticed how the once “remarkably strong man” of high spirits returned with the sort of melancholy that comes with brokenness. Earlier in their trip to the Capitol, Rogers found Cole in his hotel room, on his back in the middle of the floor with his feet propped up, pantaloons pulled down with wet towels wrapped between his legs. Cole confided to Rogers, then, just as he would later in Syracuse that he was losing the desire to live. He wanted to thank his friends for the great efforts they were making on his behalf, but voiced his doubts that it could amount to anything. He wondered if he would live much longer. Cole came home empty handed while Rogers—who admitted he went to Washington only “partly” to help Cole secure a post—soon obtained an appointment for himself as a detective in the same revenue department.15

Later that spring the determined veteran finally got an appointment as a special agent of Customs, which required him to reside near New York City, leaving his wife and two daughters alone for weeks at a time. As they had done over the course of the war, the Cole

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family again endured separation from father and husband. Because of his new occupation Cole began planning to send his two girls to boarding school and relocate his wife to Brooklyn. His late-coming patronage boon, though, would soon mean little, as new light would be cast on a larger web formed through sexual patronage, home front politics, ruptured gender roles, and his own hearth.

The Gravest Suspicions

After he had been home approximately a year, in late May of 1867 Cole returned from New York City to Syracuse, where walking through the town he crossed paths with his attorney and “bosom” friend, Luther Harris Hiscock. However close these friends had been before the war, Cole now harbored animosities. During the war Cole came to despise men who stayed home and grew fat from exploiting wartime opportunities. Also, along with other men of local stature, Hiscock was a board member of the Empire Windmill Manufactory that had recently cut Cole loose, withholding a large sum of his pay. Hiscock seemed unusually surprised to see the veteran walking the streets of Syracuse. And after some small talk, or right in the middle of it, Hiscock inquired, “When are you going to New York, General?” It dawned on Cole that his friend inquired about his leaving town with

Information about Cole’s appointment in *Syracuse Journal*, April 25, 1868.

See: *Syracuse Journal*, April 30, 1868, April 25, 1868, and May 7, 1868, for various testimonies about Cole’s employment at the windmill company. Many of Hiscock’s friends, including his brother Frank, were directors of the new company. Before Cole decided to take the job as superintendent at Empire Windmill, he seriously considered trying his hand again at owning a pharmacy. Cole, one associate reported, “was waiting for some drug store to fail or burst up, and watching an opportunity to buy one out and resume the old business.”
unusual curiosity and frequency (as apparently this was not the first time he asked).\textsuperscript{18} As Cole remembered it, in that moment, scales fell from his eyes. His wife’s strange behavior during and after the war; her control of the money; her depression; her sickness; his sense of being duped by “rings” of men who, while piling upon themselves privilege, left others to sink. Cole’s face went deadpan, and when he stared into Hiscock’s eyes, the latter averted his eyes from Cole’s glare like a “guilty dog,” blood rushing to his cheeks.\textsuperscript{19}

Immediately, the General hurried home to unearth Hiscock’s secrets. But his wife, Mary Barto Cole, wasn’t home, and he evidently had to return to New York City before he could confront her. He did approach his younger cousin, Mary Cuyler, who had stayed with Cole’s family during most of the war. After he informed her that he had just seen Hiscock who seemed like he was trying to avoid meeting Cole on the street—as if he were guilty of something—Cuyler, thinking that Cole knew more than he did, quipped “Well, General, there has been a good deal of talk about Mrs. Cole’s flirtations with Mr. Hiscock.” She soon realized that she had betrayed more than Cole had suspected, and refused to divulge more to her agitated cousin. She admitted that Hiscock made frequent calls to the house during the war, but remained silent about the time she saw them in a darkened room with drawn curtains. She told him that if he wanted more details he would need to write Montgomery

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Syracuse Journal}, June 18, 1867 and April 25, 1868.

\textsuperscript{19} According to one paper report Cole originally suspected that Hiscock had been cheating Cole in money matters pertaining to Mary’s large estate. \textit{Syracuse Journal}, January 24, 1868.
Pelton, the husband of Mary Barto Cole’s half-sister, whose house served as a rendezvous for Hiscock and Mary Barto.20

Cole hurried off a letter to Pelton:

Dear Sir—I pledge you my honor that whatever your answer may be to this letter, no one shall ever know but myself, or even that I ever wrote you or you me. There has been some rumor in Syracuse of a suspicious nature, in regard to Mary and a certain limb of the law…. Write me the facts fully and frankly…. 21

He traveled to his hotel in New York where he received the crushing reply from Pelton:

“There is room for the gravest suspicion.”22

On Saturday evening the General boarded the Hudson River Railroad bound for Syracuse again; by six in the morning he was opening his bedroom door, prepared to confront his wife of fifteen years. When he did, Mary Barto Cole broke into tears, promising to confess everything if he would just give her a little time. Over Sunday Cole listened to testimonies in his parlor from several family members and friends, perhaps to verify his wife’s halting confessions. Mary lay quietly in her dark bedroom as he sat in his rocking chair, listening to his guests, at times sobbing, at others berating them for not informing him while he was away fighting for the Union.23

20 Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868 and November 28, 1868.

21 Letter to Montgomery Pelton reported in Syracuse Journal, Nov. 30, 1868, p.4. Cole also wrote in this same letter: “Now, I have less confidence in [my wife’s] discretion than in her integrity. She has no discretion and but little care for people’s opinion, as you probably know…. You will thus do her a kindness as well as myself and perhaps save a scene unpleasant and disgraceful.”

22 Syracuse Journal, June 18, 1867.

23 Syracuse Journal, June 18, 1867; April 25, 1868; April 29, 1868 (several witnesses); April 30, 1868; December 2, 1868.
Early Monday morning Cole awoke as Mary again remained in the dark bedroom. Cole had taken no victuals since his return to Syracuse and had been up much of the night “raving” at his wife. He began to look bloated, red, agitated. He telegraphed a message to his wife’s brother, Henry Barto, a well-respected lawyer and politician, only to be reminded that Barto was in Albany for New York State’s much anticipated Constitutional Convention which was about to commence. Barto had been elected as a delegate, and as Cole knew well, so had Hiscock, who had drafted the bill calling for the convention.24

It is now that Cole probably began spinning plans. He had Mary Cuyler pack two months worth of shawls and clothing for his wife and proclaimed that he would be escorting her to Brooklyn where she would take up a new residence—away from the vicious rumors and out of Hiscock’s reach. Before noon the General, for the first time in days, left for the streets. Then Mary Barto evidently came to Cuyler and confided that she sensed she was “going to her death.”25 General Cole set foot in a grocery store with which he had not done business before and asked to examine their revolvers and pistols. He looked them over and selected a breach-loading Derringer and a handful of cartridges, asking the merchant if these cartridges could be relied on for certain. That same day he asked Mary Cuyler to mend his suit jacket and in the process she noticed that he had an old Colt revolver in his pocket which belonged to his fifteen-year old daughter, Alice.26

24 Syracuse Journal, June 13, 1867.
25 Syracuse Journal, April 30, 1868.
26 Syracuse Journal, April 23, 1868. This revolver was a Colt, perhaps from the early war. I am guessing that Cole sent it home to his daughter as a sort of war memento. The Colt Army Model in 1860 was an improved version of an older model that was used in the Mexican War. In the Union
The following morning Cole boarded the Central Railroad with his wife and a male relative in tow, heading for the state capital. Cole sat by his wife as they periodically sobbed. Fellow travelers recalled a veil over her face, and the General pulling out his mustache in anguish. Upon arriving Cole checked his party into a room at the Delavan House, momentarily unable to decide if he should purchase two separate rooms for his wife and himself. The *Albany Argus* reported that Cole did not even check into the Hotel at first, but instead came back later and added “Dr. and” to his wife’s name in the hotel register. His closest friends tended to call him “the general,” though he was a physician by training. For reasons that are unclear Cole left his medical practice to try his hand at various businesses before the war. Of all his accomplishments he was certainly most fond of his generalship, which makes one wonder why he signed the book as “Dr. Cole” to remind himself (and those who might glean the registry after his meeting with Hiscock) that he was a soft-handed physician not a hardened military killer.

Perhaps he signed the book as “Dr. Cole” to remind himself (and those who might glean the registry after his meeting with Hiscock) that he was a soft-handed physician not a hardened military killer.

What happened over the next several hours is unclear and would be obscured by conflicting testimonies and journalistic reports. It is not certain how or why, but during the day Mary somehow relayed a message to Hiscock—who was still at the Convention—perhaps warning him, or planning a getaway, or luring him into her husband’s presence; the note asked him to meet at the People’s Line Steamboat landing, but it apparently reached Hiscock’s hands after the appointed hour. The General would later claim that he had originally planned to confront Hiscock and make him get on his knees and beg for arm...
forgiveness in front of other men. He would then challenge Hiscock to a duel or give the latter ten days to leave the country. This may be why Cole, in addition to his new Derringer, carried his daughter’s gun in his jacket; it was likely a gun that Cole used earlier in the war, one that by the latter years became inferior to newer firepower. If so, Cole was familiar with it, maybe even with its lack of accuracy and imprecision. At any rate, the General had been daily handling firearms for at least five years if not a decade and he knew how to kill. It is probable that Cole went straightway to the Capitol hoping to interrupt the Constitutional Convention with violent éclat. But he must have soon realized that the convention had already adjourned and that he had missed his chance to make his nemesis cower on bent knees or perhaps murder him in front of New York’s most prominent politicians.27

With the convention adjourned for the day Cole obtained an interview with his brother-in-law Henry Barto, who had just come from the convention. Something transpired in their meeting that sent Cole to his limits. Perhaps Cole asked Barto to somehow facilitate the disgracing of Hiscock the next morning at the convention; but whatever it was that Cole wanted from Barto, he didn’t get it. The papers reported that the two had a falling out ever since Cole accepted a commission over armed black men, under the controversial Butler, who by then had bolted from the Democratic Party and joined forces with Radical Republicans. Barto, who came from devout Democrat stock, reportedly despised Cole’s “promotion” in the “Abolitionist’ war. They also reported that although Cole promised he

27 For the signing of the registry see: Syracuse Journal, June 6, 1867, page 8; Brooklyn Daily Union June 6, 1867. Also see Syracuse Journal, November 25, 1868, p.4, where a fellow customs worker testified that Cole criticized the worker’s revolver for its lack of range and power. The prosecuting attorney, Henry Smith made a case that Cole hoped to slay Hiscock on the floor of the Constitutional Convention. Syracuse Journal, December 4, 1868, p. 4.
would not take Hiscock’s life but only “make him get down on his knees like a dog and beg for it,” Barto rejected Cole’s request, telling him “you will think better of this in the morning,” and urging him to talk over the matter with the ex-governor, Thomas Alvord, a political ally and warm personal friend of Hiscock’s.28

After this interview the “maddened” General stepped from his hotel to Broadway, and made a two-block beeline for the prominent Stanwix Hotel where many politicians stayed. Why he skulked into the Stanwix from the side-street door instead of walking through the main entrance from Broadway neither he nor his attorneys could convincingly explain. Through the main entrance, he must have seen Hiscock in the lobby, talking with his cronies, smoking an evening cigar, leaning against a pillar with his slippers on. Cole stepped around to the side door and almost trance-like, cut a straight line through the lobby toward his “bosom friend” and discharged the Derringer into his face.29

Following an explosion of fire and red mist, Cole exclaimed, “He’s got it!” Hiscock’s large frame folded to the marble floor with muscles contracting. Friends recalled brains and black powder on his twitching face. Stunned, one of Hiscock’s colleagues broke the silence, grabbing Cole by his mended jacket: “Oh my God, General, what does this mean?” Almost every witness that evening would agree that the ex-soldier replied to a puzzled crowd with words something like: “I considered that man one of my best friends, but he raped my

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28 Syracuse Journal, December 3, 1868, p.4; Also see newspaper clipping “Gen. Cole’s Syracuse Letter” June 17, 1867, from Hiscock/Cole Murder Trial File, Onodaga Historical Association.

29 The reporter in Syracuse Journal, January 24, 1868, claimed that Cole was “maddened” by the suggestion especially because he did not want to tell more people about the shame of his family.
simple, child-like wife while I was gone to war... The evidence is clear, I have the proof!

Moments after the murder a physician in Albany arrived to examine the body which New York politicians and friends had heaved upstairs into a second-floor bed. Hiscock was already dead when a small crowd began escorting the compliant General to the city jail. On the way, he stopped and cried out loud for the fate of his children. His mind was a perfect wreck. So was his body.

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30 There are dozens of accounts and testimonies of what happened before, during and just after the murder. The story I tell will reflect the general narrative taken from various newspaper reports and the court record; when I find that conflicting testimony reflected important division among the community I will distinguish and elaborate.
CHAPTER 8:
COLE’S BODY AND THE IMAGINED WAR

Though scholars may coolly (and correctly) submit that all experience is mediated, some bodily experiences like having one’s hand dragged into a steel pulley, taking a minie ball to the hip, or marching sleep deprived and famished seem to verge on raw experience.\(^1\) Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the American Civil War—the bloodiest of all American wars—has led to so many chroniclers and historians (then and now) who see the war first and last, as a crucible of experience—a place where important events unfolded before millions of witnesses who then left behind fragments of reality in their journals, letters, and photos.\(^2\) From the scores of memoirs written by soldiers who were at hand at

\(^1\) In a seminal article, Joan Scott (and the many historians who have borrowed from her) have questioned the ways in which experience is used as evidentiary bedrock, and seen as the beginning of knowledge. See: Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," \textit{Critical Inquiry} 17, no. 4 (1991:summer), 773-797.; Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History After the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," \textit{Signs} 19, no. 2 (1994), 368-404. Examining working women in late Imperial and Weimar Germany, Canning tries to argue for a special place for the body between discourse and agency. She does not argue that the body is unmediated but that because it is “realcitrant,” it complicates experience and agency.

\(^2\) It is no coincidence either that for many Europeans the two World Wars are locations of nearly unmediated experience. In fact, all wars seem to promise a world without mediation. As Leonard Smith has put it: “Combat, we have been told in one way or another since people began writing about, is a transformative experience fundamentally unknowable to those who have not experienced it. The most common metaphor used to describe the introduction to combat is ‘baptism’ a sacral rite of initiation.” Thus one of the basic tenets of war writing, submits Smith, is “that veterans have a unique and at some level unquestionable claim to truth-telling about war.” See:
Gettysburg, or who rode alongside Sheridan, or the sizable population of modern-day re-
enactors who sink much of their money and time into recreating the war as it really was, or
the two-part Civil War “Knowledge Cards” that can be purchased at the Library of Congress
gift shop—the Civil War has frequently served as a national preserve of reality, experience,
and knowledge.\(^3\) Cannon balls, after all, tore indiscriminately into soldiers who lay in tents
daydreaming, praying, or penning lofty promises to a lover. Whatever soldiers made of
philosophy or metaphysics they were compelled to rummage for water and corn to fill
canteens and bellies. Young soldiers, even those of a philosophical bent, returned home with
respect for hard realities: technology, frost, fire, death.\(^4\)

Historians like James McPherson have consciously moved the war’s narrative back to
gritty contingencies on the battlefield, reminding scholars that in less than half a decade,
Union generals and soldiers literally brought freedom to four million slaves—something that

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\(^3\) For a fascinating work on war re-enactors who go to great lengths to obtain authentic war
experiences see: Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 406. For the Library of Congress Knowledge Cards see: http://www.loc.gov/about/books/cards/index.html. It is interesting that besides the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil War is the only other series based on an American era or event; all the others are collections that focus on, for example, famous women, African Americans, movies, or great music composers. One can find dozens and dozens of civil war fact books on any online book retailer or the public library shelf. For a typical war-as-fact-and-knowledge book see: Philip Katcher, *The Complete Civil War: The Definitive Fact File of the Campaigns, Weapons, Tactics, Armies and Key Figures*, 1st paperback ed. (London: Cassell, 1998).

\(^4\) For a book that argues the war made ideas and principles powerless compared to raw force
see: Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 546; Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union*, 276 For an example of a soldier who was shot while quietly reading in his tent see: Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*, 84-5
eighty years of political haggling, literature and religion could not. Lamenting the ways in which social and cultural historians have written around the war—sidestepping anything that resembles military history—McPherson has argued that the “real war” remains unwritten. And it will remain so, he suggests, until historians emphasize “the experiences of the three million soldiers and the vicarious extensions of those experiences to their families and friends back home, who constituted almost the whole of the American people.”

While I am sympathetic to McPherson’s emphasis on military experience, I am more interested in the complex and often vexing process of creating “vicarious extensions” than in simply recounting them. As Cole reminds us, though, for the vast majority who experienced the war vicariously, the war was “experienced” through words, gestures and images and, above all, made palpable through the maimed soldier’s body. Below we will examine how the body and, in particular, war wounds suggested a kind of intimate knowledge about war—an understanding of its starkest realities and costs—yet at the same time betrayed the utter confusion of war. The methods used to convey the “real” war to soldiers’ families and to us today often fall short, and in this chapter, the body is an essential aspect of the unbridgeable gap.

The acquisition of war “intelligence” is habitually seen as a precursor to military victory: to know is to triumph. In the American Civil War, for example, Sherman pushed for hard war by making civilians feel the bite of military aggression; he left a trail of smoldering

5 McPherson, "Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era", 909

6 James M. McPherson, Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 239-40. In the 1990s the enormously successful works of James McPherson and Ken Burns attracted millions of readers and viewers through compelling narratives that take soldiers’ experiences seriously—but without complicating them.
ruins because from prewar employment he “knew” southerners, and therefore what it would take to break the South. In 1862 Stonewall Jackson exploited his intimate, local knowledge of the Shenandoah Valley to frustrate and punish superior Union forces. The war began with a seemingly medieval medical regime, and ended with another kind of knowledge that anticipated modern medicine. Though the war temporarily created confusion, it ultimately rewarded those who best “knew” their enemies and topography, while destroying the benighted. Losers would have to rethink, relearn the universe. From topography to the human body, the war brought knowledge. Even Mary Chestnut, diarist extraordinaire, promised at the dawning of war that she would only record objective truths: “My subjective days are over,” she promised her anticipated readers.

Fog of War

In his essay, “Worrying about the Civil War,” Edward Ayers contends that the widely accepted narrative of the American Civil War, thanks to enormously popular works from the

7 John Keegan, Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al Qaeda, 1st American ed. (New York: Knopf, 2003), 3-98.

8 Ira M. Rutkow, Bleeding Blue and Gray: Civil War Surgery and the Evolution of American Medicine, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2005). White officers sometimes used wounded black bodies to dispel myths about black cowardice and to “prove” the courage of black soldiers. After a brutal engagement in the summer of 1863 Captain Matthew Miller wrote, “I never more wish to hear the expression, ’The Niggers won’t fight!’ Come with me, a hundred yards from where I sit, and I can show you the wounds that cover the bodies of sixteen soldiers as brave, loyal, and patriotic as ever drew bead on a rebel.” Miller quoted in: Randall M. Miller and Jon W. Zophy, "Unwelcome Allies: Billy Yank and the Black Soldier," Phylon 39, no. 3 (1978), 236.

likes of James McPherson and Ken Burns, has reduced a morally complex and chaotic period into a triumphalistic drama that lets both Civil War participants and Americans today off the hook. If students of American history are wringing their hands about America’s collective ghosts, from King Philip’s War to Iraq, the Civil War continues to cater to downhearted patriots looking for a vigorous pat on the back. The dominant telling of the war, Ayers contends, has become a story of how we became “our better selves”—a feel-good tale where the good sides eventually win: Modernity and technology triumphed over backwardness—the free market over slavery, individuality over constraining community, merit over rigid hierarchy.

Such triumphalism leads to professional sins by tempting historians to emphasize an attractive yet false linear chain of events that leads to a single climax. Or, in a related transgression, it creates a gripping inevitability where historical actors from Lincoln to Sherman to soldiers on the march somehow presciently knew the end from the beginning. The war was heading toward a certain fulfillment of cherished American virtues—democracy, freedom, bravery; Americans only needed baptism by blood before they could be born again and move to higher ground.

It makes for great reading and poor history. Triumphalism crowds out complexity. Folks who are destined to win rarely look confused. Chaos and uncertainty are merely rising smoke that will shortly give way to clarity. It is no accident that Ayers ends his call for revisionism by suggesting that Civil War historians need to recover the “swirl of action and
reflection, the partial knowledge of those swept up in war.” “We need to leave some of the fog of war on the page,” concludes Ayers.10

In this chapter, through the bodies of soldier-cum-civilian Cole and those that surrounded him, I attempt to recover some of this revisionist fog. In fundamental ways, the war created a crisis in knowledge. A handful of historians have argued that the war led to an epistemological meltdown—from doubts about the guiding hand of providence and biblical authority to millions of soldiers not “knowing” if they could rely on home-front loyalty. Other fairly recent works address the problem of the misleading and inaccurate filtration of the war through newspapers; and still other work concentrates on the unprecedented numbers of misplaced bodies and unidentifiable corpses.11 As far as certainty and knowledge go, it was the body, perhaps, that promised Americans most and delivered so little—especially the strange, often secret and unknowable war wound.

10 Ayers, "Worrying about the Civil War", 144-65

11 Noll, "The Civil War as a Theological Crisis", 199; Fredrickson, "The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union", 276; Menand, "The Metaphysical Club", 546; Linderman, "Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War" Also see chapter 6 in: Royster, "The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans", 523; Faust, "'the Dread Void of Uncertainty': Naming the Dead in the American Civil War", 7-32 This confusion, though, plagued Americans even as they supposedly kept tightly clutched to certainty. For the first time during an American war—perhaps with the exception of the war with Mexico—papers promised objective, thorough reports; exhaustive lists of the dead and wounded daily filtered home through telegraph lines and papers; and many Americans continued to see the war through a stark, apocalyptic Biblicism. Listing the dead and counting the costs offered clarity but as James Dawes has contended, the desire to count amid national confusion is not new to Civil War participants. “Counting,” he writes, “is the epistemology of war. See: James Dawes, The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War through World War II (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 29.
Many who knew about Cole’s injuries whether through intimacy, rumor, or avidly following the ensuing murder trial, imagined Cole galloping on his horse during the “Tarboro Raid” of 1863 (also called the Rocky Mount Raid) in North Carolina.\footnote{This raid was called interchangeably: Tarboro Raid, Tarborough Raid, Potter’s Raid, and the Rocky Mountain Raid.} Friends remembered that in Cole’s telling, he was racing across the field, closing in on a rebel soldier, when his horse was suddenly shot down just as Cole had raised his saber for the strike.\footnote{“Syracuse Daily Journal,” (1845-1899), April 25, 1868.; See testimony of Guy Davis, Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868.} Cole and the two thousand pound stallion came crashing to earth. The massive animal rolled over its master lengthwise with its saddle positioned in such a way that the pommel (the protuberant front end of the saddle) crashed into Cole’s chest while the cantle (the back rim) dug and rolled into his groin, nearly “mashing” his body in two. The pommel had popped partly through Cole’s sternum leaving a two-and-a-half inch indentation and purplish black contusions for several months. Cole would never breathe easily again especially when lying down to rest. Throughout the war his moaning and coming and going at night disturbed his sleeping comrades as Cole was regularly “driven out of bed” for fear of suffocation.

Like a one-ton rolling pin, the horse crushed Cole’s pelvic bone and ruptured his “suspensory ligaments” while pushing part of his lower bowels and the mucus membrane out of his rectum. A few army surgeons and Cole’s closest comrades remembered the lower bowels protruding some five to six inches from the anus. After the murder a physician and ex-regimental surgeon visited Cole in his jail cell to examine the wounds from the Tarboro Raid. His findings jibed with the recollections of those closest to him during the war. The
doctor examined prisoner Cole reporting that his gut was protruded “like a pregnant
woman,” probably from his damaged spinal chord and the partial paralysis of his intestines
and other organs. Cole reported that he suffered “numbness in his lower extremities.” His
rib cage slightly jutted forward on one side. His rectum was “crammed full of hardened
feces” like marbles which he “only expelled feverishly.” He defecated but once every several
days, and sometimes could not relieve himself for up to two weeks. His would testify in the
trial and in pension affidavits that after evacuations Cole often hemorrhaged nearly a pint of
blood into a jar, and then used his fingers to stuff his prolapsed bowels back inside his
partially paralyzed sphincter. For a second day the doctor returned to Cole’s cell for similar
examinations. As he testified in court, the doctor noticed blood on Cole’s pillow and when
he touched Cole on the chest and around his wounds, the soldier shuddered as his pulse
rose. When Cole urinated for the doctor, “instead of coming off like jets” the urine merely
dribbled from his penis like water from a pitcher. Most of the time, Cole had to use
“mechanical means” to empty the bladder and lower colon. Such a litany of wounds, the
surgeon would later opine before the jury, might easily produce melancholia and “mental
frenzy.”

The prosecution, of course, would question whether Cole’s complaints were any
different from those of the common soldier. His prolapsed anus, the argument would go,

14 See: Cole’s Pension File, NARA, Washington, DC; also, Syracuse Journal, April 24, 1868,
April 25, 1868, and May 7, 1868.

In summing up the maladies the prosecution used this term “like a pregnant woman.” See:
Syracuse Journal, May 7, 1868.
amounted to little more than bloody piles (hemorrhoids)—a widespread complaint within the ranks. This was true. Bowel and digestive troubles, perhaps only second to respiratory diseases, were the greatest killers of soldiers. As recorded in the war’s medical reports, intense expulsive efforts—the hallmark of acute dysentery or diarrhea—resulted in several hundred reported prolapsed anuses. Prewar medical experts recorded a rare occurrence of men’s colons descending nearly two feet from the rectum before sloughing off after deadly bouts of dysentery. Insomnia too was a well-recognized symptom of acute bowel trouble. Partially paralyzed lower extremities, depression, delirium, and intussusception (the collapsing, or telescoping of one set of bowels into another), all of these could just as easily be explained by the pervasive yet inglorious scourge of dysentery.  

(Cole did write his brother during the war expressing fears that “intussusception” would kill him.) And if Cole rarely slept during the war, neither did most soldiers. So Cole’s adversaries argued. 

The real snag with Cole’s story about his war injury, though, was not how bad it was. There is sufficient evidence and corroboration within official and private documents. The ambiguity lay in how it happened. While Cole did participate in the Tarboro Raid, it was not then that his horse had crushed his body. That had happened a year earlier, significantly in the same general area but during a meaningless military movement with no name. This confusion was not just a calculated move by Cole’s attorneys to connect Cole’s war wounds to a battle with cachet. Instead, associates and close friends who knew Cole after the war testified of hearing the agitated veteran recount the story of his debilitating accident from the Tarboro Raid. But still, Cole did not always lie about his injuries. During the war he once

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confessed the true time and place to his brother.\textsuperscript{16} Later, he may have gradually begun telling locals what they wanted to hear.

The “Tarboro Raid” may have been the best hope Cole had at believably tying his disabilities to a memorable war event. And yet the raid was barely noteworthy in the North outside of the circle of participating soldiers and their families—and, of course, the civilian victims. Since the spring of ‘62, Union forces had gained control of the eastern North Carolinian cities of Plymouth, (Little) Washington, and New Bern. The Tarboro Raid was an attempt in ’63 to further weaken confederate resolve in the region. That same summer Americans wagged their tongues over epic battles like Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Chickamauga. During the Tarboro Raid Union soldiers, many from Cole’s home region, had destroyed vital bridges over the Tar and Neuse Rivers in order to prevent shipments of corn, wheat and pork from reaching General’s Lee’s famished soldiers. Cole’s comrades had twisted vital railroads into unusable corkscrews. They torched river ports in Tarboro, decimated Rocky Mount’s mills (where hundreds of women daily churned out confederate uniforms), and set fire to train depots, water tanks, flourmills, and several hundred bales of cotton. In regions throughout New York (where sons and husbands were part of the raid) it was painted as a vital, if tiny, step in bringing the rebels to their knees. Southerners mocked

\textsuperscript{16} In January 1864 Cole wrote his brother, “I have for a few weeks been very much troubled with my injury… received in 1862 in a cavalry charge. I have to keep where I can lie down at a moments warning & permit the parts to resume their normal position…. I am in danger of intersusuption [sic] or strangulation of the large intestines.” In this letter Cole reveals the correct date and a rare description or diagnosis of what he believes afflicts him.. George Cole to Cornelius, Cole family, “Papers”.
it as a “chicken stealing party,” but for Cole it was his best chance to inscribe honor and fame onto his pitiful body.17

The raid, though, only garnered a smattering of print in Syracuse’s most important newspaper. In two or three paragraphs Cole’s fellow Syracusans learned that plans were afoot in North Carolina to destroy significant stretches of rail, bridges and culverts, and that the “cavalry hero” of this operation, Major Cole, would make the success of his superior, Gen. Potter, “doubly sure.” Later, without even a whiff of Cole’s name, the paper reported that a thousand foot bridge over the Neuse River had been burned, possibly cutting off communication for weeks. Also, a group of nearly two thousand “contrabands” had been “picked up” by Cole’s regiment during the mission but then lost to the rebels again. These sparse anti-climactic descriptions were literally surrounded by and swallowed up by daily columns about the draft riots in New York city, continuing stories on Vicksburg and long lists of detailed updates of injured soldiers who three weeks before fought at Gettysburg.18

Because more important battles eclipsed the raid that summer, Cole’s friends and colleagues back home perhaps knew just enough about the incident to connect some meaning to “Tarboro” and the general operation within the North Carolina region—but not enough to catch chronological inconsistencies. Maybe while Cole tried to explain his injuries to those who had stayed home, his listeners interjected the “Raid” into Cole’s narrative as a way to

17 Norris, “‘the Yankees have been here!’: The Story of Brig. Gen. Edward E. Potter’s Raid on Greenville, Tarboro, and Rocky Mount, July 19-23, 1863”, 1-27 Norris notes that even this small victory ironically led Confederates to place more forces in the region which ultimately led to the confederate victory in Plymouth where over 3000 union soldiers were captured.

18 Most of the reports that entire month are dedicated to the draft riots, Vicksburg and Gettysburg. Syracuse Journal, July 22, 1863, and July 27, 1863.
place Cole’s story on a mental map of the war. (Men who avoided the war may have been eager to prove their knowledge about what local veterans had experienced.) If Cole did not lie, perhaps he simply let the interpolations stand.

But even if Cole had consciously lied, he had a decent motive. The Tarboro Raid, for those who actually knew its contours, was known for its soldiers’ extraordinary endurance. Many of the cavalrymen remained in their saddles for nearly five consecutive days with only a few hours of sleep. For many soldiers it took a lasting toll. But for Cole, transposing his particular injuries onto the grueling raid promised heightened awe and wonder from any who would listen. However the conflation of war events originally occurred, by the time he returned home, throughout his trial, and until his death, Cole would continue to trace his grotesque injuries to a half-imaginary war story set in a North Carolina field.¹⁹

Perhaps Cole’s horse simply stumbled in a ditch as some of the testimonies and subsequent pension affidavits suggested that he fell at dusk. (The pension claim would be for Mary Cole as a military widow, George never filed.) Even so, he could have been lifting his saber to kill an enemy just as his horse came tumbling down. From other war records we know that in the late summer of ’62—when his horse actually did fall on him—Cole’s company engaged in minor skirmishes with rebel pickets and guerillas near Swift Creek, North Carolina. Whatever the details, Cole almost certainly suffered these injuries in 1862. Not only do his war records attest that he was temporarily admitted to a field hospital at that time.

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¹⁹ Cole moved to New Mexico soon after the trial and there told his physician, Charles Bowmer, about the Tarboro Raid. Repeatedly Cole claimed that his injury came during “the Tarboro Ride of thirty consecutive hours.” See Cole’s Pension File:, affidavit of Charles Bowmer, and of Mary Cole, March 1884, NARA, Washington, DC.
time, but in the early fall of ‘62 Mary Barto Cole journeyed to the battlefront to nurse her maimed husband, where she remained until the following spring.\textsuperscript{20}

The Symbolism of Wounds

Cole’s war comrades claimed that he had been edgy and slept fitfully ever since his injuries. Close friends and hometown acquaintances noted that the ex-soldier often looked flush, with “wild blood-shot eyes,” and that he was sometimes given to violent gestures, especially when discussing the war. Cole would often make calls on the paper store of his comrade, Frank Garrett, where the two ex-soldiers evidently spent a fair amount of time discussing their common past and ambitions. Cole repeatedly confided his desire to leave Syracuse—one day for California where his older brother had risen to political prominence—the next day for Washington, or the mines of Montana. When his war buddy inquired about Cole’s increasing downheartedness, Cole confessed that he “would never get over the difficulty he got in the service,” and that “his wound had used him up so that he was of no more good to himself or family.” When Garrett struck Cole on the leg, perhaps

\textsuperscript{20} See: United States. War Dept and others, ”The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies”, Part II, Volume 41, No. 53, pages 231-35 See the affidavit in Cole’s pension file, of Lodowick Wooden, from Rochester, who served under Cole in 1862. Wooden’s account of the fall seems to jibe best with the court testimonies, Mary B. Cole’s letters, Cole’s pension file and extant military records. As we will see, the army medical records are the most curious aspect of Cole’s injury as he was clearly injured but official records show no such injury in any year of the war. Wooden recalled that the fall happened near Swift Creek in an insignificant operation where Cole’s men charged a group of “guerillas.” Because it was dark, Cole’s horse stumbled in a ditch. Mary Cole, too, told her pension agent that her husband had a fall with his horse in July or August of 1862 “in North Carolina near Swift Creek.”
with a passing joke, Cole warned him of his pistol wound, adding that he “wished it had been higher up [so that] he would now be asleep under the sod of Virginia.”

Some time in during his first year of the war Cole had suffered this pistol shot in his thigh. Cole, like thousands of his fellow soldiers, returned home with parts of the war lodged in their bodies—spent bullets and shells in their arms, chests, necks, and buttocks. Cole was forced to occasionally wield a cane for a short while although even his own friends seemed to be unaware or forgetful about his wounds. In this small way, Cole declared that his body had carried the war home with it, though hidden under his civilian clothes. His wounds at once drew his mind back to thousand mile stretches of geography and reminded him of the vital difference of inches. He imagined how different things might have been had the wound been just a few feet higher, or maybe an inch to the left. Cole would confess, at least to those who asked, that his wounds had consumed him and made him useless to his family. He came home with all four limbs, but a complexly disordered body veiled by business trousers, and the natural contours of his own body. From the placement of his body wounds, to the confusion of timing and geography that adhered to them, to the actual pain, Cole’s injuries nagged his body and mind.

Cole’s wardrobe change, from his war clothes into those items he wore on Syracuse streets or in his parlor, was part of a potentially confusing passage where the returning soldier’s garb seemed to transform his stubborn, war-inscribed body and mind. After all wars, sporting civilian clothes serves as a sort of material witness to others and to the veterans themselves that the war no longer raged and that they have somehow come out

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21 Dunphy, "Remarkable Trials of all Countries with the Evidence and Speeches of Counsel, Court Scenes, Incidents, &c. Volume II", 243-44and Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868.
alive when many comrades remain uniformed, rotting into earth. Whether the thought flitted or hung in their minds, returning to civilian clothes underscored this “other” time when they dressed in war uniforms and slept with their rifles—some unrecoverable past that seemed distinctive, or perhaps even disconnected, every time a soldier fastened the buttons of a business shirt or the latches of his factory shoes.

But the division between war and home could be porous. After all, the lines between soldiers’ uniforms and civilian garb were often blurred even during the war by soldiers who disregarded regulations and wore their own blouse, a straw hat, or boots from the farm. Moreover, soldiers frequently altered their uniforms by creasing their hats, tearing off colored piping, ripping off buttons, sewing gold tape to the cuffs, embroidering shell jackets, attaching ladder and hook badges from their pre-war firefighting crews, or fixing regulation markings to non-regulation slouch hats.22 And the apparently clean break between military and civilian clothing also broke down when many veterans brought home their handguns and bowie knives, or kept their Wellington boots or the army standard “Jefferson” brogans until they wore out in a cornfield or at the feet of a lathe.

But even with all the personalized uniforms and crossover between civilian and military clothes, after the war millions of men shed their military garb, creating a type of

22 Ron Smith Field Robin, Uniforms of the Civil War, 1st Lyons Press ed. (Guilford, Conn: Lyons Press, 2001), 64-5, 84. One finds a maddening lack of correlation between what soldiers were ordered to wear through war memos and General Orders, and the provisional, mix-match and often personalized uniforms found in the field. While enlisted men decorated their uniforms, officers often chose to wear private jackets or go without the chevrons or bars hoping to be less conspicuous in the sites of sharpshooters. See: Russ A. Pritchard, Civil War Weapons and Equipment (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2003), 12-16.
sartorial rite that marked their passage back into pre-war worlds. The fact that millions of men began donning different outfits, and that this sartorial shift was acted out in sometimes complex, piecemeal ways, suggests that clothing helped ease soldiers in and out of war.

But the “watershed” between war and peace must have seemed even less complete when injured soldiers disrobed if only for a moment to bathe, have sex, prepare for bed, or reveal their altered bodies to medical experts of the pension bureau. On one hand, visible war wounds and opened bodies that had returned home possessed a kind of symbolic, palpable power that lent (supposed) clarity and finality to the war. In a Civil War, as in all wars, visible wounds keep the bodies of soldiers frozen in the war—and by extension the minds of all those who set eyes upon such wounds. The cauterized wound, the missing ear, reminded all those who probed them with their fingers or eyes that the war had been real as was its outcome.²³

But many soldiers, like Cole, had nothing to “show.” Compared to a stump at one’s wrist or an exaggerated limp—many wounds hid not only beneath clothes, but inside veterans’ bodies. For the many who returned home with an ague, bowel trouble, or some bone-deep pain, speaking of Appomattox or April 1865 as the “end” of the war offered perplexing finality to something that seemed to have not yet come to a full stop and that was still hidden within them. For such men the war faded away (and sometimes returned) in waves, or throbs. Phlegm-filled lungs, chronic bloody stools, or tender bullet wounds dictated the waves’ rhythms.

Through their wounds, Civil War veterans “knew” the war and often revealed that “knowledge” to strangers. A soldier might refuse to be fitted for a prosthetic, as many soldiers did, or pose before a camera with the wound conspicuously displayed. For soldiers like Cole this knowledge could be conveyed only to a small circle of intimates who nursed him, slept at his side, or grazed against tender sores. All bodies retain memory, not in the mind alone but in conjunction with muscle, skin and bone. Soldiers remembered the war in their mouths, in the ways they had chewed ill-prepared meat or worked down hard tack with swollen gums. A right knee torn from fatigue duty might force a soldier’s body to favor the left leg until this bodily imbalance hardened into a remembered gait which then was reflected in the back muscles, how one approached a chair, and wore out his soles. Wounds, also, gave seemingly dependable accounts of not only the physical pain of war, but of war’s most confusing and contested questions of when, where, why and how. Even if a Soldier could not articulate the vivid chaos and madness of Shiloh, or some skirmish in a cloud-covered night “somewhere” outside of Petersburg, he could look to his wound and even display it as a way to say: “this is what is left of Shiloh,” or “here is what I know about Petersburg.”

Yet wounds, taken as some looking glass into the realities of war, or a way to read into what happened to soldiers, lead us—perhaps as much as any other variable—into the thick fog of war. Civil War wounds erased as much as they revealed. Because they were grounded in the palpable body, they tempted both the wounded and the observer with false promises of clarity amid the epistemological meltdown of war.
In part, Cole’s story reminds us of Elaine Scarry’s maxim that “to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt.”24 Because, as Scarry wants her readers to remember, though wounds are anchored in the body (the starting place where reality is perceived) they do not have a simple relationship to reality or to the war and the contest between states. Though the crimson of blood and wound almost inevitably come to symbolize the sovereignty of the victorious side, war wounds are hardly stable in their meanings. They have no ideological meaning until one is constructed for them. Ordinary soldiers may come home with a set of explicable, perceivable wounds—a burn that starts three-quarters up the thigh and extends to the knee cap, or a minie ball wound just beneath the right shoulder blade. Yet what soldiers make of these, the stories they tell about them, and the ways that such stories are received, are anything but settled.

Union sympathizers—indeed anybody who wanted to make sense of the unparalleled loss of life and limb—were tempted to package soldiers’ wounds with a stock narrative, one that placed the wound (or death) at the end of a chain of events that began with bravery, ideological commitment, self-sacrifice and honor. But many Civil War soldiers had fought for things less noble than union and freedom. Some had hid, ducked, ran to enemy lines, feigned death, shot their own fingers off, or caught syphilis in a whore’s rented bed. This is, I think, what Scarry is getting at when she writes that in order for millions of wounds—each with a unique story—to be transformed into badges of the state, lies or silence must first cover “the motives of individuals, of governments, of armies…the disposition of events within battles, the bodily fate of large populations of soldiers.” In other words, when war

24 ibid., 7
“works” (that is, when it is perceived to have legitimately resolved a conflict) it is because it produces scads of wounded bodies bound with gauze and falsehoods. The declaration of war, Scarry concludes, “is the declaration that ‘reality’ is now officially ‘up for grabs.’” Though Scarry fails to underscore how much individual soldiers are complicit in creating the confusion, her work forces us to ask different questions about the most costly war in American history—even if we have ask them one wound at a time.  

Because I am drawing so heavily from Scarry’s creative interpretation, it is appropriate to summarize the main tenets of her magnificent work. Scarry masterfully deconstructs the complex, entangled relationship between war and the injured body. Though their relationship seems self-evident—“soldiers go to war and some get injured”—she contends that damage to human tissue is the central act and purpose of war, between two sides that attempt to out-injure the other. Injury to the body isn’t just a regrettable, but necessary function of war. It is not a mere footnote. It is the entire point. This is because it is the war wound that seemingly legitimates the war and the concluding conditions arrived at once one side believes itself decimated, too injured to go on. The scattered wounds that remain on various men’s backs, legs, necks and hands confirm “the abiding reality of one set of issues and the disappearance of another.” War is a contest of wounding, and mangled bodies from both sides remind participants and civilians that the bloody contest took place, and that there is now a winner. War-injured tissue, writes Scarry, is “the precious ore of confirmation…the mother lode that will eventually be reconnected to the winning issue…” War would be incapable of enforcing its own results (that is making the “loser” accept loss while anointing a winner by drawing new borders to its liking, and legitimating its ideology) without the destruction of buildings, the burning of barns, the severing of travel ways, and most importantly, the disfiguring of human bodies. For Scarry, it is logical that because political learning is often recorded into the body’s memory—when to salute, which flag to cry for, what notes to emphasize when singing the national anthem—that altered political configurations seem to require altered bodies. When Scarry writes about this fluid “unanchored” meaning of wounds, she is mostly addressing the ways in which their meanings are eventually yoked to the victorious state (regardless of what really happened on the battlefield—whether it was friendly fire, or a strange accident—or the unknown motives of why the soldier was willing to fight, or even which side he was fighting for). In this sense, the meaning of the soldier’s body is confusing enough. But when we remember that wounds, which come to symbolize or ratify large political arrangements, are not simply clay in the hands of the government, but marks on the body that occur amid the chaos of war, and that these wounds will need to have meaning in the most intimate of relations—the touching of a child’s crown with a withered hand, the attempt to engage in coitus with mangled genitalia—we can begin to grasp how disorienting wounds could be for those who carried them, touched them, sponged them. ibid., 91-139
Amputations and Invisible Wounds

During the Civil War, the unfortunate combination of recently adopted rifled barrels and conical, soft-lead minie balls resulted in bullets ripping into targeted flesh with greater frequency and destruction. These soft bullets spread outward upon contact, pushing fabric into the body—scrambling muscle, skin, bone and cloth. Bullet wounds, as a consequence often resulted in the loss of an arm, leg, finger or hand. Papers and journals on both sides of the war soon invested heroic meanings into soldiers’ amputations. And many soldiers reaped the symbolic power of loss. “[W]e would sell anything but our scars for long letters from pretty correspondents,” wrote two amputees from their hospital beds, clearly denoting at least modest pride in having lost a leg, and in their shared hope that it would attract women. Henry Allen, another Union soldier, wrote in an essay about his missing arm, “I wanted to bring a mark home with me to show that I had been w[h]ere danger came near me.”

Soldiers were certainly accomplices in assigning symbolic meaning to war wounds and making them code for personal honor and character. It was not uncommon for soldiers to write home, as Allen did, confessing that though they feared dying they hoped for an honorable scar. This is why, perhaps, after the war the majority of amputees never had a prosthetic device fitted to their bodies even though the US government provided free artificial limbs for Union veterans—and transportation to and from the doctor. As Francis

Clarke has argued, this cannot be explained by the discomfort of the devices alone or veterans’ ignorance about legislation that made such devices available. It seems the case too that the majority of amputees (Confederate and Union) made no attempt to conceal their missing limbs in posed photographs—often preferring to prominently display the disability by pinning limp jacket sleeves to military buttons, for example. In the war period and shortly after American inventors obtained manifold patents for prosthetics specifically designed for the new market created by warfare. And though crude by our standards, many contemporaries touted the vast improvements in maneuverability and their likeness to real body parts thanks to the use of India-rubber (more pleasant for touching) and wood limbs covered with beige painted parchment. Clarke contends that many of the amputees found that their missing limbs provided proof of their willingness to suffer for the sake of the nation. It made them selfless patriots—true and permanent republicans. And in an overwhelmingly evangelical society the “empty sleeve” often came to be understood through the redemptive narrative of Christ’s suffering. Manliness in Cole’s day was tied up in political participation, a composed self, and one’s immediate reputation within the community, the church, and among peers. If an empty pant leg denoted loss it also could symbolize self-composure and loyalty. In the predominantly male world of politics the conspicuous amputation could propel veterans into lofty political offices. By the latter part of the war, the House of Representatives hired Samuel Decker as a doorkeeper, who had both his arms ripped off in a battle explosion. The symbolism was obvious. The lowly private turned bilateral amputee now guarded the doors to the holy of holies where democratically anointed men brokered power for their constituents. For much of the nineteenth century Americans believed that self-restraint and character could turn boys or dependent males into self-made men. It would not be until late the nineteenth century that the bulk of Americans began
equating manliness (or its linguistic successor, masculinity) with the aggressive, fully formed athletic body.\textsuperscript{27}

Perhaps, though, war amputations came to acquire such symbolic gravity because the dimensions of the problem were both comprehensible (that is verifiable and therefore seemingly uncontestable) and ripe for political use. Americans made sense of the return of hobbling or asymmetric bodies by (sometimes inverted) metaphors where soldiers “gave” their limbs so that the Union could be taken back, restored. A man’s carved up body secured regional symmetry; the amputee’s loss secured the nation’s wholeness. Of course, many of the upbeat accounts of losing arms and legs would come much later from essays, speeches and memoirs in the final decades of the nineteenth century, when aged veterans, long past their prime working years, enjoyed generous pensions due to their bodily losses. Even more, their missing members fit nicely with the increasingly dominant national memory of the war which depicted it as a heroic struggle between brothers who were willing to give life and limb for liberty and nation, rather than a bloody, reckless clash over the deeply embedded problems of race and greed in America.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{28} David W. Blight, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 512.; Nina Silber, The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 257. Silber argues that middle- and upper-class Americans increasingly found the antidote to their own anxieties about changing gender roles and immigration in the romanticized chivalric Southern past. The disproportionate literary and cultural representations of amputees would continue into the twentieth century. Referring to the two world wars, David Gerber writes “we find amputees garnering attention vastly out of proportion to their relatively small numbers, and in effect, becoming
Amputees certainly affected the ways Americans digested the war’s costs. But what about the innumerable wounds of the body and mind that were less conspicuous—or less amenable to patriotic metaphor? What sorts of “losses” did soldiers drag home with them that could not be displayed in a framed ambrotype? Suppurating wounds behind the shirt, slipping joints, herniated scrotums, the stench of rotting infections from the gums and throat…. After all, of the millions who fought, no more than fifty thousand men came home from the Civil War with amputated limbs or digits, and only about forty percent of these men had fought for the Union. Yet the home front, with the complicity of many soldiers, collapsed the vast spectrum of war wounds into the category of missing: the absence of limb or sight. It is true that in its final hour, the Confederate government authorized orthopedic hospitals to treat all types of unhealed wounds—false joints, necrosis, hernias, local paralysis, just to name a few—but many private relief agencies that continued beyond the collapse of the Confederacy focused their attention on lost limbs and little else. But Cole, like the vast majority of harmed soldiers, carried less visible wounds that might have communicated different stories about the deep disruptions of war.

It is regularly conceded by Civil War historians that disease and accidental casualties produced far more deaths than enemy fire, and yet little is understood about how certain

29 Figg and Farrell-Beck, "Amputation in the Civil War: Physical and Social Dimensions"

30 Rosenberg, “Empty Sleeves and Wooden Pogs: Disabled Confederate Veterans in Image and Reality", 204-28
images came to dominate Civil War memory-making. More “honorable” wounds caused by the enemy’s minie balls and bayonets eclipsed the often staggering number of casualties due to malaria, scurvy, dysentery, venereal diseases, or tuberculosis. Or to a lesser extent, but no less significant, many soldiers suffered from labor accidents, frostbite, friendly fire, and accidentally (or purposefully) self-inflicted wounds. As for disease—malnutrition, maggot-infested meat, exposure to freezing nights, blinding heat, and the intermingling of men from all regions only hastened the break down of bodies through exhaustion and the transmission of deadly microbes. Everywhere, scattered throughout the South, soldiers dammed rivers and camped by watering places, where mosquitoes bred in the still waters and feasted upon the surrounding troops. The prolonged presence of thousands of men accompanied by their often diseased horses, cattle and swine, created environmental wastelands where animal offal, human excrement and discarded matter tainted ground and drinking waters.

Other war wounds were equally biological, yet spawned by the soldier’s more personal—emotional and psychological—make up. Probably over 100,000 soldiers in the Union army alone contracted gonorrhea during the war, more than four times those who returned to northern homes with amputations. Over 70,000 soldiers were diagnosed with syphilis. Many thousands more escaped diagnosis, returning home with latent viruses. Many more were sufficiently careful—or just lucky. When regiments languished in camps—as they often did—many soldiers who struggled with boredom and loneliness sought out pleasure with prostitutes who regularly set up makeshift brothels within the proximity of the army camps. Border States and southern cities offered soldiers (both protectors and occupiers) access to houses of assignation. In Nashville, after Union officials attempted to keep troops from frequenting bawdy houses, and soon realized the futility, army agents began monitoring
the health of the prostitutes, issuing them licenses for their trade. During the summer of 1863 a Union General out of desperation commandeered a private boat under charter, loaded it with over one hundred prostitutes and tried to ship them to Louisville. (The ladies remained on board for nearly a month and eventually returned as no other port would let them disembark.) In this same city in the fall of 1864, Union officials created a hospital for prostitutes and a separate facility for syphilitic soldiers. And the capitals of both the Union and the Confederacy produced notorious brothel districts, one of them familiarly know as “Hooker’s Division” named after the hard-drinking and rakish General Joseph Hooker, one of the Union’s highest ranking officers. Charles Francis Adams Jr., would later describe Hooker’s Army of the Potomac as a place “to which no self-respecting man liked to go, and no decent woman could go. It was a combination of barroom and brothel.”

For the northern home front, a frank debate over the crisis of prostitution and war would have unavoidably led to a pointed criticism of northern culture, and soldiers themselves. Prostitute camps and districts were something like ad hoc extensions of the thriving brothel districts in cities like New York where bawdy houses of all stripes catered to the middle-class business sector. By mid-century New York’s law enforcement virtually ignored some 500 brothels, which combined with similar forms of prostitution, brought in over six million dollars, second only to the tailor business in cash value of “manufactured articles.” What is clear is that an astonishing number of Victorian businessmen paid huge amounts to have their clothes made, and dished out only slightly less to have them removed.

Sexuality in the war, at least in this context, was another articulation of northern cities’ commercialization of sexuality where physical intimacy was increasingly packaged with entertainment, anonymity and money.32

But as the exploitative and sometimes violent world of war prostitution led to the breakdown of bodies, it also served as a salve. While bringing temporary relief from loneliness, for some soldiers, it offered fleeting vicarious contact with lovers back home. In the back rooms of a brothel, or in a clearing, at best, soldiers encountered a place where strangers offered pleasure instead of immediate mortal danger. Soldiers, who had come to grasp the vulnerability of their own bodies in war through pain, infection, and sleep deprivation, and whose bodies had become subjects of the state, used prostitution to momentarily subject another’s flesh to their own. To be sure, some soldiers with unsightly war wounds revealed their mutilated bodies to prostitutes who were paid to not notice. For perhaps the majority of soldiers who resisted its temptations, prostitution was one of various army-life vices that offered quick pleasure in exchange for a sizable cut of one’s army pay. But for the many, the solace achieved through purchased intimacy came at the price of disease—wreaking more havoc on already endangered bodies. Genital warts, cauliflower-like skin eruptions, body ulcers, measles-like rashes, obstructed urethras, chronic rashes, testicles swollen to the their apparent bursting point, dementia and death. We know that more men came home with these wounds, than did those with empty sleeves proudly pinned to lapels.

32 Timothy J. Gilfoyle, City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1820-1920 (New York: Norton, 1992), 462. Gilfoyle’s extensive research reveals the booming business of brothels in antebellum New York as well as the changing meaning of sexuality from mystical and religious moorings to that of entertainment, commodity, public intimacy, and bodily objectification. For the mid-century figures see pages, 125-27.
Wounds of Shame

To unpack the world of Civil War injuries is not to give us perfect clarity about what “really” happened at such and such battle, but to remind us to tell the story with more uncertainty. And this brings us back to General Cole and his leg with a bullet hole that he wished was at his heart and the other wounds that were “pressing” him down. This is not to implicate Cole in wartime prostitution or self-mutilation but to locate him among a population of soldiers whose bodies were overcome at staggering rates. Broken bodies elicited questions even as they narrated war history. Cole spent the majority of his five-year service in Virginia and North Carolina, malarial hotbeds near or in the port towns of Norfolk, Portsmouth, City Point, and New Bern—and all hives for wartime prostitution. (Like Nashville, the first two cities adopted Union administered inspections of prostitutes’ bodies for signs of disease) There is no proof that Cole visited bawdy houses during the war; and while many of his comrades certainly paid for sex, if Cole did he left no trace. In other words, we, like the Civil War home front, must simply wonder—even if there is little particular evidence leading us toward satisfying conclusions. It is peculiar, though, that when superiors transferred Cole to inland areas around Petersburg and Richmond (during the summer of 1864) Cole made several strange requests to return temporarily to the port regions of Fort Monroe and Norfolk, where, he unconvincingly argued, he needed to “return excess” supplies, recover some horse equipment, or capture “deserters from my regiment.” All of these tasks, as Cole knew, were not really within his purview. It was hardly warranted

to travel over seventy miles on land and over river to return some missing horse gear. Each
time the answer promptly returned: “Disapproved.” Perhaps Cole had a score to settle with
a merchant back in Portsmouth, or an old comrade he longed to see; maybe he had camp
fever, or was growing anxious as he waited under Butler’s forces just outside entrenched
confederate strongholds. But it is possible too that Cole found in Portsmouth, or in New
Berne, the same comfort and release for which many soldiers would pay, and literally suffer
if not die.

An unnamed wound from Bull Run; a spent bullet lodged in his thigh; a busted
sternum; and a crushed groin. For Cole and many comrades, one’s list of wounds obscured
as much as it revealed. As Lisa A. Long has argued, the efforts of Civil War doctors (who
found themselves caught somewhere between the “healing art” of earlier generations and the
scientific modes of the latter century) to account for, codify, and effectively address the
scads of wounded bodies, were stymied by the “the number and variety of invisible wounds
suffered by their patients.” In the latter half of the war the Union army was plagued with
problems of desertion, malingering, and bounty jumping. Conscripted soldiers or those who
had joined for the bounty for obvious reasons often had less than firm commitments to the
war. If such soldiers looked to immediately escape the violence and anxiety of war, they

34 For the frequent requests to his superiors see: Microfilm #M1817; July, August, and
November 1864. NARA, Washington, DC.

35 See: Cashin, "Civilians and Draft Resistance in the North", 263-285
needed to do one of the following: die, run, or “get” sick or wounded. For many soldiers, malingering or self-inflicted wounds were preferable to the first two options. Soldiers might blow off a toe or finger, or fake internal pains. Writing about what was and is true for both Civil War Americans and historians, Long writes that, “The reliability of Civil War bodies and the authenticity of the stories that account for them can only remain a matter of faith.”

Long partially grounds her claim in the Civil War medical experiences of Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who worked with wounded soldiers brought to Philadelphia by the trainload to be healed and rehabilitated in the city’s hospitals. Despite his attempt to create detailed histories of all types of war wounds, and his faith that eventually, given enough case studies, he would get to the bottom of all types of war wounds and ailments, Mitchell became increasingly perplexed about the problem of nerve damage. What especially agitated Mitchell was the apparent lack of correlation between the physically verifiable and what the patient reported as pain. As Mitchell and his colleagues gathered data on soldiers who reported unverifiable symptoms like phantom pains in missing limbs, numbness, pain from being lightly touched, and other nerve complaints, Mitchell was forced to consider the lack of relation between actual wounds and interior pain; in other words, he could never know if he was dealing with a wounded soldier or a malingering who had acted his way off the battlefields. Mitchell increasingly focused his attention on exposing the impostor, hoping to root out imitators through shock, blisters, and intimidation (like mentioning horrific medical measures that would need to be taken, just within earshot of the supposed malingering).
Mitchell and colleagues even went so far as to study the common clues of malingering itself by examining actors who pretended to have seizures.\(^{36}\)

While systematic documentation of battlefield injuries was not an entirely new objective—both the French and British attempted it in the Crimean War—Civil War medical authorities were the first to push for a totalizing understanding of war wounds through long-term studies of postoperative conditions. Early in the war, the Surgeon General of the Army began creating the mechanisms for obtaining more accurate descriptions and reports of wounds from battle. This included significantly more paper work that needed to be sent in immediately after engagements. These medical reports eventually categorized wounds by their degree, causation, exposure to surgery, and whether the soldier was black, white or confederate. By 1864, several thousand severed limbs and specimens (internal organs, bones, tissue) had been forwarded to the Army Medical Museum, after surgeons were ordered to begin collecting specimens like excised portions of bone, or diseased joints, or fractured craniums in small casks of diluted whiskey, each wrapped in cloth and attached to a piece of wood with the soldier’s name and ailment written in pencil.\(^{37}\) But as doctors tried to define

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\(^{37}\) Civil War Surgeon and curator of the Army Medical Museum, John Brinton, noted that it was a great difficulty to obtain “truthful and full” histories of the body parts sent into his care. Many surgeons and officers either lacked interest in the scientific accumulation of specimens at the museum, or were simply swamped by the carnage and mayhem following battles. Brinton admits that he sometimes had to go to the field hospitals and dig out “putrid heaps” of body parts to bring back to his museum. See: John H. Brinton, *Personal Memoirs of John H. Brinton: Civil War Surgeon, 1861-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 186-8. Also see: Goler and Rhode, "From Individual Trauma to National Policy: Tracking the Uses of Civil War Veteran Medical Records", 163-84;
the contours of pain and injury, and to make sense of the carnage, most Americans found
comfort in assigning moral meanings to soldiers’ mutilated bodies, even if they quietly
doubted certain individual histories. It’s not just that soldiers might create stories about
battlefield injuries to mask more mundane wounds like being kicked by a mule, poked in the
eye while on night watch, or falling off one’s horse during drill, but the injuries themselves
might have been creations.

Self-Inflicted Wounds

As Silas Weir Mitchell came to see, it is nearly impossible to tally or winnow cases of
malingering and self-inflicted injuries because their primary purpose was to deceive both
comrade and family members. And though the pension bureau in later years would ask
probing questions about the connections between aging veterans’ ailments and war injuries,
most intentionally self-inflicted wounds, if not immediately exposed on the battlefield or
hospital, were accepted and then legitimated by the pension process. Wounds born out of
fear, insanity, or a volatile revolver, then, could become marks of honor that would promise
status and eventually monthly pension payments—if not for Cole, then for some of his
comrades. Take, for example, Charles Babbitt who had already begun the process of
applying for a pension when Cole returned home to Syracuse. Like Cole, Babbitt joined the
12th NY Infantry in April 1861. And like Cole, Babbitt began the war fighting alongside
friends and acquaintances from Syracuse, but in the latter half of the war joined a regiment

Barnes and United States. Surgeon-General's Office, "The Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War", Vol. 1, pages iii-ix
filled with comrades who did not share the same local webs of friendship, work, church and family. Babbitt, though, wound up in Meade’s (and Grant’s) Army of the Potomac.

Whereas Cole, bottled up with Butler at Bermuda Hundred, played a supporting role, Babbitt was directly subjected to the slaughterhouse in Virginia in the summer of 1864. Babbitt came home after the war with a bullet lodged in his shoulder, an injured elbow, a stiff, mangled left hand and a body that over the previous year had shrunk from 150 to 90 pounds during a four month stint in Libby Prison. Though Babbitt was a simple, uneducated man, he had comrades from all classes who would vouch for his honesty, sobriety, and honor. “He was as loyal a man as ever lived,” wrote his first captain. Most of these comrades, though, only “knew” private Babbitt during the early war period. Babbitt, though, had a secret that he would keep close to his chest for over thirty years, until in 1898, God told Babbitt that he better “clean up [his] army character.” Hounded by epileptic fits and poverty, Babbitt revealed the secrets that had nagged at him so long. Though he knew he would be cut off from his monthly pension, his only means of support, and he had no family to take him in, Babbitt penned a somewhat frantic confession to President William McKinley, confiding that when his regiment (9th New York, Heavy Artillery) was on the advance at Cold Harbor in 1864, Babbitt—who at that time was suffering from the blues

38 His second regiment, the 9th New York Heavy Artillery, was drawn up mostly from other New York regions like Cayuga and Wayne counties. Dyer, "A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion", Volume 3, page 1885

39 Grant’s Overland Campaign siphoned off many of Butler’s troops. Though Cole was involved in a feint in hopes of drawing Lee’s energies from the Army of the Potomac, during this period he was reported doing guard duty at Bermuda Hundred. See: New York Herald, May 27, 1864; Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868. A Dr. Rice also recalled seeing Cole at this same time at Bermuda Hundred, noting that he seemed markedly melancholy. Testimony of Dr. Rice in Syracuse Journal, April 27, 1868.
and exhaustion—fell to the back, found a place in a strip of woods, placed his left hand over his musket barrel, and reaching to pull the trigger with his right, fired a musket ball through the middle of his hand, taking the tendons with it.

As hoped, this had secured Babbitt a hospital bed for several weeks, giving him rest from the grinding war and probably morphine to numb his mind. But months later when he returned to the battlefield he was hardly ready. That fall, during action at Cedar Creek, Virginia, Babbitt gave himself up to rebel lines “to be taken prisoner.” Actually, when he was later deposed during a special pension investigation, Babbitt clarified that he didn’t technically run into enemy arms but instead, when the enemy surrounded him and other Union soldiers, he didn’t try as hard as the others did to get away. “I remember it now, we were surrounded by the enemy. Some of the men made a desperate effort to get away and did. I did not.” He didn’t “voluntarily” throw himself into Rebel lines, but “might have got away” if he had made a “desperate effort.” After nearly starving to death, Babbitt returned to Syracuse with an emaciated frame that, in his mind, was inscribed with cowardice.

Babbitt’s confessions to President McKinley (and later to his Congressman from Syracuse) supply a small window into the clouded histories of war and wounds—even within the soldier’s mind. From 1864 on, Babbitt figured himself to be a coward and a turncoat because he shot his left hand and as was captured when, as he put it, “he might have got away.” But those who knew Babbitt earlier in the war would claim that they could never believe he had committed such actions. It seems that in 1862 he received two “honorable” wounds at Malvern Hill which nearly incapacitated his left arm. And after he faithfully served his first term of two years, “a comrade without a blot,” he voluntarily enlisted again—hardly
the actions of a malingering. But by the eve of the battle of Cold Harbor, Babbitt was clearly suffering from depression.\textsuperscript{40} He was trained as a pressman before the war, and he must have assessed the ways that his lame shoulder and elbow would hamper his chances of returning to his trade of working the press. Shooting his left hand merely finished off that which was already in doubt. At the same time, the blast instantly transformed his partially debilitated arm into a full specimen of honorable sacrifice. And perhaps it gave him some (dark) certitude about his postwar trade even as it let him escape the violence of the battlefield.

At approximately the same time that “General” Cole had returned to Syracuse after his extension in Texas, Babbitt had begun translating his contradictory war history into pension affidavits. His monthly pension payments only reinforced his falsified stories, as did his bonds with local veterans—especially those who displayed their own war wounds. We can begin to sense the gravity of war wounds for freshly returned soldiers when we realize that it took Babbitt over three decades to come clean. And he did it amid harrowing epileptic fits, and financial destitution, in order to end his “Days in Hell.” In Babbitt’s confession to President McKinley (a fellow war veteran who Babbitt hoped would show sympathy), the old man repeatedly referred to his mistakes as “foolish, Cowardly Actions.” Though he had once hoped to let the lies die out “with the world,” he now knew he had to ask forgiveness from his government before he could stand before God. “I can not go to sleep at night as I use to do because of my cowardly sins of the past,” he wrote. “I have not seen a real Happy

\textsuperscript{40} During Grant’s Overland Campaign, various officers on both sides suffered something comparable to nervous breakdowns. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. described the hellish period: “Many a man has gone crazy since this campaign began from the terrible pressure on mind & body.” General history of the campaign along with Holmes’s quote, in: McPherson, “Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era”, 718-38, esp. 733-34
Day Since the day I Committed the sins in the army of the Battle of Cold Harbor 1864, and Cedar Creek, Va., Oct 1864.” Like an old ex-soldier waxing nostalgic about his list of military exploits, Babbitt repeatedly referred to the battles with accompanying dates—markers in his mind, not of turning points of a grand struggle, but the brief overlapping of map and time allowing him to pinpoint his turning into a coward and a liar.

The Pension Bureau’s response to Babbitt’s confession also suggests something about the strange mythology of Civil War wounds. While Babbitt repeatedly claimed that his “Cowardly, Foolish Acts” were “INSAIN,” that he had to be out of his mind for doing such things, the Bureau believed that it was Babbitt’s confession that marked instability of mind, not his army history. Investigators wondered if Babbitt had recently experienced too much “religious excitement.” He hadn’t. Yet he kept hearing a voice tell him to uncover his army secrets and to “owan up” to his past. One of the Special Examiners who took pity on Babbitt, argued with forcefulness to the Bureau that the aged Babbitt was perfectly sane and that he admitted what many would never divulge. Referring to self-inflicted wounds in general and perhaps many of his recent suspicions with other pension cases, he wrote, “Many others did the same thing but their conscience does not bother them.” Fellow pension investigators knew this of course, but wondered if any sane man would confess all of this on his own accord.

Babbitt requested either a pardon, or to be condemned to prison, as he did not want to be reduced to a street beggar. He offered his small house in payment for his falsely collected pension. He wanted to labor away his sins. Hoping that patronage could rescue his manhood, he begged for a post in the government, maybe in Cuba, so he would not be reduced to handouts and stealing, where he could “once more be a man and a Christian.” But what Babbitt feared the most was the revealing of his army sins to his comrades. “I can
not now look a poor dog in the Face let alone a decent Honerable man Especially a Comrade,” he lamented.  

Within Cole’s ranks and in homes peppered along Syracuse streets and throughout the nation, soldiers’ bodies were simultaneously sources of great anxiety and pride. Cole’s wounds then, took on meaning in an environment where scars and missing limbs could be either badges of honor, or marks of hushed cowardice or clumsiness. Four days before Cold Harbor, a brigadier general from the Army of the James had issued an order attempting to quash a rising number of self-inflicted wounds in his division. “Such conduct is dastardly and despicable and none but arrant cowards will engage in it.” Surgeons were then charged with inspecting and immediately reporting any curious injuries. Once recovered from his wound, the self-mutilator would then “be brought to trial and receive the punishment of a coward.”

While one grotesque wound or nagging ailment might be traced to Gettysburg, another might stem from a nameless brothel, a comrade’s musket, or a camp axe that intentionally lopped off one’s small toes or trigger finger. Thanks to a few shreds of evidence in Cole’s service record, and most importantly, the his widely publicized trial, we

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41 Pension file of Charles Lucillus Babbitt, 12th NY Vols and 9th NY HA., NARA, Washington, DC.


43 For more on self-inflicted wounds in the war see: Mark H. Dunkelman, Brothers One and all: Esprit De Corps in a Civil War Regiment (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 83-7.
can sketch out a partial narrative about war and disability, and the ways in which other
soldiers and civilians dealt with “private” wounds amid public confusion and uncertainty.

When Cole’s enemies suggested in the papers and in the courtroom that his
grotesque wounds were hardly noteworthy, they tapped into a well of confusion. We can
never know if Cole’s prolapsed anus occurred because of his horse alone, or also due to
extended bouts of diarrhea, which were merely aggravated by his crushed groin. And given
the doubts and confusion of medical experts we may wonder if anyone but Cole could have
known the truth. Then again, even permitting soldiers certainty about their own bodies,
given the frequent convergence of disease and injury, and the multiple complaints that most
soldiers simultaneously suffered from—is perhaps too optimistic.

A quarter century before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln expressed fears that the
ardor of the American Revolution “must fade, is fading, had faded
with the circumstances that
produced it.” Its soldiers, most of them dead now, once provided a “living history” for their
families. “a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs
mangled, in the scars of wounds received…a history too that could be read and understood
alike by all.”44 Like Lincoln, many Americans entered the war with memories (or stories
from memory) of disabled Revolutionary heroes who stood as proof of a glorious national
birth. This connection between honorable war and disability began anew and was multiplied
in thousands of soldiers’ photographs and veterans’ gatherings. In her book about the

44 Lincoln, Abraham. Fehrenbacher,Don Edward and Alfred Whital Stern Collection of
Lincolniana (Library of Congress), Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858 (New York, N.Y: Literary Classics
of the United States : Distributed by the Viking Press, 1989), 25-36..
Herculean task of writing about wars of the twentieth century, Margot Norris points out the paradoxical endeavor of writers who attempt to make the confusion of war seem understandable, and “its sense of experienced ‘unreality’” somehow seem real to their readers. “War,” she writes, “is a world-unmaking event, a reality-deconstructing and defamiliarizing activity...”\(^{45}\)

As Cole’s “reality” and a significant number of souls who inhabited his sphere, make clear, the world is unmade through war, but then seemingly held together with silence and untruths. For Cole, the untruths began long before he started spinning doubtful tales about himself in Syracuse parlors, among shopkeepers—or from his cell. After the war, Cole linked his physical troubles to places on the map made notable by the scale of destruction. Once home, he had motives to connect his maimed body to significant war events.\(^46\) But during the war he had reasons to hide his wounds altogether in the hopes of returning home as “the General.”


\(^{46}\) Cole participated in Bull Run, which would certainly have had universal recognition amongst fellow Syracusans. The problem was that first, Bull Run was an embarrassing fiasco for the Union as many soldiers darted from the field of battle; and secondly, Cole’s first company—which he formed from men in Syracuse—marched off to war on foot. Cole had no horse to fall on him at Bull Run. He transferred to a cavalry regiment later in September 1861. Perhaps most importantly, though, when Cole transferred into the 3rd New York Cavalry he went from a regiment primarily drawn from his county (Onondaga, NY) to one that drew from others in central New York. For Cole, like most soldiers, as he went deeper into the war he did so less connected to community roots. See: Frederick Phisterer, *New York in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1865*, 3d ed. (Albany: J. B. Lyon company, state printers, 1912), 72-7.
CHAPTER 9:
“FIRST AS A PRIVATE, AND LAST AS A MAJOR GENERAL”

A day after the murder, following the Coroner’s inquest, prisoner Cole made his formal statement: “I had a friend, L.H. Hiscock,” it began. Until recently, he thought Hiscock “the best friend in the world,” and Mary Cole to be “pure as snow”—until Hiscock seduced Mrs. Cole as she lay in her deathbed. Before Cole continued with his crafted narrative about how Mary had thought she was coming to her final days, and called upon Hiscock to draw up her will—and how as she lay helpless, the attorney raised her up and kissed her—and how over a series of encounters, shame and remonstrance led to partial consent—before laying out this delicate and time-sensitive narrative, Cole gave thousands of eager readers a terse, seemingly matter-of-fact war record: “I was in the army, first as a private, and last as a Major General.”

Cole crafted that line as much he did the story about his wife’s supposed seduction. It was not lost on his critics. After reprinting the statement, the New York Times added below, in a relatively objective tone that Cole had actually begun as captain and ended a

1 Fascinatingly, Cole’s commander and sometimes nemesis Ben Butler once touted his own record to one of his officers: “The trouble with you West Point officers is that you never were in the militia. Now I was in the militia, I rose from a private to a major-general; It isn’t everybody that knows it, but I did.” See: Thomas Leonard Livermore, Days and Events, 1860-1866 (Boston: New York, Houghton Mifflin Co, 1920), 353-4.
brigadier general (the first being a few steps above private and the latter a significant peg below Major General).²

Within several days, the *New York Tribune*—one of a few papers that partially defended Cole’s actions—reported a “strong under-current of opinion in favor” of the prisoner. After assuring its readers of Cole’s record of honor and integrity, the author added, repeating and embellishing Cole’s original statement “He enlisted as a private early in the war but was soon mustered in the service of the United States as a captain. During the vicissitudes of five years he rose to the position of Major General, his promotion each time coming unexpectedly and entirely without solicitation on his part…. When General Cole went into the army he left a lucrative business, which, in his absence, was entirely broken up.”

The *Syracuse Journal*—whose editor Cole believed to be in a political alliance with Hiscock—reprinted this seemingly unremarkable sketch of Cole’s character, warning readers that Cole’s army record and previous accomplishments should not color how Americans viewed the murder. This was a question of law and order, not of military rank or battlefield exploits. But then, as if to concede that the sketch mattered dearly, over half of the *Journal’s* article was dedicated to challenging Cole’s purported “cardinal virtues.”

Cole did not enlist as a “private.” He did not leave a “lucrative business” to go into the army. He went out as Captain of Co. H in the 12th Regt. N.Y.S Volunteers, and was subsequently transferred to a cavalry regiment. He was brevetted a Major General about the time he was mustered out of the service. His promotion, if it did come “unexpectedly and entirely without solicitation on his part,” was not conferred, we apprehend without some of the usual appliances in such cases. There is evidence to prove, if it were essential that the

² *New York Times*, June 5, 1867. Page 1
fact should be known, that Mrs. Cole was not without her anxious desires and active efforts in this behalf.\(^3\)

The next day after the shooting, at the Constitutional Convention, Hiscock’s closest colleagues eulogized their slain friend, making private anguish a matter of public record. Noting that the corpse was about to be returned to “the county that gave him birth” and into “the arms” of family, Hiscock’s political ally Thomas Alvord then emphasized how the deceased had outgrown those same arms. His lifeless body might be returning to family, he argued, but Hiscock’s will and determination had never been bound by blood. Though born into a “crowded” household in rural Pompey, this son of a farmer and common field laborer soon “emerged” from his humble position “anxious and desirous to permit his intellect to grow and expand.” Hiscock, emphasized Alvord, “stood outside of the family circle and with his own hands and with the work of his own brain, brought himself to the position which he occupied but yesterday.” Hiscock even lifted up those in his family who could not muster such will. True self-made manhood culminated in the making of others. “From the beginning to the end of his career” Alvord continued, Hiscock was “eminently” a “self-made man, working out with his own intellect and with his own arm all positions which have been given him.”\(^4\)

Days later, prominent attorneys convened at the Onondaga Supreme Court to reiterate the message of what made Hiscock’s death so tragic. While they expressed genuine,

\(^3\) *Syracuse Journal*, June 13, 1867. Cole began the war as a captain. See, for example: W. W. Clayton, *History of Onondaga County, New York* (Syracuse, N.Y: D. Mason, Truair, Smith & Bruce), 1878), 406..

\(^4\) *Syracuse Journal* June 6, 1867.
if passing concern for his orphaned children, Hiscock’s high-profile colleagues mostly paid tribute to a slain man-on-the-make. The murder snuffed out potential greatness; it ripped out the final half of a narrative of a man who had overcome local, small-town restraints of family and farm, and had just begun to grow in stature—in urban influence, politics and self-made manhood. It was a narrative that set up Hiscock as a model for the urbane self, breaking from the mooring of the agrarian clan. After Hiscock had practiced in a local small town “for a short while” he moved to Syracuse “thus changing a limited sphere for a wider range of usefulness, and one better adapted for the display of his abilities and capacities.” Just days before, the slain had “engaged with us in the great struggle for successful life.” “Labors” were about to be placed upon him due to his accumulating power within the State Assembly. “He was a rising man” added another. And yet another: “as a member of the Legislature he rose very high.”

Hiscock had moved beyond his kin, and most essentially, without aid; he had traded his agrarian past (a limited sphere) for the politics and possibilities of the growing city of Syracuse. Cole had followed a similar path, supposedly creating a lucrative business and later securing the highest of promotions without patronage. These arguments, professions and corrections were not so much about defensive cronies or newspapermen ironing out the facts for the public; they were a conversation about what it meant to be a man. The papers in particular looked to unravel Cole’s manhood. The story he wanted to tell about himself depicted a soldier in control of his destiny. As the story went, Cole started from nothing, built up a prosperous business, tossed it aside for the Union, humbly entered the ranks as a

5 *Syracuse Journal* June 10, 1867.
common foot soldier, and because of his bravery returned home a Major General in the cavalry—a rank that only U.S. Grant exceeded.

Over the nineteenth century high birth became an increasing liability in public life as men like Andrew Jackson, who boasted of a rough-hewn intuition superior to cultivated book learning, sent gentlemen-politicians like John Quincy Adams packing from the presidential office. (Massachusetts, of course, quickly returned Adams to congress where he took on the elites of slavepower.) During the Revolution many elites criticized the English aristocracy, glorying instead in republican equality—which in effect called into question American elites’ own elevated station. But, as with John Adams, it was their sons and grandchildren who would pay the price for such lofty idealism and confront the shame and frustration of being downgraded in the public sphere. With regards to affectation, the comparatively homespun yet aristocratic Jefferson who defeated John Adams in 1800 was hardly the untutored frontiersman, Andrew Jackson, who would roundly defeat Adams’ son twenty-eight years later. (Only J.Q. Adams’s fellow New Englanders awarded their state to the Harvard trained polymath: as the slogan went, “John Quincy Adams who can write/And Andrew Jackson who can fight.”) By 1840, even the Whig Party, well-known as a political haven for privileged classes, painted its presidential candidate, William Henry Harrison as a rough-and-ready common man (despite his aristocratic roots from Virginia). The “Log Cabin and Hard Cider” presidential campaign demonstrated how antebellum men of means would need to emphasize links to poverty and grit if they wanted to win at the ballot box. Even Daniel Webster, an established and seasoned Whig, would claim that though he just missed such virtuous origins, his older siblings were born in a log cabin; anyone who slandered him as an aristocrat was “not only a LIAR but a COWARD” itching
for a fight. A man looking to win public office had to emphasize how he had made something from nothing—and how though he had shaken poverty, he never lost his roots. To Cole’s contemporaries, ascent mattered more than altitude.

**Self-Medicating Man**

So much did Cole view military rank as a measure of his manhood that he seems to have gone beyond the customary troubles to secure promotions. Of course, like other soldiers, he had sent letters to key contacts; but he also masked his own disabilities to keep himself in the running. In late July, 1862—roughly the same time that Cole received wounds to his groin and chest from his horse—his Army doctor reported from a North Carolina field hospital that Cole’s injury warranted a furlough home. Curiously, though, the doctor mentioned nothing about the injuries from the horse. As the medic reported it, Cole suffered from a pistol shot in the thigh received that morning. After the war Cole would talk about a bullet wound in his leg claiming that he wished the ball had pierced his body a few feet higher and left him sleeping under the Virginia sod. But Cole’s army doctor reported this supposed lodged bullet from a hospital in North Carolina, not Virginia (the right body

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6 Webster quoted in: Hofstadter, "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life", 165 Hofstadter sees this process as more of a conscious rejection of gentlemen as demanded by democratic politics, more than an attempt to recover a world of merit as promised by the American Revolution: see, pp.145-171.

7 Mark Summer has shown how this rhetoric continued in party politics as a way to mask class differences. To the extent that the Americans came to realized the overwhelming obstacles for the disadvantaged, the rags-to-riches autobiography suggest a marked level of inward grit and talent which the candidate must have had in order to thrive in a rigged society.Summers, "Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and using Power in Gilded Age Politics", 176-78
part but one Confederate state off). Maybe Cole confused his wounds and skirmishes when he got home. Or, he was shot in the leg in Virginia, and again, a year later, in North Carolina at the same time that his horse rolled over him. Cole did receive some type of injury earlier at Bull Run, Virginia. But unless Cole returned home with two bullets in his leg, one from Virginia the other the state below it—quite possible, but not above question—this bullet wound reported from the North Carolina field hospital was probably a cover.\(^8\)

Maybe at the insistence of Captain Cole, the doctor either reported an old bullet wound, or one that had merely been caused by the horse fall, instead of the crushed groin and chest. The doctor claimed that the ball could not be extracted and that Cole could not, therefore, resume his duties.\(^9\) Cole's confusing bodily wounds reflected and perhaps garnered legitimacy through the haziness of wartime geography and record keeping. Soldiers could use the fog of war for their own purposes. The contradictory medical records were part of that fog, as Cole’s wife would sadly learn.\(^10\) Mary, years after the war, applied for a

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\(^8\) For injury from Bull Run, see Cole’s compiled service record (CSR), 2nd US Colored Cavalry, Microfilm #M1817. In a summary of his service it briefly mentions that “wounded in action at Blackburn Ford, July 1861.” NARA, Washington, DC.

\(^9\) Cole’s medical report can be found in Cole’s compiled service record (CSR): “From New Berne NC, July 23\(^{rd}\) 1862.” NARA, Washington, DC.

\(^10\) In fact Cole’s doctor reported the wound and request for a furlough a day before Cole’s company participated in a minor skirmish in North Carolina. It is unclear if Cole participated in this skirmish, though one comrade, seventeen years later remembered him being there. Cole was likely in a bed, or possibly on a train for New York to recover for a couple of weeks. All we know is that he was “on leave,” or as found in another service report, “July 1862 Absent on fifteen days furlough from July 25/62.” Later, in the same report we find, “Sept 1862 absent in New Berne sick.” See George W. Cole’s compiled service records (CSR hereafter), 12\(^{th}\) NY Infantry, and 3\(^{rd}\) New York Cavalry. Field reports show a minor skirmish happened a day after the injury—suggesting that Cole’s horse did not fall on him during any engagement with the enemy. Instead the company reports make it more plausible that Cole was on picket duty with his men, and he simply stumbled into a ditch. See:
widow’s pension only to discover that, mysteriously, there was no hospital record of the fall on the horse that had maimed her husband and prematurely taken his life after the war.\textsuperscript{11}

Though she nursed his wounds for months the pension investigators would report back that, in effect, she had not. This may also explain why Cole, otherwise unashamed of asking from the government what it owed him, never filed for a soldier’s pension.

We do know that Cole had tried to take control of his own convalescence. And there is evidence that he attempted to hide his wounds from certain people. When Cole first arrived at the New Bern hospital in the late July ‘62, the steward, who had never administered a catheter, apparently struggled to insert it into Cole’s urethra. Cole grabbed the catheter and inserted it himself. Shortly after, Cole took the whole ordeal into his own hands, as it appears he did not remain under the direct care of military doctors. He was confined to a bed but it is not clear if it was in the cavalry’s hospital or in his own quarters.\textsuperscript{12}

Soon after the accident, Cole’s tenderfoot private and personal orderly Edwin R. Fox---who two years later would kill one of Cole’s African-American soldiers—nursed the captain for nearly a month as the latter lay “in confinement.” Cole, who had once practiced as a small

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\textsuperscript{11} Because there was no record of the fall, Mary Cole’s claim was rejected. See Cole’s pension file.

\textsuperscript{12} In his deposition for Mary Barto Cole’s pension application, ex-corporal Lodowick Wooden—one of the few people who stated the correct time and place of Cole’s accident—claimed that Cole remained in confinement for most of the winter of 1862 and some of 1863, “spending but very little of his time with the company.” Wooden also claimed that Cole complained to him that the injuries “troubled him to ride and to breathe and that it had caused a fistula in ano which was troubling him very much.” It appears that Cole admitted the extent of his injuries to some of his junior officers but seemed to keep them from his superiors. See deposition in Cole’s pension file: Lodowick M. Wooden, December 1879, NARA.
town physician before he tried his hand at various business ventures, instructed Fox on how to treat the wounds. “Under the directions of Cole,” Fox administered injections, cleaned the profusions of blood and waited on his captain. Mary Barto Cole arrived sometime later and nursed her husband until the following spring. Cole apparently cordoned himself off from army medical help, creating a private space where his most intimate dependents nursed their superior (or husband) back to health.

Even Cole’s commander, General Godfrey Weitzel never caught wind of the impairing injuries. Though he served in close proximity to Cole in Virginia in the Army of the James, Weitzel claimed he was unaware of how badly Cole had been hurt. Weitzel did recall, though, at least once catching his subordinate by surprise as he lay in his tent in an inclined position on his back. Startled, Cole jumped to his feet “in a peculiar manner” to salute his superior. Cole wrote to his brother in early 1863 that he had been “very much troubled with my injury…received in 1862 in a cavalry charge. I have to keep where I can lie down at a moment’s warning & permit my parts to resume their normal position….” Edwin Fox would testify that Cole always fulfilled his duty though “he was not fit to do so.” Referring to a time when Cole had partially recuperated, Fox remembered that “when an order came, [Cole] would jump up, rush out the tent and mount his horse: he was the first

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13 Cole’s Pension File (CPF): General Affidavit by Edwin R. Fox, June, 1882; CPF, deposition of Mary B. Cole, March 12, 1884; more evidence of Fox found in Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868; Coles takes catheter away from hospital steward in Syracuse Journal, April 28, 1868.

14 Testimony of General Weitzel, Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868.

15 George Cole to Cornelius Cole, January 28, [1863], Cole family, “Papers”.
man to be in his saddle.” How Cole could keep this debilitating injury from his superior, and perhaps even suppress or alter medical records, is unclear. On his side was the fact that the injury seemed to attack him in waves, allowing him stages, sometimes weeks, where he could meet his duties. But what he did when called into action during one of his bouts we can only imagine. It gives us an idea, though, of how badly he wanted to come home a decorated officer.

In fact the timing was such that when Cole was crushed by his horse he stood a decent chance of getting promoted to major in his regiment. In fact, thanks to the help of a black pilot in North Carolina, Cole obtained that appointment less than a half year later. Soldiers like Cole kept tabs on the seniority and merits of fellow officers, constantly playing out in their minds how they could make their next advance. Soldiers like Cole scrutinized army regulations and exposed any deviance from protocol or procedure that held them back. They kept their eyes on officers just above them, and just below. If they found out

16 *Syracuse Journal*, April 25, 1868.

17 George W. Cole, CSR, NARA, Washington, DC.

18 Cole sent letters to his superiors asking them to clarify certain rules of seniority and promotion. He also tried to capitalize on the confusion that resulted from merging the regular and volunteer armies, and the creation of the African-American regiments. In 1864 he wrote his superior in the Army of the James asking, “Is it the intention of Genl Butler that Colored Cavalry be brigaded with white Cavalry? Is my Regt considered volunteer and thus come under the amendment to P9 Army regulations, or, does an officer in my Regt rank one receiving his commission from a state?” George W. Cole to Maj Davis AAG, March, 1864, CSR, 2nd USC Cavalry (Microfilm #M1817), NARA.
that a superior or ranking comrade was on his deathbed, they might, as one New England officer did, begin counting the days with anticipation.19

As Cole’s detractors after the murder fully appreciated, to flatten Cole’s or any man’s professional trajectory—the purported full stretch—from common beginnings to distinction amounted to character assassination. A man’s station as doctor, lawyer, or war hero, of course mattered, but not nearly as much as the rungs below him to which he could point as he tallied the steps between his current perch and his former lowly self.

Cole’s slightly altered story about himself was not his alone, but part of a collective tale that men told about one another in order to assign meaning to status, wealth, poverty, and financial ruin. This story presented an autonomous man cutting his way through the masses. The plot emphasized self-reliance and eclipsed fathers, erasing the connections between intimacy and power. By the Civil War Americans had learned to tell it well. It had been handed down and refined since the Revolution and inscribed and pressed into children’s brains in schoolhouses across the nation.

19 The abundant war letters of Charles Brewster from the 10th Massachusetts are strikingly similar to the handful of Cole’s. Like Cole, and Charles Francis Adams, Brewster hoped the war would cover up his pre-war failures in professional life. Though he imagined the military as an island cut off from the games and corruptions of civilian life, he in fact, soon found these habits of scheming machinations in the war. He, like Cole, had brought them with him. See:Charles Harvey Brewster and David W. Blight, *When this Cruel War is Over: The Civil War Letters of Charles Harvey Brewster* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 9-12, 54-56.
Abraham Lincoln was burdened by a strained relationship with his father. The upstart lawyer never could reconcile his ambitions with the humble, unschooled man who introduced young Abraham to the world. Books became a central way for Lincoln to distance himself from his own flesh and blood. As a young boy Lincoln supposedly penned this couplet: “Good boys who to their books apply/ Will all be great men by and by.”

Lincoln’s thinking was anything but original. While young George Cole was in the middle of his second decade, Emily Chubbuck, a student at the Utica Female Seminary published *Allen Lucas: The Self-Made Man*, a didactic novel for juveniles. (Utica and Chubbuck’s various childhood homes were less than forty five crow-flight miles from Syracuse and only double that from Cole’s birthplace by the Finger Lakes.) The protagonist, Allen Lucas, is a young son of a poor farmer who under the guidance of a sensitive and gifted teacher acquires a hunger for knowledge. Lucas’s schoolmate, Robert May is a naturally gifted, yet “pale and puny” scholar who from his early youth absorbed the praise that he would become a “great man.” Robert, whose father is an indigent farmer, comes to expect sacrifices from his sisters

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1 This general argument and quote can be found in, Forgie, "Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age", 33-36
and father to scrape together enough funds to send their gifted brother and son to an academy and college. On one level it is a story about young men moving beyond the agrarian drudgery of their fathers—choosing advancement above family. After Robert graduates from college (for which his father literally dies in order to pay tuition) the prodigious scholar breaks off an engagement with his sweetheart in order to marry the daughter of a prominent judge. This marriage of expediency and ambition, explains Robert in a letter to his jilted lover, was actually honorable as it “gratified” his “ruling principle.” Allen on the other hand weathers ridicule from Robert when the former announces he is going to take on the trade of carpentry. As Robert parleys his law training into a seat in the lower house of the US Congress, Allen returns home, accepts a smaller sphere of influence, and becomes a steward over his community.

Chubbuck apparently took the grist of her narrative from her experiences in rural towns and villages—one a little more than twenty miles from Hiscock’s home village—where she struggled between her duties of supplementing the meager income of her parents and her desire for education. While it might be worth noting that Cole too, married the

2 Emily C. Judson, *Allen Lucas the Self-made Man* (Utica: Bennett, Backus, & Hawley, 1844). Though Chubbuck grew up in a frequently destitute household, her parents maintained a sizable library. After religion, Chubbuck would claim, knowledge was the “most desirable thing.” She and her siblings were “never allowed to associate with ignorant and vulgar children.” When Chubbuck was fourteen her family again relocated, this time in a small village called Morrisville where an academy opened up in 1831. Chubbuck and her sister Harriet sewed into the night to pay for tuition clothing and food. But when Chubbuck became ill her doctor warned against attending the district school again. When she regained her health her parents attempted to persuade her to return to the mills; but she resisted and at the age of fifteen she obtained permission from several farmers to teach school to some twenty children. She would go on to teach in Brookfield, Syracuse, Hamilton and other places. She finally got accepted into the Utica Female Seminary where the director encouraged her to write didactic stories for youth. See: Evert A. Duyckinck, *Portrait Gallery of Eminent Men and Women of Europe and America: Embracing History, Statesmanship, Naval and Military Life*,
daughter of an eminent county judge, or that Hiscock ascended into state politics through the connections he established as a lawyer in various small towns in upstate New York, the plot of *Allen Lucas* and the history of Cole’s contemporaries share something more fundamental. From the beginning and throughout *Allen Lucas* education compounds childhood ambitions and drives a wedge between sons and their families.

The story begins in a classroom where the new teacher, Mr. Dawson, tells his scholars about a young injured eagle that was raised by goslings. The story was meant to instill fear into the scholars who had not applied themselves; because, though the eaglet came to realize its true nature, it waited too long. Tied to the earth with its “nature degraded,” the bird became “a slave of circumstances.” This story awakens the ambitions within Allen Lucas as he realizes he is “not too old” to learn to fly. He brings home books lent to him by Mr. Dawson and begins dreaming about the possibilities of his future profession. It is when Allen brings home a mathematical “puzzler” to his untutored father that it becomes clear to the son that his school teacher “must know a great deal more than [Allen’s] father.” The farmer’s son had “tried his powers, and he never could grow weary of exercising them; he had taken one draught of the waters of knowledge….He had given a little glance to the field spread out before him and his heart swelled…”

Allen, because he does not want to overburden his parents, decides against continuing on to an academy. He instead chooses to use his hands—to become a carpenter and an architect. Robert on the other hand is fixed upon his plan of attending an academy

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*Philosophy, the Drama, Science, Literature and Art, with Biographies* (New York: Johnson, Wilson, 1873), 321–36.
Robert has ambitions to end up in Washington. But when he gets there it is at the cost of a loveless marriage, a cold heart, and a physiognomy that exudes loneliness and death. What is strange about this story is the manner in which Chubbuck ties herself in knots trying to simultaneously praise the powers of education while reigning in its tendencies toward avarice and unbridled passion. Clearly Chubbuck meant to celebrate the virtues of education; but the underlying warning is about how education can easily lead to excessive ambition and ultimately a loss of gratitude and affection toward one’s community and family.

As suggested by Chubbuck’s story, education in the antebellum period—district schools, special schools, seminaries, academies and colleges—helped prod young boys to the outer boundaries of their parents’ influence. It allowed them to consider perhaps for the first time moving beyond the tracks of their fathers, mothers, and grandparents. Like the fictional Allen Lucas, George Cole was born into a farming household. When he was a boy he attended district school; later he left home to board at several academies and colleges. In fact the only primary source left from Cole’s youth is a letter he wrote in 1848 to his schoolmate at the all-male Wesleyan University in Middleton Connecticut. During the school year Cole had become gravely ill and had to drop out and return home under his parents’ roof. He lost thirty pounds and complained that he had not been able to read anything of substance since he left Wesleyan. His dear sister had just died and Cole confided that his parents bordered on death from sorrow. He yearned to get back to school and to escape what he called “the

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status quo.” For Cole, his home had become a place where things remained the same or died. “I have seen my own bright hopes and anticipation recede from my grasp,” he continued, “and I know not how distant the time may be when I may again live, for this dull monotonous existence cannot be called by that name.”

As Mary Ryan has shown, education played a pivotal role in creating a new middle-class in the decades preceding the Civil War. Common schools, district schools, and especially academies substantially altered fundamental expectations of young scholars as they daily confronted pedagogy outside of their immediate families, and prepared for college. As Ryan emphasizes, though, the educational launch into self-made manhood almost always began with sacrifices from parents and kin. Cole, like his older brothers, followed this pattern from academy to college. Hiscock, who grew up on a farm of milk cows, wheat, and oats, attended Pompey Academy, the first such school in Onondaga County. About the Academy, a local paper would later boast “It cannot be doubted that more men who have become celebrated in the highest seat of the State, legislators, judges, disciples of Blackstone,

4 George W. Cole, "George W. Cole to James Griffing, August 1848," http://www.griffingweb.com2007). This is the only letter from Cole among an immense collection of letters to and from the Griffing family. What is interesting about Cole’s letter is that though he speaks of family death and depression he does not mention God a single time. James Griffing (to whom the letter was addressed) would go on to become a prominent Methodist minister and Wesleyan, which was founded in the 1830s accepted young men from Methodist families. Indeed, Cole rarely mentioned anything having to do with providence or his supposed Christian upbringing in his surviving letters from the war. The only explicit description of a personal relationship with God came in a letter to his sister in law, one month after the murder, where Cole pleaded for counsel: “I am anxious to see you but do not neglect your own duties….I want your advice on a delicate matter. I was mighty near escaping a trial a few days since and to be tried before a bar more high & more merciful than the earthly tribunal, for my advocate will be Christ. I am employing him often daily & he is very encouraging to me.” But still he yearned for human contact: “Come as soon as you can conveniently—I am alone nearly all the time with my thoughts and memories & grow nearly distracted at times…..” George W. Cole to Olive Cole, July 5, 1867, Cole family, "Papers"

5 Ryan, "Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865", 168-72
M.D’s, army generals, clergymen, foreign ministers, poets, etc have been educated within these walls than any other school of its kind....”

Cole’s parents seemed to have followed this same strategy of using boarding schools and seminaries to move their sons from the plow and toward legislative halls, medical school, courtrooms, and foreign consuls.

The explosion of schools in the antebellum period was both the fulfillment of revolutionary aims, and a systematic response to the excesses unleashed by the same. Gordon Wood has called the Revolutionary character “world shaking” in its scope and ambition to remake human relations from the bottom up—especially the extent to which ordinary folks believed they could acquire new skills. If the Revolution was an earthquake, though, its tremors set off a tidal wave that for many seemed to hang over Americans, threatening to overwhelm God’s nation with materialism and ambition. When Cole and Hiscock were young boys, reformers like Horace Mann were sounding alarms that became fixtures in prescriptive literature. The Revolution, warned Mann, ripped the lid off age-old

6 George’s older brother, Cornelius, who seems to have led the way for his younger brothers, attended district school in rural Lodi, New York, then transferred to Ovid Academy, then to Lima Seminary, and finally Wesleyan University of Connecticut where George also attended. George Cole’s lawyers claimed that like “so many of the self-made and prominent men” in the nation, he studied hard during summers by supporting “himself and paying the expense of his education....” Cole left home for Lima Seminary at the age of seventeen. Cornelius Cole, Memoirs of Cornelius Cole (New York: McLoughlin Brothers, 1908), 1-3. and opening defense of Cole’s attorney, Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868.

7 One brother, Gilbert, was appointed “commercial agent” of the consul to Acapulco from 1864-1867, a sinecure that started a year after his older brother Cornelius was elected to congress.

8 Wood, "The Radicalism of the American Revolution", 238
societal containers, where the passions of the self were once constrained by abusive, coercive powers like kingships or Popery. Americans could not afford to take false assurance in the relatively restrained behavior of the founding generation, warned Mann. Jefferson’s generation had not fully experienced the free fall into the age of the unrestrained self. “Strong hereditary and traditional feelings of respect for established authority” kept the revolutionary generation bound by their own bosoms. Over the history of the world, Mann continued, only a handful of individuals—we might imagine Nero or Genghis Kahn—had the liberty to pour out the “lava of their passions.” But now, five decades after the fact, with the partially restrained revolutionaries taking their places in the nations’ graveyards, millions of budding boys stood poised to explode with volcanic force into a “free, unbarred, unbounded career, which is here opened for their activity.” With no absolute external force tamping down their “latent capabilities of evil” the rising generation would be corrupted, if not swallowed up by its own ambitions.9

Mann joined a growing chorus of American prophets who worried about the destructive rise of the unbounded American self. But he mistakenly saw the Revolution as a passive variable in this process. For Mann, it was more a problem of cessation than

9 Horace Mann, ed., Lectures on Education (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 117-62. Mann’s solution—just as it was a primary strategy for Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Rush, etc—was public education that would instill virtue and commitment to community and state over the self. But compared to the Northeast and even the northern Midwest, rural and, later, common schools foundered in the southern states. By the Civil War much of the North had accepted tax-supported common schools and common-school reformers’ promises that such schools would work out problems with inequality, and bring national progress.

Interestingly, because it is germane to the Cole household, Catherine Beecher argued that women’s collective benevolence and sacrifice of self could keep the nature from rupturing. See: Kathryn Kish Sklar, Catharine Beecher, a Study in American Domesticity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 356.
causation. James Madison’s generation removed the tyrannical and repressive forces that once held human passion in check. Mankind’s destructive impulses had simply laid in wait until the visionary generation of 1776 let the lid off the container. But these volcanic pressures were not merely left unmonitored; the Revolution itself—with its emphasis on merit, creating a natural aristocracy, and educating a virtuous citizenry—pushed the magma of self-made manhood and all its connotations of ambition and materialistic mobility beyond the volcano’s brim.10

Ironically, it may have been Horace Mann’s life’s work—the crusade for common schools—that exacerbated the very problem he hoped education would contain. But this paradox, which he merely prodded forward, was part and parcel of the revolutionary agenda for building a republic. For revolutionary figures like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, the axiom that men could be remade and improved through education provided the keystone for the revolutionary archway into a new world. Central to the health of the young Republic, men had to achieve their stations in society through their own talents and labors. The provision of equal opportunity played an essential role in thwarting corruption and dependence—the two bugbears nipping at the heels of every republic. But early American elites did not look to eliminate aristocracy so much as create a society where a “natural aristocracy of virtue and talents” would replace the triple yoke of bloodline, money and

10 The specter of boundless political ambition was part of a wider apprehensiveness that the new generation of Americans would not live up to the legacy of the founding period. In 1839, a year after Mann’s Lecture, Abraham Lincoln compared the reelection of Martin Van Buren to “a great volcano at Washington, aroused and directed by the evil spirit that reigns there, [that] is belching forth the lava of political corruption…” See: Abraham Lincoln, Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858, ed. Don Lincoln, Abraham. Fehrenbacher,Don Edward and Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana (Library of Congress), ”Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858”, 64-65
influence. Men “whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue” would be able to cultivate such gifts through access to government backed schools and public libraries. They would become stewards and leaders within their community due to merit “without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance.” The providence of nature would fashion a new American aristoi, not arranged marriages based on political connections and the “fortuitous concourse of breeders.”

Visionaries from Jefferson’s generation had no intention of leveling society but instead hoped to create unassailable, natural divisions based on merit—a stable order where men joined the ranks of the elite, not because of bloodline or patronage, but because they were anointed by nature and pulled from the cesspit through republican education. In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson speculated that public education would not only diffuse general knowledge among the masses, but, perhaps just as importantly, recruit fresh blood into the natural aristocracy. “The best geniuses,” he argued, “will be raked from the rubbish….” Likeminded aristocrats still believed in the dregs and crests of civilization; they just wanted the disparities to be a product of Enlightenment order, not chance. Education would help bring the bottom up even as it distilled from the masses of men, a chosen few.


12 Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in Jefferson, "Crusade Against Ignorance", 161-67

13 Jefferson quoted in ibid., 84-94, 162. In a letter to John Adams in 1813, Jefferson wrote “May we not even say, that that form of government is the best, which provides the most effectually
Most of those who imagined and articulated the Republic into being believed in John Locke’s conception of young children as blank slates, waiting for adults to leave their marks. For this reason education was perhaps the single most vital aspect to keeping the Republic on track. And as George B. Forgie has argued concerning antebellum Americans, “probably no other generation of American children was as self-consciously socialized.”14 Yet, while advocates for publicly funded education like Jefferson and Benjamin Rush found some sympathetic ears, between 1779 and 1817 Americans repeatedly rejected legislative proposals for publicly funded schooling.

Agrarian communities across the new republic had long since relied on informal modes of education like church and rural schools (part schoolhouse, part extension of family) to teach children rudimentary reading and arithmetic skills. Jefferson’s and Rush’s educational proposals were, at heart, attempts to intercede in rural familial educational patterns and eliminate the transmission of what they deemed superstition and tribalism from backwards parents to impressionable children. As Rush argued, the government needed to

for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government? The artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provision should be made to prevent its ascendancy.” ibid., 162-63

14 Forgie, “Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age”, 14-15,19-53Forgie argues that this second generation imbibed stories about the Founding Fathers, especially George Washington. Forgie notes that children’s books about Washington, though, consistently couched Washington’s great political and military feats in domestic imagery. He points out that Mason Weems’s widely read biography of Washington consistently drummed the message into its readers’ heads, that Washington’s greatness derived from private virtue, not his public exploits. Forgie argues that by doing this, Weems hoped to secure veneration for the nation (through its symbolic father) while playing down Washington’s ambition. The private, ordinary virtues that made Washington godlike could be emulated in workaday lives. Nobody needed to have ambitions to lead great armies or spark a revolutionary movement. But Weems and similar biographers tied themselves in knots trying to simultaneously mute the public persona of Washington, as they wrote about the culminating public exploits that made these erstwhile private virtues apparent, measurable to other Americans.
filter out “the deficiencies of parental government.” Through education, children and men could be converted into “republican machines. This must be done if we expect them to perform their parts properly in the great machine of the government of the state.”

Public education, then, from the beginning was a conscious effort to supplant parents as the sole or even primary instructors. Free common schools and especially public universities would create a virtuous citizenry and yoke young Americans to the Republic. But parents in the young Republic rejected the prospect of paying taxes for a system that would in effect, diminish their ability to pass down their unique worldview and familial customs.

Historian Bernard Bailyn has shown how the familial relations had already begun changing long before Jefferson and latter common-school reformers like Horace Mann attempted to pry malleable children from backwards parents. The colonial experience—where parents struggled in a hostile wilderness, where children did not need to attach themselves to parents in order obtain land, and where extended kin networks gradually contracted into nuclear families—had already begun diminishing the sway that parents held over their children. The outside world became less an organic extension of the family, and more of an alternative to the home. The Revolution merely ratified and hastened what was already afoot. In the early Republic the evolving conception of education picked up speed and further hardened into its world changing form. Once the antebellum common school crusaders forged publicly funded schools throughout the North and Midwest, “education” had significantly shifted from being synonymous with family instruction, or merely...

supplementary, to implicitly oppositional. Because this new mode of education removed the passing on of worldviews through the conservative channels of patriarchy and family tradition, “education” ceased being the primary mode of replicating customs and delicate belief systems. Instead, Bailyn concludes, education became “an agency for rapid social change.” This halting transformation from hearth to state sanctioned schoolhouse tended to “isolate the individual, to propel him away from the simple acceptance of a predetermined social role, and to nourish his distrust of authority.”

During what one historian has called “the age of academies” (between the Revolution and the Civil War) Americans erected thousands of these academies across the nation’s rural landscape. While they rejected Jefferson’s and Rush’s vision of centrally controlled state schools, they in fact implemented from grassroots what revolutionary visionaries had advocated all along: creating good republicans and “improving” children through schooling. And by the 1840s public education, too, found many willing supporters amongst erstwhile critics. As immigrants from Ireland and Germany poured into American cities education reformers across America used jingoism as a way to sell common schools

16 Carl F. Kaestle, Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 3-12.; Bernard Bailyn, Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study (New York: Vintage books, 1960), 147. On page 25, Bailyn argues that other “softer” historical processes occurred within colonial families that help explain the rise of achievement oriented, isolated individuals. By the middle of the eighteenth century families had contracted into isolated units and in the process transformed the ways in which the child entered into, and perceived the world: “As the family contracted towards a nuclear core, as settlement and re-settlement, especially on the frontier, destroyed what remained of stable community relations, and constant mobility and instability kept new ties from strengthening rapidly, the once elaborate interpenetration of family and community dissolved. The border line between them grew sharper; and the passage of the child from family to society lost its ease, its naturalness, and became abrupt, deliberate, and decisive: open to question, concern, and decision. As a consequence of such a translation into the world, the individual acquired an insulation of consciousness which kept him from naked contact and immediate involvement with the social world about him: it heightened his sense of separateness.”
with the promise of disrupting what were believed to be superstitious and dependent familial worldviews. Thus concurrent with the rise of common schools in larger towns, hundreds of thousands of parents predominantly from farm communities sent their children away to board and learn under the tutelage of schoolmasters. Unlike Latin Schools these academies admitted any child whose parents had or could scrape together the funds. In what is probably a conservative estimate one observer counted over six thousand such academies in 1850. And more than any state New York experienced an outburst of academies in the antebellum era, especially in central New York where George Cole and Luther Hiscock parted from family to learn at the feet of learned men and women.

In these academies a student would likely board for the week, seeing his classmates more than his father. And instructors consciously assumed the role of surrogate parents. Rivalries abounded not only between academies but between competing students. Most of all, these academies prided themselves on a practical pedagogy, often “fitting” students for


19 Members of the Cole family who attended the Ovid Academy had to walk seven miles to attend. Cornelius—and we can safely assume the same for his brothers—“for economy’s sake” boarded at the academy during the weekdays. Ibid., 1-48; Elmer Ellsworth Brown, The Making of our Middle Schools: An Account of the Development of Secondary Education in the United States (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 228-57.; Catherine Coffin Phillips, Cornelius Cole, California Pioneer and United States Senator; A Study in Personality and Achievements Bearing upon the Growth of a Commonwealth (San Francisco: Printed by J. H. Nash, 1929), 16-17.

20 Ryan, "Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865", 170; Phillips, "Cornelius Cole, California Pioneer and United States Senator; A Study in Personality and Achievements Bearing upon the Growth of a Commonwealth", 19
college and professional careers. As early as 1819, critics like this one from a British
magazine noted the disturbing departure from the classics, and an increasing emphasis on
money.

These academies are not always exclusively classical schools; some are partly
appropriated to education for the counter and the counting-room; and as far as
this object goes, there is no striking defect in them; it not being a difficult matter
to teach a lad to count his fingers and take care of his dollars\textsuperscript{21}

When Charles Francis Adams, Jr., blasted his father for not preparing him for
manhood, he specified that he should have been sent away to boarding schools. “I should
have been compelled to rough it with other boys,” Adams wrote. For several pages, Adams
continued his denunciation of his emasculating education. He should have been taught to
wrestle, compete, to have been “rubbed” into shape, and learned to taken his bruises.
“Instead of getting [boarding-school life]” Adams concluded, “I was at the age of thirteen,
sent to a Boston Latin School.” Sixty years later Adams still believed his European-style
education to be the most “profitless” stage of his life.\textsuperscript{22} He wished instead that he had been
taught to grab for more---to have been better prepared for muscular manhood and counting
winnings. However much education then and now has come to promise equality and a
“natural aristocracy,” it also created a nation of dollar counters. Like the story of eagle from

\textsuperscript{21} About the district school near the Cole’s farm Cornelius wrote that “their instructions
were the more practical on that account, and tended rather to the useful than the ornamental. The
studies comprised little more than what Mr. Lincoln called the three R’s: reading, ‘riting, and
our Middle Schools: An Account of the Development of Secondary Education in the United States}, 246 Also see:
ibid., 226, 228-9, 230-33,235, 244

\textsuperscript{22} Adams, \textit{The Autobiography of Charles Francis Adams}, 17-23
Allen Lucas, it prodded many young boys to lift their sights and disdain the loam beneath their fathers’ fingernails. It multiplied the “unbounded careers” that Horace Mann hoped it would quell. It helps explain the emergence of antebellum men like Cole who, to use Whitman’s words, toiled so they could “feed the greed of the belly,” walking…with “dimes on their eyes.”23

The Revolutionary Legacy of Ambition

The framers of the American republic had once hoped to fashion a political structure that would hold in check and in fact harness the dangerous passions of ambition and avarice. Atop the philosophical accretion formed by European political philosophers like Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Blaise Pascal, François de La Rochefoucauld, Adam Smith and perhaps most importantly, Montesquieu, American revolutionaries fashioned a government that promised to bring forth light from what was previously viewed as the darker corners of human nature. Looking to replace the corrupt webs of personal influence, cronyism, patronage, bloodline, and all allegiances to the Crown, American revolutionaries fished for ways to bind the American “people” to one another. They promoted these

horizontal ties through what they called the “natural affections” like friendship and affinity, affirming the general Enlightenment belief that humans are more good than not. But “friends” could also be converted into dependents and thus corrupted. America’s radical social experiment was an attempt to build the best society from men “as they really are,” instead of how utopian visionaries or apologists for monarchies had depicted them. Like their European counterparts the architects of the American republic doubted religious prescriptions and moral philosophy could reliably restrain the volatile passions. Individuals were not capable of mastering their passions; neither could ambition be suppressed by iron-fisted tyrants.25 (Besides who would keep the King’s passions at bay?) Instead, only a properly ordered society could harness mankind’s vices by diffusing the passions and by playing them off one another. If men were naturally affectionate, they could just as easily become master and servant.

Here, then, was the revolutionary schema of how to keep overly ambitious men in line: While a man’s unchecked passions led to corruption, a nation of self-interested agents, equally smitten with passions, would actually produce desirable fruits. A republic filled with equally ambitious men—checked by proper government and tempered by moderate religion

(not of the enthusiastic kind)—would produce deserving elite, even as commonly shared ambition would neutralize its excesses among would-be despots. But in this new society, old religious strategies would only play a complementary role. Statecraft and realism about human nature would bring forth a new paradigm for managing mankind and its vices. For example, whereas for millennia religious precepts held that a woman’s coquetry would lead to the injury of her soul, as the new argument went she might better resist sin by thinking of modesty as a way to, in the end, attract a better suitor. Her “interest” of wanting wealth, sex or power through men, then, could actually be used to suppress her coquetry. If a merchant lusted after wealth he might learn—not that avarice would canker his soul—but that honest dealings, in the end, would bring him more customers who in turn would line his pockets with gold. The countervailing passion—the less destructive one that keeps the more dangerous ones at bay—became one’s “interest.” Thus the project of creating a better society (with a somewhat realistic assessment of the dimmer aspects of the human condition) led to the emphasis of self-interest over moral injury as a way to neutralize a citizenry’s worst passions.26

Once upgraded from a passion to a guidable self-interest, ambition or avarice could be harnessed and subdued through the Enlightenment social calculus of “countervailing forces.” Here is where the passions-turned-interests were welcomed as a way to promise collective excellence and virtue. Countervailed ambitions, it was hoped, would keep

26 Hirschman, "The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph", esp. 20-31. Early popular biographies about George Washington emphasized that the Father of the nation obtained his “godlike virtues” only after an internal struggle with his passions. Only then did the first president overcome his passions by, as one of Washington’s eulogists put it, a “sublime adjustment of powers and virtues.” See: Forgie, "Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age", 38-41.
opposing powers in check while galvanizing the fledgling nation into a great republic. For example, Alexander Hamilton argued that allowing a president to run for reelection would stifle his swelling ambitions at the end of his term. “His avarice might be a guard upon his avarice” in that if he wanted to prolong his presidency he would suppress his immediate ambitions for future rewards. This same logic of pitting powers against one another informed the creation of an American government made up of three, discrete powers—judiciary, executive, and legislative. As Publius (James Madison or Hamilton) reasoned in his defense of a government made up of separate departments, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” That is, in a republican government man’s most destructive impulses must meet equally potent passions and in the process actually be transformed into stabilizing bedrock.

In short, this societal alchemy drew from the reasoning that if every man desired to wield power, all tyrants would be kept at bay. But even more, European thinkers who would partly shape the ideas of America’s founding generation came to view the pursuit of money as a mild or soft passion that could be used as a lever against the consuming desires for pleasure. But commerce would not just govern the darker passions; it would actually create a “middle rank of men” with common interests who would keep in hand the powers of the monarch or president. The pursuit of money and its cultivation of a thicket of local and international commercial networks would restrict monarchical fiat. Before a sovereign could raise an army, wage war, or collect taxes, he would have to strike bargains with the growing commercial community. Thus, in America, pervasive ideas about the passions of the individual were grafted into political theory, especially in the doctrines of separation of
powers, and checks and balances. The collective lust for money and fame, therefore, was somehow good for union. It’s important to emphasize, though, that political philosophers from the early Enlightenment to Jefferson’s generation looked to mitigate vice, not unleash it. They came to believe that the best way to subdue a devil was to strategically place him in a ring of fellow demons. If they quietly feared that the demons would somehow combine forces, they placed bets that they wouldn’t. Had they been able to foresee such a thing, Albert Hirschman argues, “they would have shuddered—and revised their thinking.”


Adam Smith and sympathizers took the reasoning a step further by collapsing the human passions into one: the “augmentation of fortune.” While compared to his intellectual forerunners, Smith perceived and took seriously the passions of the masses, as he rolled the previously troubling passions of avarice, ambition, fear, cupidity, into the desire to acquire wealth. Though Smith was ambivalent about the effects of industry, especially on education and the martial spirit, he believed that self-interested individuals would unintentionally bring wealth and happiness to the collective. To the extent that Americans imbibed this aspect of Smith’s ideas, this too complicated American citizens’ relationship to the market. Also see: Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, 56-66, 69-135. Hume contended that commerce would help overwhelm the other passions; Montesquieu and political philosophers from the Scottish Enlightenment like John Millar contended that industry and commerce would forge a more healthful political structure, even as it rectified personal behavior.

28 For examples of how the desire for immortal fame was construed as a way to promote virtuous actions, and how Lincoln reasoned that otherwise dangerous passions could be channeled and purified by something like the revolutionary cause, see: Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age*, 57-62.

29 Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, 4-5.
By the last decade of the eighteenth century and especially within the first third of the nineteenth, many of America’s Founding Fathers shuddered. But while they could revise their thinking, they could not remake history. Similar to the boom in American education, garden variety Americans embraced revolutionary ideals, but calibrated them to their own ends, often outstripping the hopes of erstwhile proponents. The Revolution’s elite “invented” the “myth” of popular sovereignty with the intention of gutting and replacing the myth of “the Divine Right of the Kings.” But to their dismay, poorly bred Americans—as they saw it—mistook rhetoric and political fiction for reality. The lofty claims of the Declaration of Independence, especially the accompanying claims to equality and popular sovereignty, took root in the newspapers, octavos, in conversations by the workbench and in the fields behind the plow. In this way the most Radical aspects of the Revolution bloomed in the workaday lives of early Republic farmers, jobbers and artisans.30

The conservative flank of the Revolution, especially those within the Federalist Party, had an Olympian task before them. They needed to justify their own breaking with British political and social structures and at the same time convince their children to play the role of preservers. Parents who recently cut bait from the past would find they created a disturbingly unstable, bough-heavy world of growing branches and clipped roots. And in turn, what transpired over subsequent decades was—for some—an alarming ferment caused by the merging of revolutionary rhetoric, evangelical religion, the deluge of cheaply printed pamphlets and papers and the immense opportunity for land speculation and geographic mobility in the early Republic. The first generation of Americans—those born just after the

Revolution—proved to worried elders and curious European visitors that countervailing self-interests merely lulled the passions, only to evidently nurse them and turn them loose with more perilous clutches. A sizable group of critics in early Republic warned that ambition and the lust for money would lead to certain destruction. “In our very prosperity,” warned one anonymous writer in a Richmond paper, “is to be found the principle of decay.”

The children and grandchildren of the revolutionary generation took it even further by sharpening the discourse used to defend the War of Independence. As the historian Edmund Morgan has argued, revolutions in thought “frequently take the form of shifts in emphasis, with old ideas not repudiated, but put to new uses.”

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32 Anonymous writer quoted in, Watts, "The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820", 76

Revolution picked over old ideas to make a radically different society, so too did antebellum men continue to draw from the Revolution’s well of words and symbols even as they pushed them to radical conclusions. By the end of the War of 1812, Americans had bartered away their deepest commitments to a republicanism that circumscribed market behaviors and expansionism. Jefferson’s party hung the drywall on the studs and beams that Hamilton’s party hoped would become a bustling house of nationalism and trade. Jefferson’s party of republican yeomen doubled the size of the nation with the Louisiana Purchase and waged a war that forced the government to further centralize while stoking internal trade. By the war’s end, Americans had become what one historian described as a “consolidating, congealing society of self-made men.”34 Over the next three decades the watchwords of the early Republic: independence, merit, republicanism, and the natural aristocracy—morphed into a culture marked by desperate, breathless money-grubbing. And the grubbers seemed to have materialized from all sides. As a number of historians have convincingly argued, the turbulent, possessive individualism of the antebellum northeast was born out of Jefferson’s Republican descendants—farmers, artisans, industrious yeoman who imbibed democracy and volunteerism—as much as it came from the stock-jobbers and financiers of Hamiltonian Federalism.35

34 Watts, "The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820". One historian has argued that the expanded nation along with the antebellum boom in cotton exportation from the South created a chain of regional needs and market responses (the South sells cotton to the Northeast and England, the West sells foodstuffs to the South, and the Northeast sells manufactured products to both regions). See: Douglass North, The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 304..

Post Heroic Cole?

He went to school in the age of academies. He worked his father’s land in an overwhelmingly agricultural region, and nation. He worshipped with his parents in a Methodist church, one of the fastest spreading churches in America. He grew up in a place and time where adults spoke in slightly, but significantly different ways about avarice and making money. As a young man he conformed to two of the key familial hallmarks of the growing new middle class in antebellum America, putting off marriage until his mid twenties after he finished school. And though he came from a household with twelve brothers and sisters, he only had two children of his own. If prisoner Cole was somewhat unordinary he was cut from common cloth. Yet the most basic cultural contours can partly explain his psychology—of how it was that he became so desperate for clout—or came to see his

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36 Cornelius would describe his parents as “pious” and that all the children were expected to “observe with some strictness the commonly accepted rules of morality.” Both sides of his family once adhered to the Dutch Reformed church. Cole, "Memoirs of Cornelius Cole”, 4,8

37 For hallmarks of “new middle class,” see: Ryan, "Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865", 155-57, 167-68

George Cole may have actually wanted more children but Mary Barto apparently grew very sick after giving birth to their first daughter, Fanny. Mary subsequently resisted George’s sexual advances in fear of becoming pregnant. In a letter to his sister-in-law, George wrote from his prison, “She almost denied me marital rights for two years past, as she now says from a disinclination of guilt and grief. Before that from fear of having more children.” Also Cole’s move from farm to town may have also been driven more by Mary then her husband’s ambitions. Before moving to Syracuse they purchased a farm in west Lodi on the back of Seneca Lake. But as Cole’s lawyer argued, Mary, “having always lived in a populous village, and being much accustomed to society, became dissatisfied with the retirement of country life…” In other words, this move from an agricultural world to a new middle class in populous towns, Cole either resisted, or he wanted others to believe that Mary had led the way. See: Syracuse Journal, April 25, 1868. George Cole to Olive Cole, December 5, 1867 in Cole family, "Papers".
performance in the war as more important than his wife’s well being. The few fibers of
evidence from his youth point back again to the Revolution once again—to material and
rhetorical remnants which he daily sifted in his brain.

As a boy he plowed and dirtied himself on land wrenched and “purchased” four
decades earlier from the Onondaga and Cayuga Indian Nations. Along with other states
New York parceled out vast portions of its interior after the Revolution to veterans as
soldiers’ bounties. Before leaving for college, George’s older brother Cornelius, by default,
became the neighborhood’s land surveyor, when the “old gentleman,” Mr. Fowler—who
had taught Cornelius the art—died. The skill would have familiarized Cornelius with the
original boundaries and remnant bounties along the thin strip of land between the Cayuga
and Seneca lakes that the Coles called home. Surveying would have been needed to negotiate
between the conflicting claims on land from original soldiers’ bounties, speculators, forged
deeds and squatters that had plagued the Military Tract since the lands were parceled out
though a post-war lottery.38 If not from his own father or local rumors, then from his closest
brother, George likely learned the connections between his childhood surroundings and
war—the interpenetration of property, power and manhood.39

George also probably learned from inference, if not directly, that the parcels of land
around the Finger Lakes—many of which had already filtered and consolidated into private
hands—were originally awarded to soldiers according to their rank. Within this particular


Military Tract, major generals received over ten times that of a common soldier. A mere captain received 1500 acres while a private only one third of that. Many soldiers immediately sold their bounties, trading propertied rank for cash wealth, further blurring the lines between land, rank and speculation—signaling an increasingly dominant form of manliness informed by aggressive entrepreneurialism.40

Though George’s grandfather, “Captain David Cole” did not enlist with a New York Batallion, and therefore did not qualify for a New York bounty, he probably sold off a comparable bounty from New Jersey, and in 1800 purchased a tract in the “Lake Country.” At the same time, embedded in this military tract were the marks of brutal Indian killing. After tribes from the region sided with the British during the Revolution, and made various attacks on patriot settlements, a military expedition in 1779 led by major general John Sullivan pulverized nearly forty Iroquois villages, burning crops, and leaving many to starve and freeze the coming winter. Along the lakes the Cole boys occasionally found wigwams of remnant Cayuga Indians who had been wiped from the region. Cornelius recalled that occasionally “an aged and weatherworn female” would come to their door selling baskets, beadwork and “nostrums.”41

Though Cornelius did not say whether or not any of these “homemade wares” were purchased and integrated into the Cole hearth, there were other “relics” that captured the


41 Cole, "Memoirs of Cornelius Cole", 5-7
young local children’s imagination. Sophia Webster Lloyd, reflecting on her childhood in the region, remembered how the plowshare turned up the “charred and blackened corn” left from Sullivan’s scorched-earth warfare. As a child she experienced consternation as to why the “quiet, peaceable, peculiar people” endured “with such resignation,” watching their forests being carved up and cultivated, and “our corn ripening even over their buried dead.” Just to the east of her neighborhood lay an ancient Indian burying ground, where each spring local farmers plowed up “treasures” which children gathered—arrowheads, wampum, and pipes. Graves still held their shape on the unbroken side of the hill. When children walked to district schools and their academies, they filed through the hillside as they “meandered in and out of the depressions.” Shards of snuffed-out life literally cropped up from below their tiny feet—inscribing on their fragile minds the relationship between violence and white men’s “progress.” Lloyd claimed that though Sullivan’s raid was a “matter of history,” there was a “peculiar vividness” to the past when it “speaks of the things with which one is familiar.”

When General Sullivan burned down Indian settlements in the Finger Lakes region his horses became such an impediment during the retreat that he had them slaughtered some thirty miles below the Cole farm. The “bleached bones” which many years later, still marked the site, came to be known as Horseheads. Sullivan’s destruction from the scorched earth to the mass murdering of his animals, cut a swath through the region, leaving its marks for
generations and touching the psyches of its antebellum inhabitants. George Cole’s brothers would “act out the story” of Sullivan’s march on his way to torch wigwams. As Cornelius recounted it, “[Sullivan’s] line of march was down between the two lakes…and his military road, hewn through the primitive forest, was plainly observable for many years.” It must have been particularly potent for the young Cole children, though, as it ran directly through their father’s property.43

There were other violent rhythms emanating from this gorgeous region of grassy hills, red plums and nut-bearing trees. Every year folks gathered from a twenty to thirty mile radius to participate in or celebrate the General Training of the region’s militia. In the lake region in the three decades preceding the Civil War, young men mimicked adult soldiers in what Cornelius called “the greatest moment to the youngster.” The rank and file came in farm clothes, while militia leaders “were decked out in the most approved Revolutionary style,” donning epaulets and jackets adorned with gold braid “in profusion.” Boys hauled along old revolutionary muskets, or squirrel guns, eager to participate amid the “deafening” clamor and martial music. If the children wondered if the burnt corn and pipes were from an imaginary clash between white men and Indians, at these training days those aging men still left from “Washington’s old soldiers” were “made conspicuous.”44 The War of


44 Cole, "Memoirs of Cornelius Cole", 9-10 By the Age of Jackson the state sanctioned and controlled militia was giving way to a new volunteer model particularly in New York and Massachusetts. Like antebellum reform movements these militia groups were created by the merging of volunteerism and deeply held fears about corruptions, sin, and the decline of society. Kenneth
Independence was made real to them through gunpowder parades, epaulets and wizened soldiers.

Through abiding revolutionary symbolism and rhetoric, or hearing grown men talk more openly about their ambitions—through Indian treasures, scarred landscapes from Revolutionary expeditions, and the remnants of soldiers’ land bounties, young men like George Cole absorbed the interconnectedness between war, manhood, race, money and status. In schools, boys (and to a lesser extent, girls) learned to see their family from without. The grandeur of literature, math, and geography made home feel like the “status quo,” even as the transportation revolution between 1815 and 1840 provided the roads and rails for less considerable departures for academies, universities, and towns filled with imagined opportunities. And through repeated competition at the academies or seminaries, boys came to partly view peers as either useful to one’s ascent beyond father, or a hindrance. From a delicate age, and perhaps reified by the rise of sports within mid-nineteenth century pedagogy, boys learned to divide their peers into “friends” or “rings” of designing others.

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45 Joseph F. Kett, Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1977), 30-31. Kett calls the shift in father/son relations in the early nineteenth century “semindependence” where boys did not increasingly cut themselves from their fathers, but instead lived out a “jarring mixture of complete freedom and total subordination.” ibid., 29

Along with these softly connected influences from below and above the earth Cole’s generation was barraged by a thoroughgoing effort from writers and advice givers to turn children’s minds to the greatness of America’s founders. In verse, fiction and juvenile literature the Founding Fathers, and in particular George Washington, assumed the proportions of deity. In 1837 one antebellum ballad writer proclaimed his hope that the nation’s “rising sons” would become like “A race of God-like Washingtons.” Particularly in the schoolhouses and academies, pupils encountered a curriculum filled with, what one historian has described, “an abundance of hero worship,” with primers given to “exuberant Americanism.” Parents were instructed to make the first lisps of their babies, not “mother” or “father,” but the sacred name of George Washington.

With all the hero worship though, by the 1830s Americans began to grow uneasy with living in the shadows of an earlier generation. Antebellum shadow dwellers began to worry about how they might channel ambitions, live up to their models, in what George Forgie has called the “post heroic” age. Lincoln and his generation came to believe that the only way they could safely channel their ambitions for fame, when all the important work had been done, was to save the Republic from an ambitious would-be tyrant. As Forgie argues, this deep psychological need to measure up to the greatness of the generation of ’76 made the Civil War—with its slavepower antagonists—an irresistible outlet for Lincoln and his generation. One way that self-made men justified moving beyond their biological fathers

47 Thomas Dunn English quoted in, Forgie, "Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age", 28

was to adopt great men from the Revolution as their new guides into the world. But honoring these demi-gods through music, literature, and spoken word only stoked the ambitions of these post heroic men who yearned to be like their national fathers, but had no theatre in which they could safely release such monumental ambitions. No place, that is, until the secession crisis.

To reduce Cole to little more than a “post heroic” son, looking for a place to unleash his ambitions would be silly. And to suggest some sort of geographic determinism, or that simply “going to school” made him a monomaniac with a penchant for bloodshed, confuses the intricate overlap between biography and broad historical trends. In telling the story of Cole, though, taking the legacies of the Revolution seriously allows us to insist that he was both peculiar, yet unsurprising. Somehow Cole’s life is both a story about the edges of insanity, and the central logic of manhood in the Civil War era. He was extraordinary only because he took the “normal” course of manliness to its logical, violent finish.

Unfortunately, besides his dour letter to his school chum, Cole left no sources from his childhood. Through those who did, then, he must be read. It is through imagination only, then, that Cole sits in a classroom, prodded to dream beyond his father’s farm. So too is it fanciful, the image of him acting out the destruction on Sullivan’s Road across his father’s farm, and that he somehow carried these violent games in his mind when he cut his own destructive trails through North Carolina. (In both the Sullivan Expedition and the Tarboro Raid much of the suffering came after the original attacks, disproportionately affecting

49 Forgie, “Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age”, 308
women and children. Also, both expeditions ended with soldiers killing their own horses, though the Tarboro slaughter was much smaller.) Imagining how young Cole’s mind assimilated the meanings of soldiers’ land bounties—or, perhaps, where his thoughts took him as he ambled home one spring carrying a grave treasure in his pocket—pushes Cole’s narrative beyond the grasp of history. But, then again, to depict the sometimes boundless ambitions that haunted Cole and so many of his contemporaries as a universal impulse unshaped by place or time, is a failure to recognize how all actions are historically bound, and how all sin, like politics, is local.\footnote{This is not to claim that it remains local, but that even national or global sins are acted out through the narrowest of concerns—about material possessions, safety of self, money in one’s pocket, sexual desires, passing wealth on to children, local jealousies, etc. See the new and daring work on the violence of the Holocaust and global Civil Wars where the heinous actions are traced to micro-level “rational” choices made by perpetrators. For example, Omer Bartov, “The Microhistory of Genocide: Interethnic Relations and the Origins of the Holocaust in Buczacz, Ukraine”; Stathis N. Kalyvas, The Logic of Violence in Civil War (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 485, http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0633/2005018158-d.html; http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0515/2005018158.html.} Whether or not young Cole longed to match the glory of the grey-haired veterans at Training Day, or whether his ambition swelled as he stood, dwarfed by the shadows of a god-like generation, he fought the Civil War as if he had. If he felt the long arm of the Revolution tapping him on the shoulder, he had intimate reasons to take notice. After all, before the patriotic primers and training days, Cole was prepared to associate himself with the burdens of the past—every time his parents uttered his full given name, “George Washington” Cole.
CONCLUSION: “DON’T FEAR MY MANHOOD”

The Stanwix tragedy immediately set off a year-and-half debate about Cole’s manhood—leading to questions about sexuality, marriage, money, passion and how these things were inflected by the recent war. The next morning at the Constitutional Convention, Hiscock’s colleagues paid tribute to the slain, once rising politician and lawyer. They moved to adjourn the convention, set the capitol’s flag at half-mast, agreed to wear badges of mourning for thirty days, and appointed a group of eight to accompany the corpse back to Syracuse, where religious services would be held in the home of Hiscock’s brother.¹

When the Reverend S.R. Dimmock—pastor to the religiously lukewarm Hiscock—stood beside the metallic casket, he admitted he came with “no eulogy to pronounce” and that flattery would be disgusting. His message, as he put it, would address the “public grief” of the event, not tender sentiments. For Dimmock, this public grief could be traced to another tragedy. One can imagine the hushed parlor as the pastor took the floor looking to impose order on a narrative that had spun out of control (that is, beyond the typical providentialism of religious eulogies). Some certainly wondered how he would negotiate the contested and humiliating improprieties of the deceased. But then Dimmock began with

1. Syracuse Journal, June 6, 1867.
what he deemed the tragedy’s beginning: “War,” he began, “is, of necessity, a scourge to any
nation, even if the cause be just and the result success.” Americans had always feared that
war would challenge Christian moral codes and fill the penitentiaries. “In this we have not
been disappointed,” he added. Dimmock made little attempt to rehabilitate Hiscock’s moral
reputation. The slain had sullied hands, as did the murderer. But, he continued, the
homicide reminded many that the darkest effect of war was “to cheapen human life.” Then
Dimmock said what few dared about Civil War veterans: “To a soldier, he who has been five
years in bloody conflict, it is a light thing to deprive his fellow of mortal existence. The
springs of humanity are dried up, and the susceptibilities blunted, so that, even on slight
provocation, one will assume the prerogative of God alone…”

But if the murder was a result of war, it was also about manhood. Though Dimmock
might have been more perceptive than most by tracing the murder to strains magnified by
the war, he went on, like many others, to ask questions about honor. He challenged Cole’s
supposed defense of manhood, stating that though his war record had won him laurels, the
cowardly murder was essentially the “suicide of honor.”2 The papers made similar
statements and doubted if prosecutors had any chance against a decorated soldier. The
Albany Journal, which with the vast majority of the press found little justification for the
murder, asked, “How does it happen that such a time was chosen for the deed as would give

2 Syracuse Journal, June 8, 1867.
it greatest publicity and romance?” After suggesting that Mrs. Cole might have played the role of the temptress, the paper asked, “Is this justice?—Is this honor?—Is this manhood?”

Prisoner Cole almost certainly read these articles and many like it in his cell as he scoured the papers from all over the region. Finally, the papers paid him notice. For Cole, and the many who cheered him on, publicity was essential, and, yes, it was justice, honor and manhood. If ever the veteran came close to authoring his own life with a captive audience ready to consume his narrative, this was Cole’s peculiar hour of inverted or at least ironic control and power. Soon after the murder, struggling to pull himself out of the pit of loneliness and depression (Cole considered his two daughters to be orphans because, as he put it, Mary no longer existed because she had cashed out her purity) he confessed “I am awfully lonesome & cast down & hopeless….” He then assured his sister-in-law of what must have worried him most: “don’t fear my manhood, I shall acquit myself as a man.”

Cole retained some of the most prominent attorneys in the Northeast for this very purpose. For a considerable sum, his Lawyers would rescue Cole from ignominy by linking Cole’s manhood to violence and war. For example, attorney James Brady, would proclaim to the jury that if his own sister had suffered such advances, and he did not do just as Cole had done, then he (Brady) would be “unfit to live among men.” Several times during the trials, 

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4 George and his brother Cornelius concluded that the newspapers were in league with a vast “Canal Ring” in New York State politics: various letters post June 6, 1867, in Cole family, *Papers*

5 George Cole to Olive Cole, June 22, 1867, ibid.. For more on how the loss of womanly virtue equaled death or the loss of self, see example in Paludan, *A People’s Contest: The Union and Civil War 1861-1865*, 332
when the judges and prosecuting attorneys suggested to the jurymen that they should consider manslaughter if they felt they absolutely could not send Cole to the gallows, the General’s attorneys boldly and emphatically rejected such a compromise, daring the jurymen to either set Cole free as a savior to moral men, or send the veteran to the scaffold to hang. “He has faced death at the cannon’s mouth; he can look upon it without trembling if it comes upon the gallows.” Cole was either a hero—a returned soldier who simply went about his duty of “protecting the union” after the war—or he had squandered his manhood and therefore deserved death.  

And if it came to death, Brady would later argue to the jury, the “General’s countenance might blanch, though it never did in battle….if he does ascend the scaffold, he will have that to console him which no one can take away—he can say: ‘As I fought to protect my country, so I fought to protect my home.’” Brady would further weld the war to the manly protection of families by concluding, as had Hiscock’s eulogist, that soldiers returned home with a predisposition to kill in the name of honor and order.

And so if he dies, he will die for you, and for all of us. But gentlemen, the hand never was made that would pinion to his side the right arm which wielded the sword so long and so bravely for his beloved and imperiled country—that hand does not exist on earth. [Cole must be acquitted] with all the honor he earned and had, when he answered to the call of the country in 1861, and fought its battles at subsequent periods while it had any to be fought.

When Brady closed with this conflation of Cole’s military killing and service to the family, the courtroom roared with applause. It was a conflation with which many Americans had grown comfortable and which they apparently longed to hear. Men and women packed the

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6 Syracuse Journal, December 4, 1867 and April 25, 1869.
overflowing courtroom, most to back the soldier. In his prison cell, Cole received frequent admirers. Men brought their families to meet the imprisoned soldier. Cole one time read his wife’s poetry to a visitor. Women brought him wreathes. Visitors came to see him as if on some pilgrimage to a dying vestige of manliness.7

The “Stanwix tragedy,” as it was often referred to in the papers, is in part a narrative that can be intuitively grasped with little historical context. On one hand it supports what we already know about nineteenth-century America. It is not surprising, for example, that the murder and its ensuing trials garnered enormous attention throughout and beyond the New York region among Victorian Americans, nor that newspapers competed for readers by releasing extra editions and promising full coverage of every turn in the drama.8 Much of the region’s captivation was anchored in the age-old dramaturgical trinity of sex, jealousy and violence, along with the legal curiosities, strategies and sharpened rhetoric inherent in such trials. But the murder trial also served to bring debates about

7 Syracuse Journal, November 18, 1867, and January 24, 1868. The Journal reported on Cole’s cell conditions, stating: The General says that the sentiment and feeling of the people of Syracuse is, as far as he can learn, strongly in his favor. This is especially the case so far as the ladies of that city are concerned. Scarceley a day passes that he does not receive a call or letters from this class, who show their warmest sympathy in his behalf. Occasionally he receives bouquets. One of these now makes his cell more cheerful.”

8 See: Karen Halttunen, Murder most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 322. Halttunen argues that nineteenth-century Americans increasingly imagined criminals of the most heinous crimes as standing on other side of an impassable gulf that separated them from the rest of society, instead of earlier conceptions of the murderer as a regrettable culmination of the depravity shared by all humanity. This makes the defense of Cole’s murder (and similar homicides) that much more striking as through the language of manhood, honor and war, American male jurists came to see accused like Cole as representative of general manhood. For more on the relationship between murder and eager newspaper readers, see: Patricia Cline Cohen, The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 432.; Andie Tucher, Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America’s First Mass Medium (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 257.
gender and war into closer contact—especially about what womanhood and manhood should look like in the newly restored Union. Many conservatives pounced on the opportunity to decry New York’s anemic anti-adultery laws (which they consistently argued only encouraged cuckolded husbands to remedy with pistols that which the law failed to address). On one side defenders of Hiscock argued that to acquit Cole would plunge society into barbarous mayhem where passions and “sickly sentimentalism” had primacy over law and reason. On the other, Cole’s sympathizers appealed to natural and eternal laws, especially the husband’s god-given duty to protect the sanctity of his hearth and mattress.

As historian Hendrik Hartog has amply shown, similar nineteenth-century murders and their ensuing acquittals cast light on the legal institution of coverture where, because a wife’s identity was “covered” by or absorbed into her husband’s, an attack on the wife’s body was tantamount to an attack on his own. The “unwritten law” stated that a husband who caught his wife in the act of adultery—providing he did not have time to “cool off” first—was justified in slaying the “seducer” or rapist, just as he would an attacker of his own person. Most importantly, though, as Hartog points out, the arguments surrounding or used to defend such murders revealed “a profound sense of male disquietude because of lost or changing rights and traditions, and the cases themselves were used by defense lawyers and by parts of the media to create a new legal understanding designed to restore male honor and property rights in women.” This understanding hinged on the male jurors’ belief that any husband who caught his wife in bed with another man would by nature be driven to frenzied insanity—driven to restore order to his family and community, by way of murder. Hiscock, for those who privately or publicly sympathized with Cole, became a metaphor for perceived
societal decline and “the changing rights and traditions”—religious backsliding, weakening morality in the cities, and threatening reforms like women’s rights activism.  

But inextricably tied to these issues was the fact that Cole had been away from his home for five years trying to make a name for himself in combat. And, as many contemporaries understood, his trouble at home extended to trouble in the fields. Still coping with the return of nearly two million soldiers who served for various stretches in the Union Army (over a third of a million Union soldiers, of course, never returned) many northerners must have viewed Cole as an aberration even as he represented the collective malaise and private upheavals of returned soldiers: the son who couldn’t hold a job; the neighbor with half a leg; the morose brother; the husband troubled with war secrets.

Over a period of eighteen months the two trials (the first trial had one juryman who would not budge from his position that Cole was guilty of murder), would prove, not so much that Cole was innocent or guilty, but that his peers and a sizable slice of society cared more for impassioned accounts of war heroism and the prerogatives of husbands, than legalistic niceties. The proceedings in both trials bordered on farcical as no amount of warnings from the judges nor objections from the prosecutors could stymie the defense’s lionization of the troubled soldier and constant revisiting of imputed sexual acts that drove him to murder. Cole, after all, never caught the two “in actual coition.” He never found love

letters. He never caught Hiscock making gestures or calls to Mary.\textsuperscript{10} Instead, after suspecting something foul, the veteran methodically took interviews, confirmed his suspicions, mulled over his options for nearly three days, shopped for a dependable second handgun, and acquired (with evidently a good deal of coercion and strategy) multiple confessions from his wife. These apparent technical hitches, though, would only play into Cole’s hands. If his frenzied insanity did not come from finding his wife in bed with another man, his attorneys would argue, then he must have been dragging something from his past. Latching on to the relatively new legal strategy of temporary insanity, his attorneys repeatedly traced lines from Cole’s momentary loss of bearings to his anguished war experience. What ensued then was a legal strategy that continually linked Cole’s disrupted sexual relations, wartime predators, and heroic struggles on the battlefields.\textsuperscript{11}

With all their demonization of Hiscock, and gender baiting, however, Cole’s attorneys were on to something. Though they regularly painted Cole into romanticized narratives of military struggle, they were forced to tell another story about the war—one that would make Cole appear like a victim of a chaotic orgy of violence, primed for “frenzy.” Here the trial only touched upon a fraction of the convoluted history of Cole and the war he hoped would remake him. It partially revealed how the “fog of war” followed soldiers’ bodies home, rolling into bedrooms and workspaces all over the Union. As contemporaries

\textsuperscript{10} About the only event that might have agitated Cole happened several months before the murder while at a fundraising bazaar. Cole—who was dressed up as an Indian Chief for entertainment—caught Hiscock and Mrs. Cole arm in arm inside the latter’s booth. Cole half-jokingly warned, “Take care, I am watching you.” See: \textit{Syracuse Journal}, April 30, 1868 and April 27, 1868.

\textsuperscript{11} Dunphy, "Remarkable Trials of all Countries with the Evidence and Speeches of Counsel, Court Scenes, Incidents, &c. Volume II", 194-420
consumed the unfolding drama, mourned the slain, and pored over trial reports, they
unavoidably engaged in contemporary debates over the meanings of purity, manhood, honor
and the family and how all these things had been altered by war.

After half a decade in the war fields, trying to make something of himself in the way
that men were supposed to do, Cole returned home hoping he was playing the game of life
to its fullest. But he soon tripped through others’ wires. This time, though, he found that the
wires reached into his own bedroom. Cole became a hero by killing a fellow “self-made
man” who had committed the cardinal rule of tampering with the delicate relations between
wife and man-on-the-make. To Cole, and his many sympathizers, Hiscock had attacked the
final refuge of purity and safety to which all self-made men would eventually turn. If Cole’s
schooling and professional ambitions were integral to making new middle-class families, so
was the indispensable prescription that wives must create a domestic refuge for their market
grizzled husbands. Not only was the wife supposed to offer safety and love to her husband
instead of seeking worldly preferment, her body was not supposed to be subject to like
passions. Her monopoly on domestic virtue rested in her claim to sexual purity. In a society
committed to “countervailing” interests, her propensity for self-denial neutralized her
husband’s lusts for power and pleasure.12

No wonder then that the newspapers correctly reported that Cole was equally
disturbed with the fact that Hiscock—an estate attorney—had helped Mary Barto Cole

12 Coontz, "Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, Or how Love Conquered Marriage”,
161-75; Rotundo, "American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era”,
120-40
protect her recently inherited money from George Cole’s reach. That she lusted other men’s bodies or other men’s money undermined the same familial strategy. Hiscock had blown the lid off an ideal of womanhood that was in large part a strategy for families to keep pace in an increasingly market-driven world without feeling they had trampled all over the mores of their parents. Mary’s sexuality was vital, not just because of the particular commitments made in monogamous Christian marriages, but because a wife’s controlled passions provided the counterweight to the breathless search for station that consumed fathers and husbands like “General” George Washington Cole. When Cole came to grips with how his wife’s passions had been made public, he calculatedly planned to upstage (and eclipse) her passions with his own. He knew as did most men, that a public murder would be approved by a jury of male peers, in the name of manly passion and female purity.

It is not clear if Cole realized how tightly wound together his own ambitions were with his wife’s sexuality. But his most significant promotion came—as one newspaper suggested—because “Mrs. Cole was not without her anxious desires and active efforts in this behalf.” In February 1866, just as Cole was set to return home from Texas for good, L.H. Hiscock—with the help of his powerful political ally from Syracuse—telegraphed an urgent message to the region’s congressman in Washington: “GET GENERAL COLE BREVETTED MAJOR GENERAL IMMEDIATELY BEFORE MUSTERED OUT IF POSSIBLE.”

No doubt that Mary’s sexuality and probably even events that took place in George W. Cole’s bed, were part of a complicated game of passion and wirepulling that ultimately exposed the often masked connections between intimacy and power in the Civil

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13 Syracuse Journal, June 13, 1867.
That Cole returned a general and a cuckolded husband were tied together in ways that probably only Mary Cole and Hiscock appreciated.

Killing rebels and gaining rank was not enough for Cole; commanding black troops got him nothing except a position in which he basically re-enslaved them, shipping them southward, to basically build railroads against their will. His own drive for rank made him blind to his black soldiers’ desires to take care of their wives and children. When he returned home from war, his search for gainful employment was fraught with humiliation. He was finally recognized as a sensational hero only after he “protected” his wife from her so-called seducer. There was some talk in the press and among Cole’s family that the prisoner would retain General Butler to defend Cole’s actions. Actually, Cole’s camp did approach Butler but was turned down as the tireless Massachusetts General, recently elected Congressman, was thoroughly consumed in the first stages of what would be his own political ascent.15

When he was finally acquitted in the winter of 1868, Cole’s backers stood atop their seats, giving “deafening cheers” in the courtroom. The judge futilely banged his gavel, calling for “Order!” amid the pandemonium created by those who believed that Cole had just vindicated another kind of “order.” For two minutes, Cole’s supporters “threw their hats upwards, waved their handkerchiefs and continued cheering.” As Cole moved outside he was surrounded by elated persons “striving to grasp his hands.” After the verdict, the

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14 Telegraph message found in microfilm #173CB1866, NARA, Washington, DC. Interestingly, the other politician who signed his name to the request, Thomas Alvoord, was the same powerful Syracuse politicians who Henry Barto recommended Cole should see, just before Cole left the interview with Barto and killed Hiscock.

jurymen were also anxious to congratulate him. Cole addressed them, saying “I thank the Jury for restoring me to the guardianship of my children.” A crowd then followed the wounded veteran to the hotel where they continued to fete the “hero of a domestic tragedy.”

The hero, though, did not return to his children. Soon after the trial he made one last fruitless trip to Washington in attempt to lay pipe for his future—despite the help of his brother. Within a few years Cole was in New Mexico, raising sheep in hopes of entering a lucrative wool trade. He remained there until his death in 1875. But the sick General did not come to the margins of “civilization” to herd sheep alone. He dreamed of building a railroad and tying the territory to Nevada. Cole left little record of his doings in New Mexico. But one of the last letters we have from Cole reveals a broken “man of force”—thousands of miles from his abandoned wife and daughters—looking for one last shot. But Cornelius, for some reason, had finally turned cold on his younger brother’s dreams. “I seem to have a faculty of making others believe I can be somebody far more readily that I can you…,” George wrote with marked desperation. George promised that he would repay Cornelius for the remaining trial debts with the certain profits that would come from the railroad investment.

I’ll in time make it up to you—as I am out of work, out of money, out of clothes to appear creditably even, and I cannot push my fortunes thus….It makes me curse to sit here (nailed fastly, want of a little) and see progress

16 Dunphy, "Remarkable Trials of all Countries with the Evidence and Speeches of Counsel, Court Scenes, Incidents, &c. Volume II", 419-420 Cornelius to C.K. McClatchy, December 9, 1868 XXXX UCLA; Syracuse Journal, December 7, 1868.
coming like a RR train [moving] along to leave me by the wayside as it now looks.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1875 Cole’s jumbled bowels laid him down and finally took his life. There is some evidence that his old war chum, Edwin Fox—who had become a borderlands drifter and something of a cutthroat—continued paying visits to his sick “captain,” and perhaps, as he had done in the North Carolina army tent, nursed his commander.\textsuperscript{18} Away from his daughters, financially broke, with ragged clothes and dreams of railroad investments eating his mind, Cole died an unmade man. It is in this pitiful way that he had come to experience how the Linocolnian vision of merit transformed the meaning of human life into a race with no finish line. For every “winner” in Lincoln’s “race of life” many more ended their lives defeated, licking their wounds—and like Cole—anxiously eyeing their next main chance.

Even if “the General” failed to see what his pursuit of manhood had done to himself and those around him; Mary Barto Cole fully understood. In 1879, with all her money gone, and her two daughters still living with her, she began applying for a widow’s pension. With obvious trepidation she wrote Cornelius, asking him if he could, one last time, pull the well-worn wires and gather testimonies from friends who knew of George’s war injuries. “I am now going to trouble you again,” she wrote. Then…“I believe women are nothing but trouble….” By 1881, Mary expressed fears that her daughter Alice’s health was “permanently injured by hard work and anxiety about our affairs.” Fanny, her other daughter, was also at home and had “taken entire charge of her grandmother who is 94 years old….” These few

\textsuperscript{17} George Cole to Cornelius Cole, May, 1874 in Cole family, "Papers"

\textsuperscript{18} See affidavit of Edwin Fox, March, 1884 in Cole’s Pension File, NARA, Washington, DC.
glimpses depict a broken Mary Cole, living in financial need with her two daughters (one of them quite troubled) and their aged grandmother—a house of wives and children left behind by self-made men. And though Mary confessed that she needed “that pension very much,” she would eventually be rejected in the mid 1880s, and learn how well General Cole had kept the extent of his injuries from official war records. In this “the General” had finally “made” himself by erasing his own brokenness and by extension his dependence on those who nursed him.19

19 Mary Cole to Cornelius Cole, November 7, 1879 and February 17, 1881 in ibid.; Also see various letters between Mary Barto Cole and the Pension Bureau in George Cole’s Pension File, NARA, Washington, DC.


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