

The Unconventional Black Women of the American Civil War

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Abstract:

Much of the historical interest has touched upon the study of warfare as a man's fight. The study of the American Civil War (1861-65) revolves majorly around the role of men as active participants on and off the battlefield. However, women's role in the history of the Civil War remains obscure. The Civil War foregrounds the conflict between the Lincoln led Northern/Union states to abolish the institution of slavery and the Confederate states, formed after the secession of eleven southern states in order to preserve the practice of slavery. With the outbreak of war, men were commissioned to join the troops while women remained behind with children and the elderly. As men departed to the battlefield, women had to emerge from the comfort of the households to assume the roles previously reserved for men. The new positions of women amidst the realities of war were directed by the differences between women across race, class, and geography. Regardless of the restrictions placed on women since antebellum times, the American women enlisted as combatants and marched off to war in disguise. As the institution of slavery collapsed during wartimes, the black women who spent most of their lives as slaves encountered new found

liberty and struggled to position themselves mentally, socially, and economically in a free state. To gain the perspective of black women during the Civil War, the paper traces the life of an African-American slave, Susie King Taylor, who attained freedom in the early years of war. Through her Civil War memoir, *Reminiscences of my life in Camp*, the paper examines the potential of a free black woman as a laundress in the 33d United States Colored Troops.

Keywords: Black Women Resistance, Black Emancipation, American Civil War, Slavery, Black Education

Aiding the Cause of Freedom: The Life of a Black Woman in the Union Army

Susie King Taylor was born in Liberty County, Georgia on August 6, 1848. Born on a slave plantation, Grest Farm, she lived with her mother who worked as a house servant for the Grest Family. At the age of seven years, her grandmother, Dolly, a free black woman, takes Taylor and her brother to Savannah with the

permission of their owners and sends both the children to a free black woman, Mrs. Woodhouse, to receive an education. Much against the strict laws of Georgia regarding slave education, her grandmother created new opportunities for her to learn to read and write from various teachers, both black and white. In 1862, she is transferred to St. Simons Island which was under the control of the Union army¹ and there she gets the opportunity to teach in a freedmen school. Her memoir, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* (1902), records her journey as a laundress through the Civil War years with the first black regiment of the Union army, the 33rd United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers.

During the period of slavery, the slaves were discouraged and often punished by their white masters if they endeavoured to receive an education. Education was pronounced illegal for the slaves by many southern states as the ability to read and write could dismantle the institution of slavery.² Reading was not considered to be a major threat initially. However, as slaveholders

became aware of the abolitionist material being spread in the southern states, reading was consequently prohibited.² In the wake of the abolitionist movement in the 1830s, the American Anti-slavery society³ was formed by William Lloyd Garrison in 1833 which vehemently argued for the immediate emancipation of slaves. The anti-slavery press, until the outbreak of the Civil War, supplied every form of incendiary record of writing to spread awareness about the horrors of the institution of slavery in the South. There was a wide range of abolitionist material such as pamphlets, newspaper reports, speeches of the abolitionists and the memoirs of former slaves, and 'in addition to publishing the reading material, radicals imprinted antislavery imagery on a variety of items: stationary, song sheets, candy wrappers, pin cushions, envelope stickers, draw-string bags, medallions—and prints' (Camp 101). The antislavery imagery focused on the slaves who could not read—'the use of illustrations allowed abolitionists to reach a wider audience. Images could be viewed by all, even those who could not read' (Camp 101).

Additionally, fear proliferated among the slaveholders about abolitionist literature

¹The Island was under Confederate army's control in 1861; however, the Union army occupied the island in 1862. The island remained under Union control after 1862. ² South Carolina was the first southern state to prohibit slave education in 1740. In the following years, other southern states had strictly prohibited slave education.

² By 1836, even reading was pronounced illegal by the southern states.

³ The anti-slavery society constituted sixty-two prominent abolitionists including Wendell Phillips, Susan B. Anthony, Lewis Tappan, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the like.

which emerged around 1820.⁴ Literacy, therefore, could have allowed the oppressed slaves to gain awareness about the abolitionist movement taking place in America which encouraged revolution against the practice of slavery. Furthermore, reading and writing encouraged communication between the abolitionists and the slaves, and also stimulated interchange of ideas and assistance among slave community to devise methods to seek escape from the shackles of slavery.

In her memoir, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, Susie King Taylor recounts how she receives the opportunity to learn to read and write under the guidance of Mrs. Woodhouse when she is about seven years of age. Mrs. Woodhouse secretly taught about thirty children in her school even when the southern states had declared severe punishment for anyone, both black and white, for educating slaves—‘masters who had employed their favourite blacks in positions which required a knowledge of bookkeeping, printing, and the like, were commanded by law to discontinue that custom; and private and public teachers were prohibited from assisting Negroes to acquire knowledge in any manner whatever’ (Woodson 9).

⁴ The autobiographies of escaped slaves, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Solomon Northrup, which were published in 1845, 1861 and 1853 respectively, were widely circulated.

Frederick Douglass,⁵ an American activist, abolitionist, writer and former slave, highlights the significance of education in the emancipation of slave community in his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Like Taylor, Frederick had struggled to receive the opportunity to learn to read and write.⁷ His white master, Mr. Auld, discourages his wife to make him learn letters by saying ‘if you teach that nigger . . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master’ (Douglass 20). A sudden revelation dawns upon him as to education is the road to freedom from slavery—‘it was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . . . Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master’ (Douglass 20). He struggled to become literate as he did not have the assistance of any free black relative, whereas Taylor is motivated and guided

⁵ Born around 1818, Frederick Douglass lived on a slave plantation in Maryland. He is oblivious about his birth date, however, later in life, he chooses February 14 as his birth date. ⁷ When his master, Colonel Lloyd, shifts him to Baltimore, Maryland, Frederick gets the first opportunity to learn letters from his mistress, Mrs Auld.

by her grandmother who is aware about the benefits of education of the black community.

In the antebellum era, due to the plethora of abolitionist materials, Taylor is able to learn about the North and, specifically, about the Yankees who were known as the saviours of her race—‘I had been reading so much about the “Yankees” I was very anxious to see them’ (Taylor 7) and ‘I wanted to see these wonderful “Yankees” so much, as I heard my parents say the Yankee was going to set all the slaves free’ (Taylor 8). Her education not only challenged the racial prejudices but also helped her to challenge the gendered dynamics antebellum era. She had become an educated black woman, the rarest form of emancipation a female slave could achieve.

The slave women of the rural sections of the South worked in cotton plantations. In addition to doing the laborious work in the fields, they had to assist the mistresses of the households in managing the household chores. They indulged in gender-specific work given by the masters, however, quite often the difference diminished between the work of a male slave and a female slave—‘while many women performed gender-specific work in the field as well as in black and white households, many other bondwomen slaved away at gruelling chores that seemed little from men’s work’ (Camp 79). Women were harshly punished by their masters for minor mistakes and often suffered cruelties

which contained sexual overtones—‘cruelties that twisted such intimacies as sexual possessiveness, or the private body, into public events and violent acts were familiar features of women’s lives in slavery. When women broke the rules and moved out of bounds, they risked and received punishments that were more than physically painful and heartbreaking; some were sexually degrading’ (Camp 33).

However, the slave women living in cities and towns of the Upper South led a comparatively easier life, especially in terms of mobility, than the women of the slaveholding south. Enslaved men and women of cities received kinder treatment, and they could be in close proximity to the free blacks as the majority of the free blacks lived in cities. Free people of colour in cities and towns enjoyed privileges denied to the enslaved people living on the plantations. Even free black women engaged in small businesses and earned a living for themselves under a strict supervision of their white guardians—‘most cities required all free people of color to have a “guardian”, a white man responsible for their good behaviour. Though all black women in the urban South suffered under caste legislation intended to keep blacks from prospering, or learning to read or write, many managed to carve out for themselves lives that were less constricted than those of their sisters on the countryside’ (Jones 39).

Taylor’s grandmother, Dolly, was a free black woman who enjoyed freedom

of movement in the city due to her free status. Dolly indulged in exchange of household commodities for the poultry products to sell in the city to earn profit—‘she would hire a wagon to carry bacon, tobacco, flour, molasses, and sugar. These she would trade with people in the neighboring places, for eggs, chickens, or cash, if they had it. These, in turn, she carried back to the city market, where she had a customer who sold them for her. The profit from these, together with laundry work and care of some bachelors’ rooms, made a good living for her’ (Taylor 3). Further, she was able to save money in Freedmen’s savings Bank⁶ in an era when enslaved people struggled to obtain even a piece of clothing from their masters—‘in that bank she had placed her savings, about three thousand dollars, the result of her hard labor and self-denial before the war, and which, by dint of shrewdness and care, she kept together all through the war’ (Taylor 3).

Also, the cities had small farms, and consequently, the required number of slaves to work on small farms was quite less in comparison to the number of slaves required to work on vast plantations. A slaveholding family in the city owning three to four slaves usually formed close bonds with their slaves than a planter family who owned more than a hundred slaves. Hence, in her memoir,

⁶ Freedmen’s Savings Bank operated from 1865 to 1874 for the economic emancipation of African-American people. Its failure resulted in the loss of the savings of the black community.

Taylor underlines that after moving to Savannah with her grandmother, she receives the opportunity to learn lessons from her landlord’s son at her grandmother’s request—‘James Blouis, our landlord’s son, was attending the High School, and was very fond of grandmother, so she asked him to give me a few lessons, which he did until the middle of 1861’ (Taylor 6). The assistance of her grandmother combined with the degree of mobility in the city allows her to pursue her education.

Furthermore, urban slaves were given the opportunity to learn some kind of trade to assist their masters in urban businesses due to which the slaves acquired trade skills of some kind. However, the slaves were barred from obtaining the opportunities to become literate. In her memoir, Taylor marks the opportunity to learn to read and write by pretending to learn some kind of trade — ‘we went everyday about nine o’ clock, with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. . . .The neighbours would see us going in sometimes, but they supposed we were there learning trades, as it was the custom to give the children a trade of some kind’ (Taylor 5). She highlights the difference between the slaves of the plantations and the cities later in her memoir when a Union commander becomes aware of her ability to read and write, and asks her as to how is she different from other people of colour—‘the only difference is, they were reared in the country and I in the city’

(Taylor 9). Thus, she breaks the barriers of her race and gender, and becomes skilled in reading and writing. Her education helps her to carve a new identity for herself during the Civil War years as she embarks on a perilous journey as a laundress in the black regiment of the Union army.

The American Civil War freed nearly four million slaves from the shackles of slavery. At the onset of war, Abraham Lincoln⁷ had refused to comply with anti-slavery policies as he was against the idea of considering the emancipation of blacks as a war aim. However, on January 1, 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation which officially declared the freedom of slaves—‘although emancipation was not recognized as a war aim in the beginning of the conflict, many African Americans took steps to push President Abraham Lincoln and the federal government in this direction’ (Frank 10). The preservation of the Union was the main agenda in waging war against the southern states. However, as thousands of enslaved men fled the plantations to join the Union army, the abolition of slavery became a worthy military tactic and a righteous path to Lincoln. As the Union control became more pervasive in the southern states, a number of slaves fled to the Union frontlines. The fugitive slaves and free blacks volunteered to serve in the Union army; however, in the first year

⁷ Lincoln was the President of the United States from 1861 to 1865. He was assassinated in 1865.

of war, they were not accepted in the Union army. In order to impede the Confederacy and to increase the declining number of white volunteers, black recruitment was considered a necessary move to win the Civil War.

The official enlistment of blacks, free and fugitive, began after the issuance of the

Emancipation proclamation in 1863. Free blacks from the northern side also reinforced the Union army. With the enlistment of black soldiers, many black women managed the households without the assistance of their men and in addition, they started to do a myriad of duties to assist the Union Cause. The free black women driven by economic necessity worked as nurses, laundresses, teachers, and cooks—‘many free black women took jobs with the federal government to provide themselves with the basic necessities. About a quarter of a million African Americans officially worked for the Union and Confederate armies as laborers, servants, and laundresses’ (Frank 11).

Additionally, many black women living in the South, free and enslaved, moved to safe places when the distance between their household and battlefield started to diminish, and destruction and violence cut across the southern states. In her memoir, Taylor marks the defining event of her life when she is taken to St. Catherine Island and, subsequently, transferred to St. Simon's Island under Union control in April, 1862. The invading Union army attacked Fort of

Pulaski⁸ to gain control of the fort in order to extend the Union blockade to Savannah. As Savannah was a major port of the Confederacy, the siege of Fort Pulaski marked a tremendous victory for the Union.

After the Siege of Fort Pulaski in 1862, Taylor is taken to St. Catherine Island by her uncle in order to ensure their safety under the aid of the Union fleet—‘about the time the Union soldiers were firing on Fort Pulaski. . . I remember what a roar and din the guns made. They jarred the earth for miles. . . .Two days after the taking of Fort Pulaski, my uncle took his family of seven and myself to St. Catherine Island. We landed under the protection of the Union fleet’ (Taylor 9). She is further transferred to St. Simon’s Island and on the way to the island, a Union commander, Captain Whitmore, asks if she could read, write, and sew. The Captain tests her abilities after receiving an affirmative answer from her and he is astonished to see her skills—‘he was surprised at my accomplishments (for they were such in those days), for he said he did not know there were any negroes in the South able to read or write’ (Taylor 9).

⁸ The Battle of Fort Pulaski was fought from April 10-11 in 1862. The battle concluded with the siege of the fort by the Union army. After the Union army took over the fort from Confederate control, the fort was used as a prison till the Civil War’s end.

Taylor is given the opportunity to open a school by Captain Goldsborough on St. Simon’s Island for the children of the freedmen—‘he was pleased to hear of my being so capable, etc., and wished me to take charge of a school for the children on the island, I told him I would gladly do so, if I could have some books’ (Taylor 11). Her accomplishments help her to get officially enrolled in the war regiment. Although she is enrolled as a laundress in the army, she majorly performed the duties of a teacher—‘I had about forty children to teach, beside a number of adults who came to me nights all of them eager to learn to read, to read above everything else’ (Taylor 11) and ‘I was enrolled as company laundress, but I did very little of it, because I was always busy doing other things through camp, and was employed all the time doing something for the officers and comrades’ (Taylor 35). Her enrolment provides her with a sense of freedom and responsibility, and she faces the challenges of the army life as she follows her regiment from one battlefield to another.

Furthermore, amidst the violence of the Civil War, many slave women who fled the plantations to seek help from the Union soldiers became the victim of sexual violence— ‘Union soldiers raped slave women more often than they sexually assaulted white

Confederates white Confederates. These actions, which were comparable to the treatment of slave women by Confederate deserters and returning

soldiers, often surprised slave women who had initially come to see Union soldiers as natural allies and emancipators' (Frank 15). Sexual violence by the Union and the Confederate soldiers against black women was rampant during the Civil War years. During the Civil War, black was the most vulnerable target for sexual violence in the southern states. The black women after fleeing the plantations were subjected to immeasurable mental and physical atrocities if caught by the Confederate soldiers. However, in many cases, when women fled the plantations to search for their loved ones, they were welcomed under the protection of the Union soldiers and were helped to seek their families. Taylor's memoir mentions the cordial treatment received by her from the Union soldiers and lacks any record of sexual violence perpetrated on her.⁹ She took care of the injured and dying soldiers of her black regiment, and in addition, looked after the white Union soldiers who appreciated her care and sympathy—'you were the first woman we saw when we came into camp, and you took an interest in us boys ever since we have been here, and we are very grateful for all you do for us' (Taylor 30).

Additionally, in her memoir, Taylor highlights the struggles of the

black soldiers of her regiment who were not provided with any pay for a long time and their families had to struggle to earn a living. —'a great many of these men had large families, and as they had no money to give them, their wives were obliged to support themselves and the children by washing for officers of the gunboats and the soldiers, and making cakes and pies which they sold to the boys in camp' (Taylor 16). The soldiers of the regiment expected to receive the reward for serving the Union like every other Union soldier and for serving their own cause of freedom from slavery. In 1863, the U.S. Congress decided to provide them with half-pay only to be refused by the black soldiers who addressed the issue with patience—'in my regiment the men never mutinied, nor even threatened mutiny; they seemed to make it a matter of honor to do their part, even if the government proved a defaulter; but one third of them, including the best men in the regiment refused to take a dollar's pay, at the reduced price' (Higginson 238).

Also, Taylor mentions in her memoir as to how she witnesses the horrors of war from the camp side and remains with her war regiment till the end of the Civil War. She exhibits incomparable courage in her journey with the soldiers as she serves the Union army amidst the most dangerous expeditions and remains unscathed even after being in close proximity of the battlefields. She reflects on her precarious situation of witnessing the destruction caused by war from a close distance—'they were a

⁹ Taylor does not mention that any kind of sexual assault was perpetrated on her. However, this could be a conscious omission on her part, given the history of sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers on the black women during the war.

gruesome sight, those fleshless heads and grinning jaws, but by this time I had become accustomed to worse things and did not feel as I might have earlier in my camp life' (Taylor 31). In addition, she spends most of her time to nurse the sick and dying soldiers—'I gave my assistance to try to alleviate their sufferings' (Taylor 34) and 'my services were given at all times for the comfort of these men' (Taylor 34). Additionally, in the way of performing her routine duties in the war camp, she learns to handle 'a musket very well while in the regiment, and could shoot straight and often hit the target...I was also able to take a gun all apart, and put it together again' (Taylor 26).

Therefore, Taylor's memoir underlines the struggles of her race in obtaining the civil rights denied to them for generations. It is the one and only published account by a black woman which describes the military moves vividly and provides a detailed description of the contribution of the 33rd United States Colored Troops in the Union army. She opens a freedmen school in Savannah after the end of the Civil War and later moves to Boston, and becomes the President of Corps 67, Women's Relief Corps.

After facing oppression at the hands of their white masters for generations, the black women strived to find a pathway to freedom. The Civil War gave impetus to their cause of freedom and emancipation, and the subsequent victory of the Union uprooted the legality

of the inhuman institution of bondage. The black women equally contributed to the efforts of the Union to win the war. A number of black women like Susie King Taylor contributed to the Union cause leaving their families behind, and assumed the role of relief workers, nurses, cooks and seamstresses. In addition to the desire to follow husbands in the Union army, economic necessity motivated women to embark on the dangerous journey with the military. With the end of the Civil War, family reunions took place in the black community—the soldiers returned to their families and women ventured to seek their lost children and relatives.

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