

Amy Murrell Taylor. *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. pages cm \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-4362-5.

Reviewed by David Hopkins

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Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

Civil War scholars are familiar with the stories of Union general Benjamin Butler's May 1861 designation of runaway slaves as "contraband of war" and, later that summer, Congress's passage of the First Confiscation Act. From there, the federal government, with the help of its generals in the field, began a process that culminated in President Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. What we did not have, until now, was an in-depth study of how this process unfolded on the ground in so-called contraband camps. Amy Murrell Taylor's most recent work, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps*, details this very process, noting that "freedom had to be searched for and found" (p. 2). This book explores life inside the many camps across the South where black refugees fled with the outbreak of the Civil War, and how these refugees ultimately forced the hand of the Union army. As a result, Murrell argues, they pushed the federal government toward an emancipationist war policy.

Each chapter of *Embattled Freedom* details a particular aspect of the experiences of the numerous black refugees who marched their own path to freedom during the war. These chapters deal with hunger, faith, finding shelter, work, and fears about what would come next—either from

the Union army or those at the top of the federal government. Through these themes, Taylor details the daily, weekly, and monthly experiences of the black refugees to show that their journey into the bloodiest conflict in US history was also a journey in search of work, food, care, and justice within the military sphere. In other words, black refugees' claims for freedom were continuously contested. In a detailed chapter about refugees' clothing, for example, Taylor shows that nineteenth-century views of clothing and charity posed a problem for those refugees who tried to distance themselves from slavery, as the Union army, missionary societies, and other benevolent associations often sought to impose their particular set of values or lectured refugees about their clothing.

Utilizing a wide range of archival sources, Taylor illuminates the lives of the many refugees inside these camps. Black refugees and Union soldiers interacted daily, and Taylor does a superb job of not only telling individual stories but also performing the Herculean task of disaggregating the refugees from the masses to individualize their experiences. A good example of this is the people whom she follows through the war: Edward and Emma Whitehurst, Eliza Bogan, and Gabriel Burdett. Taylor's weaving of these four individuals' wartime stories adds a personal ele-

ment, giving a human face to the different policies and statistics of the refugee camps. Detailing how people lived and survived in these camps during the war, as Taylor notes, is an important part of the story of slavery's destruction in the United States.

Reminding the reader that slaves had always run away in the years leading up to the war, Taylor details how the Civil War initiated a gradual emancipation process that ebbed and flowed with the war. This began with the classification of "military necessity" for the Union army and, as each year of the war unfolded, this could change and greatly affect one's path to freedom. As a result, the relationship between the army and refugees could be complicated, as the army could both provide opportunity and take that opportunity away. For example, Taylor describes refugees who found work and were paid a wage within Union lines. While wages were not always fair, they gave refugees a chance to participate in the economy as well as bear the fruits of their own labor, which was an important step to freedom. However, as Taylor reminds readers, this could very quickly change with a new commander who might view refugees as vagrants—a label that was applied by both the army and aid groups who tried to help later in the war.

One of the more interesting aspects of Taylor's work is her telling of how refugees found—or made—shelter, and when it came to shelter, location mattered. For example, the exemptions found in the Emancipation Proclamation made finding shelter much more difficult. According to Taylor, about one-third of wartime camps fell under areas exempted by the proclamation (p. 57). "We revere the Emancipation Proclamation without knowing how tenuous the emancipation process really was," Taylor writes. "We admire battlefield triumphs without seeing the many thousands of men, women, and children who were there and who risked everything to ensure that the war ended with the 'new birth of free-

dom' that President Lincoln envisioned" (p. 248). This, in effect, created a constant push and pull on refugees' freedom—a push and pull, Taylor argues, that never went away as a result of this spatial nature of freedom.

Embattled Freedom is a welcome addition to the recent Civil War scholarship that highlights the experiences of people who lived on the fringes of the war. Recent works by Thavolia Glymph, David Silkenat, Yael Sternhell, and Chandra Manning have ventured down similar paths in telling stories of how ordinary people, including refugees, experienced the war.[1] While Silkenat's work focuses on black and white refugees in North Carolina and Manning focuses more broadly on black refugees and citizenship, Taylor looks at the camps as physical spaces and reconstructs daily life inside those camps. *Embattled Freedom* brings to life an aspect of the Civil War that many scholars have glossed over in telling the stories of armies and their movements, as even works about Civil War refugees say little about life in the slave refugee camps. Taylor's well-researched and well-written account of these camps will allow scholars to paint more detail into not only the larger story of the pursuit of freedom and equal citizenship that would continue into Reconstruction, but also the everyday experiences of Civil War-era Americans. While the camps did not survive the war, many institutions connected to them did. Institutions like orphan asylums, schools, colleges, and churches all outlived the wartime camps and played important roles in the continued pursuit of black freedom in the United States.

Note

[1]. Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); David Silkenat, *Driven from Home: North Carolina's Civil War Refugee Crisis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016); Yael Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Uni-

versity Press, 2012); and Chandra Manning, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2016).

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