Resource #5. Enslaved People Working for the Confederacy

A. Drawing of Enslaved Workers

This drawing, titled “Rebel soldiers impressing slaves into work on Confederate fortifications,” shows enslaved people being forced to build fortifications by the Confederate army, and by their enslavers.

B. Request to an Officer

A civilian who was supervising a group of enslaved people (including one of his own) who had been furnished to the Confederate army by their owners for the defense of Charleston asked an officer that the men be relieved so that they could "recruit" (that is, physically recover) from the strenuous labor.

Resource #5. Enslaved People Working for the Confederacy (cont'd)

Charleston 20th Aug. 1863

> *I would respectfully suggest to you, that the negros over whom I have the supervision, a list of whom, I send you in another communication of this date, be relieved from the work on Fort Sumter, to recruit, as the work is very straining, which I have learned from those who I have seen in the Hospital one having been ruptured, and others with swollen legs & feet, from carrying sandbags, Hoping that the matter will have your earliest attention, I am, Sir, Respectfully Your obedt. Servt.*

C. A. Grasser

C. Jacob Stroyer

One of the enslaved men forced to work on the Confederate fortifications around Charleston was Jacob Stroyer. Years after the end of the war, Stroyer recalled how Singleton's financial reversals and death around the time the war broke out brought changes to his own life. Difficult and dangerous as labor on the fortifications was, he viewed it as a welcome change from plantation work.

> *Master went away that spring for the last time, he never returned alive…The creditors came in for settlement so all of the fine horses, some others such as carriage horses and a few of the mules, had to be sold; the slaves could not be sold, because they were given to him by his father, until the grandchildren (that is master's children) were of age. What master bought himself could be sold after his death, and it was. …*
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> *This was in the time of the war, in the year 1863, when a man was going around to the different plantations, gathering slaves from their masters to carry off to work on fortifications and to wait on officers; there were ten slaves sent from Mrs. Singleton's plantation and I was among them. They carried us to Sullivan's Island at Charleston, S. C., and I was there all of that year; I thanked God that it afforded me a better chance for an education that I had at home and so was glad to be on the Island.*

Resource #5. Enslaved People Working for the Confederacy (cont'd)

The next year after I went home I was sent back to Fort Sumter (in the year 1864); I carried my spelling book with me, and although the Northerners were firing upon us I tried to keep up my study. In July of the same year I was wounded by the Union soldiers, on a Wednesday evening; I was taken to the city of Charleston, to Dr. Ragg's hospital, and there I stayed until I got well and was sent to Columbia where I was, when the horn of liberty was proclaimed to me in 1865; this was the year of jubilee, the year which my father spoke of in the dark days of slavery when he and mother sat up late talking of it. He said to mother, "the time will come when this boy and the rest of the children will be their own masters and mistresses." He did not live to see it, but mother enjoyed a portion of it with her children.

I have said that I fell from a horse and he stepped on my face cutting it and breaking a tooth, the scar of which is still visible. And no doubt my readers would like to know how I was wounded in the war. We were obliged to do our work in the night as they were firing on us in the day, and on this Wednesday night just as we went out we heard the cry of the watchman "look out," there was a little lime house near the southwest corner of the fort, and some twelve or thirteen of us ran into that and all were killed but two, a shell came down on the lime house and burst and a piece cut my face open. But as it was not my time to die I lived to enjoy freedom.

Jacob Stroyer, Sketches of My Life in the South, Part 1 (Salem, Mass., 1879), pp. 21-27. Digitized by Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina. Full electronic text at http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/stroyer/stroyer.html

Questions for Students:

- How do you think enslaved people felt about working for the Confederate army in this way?
- What can you tell about what it was like to do this work?