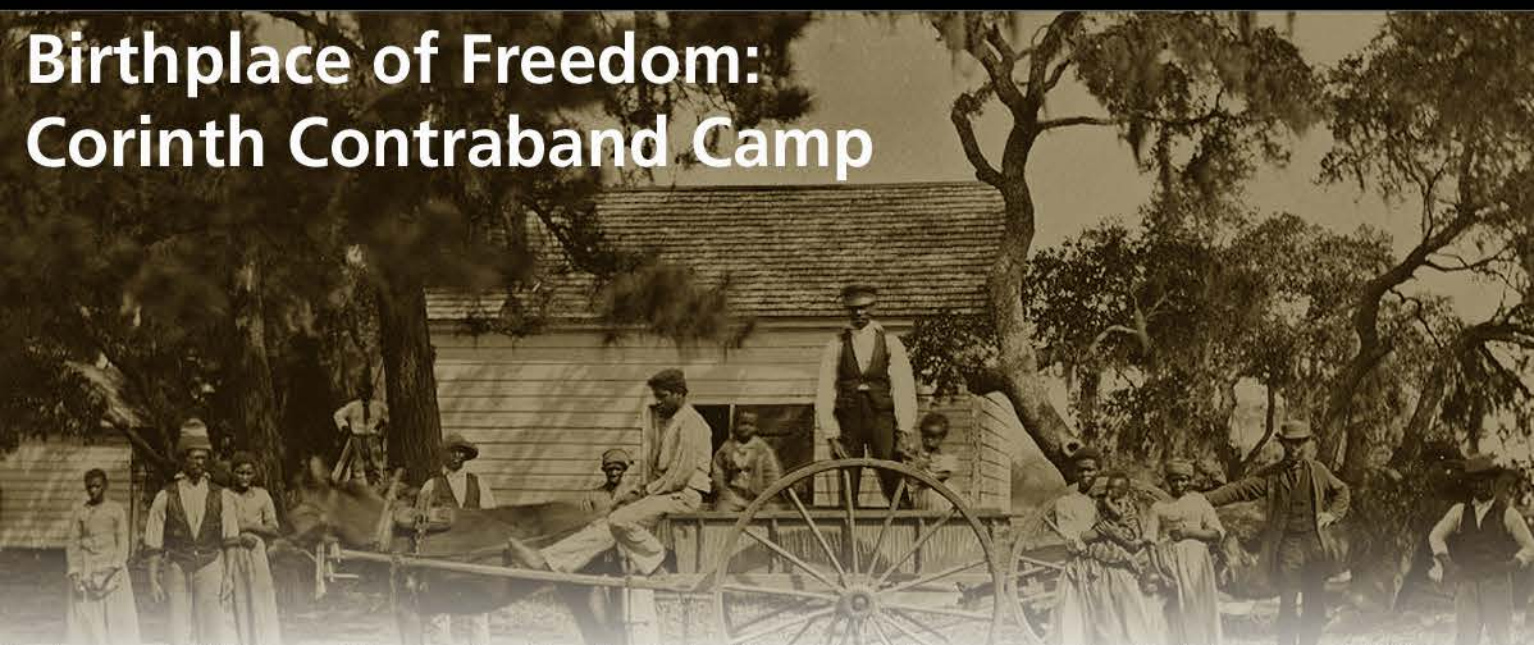




Birthplace of Freedom: Corinth Contraband Camp



Contraband of War

A group of African American slaves preparing to go to work in the fields.

Library of Congress

The security offered by United States Army forces occupying Corinth attracted African Americans who fled Southern plantations and farms seeking freedom. The migration of African American refugees into occupied Corinth increased dramatically following issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln, on September 22, 1862 (11 days before the Battle of Corinth). The proclamation authorized, as of January 1, 1863, freedom for all slaves in states still in rebellion against the United States. By December 1862, Grant reported a sizeable population of 20,000 refugee African Americans being housed, fed, and protected within his department.

Effects of the Flood

The African Americans who fled into Union lines at Corinth, and elsewhere in the Mississippi Valley, precipitated a change in Union military policy that would profoundly change their lives and, in the end, help turn the tide of the war in favor of the North.

Union General Grenville Dodge understood what effect the defection of thousands of African Americans would have on the Confederate war effort. He began to enlist the escaped slaves who came into his lines as teamsters, cooks, and laborers. Dodge also anticipated the change of mood in Washington concerning the potential use of African American men in the army. He actively recruited adult male refugees, armed

them, and placed them in charge of security at the newly organized contraband camp for the refugees on the northeast side of Corinth.



Contraband slaves fleeing Confederate forces in Virginia.
Library of Congress.

Black Troops in Blue



Nearly 200,000 African American soldiers and sailors served in the U.S. military during the Civil War.

Library of Congress.

Dodge's refugee administrative efforts led to the formation of the 1st Alabama Infantry Regiment of African Descent, consisting of approximately 1,000 men, organized at Corinth on May 21, 1863. The regiment provided a ready reserve of manpower for the garrison, participating in the daily work assignments on railroads and fortifications, foraging patrols, and raids conducted by the Union occupation forces in northern Mississippi and western Tennessee. Eventually, Dodge instructed his raiding parties to liberate more slaves and bring them back to Corinth. These tactics added much needed manpower to the Federal forces and consequently removed their labor services from the Confederacy.

After Corinth was abandoned in January 1864, the regiment moved to Memphis where it formed part of the 1st Colored

Brigade of the federal Army of the Tennessee. The unit was redesignated the 55th U.S. Colored Troops on March 11, 1864. The men eventually experienced combat in northern Mississippi at Brices Crossroads on June 10, 1864, and Waterford on August 16-17, 1864.

The companies of another regiment (perhaps as many as 319 men), the 2nd Alabama Infantry of African Descent, were also recruited at Corinth during April and May 1863. This regiment was officially organized at Pulaski, Tennessee, between November 20, 1863, and January 14, 1864, and redesignated the 110th United States Colored Troops. These soldiers fought at Athens, Alabama, on September 23-24, 1864. By the end of the war, at least 1,800 African American men were recruited for the Union army at Corinth.



A Model Camp



George North Carruthers of Ohio came to Corinth as a school superintendent with the American Missionary Association in 1863. He became President Pro-Tem of the Corinth Contraband Camp School in May 1863 and served as a missionary teacher and a Chaplain in the Colored Corps of Mississippi. George North Carruthers Papers.

The contraband camp (also referred to as the "contraband retreat" and "contraband corral" in contemporary accounts) was home of the families of the African American men who marched off to war. It began as a tent city in the fall of 1862 on the Philips farm owned from 1842 to 1867 by Mary Phillips, the widow of Joseph Phillips. Under the supervision of Chaplain James M. Alexander of the 66th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, the Corinth camp blossomed, and by mid-1863, resembled a small town, complete with a church, commissary, hospital, both frame and log houses, and a street grid with named streets and numbered houses. An American Missionary Association school operated nearby where eager students of all ages sought knowledge day and night. The freedmen were treated well in Corinth, which was considered to be a model camp. Northern white men and women from abolitionist and benevolent organizations came to Corinth to spread the word of God, teach, and care for the freedmen. Several makeshift satellite contraband camps were also scattered throughout the Corinth area.

With the service-aged male freedmen enlisted for military service, the remaining contraband camp residents, soldiers' families, and the elderly, cooperatively farmed 400 acres of land, 300 in cotton and 100 in vegetables. They sold their cotton to purchasing agents and produce on the open market to area citizens and other soldiers stationed in and around Corinth. Unlike residents of other contraband camps, the freedmen who worked directly for the government at Corinth were paid for their efforts. In the summer of 1863, Colonel John Eaton, Grant's superintendent of freedmen, estimated the Corinth camp was making a monthly profit of \$4,000 to \$5000.

As the war progressed, the strategic value of Corinth lessened for the Union Army. The federals pulled out of the war torn town in January 1864. Most of the freedmen abandoned Corinth and followed the U.S. troops to Memphis. At the time of its demise, the camp at Corinth, was home to some 2,500 people, although as many as 6,000 people were reported to have resided in the camp at its peak.

Getting There

From the Civil War Interpretive Center:

Exit the Interpretive Center parking lot by turning right onto Linden Street. Follow Linden Street to Fillmore Street. Turn right on Fillmore, following it two blocks to Bunch Street. Turn left on Bunch and follow it ten blocks to the intersection with North Parkway. The Contraband Camp will be opposite the intersection of Bunch and North Parkway.

From the Corinth Area Convention and Visitors Bureau Office:

From the office on Waldron Street, turn left onto Taylor Street. Follow Taylor three blocks to Bunch Street. Turn right onto Bunch and follow it nine blocks to the intersection with North Parkway. The Contraband Camp will be opposite the intersection of Bunch and North Parkway.

To reach the Civil War Interpretive Center or Corinth Area Convention and Visitors Bureau Office from the site, simply reverse the above directions.