

Interrupted Sentiments: The Lost Letters of Civil War Soldiers



Melissa A. Winn, HISTORYNET
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The incredible story of thousands of soldier photographs and letters that never made it home

A young Civil War soldier gazes back at me from a carte-de-visite, a playing card-sized photograph I recently purchased. He has a steely look, and his right hand grasps the lapel of his military dress coat. His left hand, in his lap, wears a ring. A small fur cap, a winter luxury, sits atop his head. I don't know who he is. He's unidentified. And when I look at him, I wonder if he posed for the photograph to let someone special back home know the fur cap had arrived in camp. If so, they never got the message. Because this photograph, like thousands of others, bears the characteristic marks—an identifying number written in red ink and the traces of brass mounting clips—of having ended up in the Dead Letter Office.



This carte-de-visite has a mark on the back indicating it was taken in Davenport, Iowa. A possible clue to the soldier's identity? (Melissa A. Winn Collection)

During the Civil War years, hundreds of thousands of young men left home for the front lines, traveling out of their state or hometown for the first time in their lives. Unaccustomed to the separation and the sometimes-stifling loneliness of war, they wrote home. But many were poorly educated or had never even addressed a letter, and the recipient's name and address on the envelopes were undecipherable. Sweeping changes to recent postage requirements and the interruption of mail in the seceded states also heavily impacted the delivery of letters. Those letters that could not be delivered, for whatever reason, were processed by the Dead Letter Office.

Established in 1825, the Dead Letter Office, located in Washington, D.C., was designated to investigate undeliverable mail, with the intent of getting it to its intended recipient. DLO clerks were exclusively granted by Congress the ability to open mail to examine its contents for further clues as to the proposed destination. Still, regulations

allowed clerks to read only the bare minimum to try to parse out names, locations, or other identifying information. These clerks needed a keen knowledge of geography and colloquial use of language to aid them in their pursuit.

During the mid-19th century, most of the dozen or so DLO clerks were women and retired clergymen. They were believed to possess a superior moral character and could therefore be trusted with the cherished and sometimes priceless contents of these dead letters.

Great care was taken to protect and return as many letters as possible, especially those with any monetary value.

“A ‘money letter’ has five different records before it leaves the Dead Letter Office and is so checked and counter-checked as to make collusion or abstraction almost impossible, in case any soul who surveyed it were fatally tempted,” according to Mary Clemmer Ames in her 1874 book *Ten Years in Washington: Life and Scenes in the National Capital, As a Woman Sees Them*, which documented the inner workings of the Dead Letter Office.



Dead letters were counted, numbered, and tied up into packages of 100, then sifted

through on the “opening table,” depicted here, by the date of reception. (Corbis/Getty Images)

For items such as advertisements or circulars, or those that were never claimed or could not be delivered, the clerks oversaw their disposal—except Civil War soldiers’ photographs. Although these items technically should have been disposed of, according to Lynn Heidelbaugh, a curator at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, they never were. And, driven by a sense of patriotism or devotion, one supposes, to the men who served the Union cause, the DLO continued to try to reunite them with their intended recipients, long after the war ended.

Enclosed with letters home, the photographs came in the form of cartes-de-visite or tintypes. Most were of a single soldier, maybe posed in front of a military-themed painted backdrop and decked out in full kit, ceremoniously documenting his participation in the monumental war raging on the nation’s own soil. Some photographs included more than one soldier. Brothers, maybe? Friends from back home? Did they all know the recipient, or was the photograph meant as an introduction to a new comrade who kept the soldier company during the homesick days of war?



(Courtesy of the George Eastman Museum)

By the end of the conflict, thousands of these photos remained undelivered, with most estimates around 5,000. They lingered in a portfolio of sorts in a Post Office storeroom, with little hope of finding their destination, until Third Postmaster General Alexander Zevely, who served from 1859-1869, conjured up an innovative idea—he ordered them to be displayed in the Dead Letter Office Museum.

The Dead Letter Office Museum housed an eclectic combination of items that represented both the Post Office Department's history and showcased some of the more curious objects that passed through the DLO each year, including unusual trinkets, loaded pistols, various bottles and boxes, and even a skull.



The photos were identified with red-ink numerals, which family and friends used to claim a familiar face off the board; Each photograph was posted to a board with a brass clip on top and one on bottom, the traces of which are still visible on the images today. (Kurt Luther Collection (2))

The museum was an oddity and a popular tourist attraction, which Zevely hoped would help put more eyes on the soldier images. At his request, the portraits were attached to panels with brass clips in groups of 36 images, or four rows of nine images each, and numbered with those telltale red-ink numerals.

Museum visitors would scan the image panels and the thousands of stranded faces they displayed, seeking a brother, a husband, a father, a neighbor, a sweetheart, often one lost to the war. The display itself was a moving tribute to the military men who had sacrificed years and sometimes their last full measure of devotion to the Union. They included soldiers, sailors, officers, young and sometimes old. They posed with rifles and sabers, pistols crammed into their

standard issue leather belts, cartridge boxes strung across their chest. They donned kepis and Hardee hats and represented states East to West. Some men looked fresh and keen. Others appeared war-weary, with worn brogans and tattered sack coats. It was a stunning display of the Union front line.



While most DLO images are of soldiers who served on land, there are some, like this one, of Navy men. This officer's family never got to see his well-posed portrait, complete with binoculars. (Melissa A. Winn Collection)

When a familiar face presented itself, a loved one would claim it by number. A clerk would remove the image and write in its place on the board the date of its removal and the name and location of the person receiving the image—at long last going home. On June 17, 1874, Mr. F. Poplain claimed the photo of Lieutenant S. Roderick of the 19th Iowa Infantry, according to an extant panel. On October 16, 1902, Edward Marsh of the 10th New York Battery claimed a photo of himself, some 40 years after he had placed it in

the mail. It is impossible now to say how many of these often-emotional reunions occurred, but some estimates put the number as high as 2,000.

The Dead Letter Office also advertised descriptive lists of the photographs in newspapers and journals of the Grand Army of the Republic. In the early 1890s, the photographs and panels were cleaned and bound into an album, one panel per page. At this time, the DLO also began working with veterans' groups to track down the descendants of any of the photographs that might have identifying information on it. The G.A.R.'s Meade Post in Philadelphia, for example, inspected the photographs and removed all those with inscriptions, then turned them over to G.A.R. headquarters in Washington, D.C., for further help identifying them and delivering them to their rightful owners.

These extraordinary efforts to reunite the soldier photographs with their recipients, went “above and beyond the standard operating procedure” of the DLO, says Heidelbaugh. “I think it shows how deep the scars of the war were for the United States and that people were dealing with the aftermath very personally and in a very tangible way.”



Soldiers posed for portraits in camp studios

set up by photographers following the armies, top. Some painted backdrops have been linked to specific army sites, like the one (left) from Benton Barracks. (Melissa A. Winn Collection)

Bound in an album, these photographs could also now travel, and the Dead Letter Office took the opportunity to exhibit the album at world's fairs across the country, where new sets of eyes could peruse the thousands of soldier photographs that remained unclaimed. At the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, Neb., the daughter of Civil War veteran J.J. Gorman claimed her father's photograph, which had been sent during the war, from Indianapolis to South Bend, while he was serving with the 86th Indiana Infantry. It had been in the DLO exhibit for 35 years, according to a report about the fair.

Held for Postage



In the summer of 1861, two consequences of the war significantly increased the volume of mail ending up at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C.: Soldiers sending letters without proper postage and the shuttering of federal post offices in the seceded states. Before 1856,

letters could be sent “postage due” and the cost of mail delivery would be collected from the recipient. In 1856, however, a law was passed that required prepayment of all mail with postage stamps. Those letters without proper postage would be “held for postage.” The sender, if identifiable, would be notified of the postage due. If left unpaid after a brief period of time, however, the letter would now be sent to the Dead Letter Office. On May 1, 1861, a new post office regulation further eliminated the notification to addressees to prepay the postage and the letters were immediately delivered to the Dead Letter Office. With so many soldiers in camp lacking the money to buy postage stamps or any place to buy them, the influx of these unpaid letters to the Dead Letter Office was stifling. In his annual report of 1861, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair wrote, “By immediately sending this class of letters to the dead letter office, it was expected that a proper compliance with the law would be enforced, but so far from this being the case, the number after one year’s trial exceeds ten thousand each month, and the attention they require imposes considerable additional labor and expense on this department.” In 1862, Third Assistant Postmaster General Alexander N. Zevely sought to curtail the situation by creating a “Soldier’s Letter” stamp which would move dead letters identified as originating from a soldier through the delivery process despite a lack of proper postage. Second, at the behest of Blair, mail service in the seceded states was suspended May 31, 1861, just before the Confederate Post Office Department assumed control of its own postal system on June 1. Much of the mail intended to move between the North and the South ended up in the Dead Letter Office as

undeliverable or unpaid mail. In his 1861 report, Blair said, "From the 1st of June to the 1st of November there were received at the dead letter office, in consequence of the suspension of postal communication, 76,769 letters, originating in loyal States, and addressed to residents in disloyal States. Of this number, there were returned to the writers, 26,711. During the same period 34,792 foreign letters, destined for that section, were returned as 'dead,' and 2,246 of them were delivered in the loyal States to authorized agents of the parties addressed, making the whole number sent out 103,886, which is considerably more than three times the quantity sent out during the previous year, when the number was unusually large. In addition to the above, about 40,000 letters from disloyal States, addressed to parties in the loyal States, were sent to the dead letter office after the suspension of the postal service, a large proportion of which were forwarded to their destination." The Confederate Post Office also designated a Dead Letter Office, which was located in Richmond, Va., although records indicate most of the mail that ended up there was destroyed. -M.A.W.

"There is a melancholy collection from the dead letter office, including two cases of photographs of soldiers which were sent and miscarried during the Civil War," noted a reporter for the local Omaha newspaper. "Looking at them, I thought how young were most of the faces...."

The fairs offered some new success stories, but with several decades now since the war had passed, they were few and far between.

In 1911, the Dead Letter Office Museum closed. The album of soldier photographs lingered in the Dead Letter Office for a time, still available for the now infrequent observer, but by the 1930s it was placed in storage. In the 1940s, embroiled in World War II, the government decided to free up storage space at the Post Office building and the album was divided and sold. In 1948, collector Philip Medicus sold 10 panels, with about 360 photos, to the George Eastman Museum, in Rochester, N.Y., where they remain today.

Photography Becomes Affordable



Two mid-19th century inventions, the tintype and the carte-de-visite, made photographs affordable and accessible to a general population. Invented in 1856, the tintype is not actually tin at all, but iron. The term was a nickname for the more technical- sounding ferrotype and the hard-to-pronounce melainotype. An improvement upon the earlier ambrotype technology, in which a negative image was exposed on a glass plate and the back painted black for the picture to be

viewable, tintypes used the same process but substituted a less expensive iron plate blackened by Japan varnish. The medium reached its peak use from 1860 to 1865. The carte-de-visite, named for its resemblance in size to the popular visiting card of the era, is a photograph printed on paper, then mounted on cardstock. Unlike earlier photos which were one of a kind, these images were made using a negative and thus could be produced in quantity. The technique was known as an albumen print since the picture was created using a glass negative on paper that was coated with egg white. Invented in 1854, cartes-de-visite were sold by the dozen. By the early 1860s, the U.S. had experienced a craze in collecting and exchanging these “card portraits.” Easy to tuck into an envelope with a letter home, they were particularly popular with Civil War soldiers. The height of their use was between 1859-1870. —Heidi Campbell-Shoaf

Argus Ogborn, an Indiana collector, sold off his collection of about 1,400 DLO photographs in 1982. He recorded his name and a catalog number on everything he collected, including his hundreds of DLO cartes-de-visite. His name and “No. 409” can be found on the back of almost every DLO image that passed through his hands. They still turn up on the collector’s market today, where undelivered DLO photographs continue to circulate, still traveling far from their intended destination.

“They were lost in the mails of the 1860s and never found their rightful owners,” says Dave Taylor, who purchased most of Ogborn’s collection from him. “With any luck, today’s owners will appreciate them as individual pieces of Civil War history

that have finally come to rest in their proper place.”



During the Civil War, the Dead Letter Office was located in the General Post Office building in Washington, D.C. Designed by architect Robert Mills, it was opened in 1842, and was the first all-marble clad exterior in the capital. In 1855, Thomas Ustick Walter, the architect who designed the Capitol dome, began to oversee the General Post Office’s expansion, which was halted during the Civil War, while the Union used the building’s basement as munitions storage. Walter’s addition was completed in 1866 and Union Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs engineered the addition’s inbuilt mechanical heating and cooling system. In 1917, during World War I, the accumulation of mail ending up in the Dead Letter Office again became suffocating, and the now more complicated delivery of it throughout the expanded United States prompted the Dead Letter Office to set up satellite offices across the country. It was the first time all dead letters were not directed

just to Washington, D.C. Eventually, most of the satellite offices became obsolete and were shuttered, including the Washington, D.C. office. Today, the Dead Letter Office exists as the USPS Mail Recovery Center in Atlanta, Ga.

“They are very touching,” says Ronn Palm, who owns and displays one of the panels with many of the DLO images still attached to it at his Museum of Civil War Images in Gettysburg. “The letter that never made it. The story that never got told.”

In my own personal collection, in

addition to the soldier with the fur cap, I have a dozen or more of these poignant images. They seem to hold on to a peculiar sense of loneliness—a sentiment, interrupted. Their faces proud, or stoic, jovial, or determined. Some of them reveal the lost eagerness of a youthful boy who has “seen the elephant.” They were fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, lovers. I wonder what parting words of affection they meant to deliver that never were said. I wonder if the soldiers ever made it home, even though, despite the valiant efforts of a healing nation to deliver them, their photographs never did.

Melissa A. Winn is the Director of Photography for Civil War Times magazine, a writer, and a collector of Civil War photographs. She thanks Kurt Luther, Ph.D., Virginia Tech, for introducing her to Dead Letter Office images and informing some of the research used here on the topic.

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How Black Women Brought Liberty to Washington in the 1800s

A new book shows us the capital region’s earliest years through the eyes and the experiences of leaders like Harriet Tubman and Elizabeth Keckley



Harriet Tubman (left) and Elizabeth Keckley (right) are two of the many inspiring figures featured in historian Tamika Nunley's new book. (Illustration by Meilan Solly / Photos via Wikimedia Commons under public domain)

By Karin Wulf
SMITHSONIANMAG.COM
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Acuity of monuments and iconic government buildings and the capital of a global superpower, Washington, D.C. is also a city of people. Originally a 100-square-mile diamond carved out of the southern states of Maryland and Virginia, Washington has been inseparably tied to the African-American experience from its inception, starting with enslavement, in part because of commercial slave-trading in Georgetown and Alexandria. In 1800, the nascent city’s population topped 14,000, including more than 4,000 enslaved and almost 500 free African Americans.

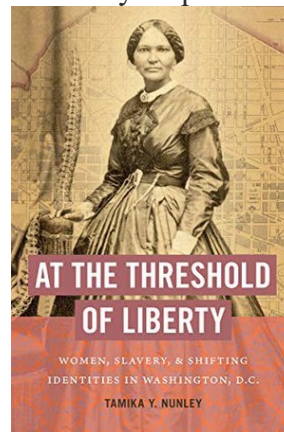
Before the Civil War, Virginia reclaimed its territory south of the Potomac River, leaving Washington with its current configuration

and still a comparatively small city of only about 75,000 residents. After the war the population doubled—and the black population had tripled. By the mid-20th century Washington DC had become the first majority-black city in the United States, called “Chocolate City” for its population but also its vibrant black arts, culture and politics.

In a new book, *At the Threshold of Liberty: Women, Slavery, & Shifting Identities in Washington, DC*, historian Tamika Nunley transports readers to 19th-century Washington and uncovers the rich history of black women’s experiences at the time, and how they helped to build some of the institutional legacies for “chocolate city.” From Ann Williams, who leapt out of a second story window on F Street to try and evade a slave trader, to Elizabeth Keckley, the elegant activist, entrepreneur, and seamstress who dressed Mary Todd Lincoln and other elite Washingtonians, Nunley highlights the challenges enslaved and free black women faced, and the opportunities some were able to create. She reveals the actions they women took to advance liberty, and their ideas about what liberty would mean for themselves, their families, and their community.

“I was interested in how black women in particular were really testing the boundaries, the scope of liberty” in the nation’s capital, Nunley says. Putting Washington into the wider context of the mid-Atlantic region, Nunley shows how these women created a range of networks of mutual support that included establishing churches and schools and supporting the Underground Railroad, a system that helped enslaved people escape to freedom. To do that, they navigated incredibly—sometimes impossibly—challenging situations in which as black people and as women they faced doubly

harsh discrimination. They also improvised as they encountered these challenges, and imagined new lives for themselves. Her research took her from the diaries of well-known Washingtonians such as First Lady Dolley Madison to the records of storied black churches to the docket of criminal arrests and slave bills of sale. Finding black women in historical records is notoriously difficult, but by casting a wide net, Nunley succeeds in portraying individual women and the early Washington, D.C. they helped to build.



At the Threshold of Liberty: Women, Slavery, and Shifting Identities in Washington, D.C. (The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture)

Historian Tamika Nunley places black women at the vanguard of the history of Washington, D.C., and the momentous transformations of 19th-century America. A beautiful photograph of Elizabeth Keckley adorns the cover of your book. She published her memoirs called *Behind the Scenes* about her life in slavery and then as a famous dressmaker. What does her life tell us about black women in 19th-century D.C.? Early in the Civil War, as a result of emancipation, many refugees were flocking to the nation's capital and Keckley rose to the occasion, along with other black women, to found the Contraband Relief Society. She's collecting donations, having fundraisers, working her connections with

the wives of the political elite, leveraging the Lincoln household, and the Lincoln presidency and her proximity to it in order to raise her profile as an activist in this moment and do this important political work of addressing the needs of refugees. We often assume a monolith of black women. But Keckley was seeing this moment not only as a way to realize her own activism in helping refugees, but she's also realizing her own public persona as someone who is a leader—a leading voice in this particular moment.

Before Keckley and the Lincoln White House, you had Thomas Jefferson, the first President to live his full term in the White House. What role did enslaved women play at the White House where he famously served French food and wine and entertained politicians at a round dinner table?

Even as political leaders were engaged in creating this nation, enslaved laborers were integral. I think about the cook Ursula Granger, who came with him from Monticello at 14 years old, and was pregnant. Despite not knowing a full picture of her story, we know that she was important. The kinds of French cooking she was doing, the kinds of cooking and entertaining that two other women who were there, Edith or Frances, might have been helping with, are some of the same things that we look for today when we are looking at the social world of a particular presidency. There was value that they added to his presidency, the White House, and to life and culture in those spaces.

How did slavery become so important to the early history of Washington, D.C.?

The federal city is carved out of Virginia and Maryland. To cobble together what's going to be the nation's capital, Congress

relied on legal precedent from those slaveholding states in order to begin to imagine what this capital is going to be. Politicians who come from the South want to be able to conduct the business of Congress and Senate while also being able to bring their slaves and their entourage and the comforts of home with them. [The creation of Washington] becomes this national symbol of compromise, but also a place of contestation, not only between abolitionists and pro-slavery political thinkers, but also the black inhabitants themselves who were opposed to slavery.



This detail from an abolitionist poster showed how the nearby port city of Alexandria, Virginia trafficked in enslaved individuals. (Library of Congress)

In 1808, the transatlantic importation of African captives was outlawed. At the same time, in Virginia and Maryland there was no longer a huge need for gang labor slavery on large plantations that had been producing tobacco. Instead, deep south states were starting to produce sugar and cotton and many of the "surplus" slaves from the Chesapeake region end up being sold into the deep south. Washington and also Richmond become important hubs for slave traders to organize and take those enslaved people further south.

Another phenomenon is the hiring out system in which people might rent out a slave for a period of time. This became a

very prominent practice not only in Washington, but also in rural areas with smaller households. This impacts women in particular ways. Many of these hired out slaves are women who were coming to work for households in the capital. When you look at bill of sale records, you see lots of women and their children being exchanged intra-regionally around the Chesapeake and D.C. in order to meet this demand.

Ann Williams leapt out a window from a tavern right in an act of refusal from being sold into slavery, into the deep South. Resistance was happening even in the city where it seems unlikely because of the degree of surveillance. These acts of desperation are really tough to grapple with. I can never give you an accurate picture of what Ann or others were thinking, but I can tell you what she did, even at the risk of her life. A lot of these stories are unfinished. There are fits and starts throughout the book, some fuller pictures and some where there is no concluding way to think about their experience other than the fact that it's devastating.

Within this context, Washington's black community is developing—and black women are very important to that community.

One of my favorite stories is about Alethia Browning Tanner, an enslaved woman who worked her garden plot and goes to the market to sell her goods, and eventually in the early 19th century made enough money that she was able to purchase her freedom and then the freedom of quite a few of her family members. After she became free, she became quite the entrepreneur and also begins to appear in the historical records as having helped founded a school, one of the first schools to admit African Americans. [She also shows up] in church records as a

founding member of a couple of black churches in D.C.

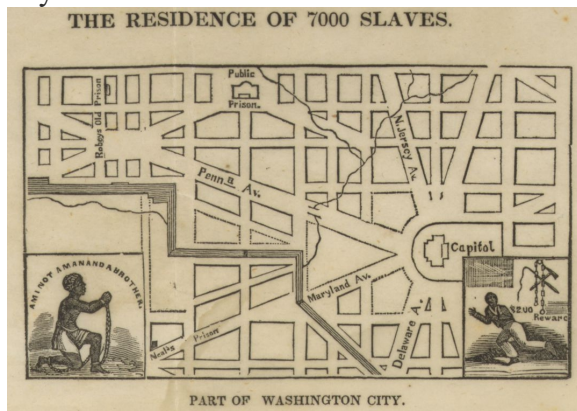
Her story is, to me, more typical of what was happening in D.C. than maybe some of the more prominent women that are associated with D.C. history. Just imagine the logistical feat of going from having been an enslaved woman to having a small garden plot to now being a philanthropist that is one of the major sources of financial support in order to build these autonomous black institutions.

This mutual support and kinship that manifests in these early decades of the 19th century is really how these black institutions are possible. Even if black men and women are free, they're at the bottom of the economic rung. And so for them to be able to even have these institutions is quite exceptional. But what really makes it happen is this mutual support, this sense of kinship, and this willingness to work together and collaboratively to build something autonomous. And that's how these institutions come about.

So, by the time we get to Elizabeth Keckley, creating the Contraband Relief Society at the 15th Street Presbyterian Church, that church was made possible because of Alethia Tanner! I find a lot of inspiration, just even imagining the leap that you have to make to say, not only am I going to earn this enormous amount of money to purchase a whole lot of family members, but now I'm thinking bigger. I'm thinking about institutions and things that can just be for us. Networks in and around Washington, led in part by women like Harriet Tubman, helped people escape to freedom. What impact did they have on the region?

Tubman was a part of a broader network, and her ability to return back to the same region to keep taking people to freedom had a lot to do with being linked into networks.

And in similar ways, we see that happening with other women in this book. Anna Maria Weems, for example, dressed in men's clothing and pretended to be a boy carriage driver in order to become free from an enslaver in Rockville, Maryland, just outside Washington. But that happened with collaboration with other people within the city.



A map included in an abolitionist poster detailed the scope of the enslaved population in the nation's capital. (Library of Congress)

Studying these networks is incredibly challenging because they're intended to be secret! But what we see is that there's a broader cast of characters that are willing to make this trek, just like Harriet did. Anna's mother, Ara, returned back to help bring a baby across state lines. She was channeling that same ethos as Harriet. And in some ways I kept Harriet as this marginal figure [in the book], not because she is marginal, but because I wanted people to be able to see that other women were also acting in parallel ways, in the same time, in the same region as her. And they were part of a broader network that was spiraling out really from Philadelphia, and then spiraling out both south, and then also further north to Canada.

You write about how these networks also came into play when enslaved blacks were suing to gain their freedom. How successful were these lawsuits?

Oftentimes, the freedom suit is triggered by something: the threat of sale; the sight of seeing slave coffles along the National Mall or Pennsylvania Avenue; a death in the family of the slave holder and knowing that you might be up for sale to resolve the estate debts. For other suits, it really was a hunger for just seeing if manumission was even possible.

The networks become really important. They include lawyers who are willing to represent these enslaved women. These are folks who don't necessarily see black women or black people as racial equals, but they do believe that slavery is a problem. I imagine that once Alethia Tanner became free, she starts telling everybody, "This is what you have to do... You need to go to this person. You need to have this amount of money. And you need to be able to do this and say this."

Black Washingtonians are mobilizing their own desires to become free. And they're trying to figure out ways through this legal bureaucracy and different logistical challenges in order to realize it.

Tell us a little bit about Anne Marie Becraft, one of the first African American nuns, who opened the first school for African American girls in 1827.

Whereas many of the other black schools are very much in line with a black Protestant tradition, Becraft founded a school in Georgetown upon a Catholic tradition, which also really illuminates for us the theological diversity of black D.C. Becraft is really deploying a strategy of racial uplift, instructing little girls on how to carry themselves, how to march through the streets in line, how to be tidy and neat, and what to learn and what to focus on and on

their own spiritual growth. She models it herself and so, when people see her and her pupils passing down the street, it's a really interesting visual of what's actually happening ideologically for black women who are in education.

They see schools as this engine for creating the kinds of model citizens that will make claims to equality later on in the century. Much of these schools are an example of black aspirations. They're not just training the students to embody moral virtue. They are training them up to be leaders and teachers that will then translate this tradition to future generations.

D.C. could be an incredibly difficult place for women to earn a living. You write about some pretty desperate choices they faced. The chapter about prostitution and local entrepreneurial economies helped create my title about the "threshold" of liberty. Even when enslaved women become legally free, what does that mean? There are only so many different professions that black women can enter in order to provide for themselves. And often they are still doing the same kinds of work that they were doing in the context of slavery. So, when legal freedom actually is a reality for them, where do they go from there? What are their options? That picture became very desperate in a lot of ways.

This gives us context for the women who are able to become teachers or own their own businesses. But it also gives us context for why women might go into sex work, into prostitution, into leisure economies. These kinds of industries that are not illegal, but they are seen as immoral and seen as degrading. And so if they were a madam, they were able to realize some of their financial aspirations. But if you were barely getting by, making very little money and a

prostitute, it can be incredibly devastating. It can be violent. It can still lead to poverty. You're going to be criminalized. You're subject to surveillance. All those very much circumscribe their ability to thrive.

What kind of sources have you used to tell this history?

The sources for the history of African American women are not abundant. But there was an opportunity to dig into the worlds of more prominent figures, like first lady Dolley Madison or early Washington social figure Margaret Bayard Smith, and see if I could find some black women in them. I would look in diaries or letters that have been read by scholars in a different context. And lo and behold, I found them. I also looked at as many newspapers as I could, church records, slave bill of sale records, court arrests, arrests and workhouse sentences. I also used the court cases analyzed and transcribed in the *O Say Can You See: Early Washington DC, Law & Family* website.

I may not have a fuller picture of these women's lives but I chose to name them anyway, to begin to get the conversation started so that anybody else writing about D.C. can now take that and dive deeper. Part of the process of working with all of these different kinds of sources that are imperfect in their own way, is also in a spirit of transparency to be able to say, this is what I know, this is where the record stops. You're very intentional in your use of specific terms to help us understand the history of these women, and Washington, D.C. Could you tell us why liberty, navigation, improvisation and self-making are themes you return to throughout the book?

This book really is about liberty, how Americans have used it in a political national context, but also how people at the time imagined this idea and this concept in their own lives. I was really interested in how black women in particular were really testing the boundaries, the scope of liberty, particularly in the nation's capital.

I also used the terms navigation, improvisation and self-making to make sense of what I was seeing happening in these women's lives. There are harsh conditions and barriers that are imposed upon these women and they are learning how to navigate them. Improvisation is how they respond to uncertainty, how they respond to the things that they could not anticipate. And then, self-making, I think, is really important. Because so much of our history around enslaved people and resistance has really emphasized that there are various different ways to resist. Self-making is the imaginative possibilities of these women's worlds. Even where we don't find women in their acts of resistance, these black women, these little girls were imagining their selves, imagining their world, imagining their identities, in ways that we have not even begun to understand.

Editor's note, March 8, 2021: This story has been updated to reflect that Anne Marie Becraft was one of the first African American nuns in the U.S., not definitively the first.

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**National Register of Women's
Service in the Civil War
(NRWSCW):
Woman of the Month**

Anna Ella Carroll

*Author, Military Strategist and Political
Influencer, USA*



Born August 29, 1815, at Kingston Plantation, Eastern Shore of Maryland
Died February 19, 1894 in Washington, DC
One of the most gifted, yet puzzling, individuals of nineteenth century America, Anna Ella Carroll was the eldest of eight children of Thomas King Carroll and Julianna Stevenson Carroll. She was born into one of America's most prominent families, counting several Founding Fathers amongst her ancestors. The Carrolls were the leading Roman Catholic family in the United States during the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, yet her father's immediate branch was Episcopalian and anti-Catholic. Her father, an attorney, was the owner of a 2000-acre tobacco plantation. He also served as a judge, as a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, and as the Governor of Maryland. Her mother was the daughter of a Baltimore physician. Anna was educated at home by her father, who was an early leader in legislation for provision of free education for all children. He provided her with a classical education and is believed to have also trained her in the law. As his assistant, she became involved in legal activities and politics at an early age. As a young woman, Anna operated a girl's school at the family plantation. But national politics would become her life's work. She

became active in the development of the Whig political party, and corresponded with party leaders on subjects including the growth of the party and policy development. According to one of her biographers, she could "scheme, connive, and maneuver as well as any man."

During the presidential elections prior to the Civil War, she was a vigorous campaigner, writing newspaper articles and pamphlets supporting her preferred candidates. With ease and speed, her political efforts gained her the confidence and support of Presidents Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore. In 1849, her political campaigning led to the appointment of her father (who had experienced financial reverses) as the Naval Officer of the Port of Baltimore, the port's chief customs officer. Anna supported national political campaigning in 1856 with *The Great American Battle*, her first book. She would continue to be a popular writer with the American public.

Anna was an ardent abolitionist, supporting the anti-slavery cause with her writings. She also had a keen interest in constitutional law, and opposed emancipation by the federal government based on her interpretation of the constitutionally-imposed limitations upon the powers of the government. She celebrated the election of Lincoln to the presidency by freeing the people she personally owned. Given her written opposition to slavery, her choice to wait until 1860 is perplexing.

Anna became a dedicated crusader for the preservation of the Union, and she understood that, in order to accomplish this goal, she needed to rally support for the new president. She was also deeply concerned with keeping her home state in the Union. Through newspaper articles and letter-writing campaigns, she helped influence Maryland politics in support of Lincoln and in opposition to secession. With the endorsement of the US government, she

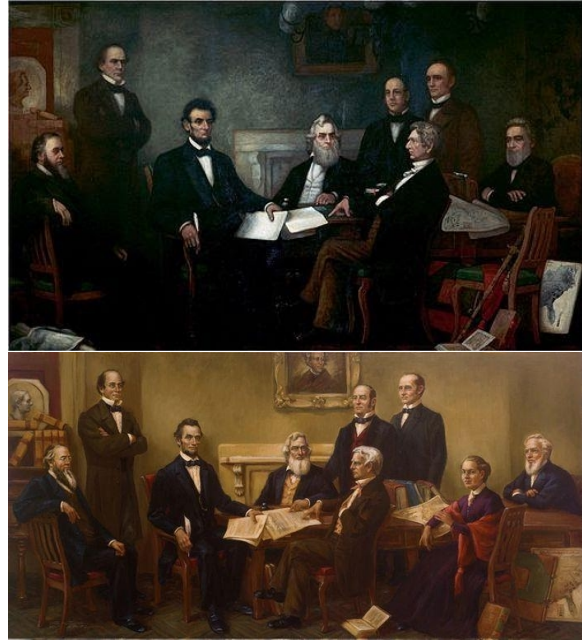
wrote a series of pamphlets which provided constitutionally-based arguments for preservation of the Union and justification for application of presidential war powers. This work culminated in her 1861 book *The War Powers of The General Government*. The arguments put forward in her pamphlets and book were often cited in speeches by senior government officials. Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, she had traveled extensively throughout the Midwest and the South. During her journeys, she observed the key roles of rail and water transport routes in national security, including the provision of links between natural resources and manufacturing sites. A particularly fateful trip in 1861 allowed her to make a reconnaissance of the Upper Mississippi Valley on behalf of her contacts in the US War Department. Armed with her own observations and the results of discussions with river pilots, she developed a detailed plan for a federal military thrust into the South following the route of the Tennessee River. As submitted to the War Department, this plan is credited by a number of historians with influencing Grant's campaign which captured Vicksburg, along with key Confederate fortifications, river-transport junctions, and railroads. Yet there are also scholarly critics who believe that Anna received too much credit for her contribution to the military campaign planning. At the time, her participation was kept a secret, and her initial post-war crediting of a US Army officer for the contribution also undercut her later arguments for recognition.

In the immediate post-war years, Anna Ella Carroll largely devoted herself to political campaigning in Maryland. She also traveled to Texas to report on the development of a new state constitution. However, by 1870, her attention was primarily focused on obtaining compensation from the federal government for her services to the US war

effort. She remained frustrated with the insufficient degree of official recognition or monetary compensation. She continued to write, and her case eventually drew the attention of the women's suffrage movement. Its leadership brought attention to her service and lack of remuneration, using it as an example of an injustice which it claimed would not have happened if women were allowed to vote. Late in her life, as the result of a special bill which recognized the "important military service rendered by her during the late Civil War," the US Congress granted her a small pension of \$50.00 a month.

When Anna died, the epigraph carved upon her grave marker commended her as "A woman rarely gifted; an able and accomplished writer."

F. B. Carpenter's 1864 painting of Lincoln and his cabinet, which hangs in the Senate wing of the US Capitol Building, alludes to Anna Ella Carroll's unrecognized role in the Lincoln cabinet, by leaving a chair empty at the table. The chair is draped by the red shawl of a woman. On the table, in front of the chair, are shown maps and documents of the types with which she worked. In 2011, portrait artist Laura Era was commissioned by a group of Marylanders to paint a new version of the work, with Anna Ella Carroll depicted in that chair, wearing the red shawl. Considering Carroll's opposition to the Constitutional justification of the Emancipation Proclamation – the reading of which serves as the subject of the painting - the revised version adds to the complexity of her story.



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American Battlefield Trust Targets Purchase of 144 Acres at Champion Hill's Iconic Crossroads.

Acquisition will be made in memory of legendary historian Edwin C. Bearss, who called the site his "favorite spot" of the Vicksburg Campaign before passing away in September at age 97

Mary Koik, ABT, May 20, 2021

(Washington, D.C.) — The fierce clash at Champion Hill, Miss., was the largest, bloodiest and most significant battle of the Vicksburg Campaign and, thanks to a new preservation campaign by the American Battlefield Trust, the central portion of that field may become part of Vicksburg National Military Park. The Trust is currently seeking to raise \$107,000 — just 1.7 cents per square foot! — to purchase a 144-acre property at the iconic crossroads with an eye toward eventually transferring it to the National Park Service. "Frequently, we are honored to work with landowners who have been careful stewards

of a historic property for generations, but to work with the Champion Family — which lent its name to both the geographic feature and the battle of Champion Hill — is special indeed,” said Trust President David Duncan. “Fourteen years ago, we worked together to place a voluntary conservation easement on their land, and now we are honored that they are fully entrusting us with their legacy and an American treasure.”

In mid-May 1863, General Grant’s army was marching unchecked through Mississippi. Confederate General John C. Pemberton left the Vicksburg defenses, hoping to prevent the Federals from severing the railroads that fed the fortress city. The two armies met on May 16 in a ferocious firefight that raged primarily over high ground owned by Sid and Matilda Champion. After a fierce struggle, Grant’s army drove the Confederates off of Champion Hill and back to the relative safety of their fortifications in Vicksburg, setting the stage for the siege that ended with the city’s capitulation on July 4, 1863.

The Battle of Champion Hill is widely recognized as the largest, bloodiest, and most decisive battle of the Vicksburg Campaign. It was a firm favorite site of legendary historian Edwin C. Bearss, who passed away last September at age 97 — in fact, the Trust previously dedicated a marker commemorating his remarkable career there. Upon his passing, the Bearss family requested that donations in his honor be made to the American Battlefield Trust. Blessed the opportunity purchase the land that Bearss once described as his “favorite place” in the Vicksburg Campaign, the crossroads “in the lee of Champion Hill,” the Trust will apply the \$78,000 tribute fund toward the effort. In order to purchase the 144 acres, a final \$107,000 must be raised from individual

donors. Contributions may be made at www.battlefields.org/ChampionHill2021.

The American Battlefield Trust is dedicated to preserving America’s hallowed battlegrounds and educating the public about what happened there and why it matters today. The nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has protected more than 53,000 acres associated with the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Civil War. Learn more at www.battlefields.org.

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