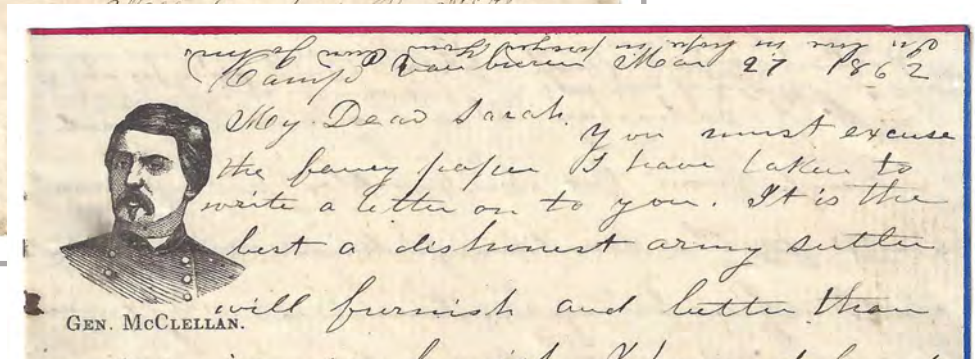


Mails of the United States

Slaves Passed Through the Lines to the North in Tennessee



28 March 1862 Camp Van Buren (Murfreesborough, TN) via Nashville March 31, prepaid 3¢ to Hamilton, Ohio flag patriotic and Gen. McClellan patriotic letter sheet, four page letter of John McKee, 4th Ohio Vol. Cavalry

Letter includes (parenthetical statements added to clarify, complete transcription on following pages):

On last Saturday evening we moved our camp from Shelbyville pike running south to the Franklin pike running west of Murfreesborough. Sabbath evening I was sent out as commander of the pickets, to remain till next morning.

*I had under my command 55 footmen and 11 horsemen. Went about a mile & a quarter beyond our camp towards dixie and distributed ourselves in little squads of from 4 to six at various points on each side of the roads that run nearly parallel and kept a small reserve on each road as so we watched day and night & **the result was that five contrabands** (escaped slaves fleeing north) **came and gave themselves up to us asking no other boon than the privilege of getting on the other side of our pickets** (away) **from their masters or employers.** We kept them waiting till our time of picket was out and then quietly let them pass down the road or across the fields as the choose. Their object was to get into camp and get employment & protection. But they run great risk. Their masters though the rankest secesh (secessionists) at heart can send the county sheriff in to claim them under the laws of the U.S. The thing has been done since we came through Nashville but (the) Sheriff met with indifferent success as the darkeys could not be found, having safely hid themselves in the covered wagons or among bales of hay. **One colored man who gave himself up to us on picket said his wife lived 15 miles in off from where he lived when he married her & had not seen her & his two children for two months & his master has assured him he should never see her again while at the same time advising him to take another wife. His running off was the result. The people here boast of their kindness to their slaves and they are generally well fed and clothed and not overworked even this far south, but what cruelty can be greater than that a man's wife should be sold from him, his children sold from him and all deprived of the rudiments of an education and the freedom of thought that is so essential to the knowledge of our relative duties to God and man, and of the way of salvation.***

*ble had been evening off for several days
as indicated by an increasing sore
ness of mouth, a symptom I've had
very little of since coming from home last till lately*

My Dear Sarah,

You must excuse the fancy paper, I have taken to write a letter on to you. It is the best a dishonest army sutler will furnish and better than secession can furnish. I have delayed writing several days because an unusual amount of writing for the company together with poor health have made it quite impossible. Yesterday my sickness reached its crisis & I spent the day in bed. Had a chill in the morning then a severe fever and a headache the fever was allayed somewhat by sweating afterwards but the headache continued till night when by vomiting I threw up a quantity of bile & was relieved of headache almost immediately. Slept part of the night and felt better than feeble this morning. My ... Has been coming up for several days as indicated by the increasing soreness of mouth, a symptom I had very little since coming from home last lately.

On last Saturday evening we moved our camp from Shelbyville pike running south to the Franklin pike running west of Murfreesborough. Our Regt only arrived we have to furnish all our own picket guards as well as camp guards which makes it somewhat burdensome. Sabbath evening I was sent out as commander of the pickets, to remain till next morning. Not being very well the exposure increased the tendency to disease.

I had under my command 55 footmen and 11 horsemen. Went about a mile & a quarter beyond our camp towards dixie and distributed ourselves in little squads of from 4 to six at various points on each side of the roads that run nearly parallel and kept a small reserve on each road as so we watched day and night & the result was that five contrabands (escaped slaves fleeing north) came and gave themselves up to us asking no other boon than the privilege of getting on the other side of our pickets (away) from their masters or employers. We kept them waiting till our time of picket was out and then quietly let them pass down the road or across the fields as they choose. Their object was to get into camp and get employment & protection. But they run great risk. Their masters though the rankest secesh (secessionists) at heart can send the county sheriff in to claim them under the laws of the U.S. The thing has been done since we came through Nashville but (the) Sheriff met with indifferent success as the darkeys could not be found, having safely hid themselves in the covered wagons or among bales of hay. One colored man who gave himself up to us on picket said his wife lived 15 miles in off from where he lived when he married her & had not seen her & his two children for two months & his master has assured him he should never see her again while at the same time advising him to take another wife. His running off was the result. The people here boast of their kindness to their slaves and they are generally well fed and clothed and not overworked even this far south but what cruelty can be greater than that a man's wife should be sold from him, his children sold from him and all deprived of the rudiments of an education and the freedom of thought that is so essential to the knowledge of our relative duties to God and man, and of the way of salvation.

A way with that kind of kindness so called hat from interested natives will at the same time find and clothe the body & starve and dwarf the soul. A soldier of the constitution should not violate it and disturb the peace of the country by enticing slaves from their masters but when the slaves of their own free will come to our picket lines when I am commander, unless ordered by my superiors, I will not forbid their coming into camp. No general provision has yet been made for the employment of these contrabands, several have employment as cooks Oslers in our Regt. But not half that came can thus be employed and as they must be fed they should be employed at fair wages. We certainly will not remain here long. No working R.R. this side of Nashville & mail comes very irregularly. Yesterday I rec'd yours mailed Mar 17th stating the money had arrived safe. Think you must have rec'd the 11 old bound (C.S.A. presumably) papers soon after, they will be interesting as historical curiosities. We are encamped in a clover field, quite green tho, the weather rather cool to do without fire. Our latest war news reported of Genl Banks at Strasburg. Decisive battles at Memphis & Knoxville where our regt fought.

In love, in hope forever, Your own John

Excerpts from: "The Revolutionary Summer of 1862, How Congress Abolished Slavery and Created a Modern America." *Prologue Magazine*, Winter 2017–18, Vol. 49, no. 4, By Paul Finkelman

The process of ending slavery began with a small event: the arrival at Fortress Monroe in Virginia of three slaves owned by Confederate Col. Charles Mallory. The next day, Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler faced what was perhaps the most surrealistic spectacle of the war, when Confederate Maj. M. B. Carey appeared under a flag of truce, demanding the return of Mallory's slaves. Carey, acting as Mallory's agent, told Butler he was obligated to return the slaves under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

A lawyer before the war, Butler concluded that Mallory's slaves were "contrabands of war" and could be taken from the enemy. Butler told Carey "that the fugitive slave act did not affect a foreign country, which Virginia claimed to be, and she must reckon it one of the infelicities of her position that in so far at least she was taken at her word." With a marvelous touch of irony, Butler offered to return the slaves to Mallory if he would come to Fortress Monroe and "take the oath of allegiance to the Constitution of the United States." But Butler knew this would never happen, so the former slaves were "contrabands of war" and remained free.

Butler hired these three "contrabands" to work for the Army, turning slaves into free laborers. By August there were more than 1,000 runaway slaves—newly minted contrabands—at Fortress Monroe and other U.S. Army camps. The War Department had endorsed Butler's action, Lincoln admiringly joked about "Butler's fugitive slave law," and Congress had passed the First Confiscation Act, authorizing the government to seize slaves used by the Confederate Army. This law opened the door to more attacks on slavery and began turning the war for the Union into a war for freedom.

Thus, by the time Congress adjourned in August 1861, there was a de facto emancipation policy, but it only involved slaves used by the Confederate Army or those who could reach U.S. Army lines—a very small percentage of the three and a half million slaves in the Confederacy. But if slaves managed to reach U.S. lines, the Army could legally give them sanctuary.

Eventually, Lincoln used the contraband theory as the basis of the Emancipation Proclamation. If Butler could emancipate three slaves as a military measure, then Lincoln ultimately determined he could emancipate three million slaves for the same purpose. But before he could accomplish this, Congress would move against slavery and racism in a variety of ways.

..... In the summer of 1862, Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia and the federal territories, authorized the confiscation of slaves owned by Confederates, formally freed all slaves who escaped to the United States Army, prohibited the Army from returning fugitive slaves, authorized the enlistment of black soldiers, and created public schools for African American children in the District of Columbia.

The timing of these laws shows that moves against slavery were not the result of desperation or fear of losing the war. Rather, Congress moved against slavery in the wake of military success, as did Lincoln when he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation after the major victory at Antietam.