Helena's Contraband Camps

Thousands of freedom seekers came with the Union army when it occupied Helena in July 1862. They had no place to live, no food, and no way to support themselves.

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Under the Army's Care

It was up to the Union army to care for the flood of freedom seekers. At first, the army housed the refugees wherever they could find room. For a short time, some lived in a barn at St. Catherine's Convent. Others lived in tents and hastily built shanties. Crowded, primitive camps stood all along this road, now Biscoe Street. The army had no experience housing and feeding thousands of civilians. The refugees in Helena suffered for weeks.

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These photos of refugee slaves were taken in and near Helena during the Civil War. The army housed Contraband in tents on the outskirts of the city. The refugees built simple shelters to house themselves and their families. The photo to the left shows refugee slaves sitting in front of a home in Helena. A Union soldier stands on the porch.

Making a Life in Helena

Eventually, the army developed procedures to help the refugees. Charitable organizations in the North sent food, medicine, doctors, nurses and teachers. The freedom seekers helped themselves—growing vegetable gardens and finding jobs with the army. Men worked as laborers, building Fort Curtis and the earthworks on Crowley's Ridge. They worked as stable hands, teamsters, personal servants and cooks. Women cooked and cleaned, and washed and mended clothes for officers and enlisted men.

Contraband Become Freedmen

Later, as Freedmen, many men joined the Union army. Others earned wages working for the army, civilians in Helena, and on plantations outside of town. By 1864, four camps housed most of Helena's former slaves—Helena, Island 63 (in the Mississippi River), Freedmen's Fort and Fort Pinney.

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Many refugees found work with the Union army and with soldiers and civilians. After the Union army instituted the plantation lease system, some worked on farms outside of town. The photos on the left were taken in and near Helena.

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Why were Freedom Seekers Called Contraband?

In August 1861, the commander of Fortress Monroe in Virginia refused to return several fugitive slaves to their masters, declaring them "contraband of war." From that time, escaped slaves within Union lines were called Contraband.

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