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Good Union people: Enduring bonds between black and white Unionists in the Civil War and beyond

James Schrufer
James Madison University

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Good Union People:
Enduring Bonds Between Black and White Unionists in the Civil War and Beyond
James M. Schrufer

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Philip D. Dillard

Committee Members/ Readers:

Gabrielle M. Lanier

Andrew Witmer

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Abstract

The thesis investigates the nature of the relationship between white unionists during the American Civil War and their enslaved and free black counterparts. To do this it utilizes the records of the Southern Claims Commission, which collected testimony from former unionists and their character witnesses from 1872 to 1880. For comparative purposes, it focuses on two regions economically similar and frequently contested by opposing armies: Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, and the region of central Tennessee to the southeast of Nashville. As the war began, white unionists were suddenly alienated from the larger community and faced persecution by authorities and threats of violence. They sometimes coped in ways which mimicked the survival tactics long practiced by slaves. Meanwhile, free blacks and slaves were forming new identities in relation to the Union, viewing it as the bringer and protector of their freedom. The devotion to Union evidenced in the Claims Commission testimony suggests that they should be considered unionists in their own right. Free blacks and slaves recognized persecuted white unionists as natural allies. The recognition of shared experience and suffering among both races resulted in cooperative action during the war, and suggests a deeper alliance than that of mere convenience. These partnerships endured into the postwar period, as white claimants were supported by black witnesses and vice versa. The persistence of such bonds despite postwar pressures supports the idea of a period of social/racial "fluidity" after the Civil War, and invites further investigation into the nature of racial cooperation in the South

Introduction

On October 19th, 1864 near Cedar Creek in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, a young physician and farmer named Henry C. Shipley dashed out onto the battlefield that surrounded his house. At his side was a younger man named Dorsey Washington, a slave rented out to work on the farmstead that Shipley himself rented. Equipped only with a wheelbarrow, the two men began carrying the wounded Union soldiers to the safety of the farmhouse, which was now behind Confederate lines. Meanwhile, the doctor's wife was busy tearing up the family linens for bandages. The battle was not yet over, and as they worked Shipley and Washington were harassed and threatened with vengeance by the temporarily victorious Confederates. No doubt Shipley and Washington would have faced repercussions for their actions, but a few hours later the resurgent Union army won the day. When the New York men who fought before Shipley's house returned to their old position, they found the dwelling full of their wounded being tenderly cared for. They did not forget.

Henry Shipley was a unionist, a member of a despised minority of men and women who never changed their allegiance from the United to the Confederate States. While many southerners opposed secession through much of the crisis preceding the war, most of them ultimately changed their minds in response to public pressure or, in the case of the border states, President Lincoln's call for volunteers to suppress the rebellion. Those who remained unswayed suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of their society's political principles. Variouslly called loyalists, tories, traitors, buffaloes, and all manner of curses by their secessionist neighbors, they endured the coercive acts of a hostile government, and threats from neighbors, bushwackers and home guards. Many

men of military age spent months “laying out” in the woods to avoid conscription agents. Others found the atmosphere too hostile to stay, and embarked on dangerous treks northward, often with the aim of joining the Union army.

Shipley’s actions during the Battle of Cedar Creek were a strong expression of his unionism, performed at great personal risk. But he was not alone that day. Dorsey Washington risked his future too, a future which he understood was tied to the defeat of the Confederacy. Many slaves were keenly aware of the political ramifications of the war, and viewed the Union not only as the bringer of freedom but the only entity with the power to protect it. They listened with interest to the white southerners around them. As the renowned educator and black leader Booker T. Washington put it:

When the war was begun between North and South, every slave on our plantation felt and knew that, though other issues were discussed, the primal one was that of slavery. Even the most ignorant members of my race on the remote plantations felt in their hearts, with a certainty that admitted no doubt, that the freedom of the slaves would be the one great result of the war, if the Northern armies conquered. Every success of the Federal armies and every defeat of the Confederate forces was watched with the keenest and most intense interest.¹

Washington refers to conditions on his plantation, where access to information could, to an extent, be controlled by the master and limited by isolation. In places like Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley and eastern-central Tennessee, where large plantations were less common, access to information could be greater. Slaves often gathered secretly amongst themselves or at the homes of white unionists to hear newspapers read. Dorsey later remembered how he and Henry Shipley often conversed about the war. “He told us colored people,” Dorsey testified, “that he was a Union man, and advised us that we would all be free...All the colored men in that vicinity considered him a Union man, he

¹ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003): 43.

always advising them about their freedom.”² In ways unique to themselves, and in ways in common with their white counterparts, southern free blacks and slaves were unionists, too.

The dramatic story of Dorsey Washington and Henry Shipley is knowable to us only because of the U.S. government’s controversial postwar effort to reimburse southern unionists for material losses inflicted by Union troops. From 1871 to 1880, the Southern Claims Commission collected claims and testimony from people claiming to have remained steadfastly loyal during the war. Within the oral testimony of thousands of claimants and witnesses is a record of motivations and loyalties, and of family and community bonds during a time of fear and hardship.

The essay that follows uses two superficially similar regions, Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley and the southern counties of central Tennessee, to explore the depth and persistence of racial cooperation between white unionists and their free black and slave allies. In the Shenandoah, the records of the Claims Commission give evidence to an understanding of mutually recognized common cause. Whites who favored the Union found themselves, after secession, an oppressed minority, forced to mind their language in public, to meet in secret, or to hide in the woods from armed searchers. For the first time in their lives, they experienced elements of the lives free and enslaved blacks had known for generations. Their reality having changed, whites and blacks were forced to interact in new ways made possible by the social upheaval of the war. In the pages that follow, not all of the stories will be as dramatic as that of Washington and Shipley, but all have something to tell us about what was possible between the races when both parties

² Claim of Henry C. Shipley, #51224, Frederick County, VA.

realized that their future as free people depended on their respect for each other. That these things happened in the American South of the nineteenth century is all the more significant given prevailing racial attitudes.

In addition to assessing wartime cooperation, we must also consider how well these new relationships persisted into a tumultuous Reconstruction period. We only know of wartime cooperation between white and black unionists because the parties involved were willing to testify on each other's behalf, in some cases more than a decade after the events in question. With whites under pressure to join the "Solid South" and blacks under threat from the Ku Klux Klan and other hostile groups, the fact that the old allies testified for each other suggests some bonds were strong enough to endure beyond the necessity created by the war.

Of course, the relationships evidenced in the Shenandoah Valley must be considered in light of other regions. To provide a useful comparison, the Claims Commission records of another region, an area of central Tennessee, will be thoroughly considered. In this region the nature and degree of racial cooperation differed. Through comparison of the two regions we can come to some conclusions regarding the factors influencing interracial bonds, and perhaps come to a slightly better understanding of the complexity of race relations in this chaotic period.

This study involved the survey of nearly one thousand individual claims. In the Shenandoah Valley, these claims are from the eight counties of Rockbridge, Augusta, Page, Rockingham, Shenandoah, Frederick, Warren, and Clarke. The northernmost Valley counties of Berkeley and Jefferson are omitted, as they were seldom under Confederate control and became part of the unionist state of West Virginia during the

war. In central Tennessee, the evidence base is confined to the region generally to the southeast of Nashville, an area that was contested by the opposing armies at several points during the war. The counties surveyed are Franklin, Rutherford, Bedford, Coffee, and Cannon. The geographic restriction is partially intended to provide a similar geographical extent and number of claims as in the Shenandoah Valley, as well as a region which was impacted by military activity throughout the war. It is also a region with a greater dependency on slavery than the Shenandoah Valley, which allows us to investigate whether racial cooperation was less or more likely there.

The quality of evidence from the Commission records surveyed varies due to factors including the competence of the interviewer, the ability of the recorder to transcribe quickly and accurately, and the eagerness of the witness to share details beyond giving the minimum acceptable response. Despite these difficulties, the records are packed with information that could answer a variety of historical questions. Before exploring what the records tell us about the matters of greatest interest here, a survey of the nature of the Southern Claims Commission, and the nature of the regions in question, is in order.

Chapter One

The Southern Claims Commission and Two Regions in Crisis

Civil War soldiers, northern and southern, could be intensely destructive to their environment. To an ordinary farmer, the arrival of even a moderate-sized military unit might seem like a Biblical plague. Crops in the field and from the barn were fed to horses, livestock was shot and carried off to camp, wagons and carriages were commandeered and ruined hauling wood, and miles of fencing disappeared into campfires. If the army planned on a long stay in the vicinity, siding and shingles were stripped from houses and outbuildings to construct soldiers' huts. All of this could occur without the necessity of malicious intent. As a result, unionist civilians often suffered material losses as great as those of their Confederate neighbors. The same 1862 regulations that permitted Union armies to live off the land also prescribed that vouchers for future reimbursement be made out for unionist citizens, but in practice this was rarely done.³

Thousands of pro-Union Southerners suffered material losses to Federal troops by the end of the war. While some were able to apply directly to U.S. Army quartermasters for reimbursement, few qualified for compensation under the strict requirements the military demanded. As peace was restored and southern states began to be readmitted to the Union, claims against the government piled up. That it would take until 1871 for the U.S. government to take action to resolve these claims may seem surprising, but controversy had arisen in Congress regarding the status of wartime unionists. During the war, the Federal Government regarded southern unionists as needed allies, the loyal base

³ In the research for this study only a handful of claimants were able to provide any receipts for goods taken.

on which to enact Lincoln's generous plan for the readmission of states. The Radical Republican reconstructionists dominating Congress after the war had different priorities. Determined to punish the former Confederate states for their treason, they had little interest in considering degrees of loyalty among the white population. All residents of seceded states were guilty of insurrection, and thus had no legal right to compensation. According to this philosophy, unionists were "guilty by association" with their secessionist neighbors, no matter what their own thoughts and actions were. Despite their hostility toward the concept of awarding compensation to southern unionists, even Radicals recognized the need to assess the claims piling up in Washington. In 1869, Senator Charles Sumner, no advocate of compensation, recommended the establishment of a commission to "classify these claims, specifying their respective amounts, circumstances, and evidence of loyalty."⁴ As the number of claims rose the political pressure to address the claims of former unionists mounted, and in March, 1871 the Radicals in the House were overcome on the issue by a coalition of liberal Republicans and southern representatives. The Senate quietly passed the legislation establishing the Southern Claims Commission as a rider on the Army Appropriations Bill for 1871.⁵

Three commissioners would head the operation from Washington. President Ulysses S. Grant chose Judge Asa Owen Aldis of Vermont for president of the Commission. Former Iowa Senator James B. Howell, and former New York Representative Orange Ferris completed the trio. All three men had been Whigs who became Republicans before the war. None were veterans of the conflict.⁶ Aldis, Howell,

⁴ Frank Wysor Klingberg, "The Southern Claims Commission: A Postwar Agency in Operation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 32, no.2 (1954): 197-198.

⁵ Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission*, 70.

⁶ Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission*, 62.

and Ferris immediately set about devising a system to process existing and new claims and take testimony from claimants and witnesses. Individuals claiming more than \$10,000 in damages were required to travel to Washington to be examined directly by the head commissioners, but for lesser claims this was neither practical nor desirable. To handle the field work of investigating claims and collecting testimony, deputy commissioners were appointed. By 1877, there were 106 special commissioners operating from fixed locations throughout the South. These men compiled the necessary evidence in each case, forwarding the file to Washington to be decided upon by one of the three head commissioners. They were typically residents of the locality in which they operated, had some legal experience, and practiced their duties for the Commission as a side line of work. The competence of these minor officials varied widely, a fact which President Aldis acknowledged in his first Annual Report to Congress when he stated, “one cannot but feel that the results would have been far more satisfactory if some competent person on behalf of the Government had investigated the claims and been present to examine the witnesses.”⁷

By the time the commission dissolved in 1880, 22,298 applications had been filed, representing over \$60 million in claims. Well before the numbers reached this level, the government realized that liberally paying out to claimants would be cost prohibitive. As a commentator in the Philadelphia newspaper *Public Ledger* observed not long after the commission was inaugurated, “the Government will be involved in an immense debt, if even a majority of the claims are decided favorably.”⁸

⁷ Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission*, 77.

⁸ Klingberg, “The Southern Claims Commission: A Postwar Agency in Operation,” 200.

The desire on the part of the government to pay out as little as possible led to close scrutiny of claims and a high standard of evidence. Additionally, despite being established against their wishes, the essential attitude of the Radical Republicans toward unionists was embodied in the approach of the Commission. As the 1871 Annual Report of the Commission stated, “Voluntary residence in an insurrectionary State during the war is *prima facie* evidence of disloyalty, and must be rebutted by satisfactory evidence.”⁹ The burden of proof was on the claimant. To have any hope of approval, a claimant had to give personal testimony, responding to the list of questions as to the exact circumstances surrounding the taking of their property, as well as to their feelings about secession and activities during the war. Questions included:

Did you ever do anything or say anything against the Union cause; and if so, what did you do and say, and why?

What were your feelings concerning the battle of Bull Run or Manassas, the capture of New Orleans, the fall of Vicksburgh (sic), and the final surrender of the confederate forces?

Did you ever receive a pass from rebel authority? If so, state when, where, for what purpose, on what conditions, and how the pass was used?¹⁰

The claimant was also required to produce multiple witnesses, typically three, who would corroborate what was taken and under what circumstances. Three witnesses also attested to the claimant’s degree of loyalty to the Union, and were expected to be able to recollect specific conversations they had with the claimants which made this clear. Witnesses were typically, but not always, the same people who testified to losses.

⁹ Frank W. Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955): 89.

¹⁰ Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama’s Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 2004): 244-247.

Even the smallest piece of documentation linking a claimant to Confederate military or civilian authorities could disqualify a claim. The capture of Confederate records at war's end gave the Commission the opportunity to search for claimant's names on the thousands of vouchers and other records. Voting for secession was, naturally, an automatic disqualification, despite the pleas of claimants that they were coerced. But even the sale of a few bales of hay to a Confederate army quartermaster was damning evidence, as was the payment of taxes or sending of clothing to a Confederate relative. Virginia unionist Henry Shipley, whose battlefield exploits have already been described, served briefly and against his will in a militia regiment in 1861, but his claim was not disqualified for this due to the strength of his other evidence.¹¹ Commissioner Aldis's remarks in the rejected case of Mr. A.P. Lowe of Rutherford County, Tennessee, are typical of many failed claims:

We are not satisfied by the evidence that the claimant was loyal. He was never threatened or molested. He never did anything for the Union cause. His surroundings were Confederate, one son and two brothers were in the Confederate Army. He calls two witnesses to prove loyalty. They testify to alleged conversations of a vague and general character.¹²

In some counties, the transcribing Commission officer recorded verbal testimony in remarkable detail, sometimes down to hesitations in speech. Others were far less careful, and similarities in phrasing appearing in different cases suggest that what often reads as verbatim testimony is really paraphrasing. The matter of how claimants and witnesses were treated according to race also varied widely based on location.

Officially, the Commission did not discriminate between the races in their questioning or in the standard of evidence expected, and the notes accompanying the final

¹¹ Claim of Henry C. Shipley, #51224, Frederick Co., VA.

¹² Claim of A.P. Lowe, #17993, Rutherford Co., TN.

decisions of the Commission in Washington display an evident desire on the part of the leading Commissioners there to give black claims due care. In fact, the claims of former free blacks were treated with less skepticism, since it was the assumption of the board that such people were bound to be in favor of the Union. Former slaves, however, typically faced great skepticism not over their wartime sentiments, but for their claims that they had owned livestock or horses. The often very personal nature of the relationship between master and slave in the Border South often led to negotiations which allowed slaves to earn money from side ventures such as shoe making or wood hauling. The idea that slaves could legally own property, however meager, during the war sat uneasily with the Commission, and such claims were typically rejected.¹³

The local agents of the Claims Commission varied in their attitudes toward freedmen and former free blacks, and this variation led to regional differences in how they are represented in the Commission records. One special commissioner attested to the special value of black witnesses when conducting field research on cases:

I go to negroes because I find I can really get detailed information from them. They always know if a man was really loyal, they know if the cribs were full or not, often remember the names of the mules, oxen, in fact are generally better posted than the rich white neighbors of the claimants.¹⁴

That the Commission utilized black witnesses, officially considering their testimony like that of whites, that did not mean the local special commissioners abandoned their own prejudices. In several Tennessee counties, for example, the testimony of black witnesses was solicited only on matters of property. They were not asked to testify to the loyalty of white claimants. The insinuation here is that the special commissioner or commissioners

¹³ A fuller discussion of slaves' ability to own property, and their own perception that they had done so, appears in Chapter 3.

¹⁴ Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission*, 85.

responsible for these examinations were resistant to the idea of black witnesses judging the honesty and values of whites. While the names of all black witnesses and claimants recorded in written testimony were followed by the notation (*Col.*), one Tennessee commissioner noted an elderly former slave as (*Very much Col.*).¹⁵

In the end, the Commission approved less than 20 million dollars of the 60 million in claims. The first historian to consider the impact of the Southern Claims Commission believed that tortuous process, years of delay, accusatory verbal examinations, and stingy compensation alienated many sincere Republican unionists, driving them into the arms of the Solid South Democrats. The Commission's policies, he wrote, "tended to bury any vestiges of Unionism which may have remained in the 1870's. In the vast mass records of the Southern Claims Commission were preserved the stories of the Unionist's courage and of his betrayal."¹⁶

For the historian, the Southern Claims Commission records represent a treasure trove of information about subjects as varied as the motivation and loyalties of Civil War civilians, military discipline and foraging practices, and nineteenth-century agriculture. Like any source, however, they must be used with care, and the shortcomings and biases of the records must be recognized and acknowledged. The most obvious potential problem was fraud, a matter very much on the minds of the commissioners. Indeed, many claims were clearly attempts by former loyal Confederates to gain compensation from a Federal government for whom they had little respect. Fraudulent cases coming from false unionists hoping to swindle the government were almost always weeded out by the thoroughness of the examination process. As a result, rather than being an unusually

¹⁵ Claim of William Terry, #8752, McMinn Co., TN.

¹⁶ Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission*, 208-209.

questionable source due to the incentive for fraud, the Claims Commission records are possibly among the most reliable sources from the period, in that part of the work of assessing the authenticity of the accounts has been completed by the Commission. The more difficult problem for the historian lies in properly assessing the biases and varying competence of the special commissioners.

Even in cases where loyalty was not in doubt, the amounts claimed could be greatly inflated. Seemingly every claimant and witness described confiscated horses as large and fine, their cattle and pigs as fat, their hay as first-rate, and assessed them at accordingly high prices. The Commissioner's skepticism nearly always resulted in a far lower price assessment.¹⁷

The unfortunate Commission practice of posting public lists of claimants at local post offices, in hopes of soliciting witnesses, is believed to have dissuaded an unknown number of former unionists from coming forward. At a time when the Ku Klux Klan was a powerful force for social coercion, it was potentially dangerous to call attention to one's wartime unionism, or to cooperate with what was seen as Federal interference. Finally, because hiring a lawyer was required to begin the process of prosecuting a claim, many of the poorest former unionists were probably dissuaded from applying. One former free black unionist from Virginia indicated in his claim that he was too poor to provide more than one witness, due to legal fees.¹⁸

The election of Abraham Lincoln on November 6, 1860 triggered the states of the Cotton South to take action to defend slavery from the perceived threat posed by the new

¹⁷ Klingberg, "The Southern Claims Commission: A Postwar Agency in Operation," 201.

¹⁸ Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission*, 76; Claim of Savery Iverson, #36731, Clarke Co., VA.

Republican administration. South Carolina seceded from the United States on December 20, 1860, to be followed by the six other states of the Deep South. For the states of the Upper, or Border South, the election of Lincoln did not push them very far toward secession. With strong economic ties to the North, and less dependency on slavery, most citizens of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri were more distressed at the rash actions of their southern neighbors than by the new President.

Even the fall of Fort Sumter on April 13 failed to sway sentiment in the Border South away from Union. But the attack on U.S. forces and property caused President Lincoln to call for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion. It was this measure, by far, that most alienated the people of the Border South, many of whom saw it as a betrayal of the promises of compromise and good intentions previously emanating from the White House. While thousands of Border South people remained devoted to the Union, most felt that their cultural ties to the South demanded they support their Deep South neighbors, even if they continued to regard secession as foolhardy. As Tennessee unionist Horace Maynard put it, “when a brother is assailed, all his brethren rush to his rescue, not stopping to inquire whether, in the context, he be right or wrong.”¹⁹

With sentiment having shifted almost instantly in favor of secession and war, those who remained faithful to the United States found themselves ostracized, the recipients of ominous threats. Conditions for unionists were similar all over the South, but there was significant regional variation dependent on the strength of Union vs. secessionist sentiment in the community. For the unconditional unionist residents of the

¹⁹ Crofts, 127, 336-337.

Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee, the experience of secession reflected the unique paths their states took to disunion.

The Shenandoah Valley

The great valley of Virginia, the Shenandoah, rolls in a thirty-mile swath between the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east and the Alleghenies to the west. Its length stretches from the Potomac in the north to the vicinity of Lexington, in Rockbridge County, in the south.²⁰ The west of the Valley, with a thick topsoil over limestone bedrock, is generally the more fertile portion, while the shale lands of the eastern regions make for poorer farming. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Shenandoah River and its tributaries provided not only ample water for settlement, but power for the many mills which enabled farmers efficient conversion of their wheat crop into flour.²¹

The Valley was settled by whites in the middle and late eighteenth century. Many were people of Scots-Irish descent from the Piedmont of Virginia, but hundreds of German families, members of the Anabaptist Mennonite and German Baptist Brethren sect, also known as Dunkers, migrated into the region from Pennsylvania.²² These people brought with them a religious ethic that rejected militarism, was generally hostile toward slavery, and frowned upon too much involvement with the concerns of the secular world. This combination of traits would cause no end of frustration for Confederate authorities.²³

²⁰ As a geographical feature the valley is much longer, extending into Pennsylvania and beyond, but is only considered the Shenandoah within the state of Virginia, where the river of that name flows through it.

²¹ Warren R. Hofstra, *The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004): 25-28.

²² Anabaptists were members of radical movements of the Protestant Reformation. The term refers to their practice of adult baptism.

²³ Charles D. Thompson, Jr., *The Old German Baptist Brethren: Faith, Farming, and Change in the Virginia Blue Ridge* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006):

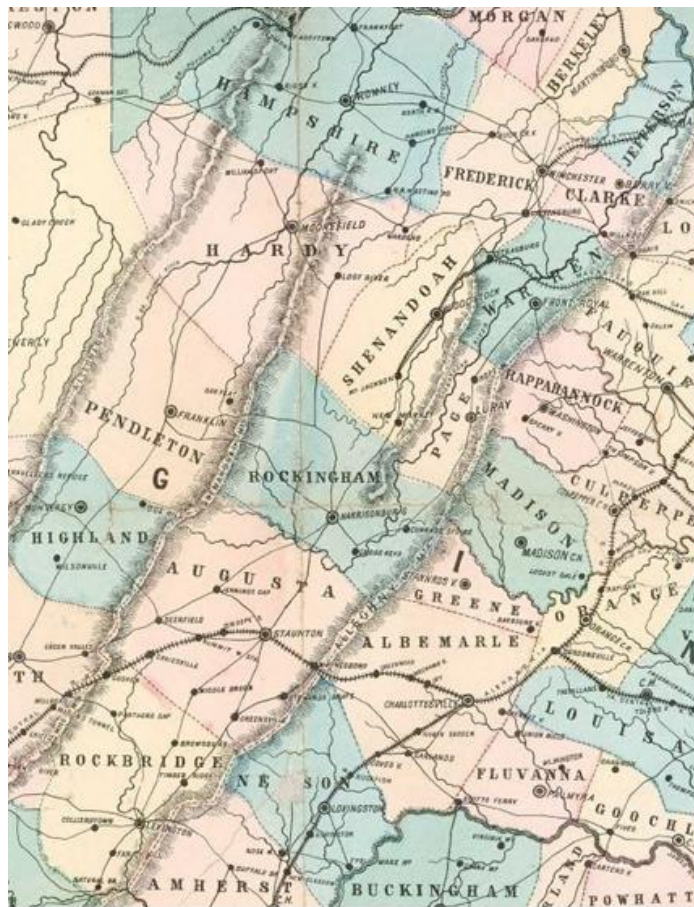


Figure 1. Shenandoah Valley Counties, 1861. (Library of Congress)

By the early nineteenth century the Shenandoah Valley had developed a unique regional economy and culture. It was part Scots-Irish and part Germanic, with a diversified agricultural economy, many prosperous farms and mills, and thriving market towns like Winchester, Harrisonburg and Staunton. A visitor to the Valley would have come away with a general impression of prosperity, but it was in some ways deceptive. There was significant wealth disparity, with the wealthiest ten percent holding half the wealth, and only about half of the heads of households owning land.²⁴ Unlike in many

²⁴ Michael J. Gorman, "Our Politicians Have Enslaved Us," in Kenneth E. Koons and Warren Hofstra, eds., *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800-1900* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000): 276.

parts of the South the agricultural produce was varied, including wheat, corn, oats, and fruit. These crops were less labor-intensive than cotton or rice, but it would be a mistake to think that slavery was not a major element of the labor force. In 1860, Augusta County residents had nearly \$7 million invested in slaves.²⁵ In smaller Rockbridge County the figure was under \$5 million, but slaves made up a full 23 percent of the population there.²⁶ While the shift in concentration of slaves to the south and west over the previous few decades had somewhat lessened the Virginia economy's dependence on the "peculiar institution," the state, and the Valley, were not immune to the rapidly worsening sectional tensions over the issues that were pushing the nation toward civil war.

As South Carolina and the rest of the Lower South seceded in late 1860 and early 1861, most Virginians remained firmly committed to the Union. The citizens of the Valley voted by a wide margin to send unionist candidates to the first state convention on the matter of secession. This reluctance to leave the Union has often been interpreted as indicative of a lack of dependence on slavery in Virginia, compared to the states of the Lower South. But it was not a lack of common interest that delayed Virginia from siding with South Carolina and the rest; it was concern over how best to preserve that interest, for Virginians knew that their property, in land and people, would be on the front lines of the coming war.

Like Border Southerners in most areas, the people of the Shenandoah remained staunchly unionist until Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers. Although the bulk of the population pivoted as strongly toward the Confederacy as anywhere else, a sizable

²⁵ \$206 million in 2015 dollars.

²⁶ Edward L. Ayers, Gary W. Gallagher and Andrew J. Torget, eds., *Crucible of War: Virginia from Secession to Commemoration* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006): 14-15.

remnant of unconditional unionists remained. While a fair number of these were people of Anglo or Scots-Irish stock, many were from the pacifist, anti-slavery German religious sects, the Mennonites and Baptist Brethren. Their persistent refusal to abide by the will of the majority population would color the nature of wartime unionism in the Valley.

The public referendum on secession was held on May 23, 1861 and was, according to the evidence in the Claims Commission files, a farce. Numerous unionists testified to intimidation at the polls. It was only a hint of the four years of coercion and threats to come. Life for unionists during the war would prove a hectic experience. Confederate forces constantly operated in the Valley, and Lee's Army of Northern Virginia used it as an avenue to invade the North on two occasions. The Confederates recognized the value of the Shenandoah as a source of flour and beef to feed their armies. The Union sought to neutralize the region as a source of Confederate supply and as a route of invasion, but for logistical reasons was never able to do more south of Winchester than raid through it in force and withdraw. This unstable situation made it extraordinarily difficult for unionists, however sincere, to avoid accommodating the demands of Confederate troops in ways that jeopardized the approval of their postwar damage claims.

Central Tennessee

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, Anglo and Scots-Irish settlers from east of the Appalachians began settling the land that became the state of Tennessee. Those who settled the rugged landscape in the east of the state developed a distinct character, generally poor and with few ties to slavery and plantation culture. Settlers who

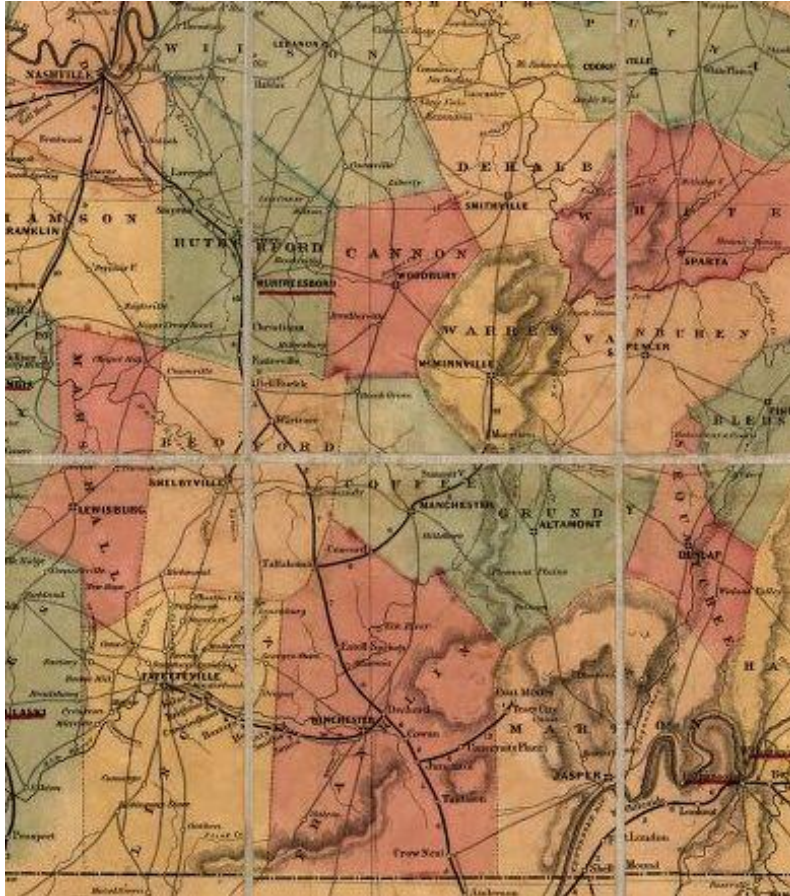


Figure 2. Central Tennessee Counties, 1861 (Library of Congress)

continued on to the Mississippi found a fertile alluvial plain, and turned the region into a land of vast cotton plantations. The people who settled the region in between formed a median between the extremes of the west and east. While some cotton was grown, agriculture was mixed, making it one of the few southern regions other than the Shenandoah Valley that did not rely on staple crop farming.²⁷ By the eve of the Civil War, the region had become a generally prosperous section. One Bedford resident wrote in 1857, “Our country is in a flourishing condition, lands have got Remarkably high so that it is not uncommon to bring 50 or 60 dollars per acre and some as high even as

²⁷ Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed 1860-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988): 16.

\$100.00 dollars per acre Negroes also sell high likely men from 14 to 17 hundred dollars without any trade and produce of all kinds demand the cash at fair prices.”²⁸ Politically, the region was characterized by a hardy Whig conservatism. Both regions would favor John Bell of the Constitutional Unionist Part in the 1860 presidential election.²⁹ While it relied more on slave labor than the Shenandoah Valley, central Tennessee was still characterized more by yeoman farms than plantations, and was in many respects comparable

The nature of slavery in the counties of central Tennessee reflected its diversified agricultural economy. The majority of masters owned between one and ten slaves, just as in the Shenandoah Valley. The Claims Commission files indicate that the same kinds of negotiated financial arrangements often existed, with slaves shoeing horses, or repairing shoes until they had earned enough money to purchase minor property of their own.

The road to secession in Tennessee was fractious, and as in Virginia the tide only turned when it became clear an invasion of the South by Federal troops was imminent. A key difference between the secession processes of Virginia and Tennessee was the role of the governor. Unlike the conditional unionist John Letcher in Virginia, Tennessee governor Isham G. Harris was a strong advocate of slave interests and turned toward secession when Lincoln was elected. While most the people of the state remained opposed to secession, Harris used secessionist sympathy in western Tennessee to move the state toward the Confederacy. Harris acted too soon, however, and the public referendum to vote on a secession convention was easily defeated. The vocal unionist

²⁸ Ash, 16.

²⁹ Ash, 9.

faction in the state, led by the ambitious East Tennessee politician Andrew Johnson, and the editor William Brownlow, continued their denunciation of Harris and secession. After Lincoln's call for troops shifted public opinion toward secession, the state legislature met on April 25, scheduling a public referendum on secession for June 8th.³⁰ The central Tennessee claimant testimony contains tales of polling place intimidation similar to those from the Shenandoah Valley. At any rate, the popular vote was irrelevant, as by the appointed date the state had already turned over its militia to the Confederate government and proposed Nashville as the national capital.³¹

The central Tennessee counties of the study area were contested territory at several points during the war. Federal armies compelled the evacuation of Nashville in February 1862, and Union armies soon penetrated into the region. The Confederates were not content to abandon Tennessee, and soon returned, fighting a major battle at Murfreesboro in Rutherford County, at the end of 1862. Further maneuvering by both armies continued to impact the region. In the fall of 1864, Confederate General John Bell Hood launched a desperate offensive into the area from north Georgia with Nashville as his objective. Hood's failed campaign was the last time the region would endure the stress of foraging armies, but the peace ahead would come to seem, for unionists, every bit as tumultuous.

The Shenandoah Valley and the counties of central Tennessee were comparable in many ways. The situation for slaves in both regions was similar, with most masters

³⁰ James Welch Patton, *Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966): 10-11.

³¹ Patton, 55.

owning fewer than ten. Many slaves had arrangements with masters that allowed them to earn enough money to buy a horse or a cow. It was not much, but it gave them some sense of independence, however tenuous or illusory, and it was the confiscation of their meager property which brings these people into the Claims Commission records.

For free blacks too, conditions were similar in the Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee. While they had some legal rights, their status was a strange sort of limbo between slave and free. As Caleb Perry Patterson wrote in *The Negro in Tennessee*:

He had no place in society, socially or economically. He could not associate with whites. He could keep the company of slaves only by permission. His own class was so small that his opportunities were very limited there. Poverty, ignorance, oppression, discrimination, and hostility of both slave and white man made his position in actual life much worse than his legal status.³²

As we shall see, the degree of social isolation suggested by Patterson is not borne out by the records of the Southern Claims Commission. The war brought both slaves and free blacks new ways of interacting, at least with those whites with whom they shared the dream of Union victory. With the economy, politics, and society of the two regions generally in accord, we might expect the evidence of the Claims Commission records to be very similar in both places. In many ways this is true, but in the matter of race and racial cooperation there are notable differences evidenced in the record. Understanding why this is the case requires exploring the wartime unionist experience for both races.

³² Patterson, 174.

Chapter 2

Black and White Unionism

Dr. Henry Shipley's war began with a summons to report to Winchester for compulsory service with the state militia. After nineteen days in camp, he managed to procure a pass from his company commander to return home for the weekend to obtain provisions for his family. While at home he was beset by requests from patients. Shipley was able to use the convenient excuse of his medical practice to secure an indefinite furlough to remain at home. He had successfully avoided involvement in the Confederate war effort, but the cost was social isolation. We might imagine that the Doctor was forced to hide his sentiments during most of his house calls. With few friends in whom to confide his true feelings, it may have been at this time that his relationship deepened with Dorsey Washington, the rented slave. The two began discussing the war frankly.³³

With secession and the start of the Civil War, white southerners still devoted to the Union found themselves feeling alone and afraid. Over the next four years, supporters of the Union, white and black, free and slave, would experience many of the same fears and hardships. For white unionists, the time was characterized by the overturning of their world, the potential or actual destruction of everything they had worked a lifetime for. For slaves and free blacks, while it was a time of danger, certainly, the prevailing spirit was one of hope and opportunity. Although their points of view and the ways they voiced their support for the Union would vary, the shared experience of white unionists and their black counterparts would create an environment ripe for new forms of relationship between them.

³³ Claim of Henry C. Shipley, #51224, Frederick County, VA.

A large part of the experience of unionism involved deception. While black southerners were well-versed in the survival tactic of reticence and masks, for whites the need for secrecy and hiding their views needed to be learned, and some took to it better than others. Avoiding public censure required withdrawal from many important aspects of social life. Voicing one's opinion too loudly created a reputation for disloyalty to the South, one which often resulted in rough treatment by Confederate soldiers, social and economic ostracism, and occasionally arrest and imprisonment in the dreaded Castle Thunder in Richmond.

The concealing of true, private sentiments could involve more than keeping secrets from outsiders. Even within the family unit, members might keep their private feelings about the war from one another. Unionists became adept at what one historian has called "survival lying," presenting whatever outward attitude was necessary to get through the war. In places like the Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee, with the armies of both sides alternately knocking on one's door, a certain amount of prevarication was the norm. Many claimants no doubt downplayed the extent to which they played the game of favoring whichever side was camped in their vicinity. In fact, a remarkable number of claimants, influenced by the oath they testified under, admitted to favoring whatever side they had to in order to preserve their property and freedom at a given time. As one East Tennessee farmer put it, "we all had to act the hypocrite a little once in a while." Not surprisingly, such honesty seldom resulted in an approved claim.³⁴

³⁴ John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, "Highland Households Divided: Family Deceptions, Diversions, and Divisions in Southern Appalachia's Inner Civil War," in *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives on Unionists in the Civil War*, John C. Inscoe and Robert C. Kenzer, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001): 54-72; Claim of John Smith, #20448, Bradley Co., TN.

The public vote on secession was the first indication unconditional unionists had that their social status had changed dramatically. It made a great impression on many of them, particularly in the Shenandoah Valley, where the vote was held on May 17, 1861. In Warren County, Elias Andrews was one of the few who dared to vote against secession. He claimed he was threatened with hanging that day for having done so.³⁵ The situation at the polls in Shenandoah County may have been especially intimidating. One Unionist claimant reported hearing from another that handbills were posted there warning Unionist voters to “watch out for their necks.”³⁶ Another reported that a company of militia paraded up and down the main street of New Market, the county seat, throughout the day.³⁷

It is worth noting that for all the threats and intimidation that swirled around the polls, few claimants could testify to experiencing actual violence. Even so, the psychological impact of such threats is made clear by the number of claimants from the Shenandoah Valley who related their vivid memories of it. For most, it was undoubtedly the first time in their lives they experienced intimations of violence against themselves, and it must have been doubly troubling because it came from people they considered friends and neighbors. For Valley unionists, there could be no doubt now that they and their families were in danger, and that they would need to keep their sentiments to themselves in the future. “A Union man,” said Augusta County’s Elias Blankenship,

³⁵ Claim of Elias Andrews, #51394, Warren Co., VA.

³⁶ Claim of Joseph Bauserman, #42956, Shenandoah Co. VA.

³⁷ Claim of Ferdinand Zeiler, #48807, Shenandoah Co., VA.

“scarcely dared speak above his breath.”³⁸ Page County’s John Presgraves put it simply, “People about that time were shy of talking.”³⁹

Claims from the selected counties of central Tennessee cite election conditions less often than those from the Shenandoah Valley. The results of the June 11th public referendum on secession varied widely among the counties within the area of study, but with secessionist majorities in each. Several Tennessee claims attest to secessionist intimidation at the polls. James M. Haynes was a farmer in Rutherford County. He voted in favor of secession at the June 11th referendum, claiming that he was intimidated into doing so at the polling place, being called among other things an abolitionist. The man who was appointed officer of that polling place testified on his behalf.

I remember there was a very serious difficulty that [was] likely to have been gotten up against the claimant at the election that day. The claimant used some expression not favorable to the cause of rebellion and disunion and a very intense feeling was expressed against him.... The feeling was very high, and some very hot heads and claimant was in great danger of personal violence. There was not a vote cast against separation from Federal Government and secession that day.⁴⁰

A few acted more boldly. Farmer and distiller Joseph Thompson of the same county was notified that no Union man would be allowed to vote. “That made me angry,” he testified, and he went to the polls anyway with a loaded pistol. When confronted there by a secessionist neighbor, Thompson claimed he said to the man “I am going to vote as I damn please.... I told him that I would see all them in Hell before I would vote for either Isham Harris or Jeff Davis either.” He proceeded to vote against secession.⁴¹

³⁸ Claim of Isaiah Price, #43036, Augusta Co., VA.

³⁹ Claim of John H. Presgraves, #21210, Page Co., VA.

⁴⁰ Claim of James M. Haynes, #17337, Rutherford Co., TN.

⁴¹ Claim of Joseph R. Thompson, #18005, Rutherford Co., TN.

Whether or not they attempted to vote against secession, unconditional unionists experienced the disorienting shock of finding themselves socially isolated, enemies of the state and their communities. Neighbors who they assumed were fellow supporters of the Union had turned to secession in droves within a very short period. Unionists in regions like East Tennessee could still depend on a sizable community of like-minded people, with immediate neighbors counting among them. But for unionists experiencing the more common condition of living in majority secessionist areas, the sense of being cast out and alone was strong. Edward Jordan, a Rutherford County, Tennessee farmer, spoke of this changed social condition perhaps more affectingly than any other claimant:

I was not molested or injured on account of my Union sentiments. I was socially tabooed and ostracized on account of my Union sentiments. My most intimate and oldest friends and business associates would not recognize me on the street any more than they would to a dog. My family was ostracized wholly nearly all the time during the war and even after the war. No one who has not passed through a similar experience can have any idea of the bitterness and hatred which was manifested toward me and other Union men and our families by the rebels just simply because we adhered to the government of the United States.⁴²

It was a sort of social death, in which unionists had only each other for support within a wider environment of ostracism and oppression. To benefit from this support network, unionists had to be aware of each other. The evidence from both Virginia and Tennessee suggests that most white unionists were aware of a limited number of fellow unionists in their area, although there is little evidence for extensive networks that developed in place where unionists were numerous enough to operate with some confidence. Some unionists, though, were more isolated. The example of the Shipley and Mumshaw families of Frederick County, Virginia illustrates this fact. Both families lived near the

⁴² Claim of Edward Jordan, claim #3233, Rutherford Co., TN.

banks of Cedar Creek, west of Middletown, about two miles apart. The Shipleys were engaged in grain farming, the Mummaws in milling. Unionists in the neighborhood seem to have been few and far between, yet the Claims Commission files indicate that each was unaware of the other. The desperate need for social connections which resulted from such isolation would come to influence the ways in which white unionists would relate to their black neighbors. They could not afford to discriminate in the search for allies.⁴³

As the war progressed into ever more vindictive cycles of retribution, most applicants still could not claim that actual violence had been perpetrated upon them. Of course, many of these claimants ranked among the quietest, often being elderly farmers whose suspected Union sentiments were not deemed worthy of action by Confederate authorities or sympathizers. Conditions were different for Unionists who were more outspoken, or who were young enough for military service. This became especially so in the spring of 1862, when the Confederate government, desperate to field enough soldiers to cope with the expanding scale of the war, instituted national conscription. The Conscription Act made all white males between the ages of 18 and 35 subject to military service. Within months the maximum age limit was raised to 40 and then to 45. Conscription brought thousands of unionists who otherwise might have avoided notice into direct conflict with civil and military authority, and precipitated most of the violence and coercion inflicted on unionist citizens during the war.⁴⁴

Mary Jane Clem filed a claim for a single horse taken by Union troops in 1864. By then, she was a widow. In June 1862, a group of armed men entered the home she

⁴³ The Mummaws were German Anabaptists; the Shipleys were probably not. The semi-insular nature of the Germanic community in the Valley may have contributed to the two family's lack of contact.

⁴⁴ Exemptions were granted to men with certain occupations considered socially vital, including teachers, mill operators, and ministers. Most controversially, it exempted men who owned twenty or more slaves.

shared with her husband John, seizing him and taking him away at bayonet point. The following morning, John's body was found in the nearby woods, shot through the head and body.⁴⁵ The widow of Shenandoah County farmer George Miller remembered her late husband's trials:

My husband was threatened, hunted, arrested and imprisoned because he would not fight against the Union. The rebels came after him more times than I can remember. He had to be continually on the lookout and had to take to the woods very often to avoid the conscript officers who seemed determined to catch him after he got home from Castle Thunder. The woods were close to our house and we could see anyone approaching from the road some distance off. I used to carry his food to him in the woods where he had a place of concealment.⁴⁶

The practice of hiding in the woods to evade conscription or arrest became universal for southern unionist men of military age, and was nearly always referred to as "laying out." In Clarke County, William Stolle and Thomas Nicewarner laid out together. Nicewarner recalled, "He was hunted and we both camped out in the woods, and when in the bushes, he was lying down in his drawers, some rebel soldiers came to wash, and we ran for dear life. He ran through the briars in his shirt." Stolle was eventually apprehended and taken to Richmond in chains.⁴⁷

Although the act of "laying out" was perhaps the most common evidence of unionism cited by claimants, it was not by itself evidence of anything more than unwillingness to serve in the Confederate army. There were many who, in addition to avoiding Confederate service, did far more, piloting unionists and deserters north, or

⁴⁵ Claim of Mary Jane Clem, #9308, Shenandoah Co., VA. Two of Mary Jane Clem's witnesses assumed the killers were "bushwackers," paramilitary partisans operating outside military authority, but Mary's description of bayoneted rifles and the date, shortly after conscription went into effect, suggests John was taken by military authorities, and perhaps shot trying to escape.

⁴⁶ Claim of George E. Miller, #43036, Shenandoah Co., VA.

⁴⁷ Claim of William F. Stolle, #41856, Clarke Co., VA.

hiding and guiding Union soldiers separated from their commands. Robert Allison of Bedford County typified this more muscular variety of pro-active unionism:

I piloted a good many conscripts through to the Federal lines. I took forty-two conscripts or Union men about to be conscripted to the Union lines one night and I was engaged a considerable time in this business. Myself and another man had a few rebel soldiers bribed so that we could get our friends through to the Federals, and even these rebel soldiers were soon induced to leave the rebel service.⁴⁸

A witness stated that Allison “and his family had a regular battle with some rebel bushwackers that attacked him and whipped them out wounding four or five of them. I did not see the battle but it was noised and talked of all over the county.”⁴⁹

The explanations unionists gave the Commission did not always offer much insight into the claimant’s political views. Many were disappointingly vague and simply indicated that they favored the Union and rejected the Confederacy. The format of the questioning did not demand more specific answers, nor did commission agents query the claimants about their feelings toward slavery, since after all there were many unionist slave owners. In many cases, white unionists expressed their feelings about the Union only in terms of sentiment directed toward the “old flag.” For these claimants, their unionism was the product of affection for the concept of the United States, and for its symbols. If it was more complex than that, they failed to express it. Some of these people may genuinely have been less politically aware than others. Indeed, it is common to find witnesses testifying that various unionist claimants were quiet people who seldom offered an opinion about politics. While not always the case, people who expressed their unionism in the vaguest terms were often among those judged as weak claimants, whose

⁴⁸ Claim of Robert Allison, #17206, Bedford Co., TN.

⁴⁹ Claim of Robert Allison, #17206, Bedford Co., TN.

loyalties were perhaps more mixed than they cared to admit, and who were unwilling to go so far as to grossly exaggerate their loyalties under oath.

Among the claimants who were former masters in both Virginia and Tennessee, few felt the need to justify their slaveholding, though a few did. For example, Warren County widow Esther Ann McKay asserted that she did “not believe in slavery as a general thing, but I did not feel that I committed a sin in having slaves as we had them. My own experience as I saw slavery here in my neighborhood was that they were better off, better provided for and cared for than they are now. But I am glad slavery is gone. Glad to be relieved of the responsibility connected with it.”⁵⁰

McKay’s comments typify the attitude of many post-war Southerners, whether they had been enthusiastically pro-slavery or not. For most white Americans, blacks were still an inferior class who needed to be cared for regardless of whether they were slave or free. Esther Ann McKay’s entire claim is rife with the same kinds of complicated sentiments, and the Commission rejected her claim without much ado.

Some claimants used the opportunity of their testimony to make it clear that they associated the cause of the Confederacy as synonymous with the protection of slave interests. In the Shenandoah Valley, most of those who viewed the Confederacy in this light were German and Swiss-descended Mennonites and Baptist Brethren. Farmer Daniel Keller’s secessionist neighbors called him a “stamp down black Yankee.” Commissioner Aldis’s summary of his successful claim stated that the evidence “shows very satisfactorily that he was an anti-slavery man.” When Keller’s father-in-law

⁵⁰ Claim of Esther Ann McKay, #12441, Warren Co., VA.

attempted to will some of his slaves to him, he refused the offer.⁵¹ Elizabeth Mummaw, widow of a Unionist miller in Frederick County, expressed the couple's feelings:

When the state seceded my husband said he was not going to vote for secession, that he had no blacks to vote for and was not going to vote for a slave government. This was after persons had called on him and told him to go and vote. And I asked him what he was going to do. We did not believe in slavery. We were members of the United Brethren Church.⁵²

Shenandoah County miller Jacob Hockman told the Commission that he "had no slaves, and no wish to see a slave government set up in the South." When his wife Esther was asked if she was a Unionist, she replied, "I certainly was, and so was my father and all my brothers. They were all opposed to slavery before the war."⁵³ Another resident of Shenandoah County, Joseph Huff, used language similar to Jacob Hockman's, saying "The Union was good enough for me. I had no slaves and didn't want any, and had no use for a slave government."⁵⁴

The association of the secession with slavery was not limited to pacifist Germans. One of Frederick County farmer John Magill's witnesses said of him, "He was before the war so pronounced in his opposition to slavery that he was regarded in the neighborhood as an abolitionist."⁵⁵ In Augusta County, a witness for Isaiah Price described him as "opposed to slavery. He thought it not to be right, and was opposed to the South on that account."⁵⁶ In central Tennessee, the evidence in the Claims Commission records for the acknowledgment of the centrality of slavery to the Confederate cause is scarcer. This is

⁵¹ Claim of Daniel Keller, #19287, Shenandoah Co., VA; It is not explicit in many claims whether or not the claimant is of Germanic extraction. Some necessary assumptions have been made based on names, and references to religious affiliation and social connections with other families in the testimony.

⁵² Claim of Elizabeth Mummaw, #51463, Frederick Co., VA.

⁵³ Claim of Jacob Hockman, claim #21220, Shenandoah Co., VA.

⁵⁴ Claim of Joseph H. Huff, claim #7948, Shenandoah Co., VA.

⁵⁵ Claim of John Magill, claim #20584, Frederick Co., VA.

⁵⁶ Claim of Isaiah Price, claim #43036, Augusta Co., VA.

probably to be explained primarily by the lack of a significant settlement of Germanic Anabaptists in the region, as well as the greater reliance on slave labor. Especially common among the central Tennessee testimonies, more so than those from the Shenandoah, was the interpretation of secession as a phenomenon of party politics. Many claimants self-identified as “Old Line Whigs,” and these men often saw secession as a Democratic plot. A witness for Rutherford County’s Calvin G. Mitchell, for example, said Mitchell regarded secession as “an effort to build up an aristocracy in the South and to build up the interests of the Democratic Party in the South.”⁵⁷

Only a few claimants from central Tennessee cited the institution of slavery itself as part of their objection to the Confederacy. John Harris of Bedford County was a typical white unionist who laid out in the woods to evade conscript officers. In 1864, Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry passed through his area and, according to Harris, killed several unionist neighbors, provoking Harris to flee to Union lines near Murfreesboro. A loyalty witness testified that Harris “frequently said that he desired to see slavery abolished.” Another stated, “the claimant always said that the rebellion was wrong and uncalled for, that he was for the government at all hazards, and to his confidential friends would say that he was an abolitionist at heart anyhow.”⁵⁸

Harris’s admission that he was opposed to the institution of slavery, even an “abolitionist at heart,” was a rarity. No other claimant from central Tennessee professed such blatant anti-slavery sentiments. From the evidence, it seems that, even taking the absence of German anti-slavery elements into account, white central Tennessee claimants

⁵⁷ Claim of Calvin G. Mitchell, #17017, Rutherford Co., TN.

⁵⁸ Claim of John N. Harris, #18904, Bedford Co., TN.

were less likely than their Virginia counterparts to cite opposition to slavery as part of their opposition to the Confederacy.

For black claimants the story is very different. Claims files from both the Shenandoah and Tennessee attest to their strong association of secession with slavery, and a much greater percentage of black claimants were able or willing to elaborate on their feelings about the Union, sometimes quite eloquently. For example, Mary Blackburn of Augusta County had an unusually personal reason to regard the Confederacy as her enemy, and the Union as her ally. Purchased out of bondage by her free husband shortly before the war, Mary told the Commission:

I am the mother of three children all by my first husband, and all of them sold to traders whilst I was in slavery. I have never heard from them since, and know not where they are or whether dead or alive...I felt a willingness to help the cause of the Union at all times, because of the manner in which my children were torn from me.⁵⁹

The master of James Foster, a slave in Shenandoah County, allowed him the freedom to pursue the shoemaking trade in the evenings, and to keep his earnings from it. Foster earned enough money to buy a cow and a few hogs, which were consumed by Union troops in 1864. He told the Commission, “I sympathized with the Union cause all the time. I could not be any other way. I was a slave and wanted to be free and was confident if the Union cause was successful I would be free, and my race too.” A former white Unionist testifying to the loyalty of John Dogans, a former free black from Page County, stated “All colored men (he especially) were considered to be Union men.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Claim of Mary Blackburn, #41694, Augusta Co., VA.

⁶⁰ Claim of John Dogans, #36903, Page Co., VA.

It was not only black claimants and white former Unionists who testified that the black population was overwhelmingly for the cause of the Union. Washington Wells, who rented a small farm from a secessionist white family during the war, was able to get one of the sons of that family to testify on his behalf. The young man, a teenager during the war, referred to Wells as a “nigger” and a “good darkey.” When asked about Wells’s sentiments, he responded, “I don’t know anything about his politics. Of course all of them were Union, I believe, or so considered.”⁶¹

That claims were filed by former slaves obviously indicates that these slaves owned their own property, or at least believed they did. Property ownership among slaves seems to have been particularly prevalent in the Upper South, where there were fewer large plantations. In Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, few masters owned more than ten slaves. With the change to a wheat economy in the region, many of the less skilled slaves were sold off to the cotton states. Among the slaves who remained, a large proportion were skilled tradesmen. The close working relationship between these slaves and their masters seems often to have led to a negotiated arrangement allowing the slave to earn money for his or her self. While seldom enough to purchase freedom, it was often enough to buy a few animals. This sense of ownership, however shaky its legal basis, must have given the slaves in question a limited sense of control and self-worth.⁶² On plantations like those of central Tennessee, there were always some skilled slaves working as craftsmen, as well as semi-skilled slaves who alternated between help with craft work and field labor.⁶³ For the smaller slave-owning farmers, relationships appear to have echoed

⁶¹ Claim of Washington Wells, #43094, Warren Co., VA.

⁶² U.S. Census Data, 1860; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974): 393.

⁶³ Genovese, 389.

those in the Shenandoah, with some slaves achieving a degree of autonomy and probably self-worth through hiring themselves out or practicing their craft for themselves.

The question of legal ownership of property by people who were themselves property was a difficult concept for the Commission, in many cases challenging their notions about the nature of slavery. Many claims by former slaves were rejected based on a combination of lack of evidence of ownership, and the commissioner's own skepticism that slaves commonly owned their own horse, cow, or crops. But in cases where witnesses strongly corroborated claims of ownership, the Commission often approved compensation. While not conclusive, it does appear that the testimony of at least one white witness was instrumental in these cases.

Solomon Miller of Rutherford County, Tennessee, was one such slave entrepreneur. A trained stone mason in his 50s, Miller bought a horse during the war which was soon taken by Union soldiers. Miller described his financial arrangement with his master: "I had to pay my master \$27 to \$30 per month and all that I could make over that amount was mine, and was allowed to make contracts and work when I pleased at stone work, and this way I saved up a considerable amount of money. I made more money then than I can now." Even so, Miller asserted that he was glad to be free.⁶⁴

Edmund Murfree was a Rutherford County slave who does not seem to have been emancipated until 1865. In 1863 he bought a horse from a white man for \$150. A few months later, the horse was seized by the forces of General Rosecrans. Murfree testified that the man from whom he purchased the horse, John McDermott, lowered the price to \$100 in light of Murfree's misfortune. This statement suggests that McDermott allowed

⁶⁴ Claim of Solomon Miller, #16047, Rutherford Co., TN.

Murfree to take the horse with only the promise of future payment. Murfree also bought a mule from a different white man. This animal was also confiscated by Union troops.

Grant Edwards, a black witness for Murfree who claimed to have been a personal servant of both generals Grant and Sherman, stated “He is a quiet religious old negro man that every body respects and like nearly all of his race was always loyal to the government as far as I know and believe.”⁶⁵ John McDermott, the white seller of the horse, was one of those who testified on Murfree’s behalf. His statement was no doubt a major factor in the Commission’s decision to grant Edmund Murfree a considerable \$210 of his total claim of \$301.

In both the Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee, former slaves were unanimous in their expression that the Union was the entity that represented their freedom. This feeling was intensified greatly when news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached them in late 1862, though for some, Unionist masters had counseled them from the start that Union victory would mean freedom to the slave.⁶⁶

James Simpson of Warren County, Virginia, bought his own freedom in 1850. For the next 27 years he ran a grist mill for the family of his former master in exchange for room and board and one-third of the toll.⁶⁷ When questioned by the Commission about his loyalties, he answered, “I was always for the Union cause. It was my cause. When the Union troops came and was going to burn the mill I told them it would make no difference with me if they took all I had in the world I should still stand for the Union.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Claim of Edmund Murphree, #14159, Rutherford Co., TN.

⁶⁶ In preparation for this study, Claims Commission records in East Tennessee and eastern North Carolina were also extensively surveyed. The testimony of former slaves regarding the Union is consistent with that from the area of this study.

⁶⁷ Small custom mills kept a portion of the finished flour as payment, referred to as the “toll.”

⁶⁸ Claim of James Simpson, #41851, Warren Co., VA.

Testimony from Tennessee regarding the slave experience is quite similar to that from Virginia. When a Union column reached the Rutherford County farm where Hancel Mitchell was a slave, he left with them, ending up employed by the army at Murfreesboro. He bought a horse and a mule with his earnings. At some point he had a run-in with Confederate troops while riding this horse. They took the bedding and clothes Mitchell had with him and threatened to kill him for his involvement with Union forces. In December, 1864, needy Union cavalymen took both the horse and the mule. A black witness for Mitchell stated that he was present when the horse was taken, but that both he and Mitchell were too “timid” to ask for compensation for the animal, as they had both been slaves until recently. “We were both freedmen,” he testified, “and our only hope was in and with the government.”⁶⁹

It was not only slaves who saw the Union as the only likely protector of their rights. Both the Shenandoah and central Tennessee were home to a substantial number of free blacks, both manumitted slaves and free born. Life for free blacks in the antebellum South was hardly free. State legislatures continually passed new and more restrictive laws relating to the residency and activities of non-slave blacks. As the Civil War approached, they found themselves the target of increasing hostility, as those who were most successful among them became a threat to the solidifying racial hierarchy.⁷⁰

In Warren County, Virginia, Harry Roy was typical of the more successful element of the free black population. Roy purchased his freedom before the war, and owned “a little house” where he lived with his small family, along with five horses,

⁶⁹ Claim of Hancel Mitchell, #17675, Rutherford Co., TN.

⁷⁰ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York : Pantheon Books, 1974): 317.

twelve cows, and ten or more hogs. He rented eighty acres to farm from a white landowner.⁷¹ In Tennessee, Ed Peters of Rutherford County bought his freedom in 1845. At the start of the war he rented a farm from a wealthy white landowner. The landowner, who testified for Peters, reasoned that in the coming conflict Union armies would leave black farmers alone, and accordingly rented all his properties to black tenants as a means of protecting his assets. Experience would prove him mistaken, as Union armies voraciously used resources throughout the regions they occupied without much regard to the race of the populace. Peters hired two free black farm hands to help with labor. He used the old slave cabins as corn cribs. When the Commission asked him about his feelings toward the Union, he stated, "I knew if the Union was lost, I would be, and I had paid too much for myself to lose my freedom." Later, he continued, "I always wanted the Yankees to whip the rebels since I knew if the rebels whipped I would be made a slave, since I heard Jeff Davis intended to put into slavery again all free negroes."⁷²

Peters' fear of re-enslavement was not baseless. In the 1850s, with sectional tensions over slavery increasing rapidly, many slave states debated measures to enslave their free black populations. In the prevailing doctrine of "positive good," which deemed slavery not a necessary evil but the only natural and humane condition for black people, the presence of free blacks making successful livings undermined the entire argument. With schemes to deport free blacks having failed, the cry to enslave them instead grew. After John Brown's raid in 1859 these plans reached a peak in popularity before subsiding just before the war. When it came down to it, most white southerners balked

⁷¹ Claim of Harry Roy, #8602, Warren Co., TN.

⁷² Claim of Ed Peters, #17246, Rutherford Co., TN.

when faced with the actual removal of economically valuable free black labor, as well as the prospect of families, even black ones, forcibly torn from their homes. But there was every reason for Peters to worry that in an independent South, governed by some of the same fire-eaters who had called the loudest for his re-enslavement, and without the United States Supreme Court as a potential safeguard, the danger would be renewed. For Ed Peters, the Union was the only power likely to protect his hard-won freedom.⁷³

From the Claims evidence, then, it is clear that both slaves and free blacks in the Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee regions saw the Union as an entity offering salvation. For slaves, with the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union offered the freedom they had likely believed impossible, even if the details of the wartime offer were unclear and the motive misunderstood. For free blacks, used to living in a twilight between slavery and real freedom, the protection of the United States government was their only hope, especially in a South where local governments had grown openly hostile toward them.

In the historiography of Civil War unionism, there has been a tendency to view black southerners, especially slaves, not as unionists, per se, but as actors motivated only by the desire for freedom. Blacks, the argument goes, shared with white unionists only the desire to see the Union prevail. While this shared goal often brought them into contact as allies of convenience, slaves are depicted as generally not politically aware enough to have developed ideas of nationalism, and the bond between them and white unionists is portrayed as superficial.

⁷³ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974): 364-368.

The evidence from the Claims Commission testimony, however, suggests that both slaves and free blacks, at least in the Upper South areas surveyed, had a keen awareness of the Union and the Federal Government as the origin and protector of their most basic rights. With this explicit belief in the nation-state as their ally, it may be more appropriate to argue that at least some slaves and free blacks were not only unionists in their own right, but the ultimate unionists, able to express their connection to the Union in meaningful terms which exceeded the vague affections for the “old flag” voiced by some of their white counterparts.

Before the war, the people who became white unionists, and those who became black unionists, played out their lives within a racial caste system which limited the kinds of interaction they were likely to have, even though those lives were linked and paralleled in many particulars. Now, white unionists were becoming versed in the tactics of obfuscation and secrecy long practiced by the black population, and blacks were developing a form of national identity they had little reason to develop before. With the war throwing their worlds into confusion, a shared Unionism would bring their paths into intersection in ways previously unthinkable to both parties.

Chapter Three

Collaboration Between Black and White Unionists

Henry Shipley and the enslaved Dorsey Washington's joint effort to rescue Union wounded from the battlefield at Cedar Creek, Virginia was not an instance of a master compelling a slave to do his bidding. It was the result of three years of commiseration regarding the war and its meaning. "He told us colored people," Dorsey told the Commission, "that he was a Union man, and advised us that we would all be free.... All the colored men in that vicinity considered him a Union man, he always advising them about their freedom."⁷⁴

Clandestine, frank conversation about the war and its potential for change is one of the most common forms of meaningful contact between white unionists and slaves evidenced in the records of the Southern Claims Commission. It was, however, a quiet relationship carried on discreetly; here a hushed bit of advice at the local mill, there a small group of slaves gathering to hear war news. But the relationships built over time through these secretive and subversive conversations often resulted, at moments of stress, in overt cooperative action, occasionally of a remarkably bold character. This chapter considers the nature of communication and new relationships between white unionists and their black, typically enslaved, allies, and how it expressed itself in action in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and the counties of southern central Tennessee. It also addresses the question of whether this seeming cooperation as equal allies was truly as equal as it appears.

⁷⁴ Claim of Henry C. Shipley, #51224, Frederick Co., VA.

Dorsey Washington's recollection that Henry Shipley dispensed advice to slaves is echoed by testimony in several claims from both the Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee. A few of the whites who advised slaves were the masters of the very bondsmen they counseled. The advice they gave was often seemingly contradictory to their economic interests as masters. For example, Willis Lowe, a wartime slave of Tennessee farmer Alfred P. Lowe, testified to his master's sentiments:

Mr. Lowe's wife had died about six years before the war, and he lived alone on the farm with no white person, except his colored folks. I was entrusted with his farming business, and was on confidential and intimate terms with him. And when the war came up I had frequent conversations with him about the war and he explained to me the war and what it was about, and he was always opposed to the South bringing the war on, and said it would free the colored people. He said, "Willis, if this war comes you will be free," and he did not care if the colored people were made free.⁷⁵

The frankness with which masters like Lowe advised slaves to anticipate their imminent freedom is at first surprising, as they obviously stood to lose a great deal of financial investment. It may be that unionist masters simply valued the victory of the Union over their own financial well-being. It is more likely that they were influenced, at least in part, by an acceptance of the new reality brought about by the war. For many unionist masters in disputed regions, including those of the Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee, the war caused severe economic disruptions. With their Confederate neighbors refusing to do business with them, and the proximity of hungry armies discouraging them from planting as much as they did before the war, there was little

⁷⁵ Claim of Alfred P. Lowe, #17994, Rutherford Co., TN.

chance of profit for them. An enslaved workforce might become more of a burden than a benefit under these conditions.

In addition to economic factors, slavery had been substantially disrupted by the mid-point of the war in 1863, both through Union military operations and slave awareness of the Emancipation Proclamation. A September, 1863 court decision in Rockingham County, Virginia, declared that “[T]he facilities which are given to negroes to escape from their masters” had made slavery “a voluntary matter altogether.”⁷⁶ The likelihood that their slaves would eventually be free influenced many masters to attempt to reason with them to retain their labor. In their testimony, former slaves recalled that their masters consistently counseled them to remain where they were, trusting that final Union victory would bring freedom. We must consider, then, that these masters advised their slaves to be patient at least partly out of a desire to keep them on the farm and productive. Rather than an indicator of a genuine positive feeling among unionist masters toward the prospect of freedom, their words of advice could have been an attempt to retain some influence over their slaves. Such accounts are therefore of limited value as evidence of mutual respect and cooperation.⁷⁷

There are, however, a larger number of examples in both states of white unionists advising free blacks and slaves who were not their property. Elias Andrews was an active unionist in Warren County, Virginia, and a member of a network for aiding fugitive

⁷⁶ Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill, NC University of North Carolina Press, 1995): 164.

⁷⁷ One former slave in Alabama testified before the Commission that his master told him and his fellow slaves that the war would free them, and “to make ourselves comfortable at home and he would let us know when the time came.” (Storey, *Loyalty and Loss*, 52)

Confederate conscripts and deserters. James Simpson, a free black man during the war, testified on his behalf, telling the Commission, “I had a great deal of talk with him from time to time on war matters.... He was well known as a Union man by the colored people.”⁷⁸ Also in Warren County, Harry Roy, freed before the war, testified for white unionist Abraham Forney. “I went to see him often and asked him what was the best plan,” Roy stated, “as we were there in the power of the rebels, and he advised us to take steps towards the Union folks and be as quiet as possible.”⁷⁹ Horace Dean, who was Forney’s slave until the late 1850s and returned during the war to live with him, corroborated Roy’s statement. Isaac Berkeley, a former Clarke County, Virginia slave, testified on behalf of white farmer Jesse Butler. Berkeley stated, “The colored people regarded him as a Union man, and he used to tell them which side to stick to. I mean by this he told them never to betray any Union soldiers, he has told me this many a time.”⁸⁰

Testimony of this kind from central Tennessee is consistent in quantity and content with that from Virginia. Joseph Brazelton of Franklin County sought the counsel of an energetic local unionist, the brother of his own master. “I had learned to read and write while a boy as a slave,” reported Joseph, “and when the war came on I was often at Daniel Brazelton’s the deceased, who often talked to me about the war and told me how matters were going. I knew he was a Union man opposed to the rebellion.”⁸¹

The testimony of witnesses like Joseph Brazelton makes it clear that black communities were keenly aware of who the white unionists were in their area. When asked, as all witnesses were, to give the names of local unionists who might corroborate a

⁷⁸ Claim of Elias Andrews, #51394, Warren Co., VA.

⁷⁹ Claim of Abraham Forney, #9866, Warren Co., VA.

⁸⁰ Claim of Jesse Butler, #48630, Clarke Co., VA.

⁸¹ Claim of John C. Brazelton, #8369, Franklin County, TN.

claim, black witnesses were able to list them at least as comprehensively as white ones. Slaves may actually have been more aware of the extent of local white unionism than the white unionists themselves. White unionists were compelled to keep a low profile and seldom spoke to other whites about their sentiments unless they were confident it was shared. Slaves were under no such restrictions within their own racial community, and quickly developed consensus amongst themselves regarding probable unionists and potential allies. A former Tennessee slave said of his master, “We colored folks often talked about why the claimant who was then our master did not mix or keep company with his secession neighbors and attend the secession public meetings and we all concluded that he was in favor of the Union and that he had no sympathy with the secessionists.”⁸² Harry Roy said of Abraham Forney, “He was considered a Union man by the rebels, and they watched him night and day. Mr. Beecher and Mr. Forney were the only Union men in that vicinity except the colored men. They were all loyal that I knew except a few.”⁸³

The relationships formed through conversation and observation of one another formed the basis for outward expressions, as whites and blacks began to alter their ideas of each other and of themselves in relation to each other. The fact that slaves and free blacks had reason to favor Union victory for reasons of self-interest is obvious, and has been well recognized by historians. What is less recognized is the idea that cooperation between white unionists and free blacks/slaves went deeper than a temporary partnership with fundamentally different motives, with little in common in terms of ideology. In the evidence of overt cooperative action between the races contained in the Claims

⁸² Claim of Wiley J. Hines, #18363, Franklin County, TN.

⁸³ Claim of Abraham Forney, #9866, Clarke Co., VA.

Commission testimony, there is instead the suggestion that something more was developing, at least for some. The claims indicate that many white unionists saw blacks, for the first time, as something close to equals, and that blacks regarded themselves as full unionists and part of the larger unionist community.

Slaves' and free blacks' feeling of being unionists in their own right came not only from their loyalty to the government of the United States, but from their active efforts to aid the war effort. Indeed, it is safe to say the slaves and free blacks in the South gave more material aid to the Union army than their white unionist allies, many of whom were busy evading authorities or trying to remain inconspicuous. The active role slaves and free blacks played in aiding Union armies is well known. They frequently provided vital intelligence to Union forces. Some acted as guides, though the consequences for doing so could be dire. Two of the slave Simon Williams' sons guided Federal forces through the Shenandoah Valley in 1864. When the Confederate army discovered their identities, soldiers were dispatched to the farm where Williams lived, taking him and four of his other children away in shackles. Williams was forced to drive a wagon for the Confederate army. The fate of his children is unknown.⁸⁴

Ray Johnson was a free black man in Shenandoah County who bought his freedom before the war. Like many free blacks and escaped slaves, he was employed by the U.S. government, driving a wagon for the army in 1862 until he was captured. The Confederates sent him to his former master, assuming the man would re-enslave him. Instead he was offered the rent of a farm. As Ray Johnson put it, his old master was "kind of a Union man himself."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ "Gatewood, Wright," #16875, Shenandoah Co., VA.

⁸⁵ "Johnson, Ray," #10699, Shenandoah Co., VA.

Clearly, both whites and blacks who favored Union victory were capable of bold action, and many did act. With the strong parallels between the experiences of white and black unionists, and the recognition of their common cause increasingly recognized by both, it is not surprising that the claims evidence shows joint action from very early in the war onward. A few claims give evidence of anti-Confederate cooperation between slaves and their own masters. Six years after the war, Franklin county farmer Elmore Horton was shot and killed on a road near his house by parties unknown. A few years later, his widow filed a \$5690 claim with the Commission. The claim testimony gives us no details, but the witnesses seem to suggest a connection between Horton's wartime unionism and his murder. Perhaps an old score was belatedly settled. One night during the war, conscription officers came to the Horton farm to arrest him for having failed to report for duty. While leading him from the house, his widow reported, one of their slaves whistled in the darkness as if giving a signal to others. The startled conscription officers bolted rather than risk a confrontation with phantom unionist partisans. Although a dramatic example of cooperation between unionist masters and their slaves, this incident is not necessarily indicative of a shared unionist principles. There are, after all, tales of slaves protecting pro-Confederate masters from Union troops, as well. For less ambiguous examples we must again leave the slave/master relationship.

A striking early example of overt anti-Confederate action is that of the claim of John C. Brazelton. Brazelton was perhaps the boldest white unionist in Franklin County, Tennessee. His frequent conversations with slaves about the war were documented earlier in this chapter. One of those slaves, William Huddleston, testified to an incident in 1861 in Winchester, Tennessee:

I know that after the rebel flag had been raised on a flagpole some 80 feet high in Winchester, I know that the deceased gave a man five dollars to get it down one night. And the next morning it was floating to a quitting (?) from over a privy in town and the rebels were offering five hundred dollars to find out who had done this, and they made up a considerable sum of money to hire a young sailor to climb the poll and put it back.⁸⁶

Both former slave allies of John Brazelton featured this incident in detail in their testimonies, suggesting that it impressed them deeply. It was only the beginning of their relationship and high regard for Brazelton.

An unusually dramatic incidence of overt cooperative action occurred at an unknown date in Frederick County, Virginia. Samuel Mummaw, the German Baptist Brethren miller whose wife's testimony regarding their aversion to slavery was quoted in the previous chapter, was an outspoken man, a dangerous trait for a unionist. A white witness told the Commission:

I was present at a corn shucking one night when Mummaw talked Union pretty plain and a party of whites were going to handle him and threatened him, but he was a strong man himself and some colored men were ready to defend him and he was too much for them.⁸⁷

With this single quote as our only evidence, we cannot know whether the men who stood up for Mummaw were slave or free, or whether they numbered two or a small crowd. Regardless, it was a bold act, the significance of which is hard to overstate. Surrounded by the whites of their community, at least a few black men were willing to come to blows, it seems, to defend a man they must have regarded as an ally. If there had been a fight, we must imagine they would have faced severe repercussions. Even with the situation having apparently been defused short of fisticuffs, there may still have been consequences. As much as we might want to know more about the circumstances of this

⁸⁶ Claim of John C. Brazelton, #8369, Franklin County, TN.

⁸⁷ Claim of Elizabeth Mummaw, #51463, Frederick Co., VA.

incident, it is at least clear that a true sense of common identity must have existed between Mummaw and these men. It may have been an uneven regard, with the black men viewing Mummaw as more of an ally than he saw them, but the boldness of the act is suggestive of something more substantial. This evidence provides a rare but clear example of a passionate feeling of common cause which goes beyond a sort of wary partnership between parties with very different primary goals.

As discussed in the previous chapter, numerous claims from both the Shenandoah Valley and southern central Tennessee mention or detail efforts to aid in transporting conscription evaders and persecuted fellow unionists to safety within Federal lines. In the Shenandoah Valley, for most of the war this meant a dangerous trek to reach the far northern end of the valley, which was in Union hands most of the time. In Tennessee, it typically meant reaching Kentucky during the first year of the war, and occupied Nashville thereafter. While fugitives might travel singly or in small groups, some gathered at prearranged points to form much larger parties. George Hollar, of Augusta County, Virginia testified that his house was a “depot” on the route north. On one occasion his home acted as a meeting place for a group of thirty, who set out in the night with a guide toward Union territory.⁸⁸ The organization and provision of such groups presupposes some degree of communication between unionists. Because, as previously discussed, most unionist claimants kept largely to themselves and therefore had only vague notions of the unionist community around them, the families participating in these efforts were necessarily among the boldest in their willingness to risk their safety to help others. On at least one occasion the racial composition of a fugitive group was mixed. In

⁸⁸ Claim of George Hollar, #43003, Augusta Co., VA.

1864, Henry Brunk was one of a group of seventeen men who fled to Maryland. After the war Brunk wrote a rare account of his experience. When they reached a Union camp and safety, they were told that the group was almost fired upon until the soldiers saw the three black men in the party. They may well have been slaves. If so, these men were following a long tradition of fleeing slavery by attempting a dangerous journey to free soil. In popular memory this journey is associated with the so-called Underground Railroad, the network of guides and safe-houses which acted as stations along the route. The similarity of the antebellum Underground Railroad to the network of guides and safe houses for aiding conscripts and unionists is clear, and not just to the modern reader. Claims exist in which claimants or witnesses actually refer to the unionist fugitive network as an “underground railroad.”⁸⁹

In using this term, these individuals demonstrated a clear awareness of how their own network resembled the one for escaping slaves. The interracial nature of at least a few of the fugitive parties must only have reinforced this for everyone involved. Evidence from the claims even indicates that at least a few of the safe houses on this network were occupied by free black families. The experience of the Underground Railroad, so long associated with the black experience, was a now a shared experience between blacks and whites.

It may have been the undeniable recognition of such common experiences and need for one another that encouraged some white unionists to begin to lose racial distinctions between themselves and black allies. In the Shenandoah Valley, a white

⁸⁹ Emmert F. Bittinger, ed. *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley, Volume 1: Mt. Crawford and Cross Keys, Rockingham County, Virginia* (Dayton, Va.: Valley Research Associates, 2003): 954-956; Only one claim within the study area, in the Shenandoah Valley, uses this term, but it is found in other regions. See for example the claim of Beverly Weir of Bradley County, Tennessee (#21283).

witness for unionist Abraham Forney was asked, as all witnesses were, to name the men he knew who were unionists in his area. The witness answered: “Beecher was one of the loyal men. Roy, Forney and myself were others and there were a few more but they were killed out.” The “Roy” the witness mentioned was the same free black man, Harry Roy, quoted previously. Here he is simply listed amidst the white unionists. We would have no inkling of his race were it not for the claim he filed. The witness’s listing of Roy without regard to his race is admittedly unusual, and does not appear in any of the Tennessee claims surveyed, but it does suggest that at least some white unionists were experiencing a change in mindset.⁹⁰

Several claims attest to unionists aiding compatriots of another color in their time of need. The Henry Shipley claim is especially useful for illustrating such personal relationships. Shortly before the Civil War, Dr. Henry C. Shipley and his family rented a farm of over 300 acres about one mile from the village of Middletown, in Frederick County, Virginia. A few farms over, across the Valley Pike, was the farm of J.S. Danner, owner of several slaves. One of these was a teenaged girl named Celey. Sometime around the start of the war, Celey was sold south. Perhaps Danner was selling his least vital slaves to the Deep South before the Union army threatened his investments. It is unclear how they knew one another, but somehow Celey managed to get a message to Dr. Shipley, begging him to buy her to avoid what promised to be a life in the cotton fields. As a man who owned no land and had a personal estate listed at \$400 in the 1860 census, purchasing Celey must have been a daunting task, yet he did so. Now an inadvertent master, Henry Shipley appears to have maintained ownership of Celey until 1865.

⁹⁰ “Forney, Abraham,” Claim Number 9866, M1407, Record Group 217, National Archives.

Probably filling a domestic role on the farm, she would have known young Dorsey Washington, who was rented out to Shipley's landlord to perform labor there. The nature of the wartime relationship between the teenaged future spouses Dorsey and Celey is unknown, but we might presume that there was some degree of affection. If so, it must only have deepened Dorsey's regard for the doctor that he had assisted her at her time of need. When Dr. Shipley and Dorsey ventured out together onto the battlefield that day in October, 1864, it is likely that the two were willing compatriots. After the battle, Dorsey Washington heard people in Middletown making threats against Henry Shipley's life for his collaboration with the Yankees. According to Dorsey, he went to the doctor and told him that "he had better get away from there, somewhere." Shipley followed this advice and took his family to the safety of Union lines at Winchester.⁹¹

The evidence involved in the Henry Shipley claim well illustrates how very personal relationships and confidences laid the foundations for cooperative action. It may be no mere coincidence that, among the hundreds of claims surveyed, the one with the greatest amount of evidence for meaningful personal ties between a white unionist and enslaved people is also the one which involves the most dramatic single story of overt cooperative action in defiance of the Confederacy. But the Shipley claim is significant in another way because, after years of Dr. Shipley dispensing advice to local slaves, it was Dorsey Washington, one of their number, who in the end advised the white doctor Shipley to leave the area. While the story of interracial cooperation among unionists is often presented in the claim documents as one of whites advising blacks in ways that are

⁹¹ Claim of Henry C. Shipley, #51224, Frederick Co., VA; *Census of the United States*, 1860, Frederick County, Va., 177.

in accord with our expectations of the paternalist ethos, there are claims which strikingly reverse this pattern.⁹²

James H. Foster was a free black man who lived with his family in Shenandoah County, Virginia. The white unionist William H. Woodard testified to a very close relationship with Foster, one in which Foster was the benevolent party. Woodard told the Commission, “When I was driven from my house by the rebels and was obliged to stay much of my time in the mountains, his house was one of the places I used often to go at night to get something to eat and to communicate with my family through him.” One day, according to Woodard, three local men confronted Foster with drawn pistols, demanding he tell them where Woodard was hiding. He refused to talk. James Foster’s wife Mary testified to the family’s relationship with Union soldiers separated from their commands who came to them for help. “I have many times,” she declared, “shared with them the last food in the house. We regarded them as friends and wanted to help them.”⁹³

Testimony from Tennessee echoes that from Virginia. Frederick Starkey was a free black man in Coffee County, who owned a barber shop and a confectionary shop in the town of Tullahoma. He told the Commission of his efforts to aid fellow unionists:

I gave a good Union man, old James Russell, both provisions and money to help him along when he was in distress. He now lives in Grasy Cove, about 14 miles from Stevenson. I also brought old man Ance Marshall across the Tenn. River when the rebels were after him to kill him for being a Union man. He had to desert his place and come across the river, and I helped him across and he was so poor that I helped him in many and other ways till he got employment on the railroads. I also took care of Jo. Timberlake and kept him hid for a time out of the way of the rebels, supported him and finally sent him back into the federal lines.⁹⁴

⁹² A discussion of paternalism and its influence on the claims evidence appears in Chapter 4.

⁹³ Claim of James H. Foster, #48714, Shenandoah Co., VA.

⁹⁴ Claim of Frederick A. Starkey, #17373, Coffee Co., TN.

In finding himself the protector and benefactor of several white unionists, Frederick Starkey was in a highly unusual position for a black American of his era. This reversal of the expected social dynamic, this subversion of paternalism, emphasizes just how much the social order was disrupted. Both Foster and Starkey were in the position of power in the relationships they describe. What the white men they aided thought about having to receive charity from a black man, we do not know. For the Fosters and Starkey, it added to their sense of being as deserving of the label “unionist” as anyone else.

As we might expect, in other instances white unionists came to the aid of black ones. One of the bold Tennessee unionist John Brazelton’s black witnesses stated:

In the fall of 1863 I went into the 71st Ohio Infantry and acted as a courier, and in the fall of 1864 I was shot by a company of Confederate soldiers under Capt. Hays, and the deceased would slip provisions to my house for me at the risk of his life till I got about again, for rebels threatened that if anybody assisted me they would hang him.⁹⁵

When it comes to active cooperation between white and black unionists, the nature of the evidence from the Shenandoah Valley and south central Tennessee is indistinguishable in most regards, except perhaps in the willingness to consider black unionists as full members of the community. The general quantity of claims giving evidence of cooperation is similar. It might be expected that the Shenandoah Valley, with a large population of anti-slavery Germanic anabaptist Brethren and Mennonites, would yield more evidence of this type than central Tennessee, where this element was absent and slavery more prevalent. However, the Germanic factor is offset by the fact that this element was unlikely to take an especially active role in anti-Confederate resistance. While they may have disliked slavery more than their Anglo neighbors, their anabaptist

⁹⁵ Claim of John C. Brazelton, claim #8369, Franklin County, TN.

religious beliefs also dictated that they avoid over-engagement in worldly matters. This appears to have effectively counteracted the impact of their anti-slavery sentiments to the point that the two regions are not markedly different in the quantity of evidence. Most Germanic anabaptist claimants kept a low profile during the war, Samuel Mumma being a dramatic exception.

In his memoir, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass wrote of his “deep satisfaction” in learning that there was such a thing as white people who abhorred slavery. While the vast majority of white unionists were not abhorers of slavery, the slaves and free blacks of Virginia and Tennessee must have experienced a similarly deep satisfaction that for the first time in their lives they encountered whites who shared common desires with them and, in some cases, needed their aid to survive. The chaos of war had resulted in a disintegration of established social order. White unionists found themselves outcasts, stripped of rights, even hunted. The comparison to the antebellum black experience was not lost on blacks or whites. Black unionists seem to have regarded white unionists with genuine sympathy, recognizing elements of their own suffering and acting with remarkable benevolence to aid them. White unionists, in some cases, fully accepted black unionists as functionally equal partners in the larger movement of anti-Confederate activity. Some white unionists, like those who turned to Frederick Starkey for help, turned over their very lives to the care of black unionists. That the irony and significance of this was lost on either them or their black counterparts is quite unlikely. The shared experience of resistance to Confederate authority bonded many of them in deeply personal ways which we might expect to be long-lasting.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855): 165.

The cracks in the old social order which allowed these new relationships to begin and grow were deep, but after the war the desire of the majority white population to restore the old order would bring new pressures to bear on black and white unionists. Were the unorthodox new relationships and bonds formed in the crucible of wartime unionism strong enough to endure into the post-war period? Did they have a truly lasting impact, or were they snuffed out in the creation of the solid South and collapse of Reconstruction? To address these questions we must turn to the experience of creating the claims themselves.

Chapter Four

Persistent Allies

Dr. Henry Shipley and his family returned to Middletown, Virginia after the war. Dorsey Washington's dire warning to flee the area after their actions during the battle at Cedar Creek may or may not have saved his life. Like other known unionists, Shipley faced continued ostracism and hostility even after the victory of his cause. Now impoverished, he maintained a correspondence with the grateful officers of the regiment whose wounded he saved that day. In 1872, this paid off when one of them secured Shipley the humble position of U.S. Postmaster at Middletown. When the Claims Commission announced its program of reimbursement, Shipley hired an attorney and filed. As a man obviously considered loyal enough by the government to hold an official post, he probably assumed he had a strong claim. He was also one of very few unionists to obtain and preserve vouchers from the Union officers who took his livestock and produce. The only potential problem was his ability to call fellow unionist witnesses.⁹⁷ Evidently without prominent white citizens on whom to call, Shipley turned to Dorsey Washington, now living in Middletown with his wife Celey, the young woman Shipley saved from transport to the South. Both would testify on Shipley's behalf. Most significantly, the Claims Commission valued their testimony, which was instrumental in the approval of his claim.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Shipley's testimony suggests his unionist experience was fairly isolated, so far as contact with prominent white unionists is concerned.

⁹⁸ Claim of Henry C. Shipley, #51224, Frederick Co., VA; Shipley continued renting from his wartime landlord, James Leary. The political sentiments of Leary, a slaveowner, are unknown, but his persistent association with the Shipley's suggests some degree of positive feeling.

The files of the Southern Claims Commission tell us as much about race relations during the 1870s as they do about those during the war. The relationships forged in wartime must have endured long enough that the parties involved were still willing to support each other during the operation of the Claims Commission. In the chaotic, racially charged, often violent atmosphere of the postwar South, it was not a given that this should occur, especially in the wake of Democratic “redemption” from Reconstruction and the rise of the “solid South.” Yet again and again, whites and blacks aided each other’s claims, even after the transformations brought by the war had altered their social relationships drastically in many cases. This chapter considers how the process of creating the claims was shaped by the policies and attitudes of the Commission itself. The prejudices of Commission officials in some cases resulted in regional variations in the type and character of testimony collected. The claimants and witnesses themselves, through testifying for members of another race, reveal much about Reconstruction-era racial norms and relations, and the persistence of paternalism. Finally, there is the question of legacy. In both states, the immediate postwar period was not only one of turmoil but also one of opportunity for permanent advances in both the political rights of freedmen and social relations between races. In both states, this window of opportunity proved fleeting. However, the claims largely postdate the traditionally accepted period of opportunity, and they relate to later examples of nineteenth century bi-racial cooperation. Understanding the pressures acting to dissuade continued contact and collaboration between white and black former unionists requires some explanation of the course of Reconstruction in Virginia and Tennessee.

The Shenandoah Valley ended the war as a devastated land. Union General Philip Sheridan's infamous burning of September and October 1864, on top of four years of opposing armies marching, camping and fighting all over the region had drastically reduced food supplies, and hundreds of mills and barns lay in ashes. Months after the end of hostilities, many Virginians continued to receive food rations from the U.S. Army or the Freedmen's Bureau. The black population of the state wasted no time in organizing, in league with the Republican Party, in favor of universal suffrage and the confiscation and redistribution of the land of disloyal citizens. While they found allies among the white unionists of the state, who also allied themselves with the Republicans, the majority of the white population was far from comfortable with the new assertiveness of the black population, and their alliance with the hated Republicans. Even as U.S. Army occupation and the Freedmen's Bureau sought to enforce the rights of the newly freed black community, the white majority began to act on their own initiative to restore white supremacy. Although the Ku Klux Klan was not a major presence in the state, there were other means of coercion available, and antebellum racial hierarchies were largely restored in a remarkably short time.

The story of Lexington, in Rockbridge County, provides a striking local example of one community's postwar racial strife, and the efforts of local whites to "redeem" their region without waiting for state government to do it for them. In the late summer of 1865 Washington College, located in Lexington, reopened its campus. The Virginia Military Institute followed suit, quartering students in the town due to the destroyed state of its campus buildings. As a result, hundreds of young men, frequently armed and often intoxicated, flooded into town. Some of the students were former Confederate officers

and soldiers fresh from defeat. Here they found themselves confronted by the large black population of the town, further increased by refugee freedmen. Angered by the result of the war, and by the apparent lack of due deference given them by blacks, it was not surprising that violence erupted. Black teachers and schoolchildren were assaulted on town sidewalks. Several incidents were precipitated by black men, now armed themselves, attempting to protect black women from the sexual predations of white students. A number of fatal shooting incidents and fights, typically resulting in far more black fatalities than white, transpired between 1865 and 1868.⁹⁹

One notable example occurred in the spring of 1868, when a group of black men failed to yield the sidewalk to a white lady. Enraged, a student began beating one of the men with a stick, and received a pistol ball in return. A lynch mob of excited students quickly formed, capturing the black man and taking him to the town square for hanging. A professor, a former Confederate officer, convinced the mob to hand the man over to the authorities, but tensions remained high for days, and there were plans among the students to storm the jail and murder the captive. Only a calming statement from Robert E. Lee, president of the college, restored order.¹⁰⁰

The vast majority of the white population, and the local newspaper, sided solidly with the students in all such cases. Rather than supporting either side, General John Schofield, the commander of U.S. troops in Virginia, pulled the garrison out in an effort to diffuse the situation, and the Freedmen's Bureau also ceased their unpopular efforts.

⁹⁹ David W. Coffey, "Reconstruction and Redemption in Lexington, Virginia," in *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia 1800-1900*, Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra, eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000): 206-218.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Bracelen Flood, *Lee: The Last Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981): 184-185; Robert E. Lee accepted the presidency of Washington College in 1865 and served until his death in 1870.

With the Federal presence removed, the white community of Lexington declared victory. There town was redeemed from Federal meddling and black assertiveness.¹⁰¹

While Lexington's experience is made unique by the presence of large numbers of white college students and cadets, each town and county in the Shenandoah followed its own course toward the reestablishment of white rule, often overwhelming the efforts of Federal authorities, black citizens, and their white unionist allies. By the end of 1868, the racial hierarchy in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley had been reestablished to something very like the antebellum condition. In 1870, the new state constitution, the Underwood Constitution, reestablished home rule and limited the voice of black Virginians by introducing almost universal white-male suffrage at the same time as it officially enfranchised blacks.¹⁰²

Tennessee in 1865 seemed closer to readmission to the Union than any other seceded state. With much of the state under Union control since early in the war, and a large unionist population, a pro-Union government had been in place since 1863. The state participated in the presidential election of 1864, having been provisionally readmitted by Lincoln under his ten percent plan. The state was led by the fiery and divisive Governor William "Parson" Brownlow. Brownlow was a devoted Union man, but like many Tennessee unionists his opposition to the continuation of slavery was due to its association with the Confederacy, and not due to any desire for the advancement of black people. With the fighting over, the state's unionists had every reason to expect that Tennessee would gain readmission under President Lincoln's "ten percent plan," which was honored by his successor, Andrew Johnson. They were stymied by the ascendancy of

¹⁰¹ Coffey, 206-218.

¹⁰² Coffey, 216.

the Radical Republicans in Congress who, while not having yet wrested full control of Reconstruction from the President, were beginning to demand higher standards for readmission than those preferred by President Johnson. To ensure the state's full readmission by indicating the state's full acceptance of the changed status of African Americans, Governor Brownlow successfully pushed for early legislative approval of the new Constitutional Amendments. The 13th Amendment was approved on February 22, 1865, and the 14th approved on July 18, 1866. The state was readmitted a week later. Because of the established unionist government of the state, and its unequivocal actions to support the Federal government, Tennessee was spared U.S. Army occupation. Because it maintained a high degree of control over its affairs, the strongly unionist but still racist government was able to limit the political involvement of freedmen, with only a small number holding office in the state legislature during Reconstruction.¹⁰³ With the state in the midst of an economic depression and his administration wracked by scandals, Brownlow resigned the governorship to take a U.S. Senate seat in February of 1869. With his departure, the state was essentially "redeemed" as white and the Democrats rose to power.¹⁰⁴

Although the factors limiting black involvement in politics by the 1870s varied in each state, the basic result was the same. The promise of emancipation and enfranchisement dimmed considerably in the first few years after the war. Meanwhile, although white unionists benefitted from Union victory through Federal appointments and the opportunity to settle old scores, in areas of majority pro-Confederate sentiment, including both areas relevant to this study, most continued to suffer social ostracism,

¹⁰³ Patton, 201-210.

¹⁰⁴ Patton, 226.

resentment, and outright violence from their neighbors. Some of the violence, especially in Tennessee, came from the newly formed Ku Klux Klan. A witness for Stanford P. Oakley of Tennessee stated, “He was elected justice of the peace in his district at the close of the war by the loyal vote, and subsequently re-elected and declined to serve as he told me then because he had received a notice from “Ku Klux” that threatened him if he should do so.”¹⁰⁵ To counter the Klan, in 1868 Governor Brownlow raised a new state militia, posting some 1,500 of them in Nashville alone.¹⁰⁶ The “Brownlow Militia” temporarily created a safer environment for freedmen, allowing the expansion of Union League organizations among them. When Brownlow left for the Senate, the power of the Klan increased again.¹⁰⁷

It was in this environment of receding freedoms for former slaves, and continued intimidation of white unionists, especially those friendly to the rights of blacks, that the Southern Claims Commission began soliciting claims and collecting evidence in 1871. Despite the turmoil of the intervening years, the relationships forged during the war evidently endured with enough force that interracial support for claims appears in the record. This fact has significant implications, for the political and social atmosphere of both states by the 1870s was such that interracial respect and cooperation was difficult, especially when expressed publicly enough to attract the attention of the Democratic white majority.

The views of the Claims Commission regarding black claimants and witnesses has already been partially considered. In the Shenandoah Valley, the evidence suggests

¹⁰⁵ Claim of Stanford P. Oakley, #8407, Rutherford Co., TN.

¹⁰⁶ Patton, 199.

¹⁰⁷ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003): 283-284.

the commissioners treated black claimants and witnesses with the same respect as whites, at least so far as the process of recording and weighing testimony is concerned. In a few cases, commissioners did attempt to lead black witnesses into inadvertently revealing lies in ways that they did not with whites, as in the following exchange between the commission and a witness for black claimant Ray Johnson:

Q. Wasn't he on their side all the while?

A. No sir, we were all on the Rebel side a while, until the Union forces came there.

Q. When you say you were all on the Rebel side, you mean you were when there army was there?

A. Yes sir, we were not in the Rebel army at all, and never aided or assisted the army.

Q. Didn't you think the claimant rather favored the Rebels there for a while?

A. No indeed!¹⁰⁸

In the Shenandoah Valley, white claimants were not faulted for calling black witnesses, and though white witnesses were beneficial for the chances of black claimants, it was possible for black claimants to achieve success with black witnesses, depending on the apparent quality of those witnesses. White claimants who called former slaves of theirs to testify were treated with an understandable degree of suspicion. *Chart 1* indicates the number of interracial claims in the Shenandoah Valley counties. Black claimants were relatively few in number. While the number of claims evidencing interracial testimony is small, the total number of claims in the first column is inflated by the fact that a portion of them (around one-quarter) never advanced far enough in the process to collect testimony.

¹⁰⁸ Claim of Ray Johnson, #blank, Warren County, Va.

	White claims	Black claims	White w/black witness	Black w/white witness
Rockbridge	15	0	0	0
Augusta	81	3	2	2
Rockingham	176	2	6	0
Page	30	1	2	1
Shenandoah	75	1	2	1
Frederick	67	3	3	1
Clarke	15	2	1	1
Warren	11	6	3	4

Table 1. Shenandoah Valley claims by county and race.

	White claims	Black claims	White w/black witness	Black w/white witness
Rutherford	86	26	4	2
Coffee	17	2	2	1
Franklin	55	1	7	1
Cannon	3	0	0	0
Bedford	80	0	4	0

Table 2. Central Tennessee claims by county and race.

Many of the same dynamics characterized Tennessee claims. *Chart 2* quantifies interracial claims activity in central Tennessee. The data is comparable to that of Virginia, except for the extraordinary number of black claimants in Rutherford County, the cause of which has not been determined. The treatment of black claimants and witnesses in the counties of the Tennessee study area was found to differ from the Shenandoah Valley in a key way. Though the general attitude of the Commission and of most claimants was to hold black witnesses in high regard, assuming them loyal unless proven otherwise, at least one claims agent had a conflicting opinion. John Brownlow, a claims agent working in Tennessee, told his superiors in Washington “I do not always find the negro reliable though he was almost invariably so during the war. I find in some sections that colored men will testify to the loyalty of a Rebel who has dealt honestly or liberally by him since the War.”¹⁰⁹ Certainly the possibility that a witness might lie on behalf of someone who they felt gratitude toward was a reality, one which there was potential for regardless of the races involved. With the exception of Franklin County, the claims interviewers from the Tennessee study area almost never asked black witnesses testifying for white claimants to comment upon loyalty. There was nothing in the official policy of the Claims Commission to justify this, but it seems clear that the agents, probably local men, were exercising their own views of what was appropriate. To these men, black testimony regarding events witnessed was all well and good, but black testimony passing judgment on the character of white citizens may have been too much to accept. The testimony from the Shenandoah Valley suggests no such bias. Though not conclusive, the Tennessee evidence hints at additional prejudices on the part of

¹⁰⁹ Klingberg, 85.

commission officials. In the claim of former slave Calvin Crockett, for example, the Commission doubts the ability of a slave to acquire the horse and two mules Crockett claimed, and the fact that he called no white witnesses counted against him. Setting aside the differing standards of the Commission in Tennessee, the evidence suggests there were fewer enduring close relationships there, and fewer black claimants were able to call on white witnesses. In the Crockett claim, the government expressed skepticism that he should not be able to call even one white witness, perhaps a family member of his former master, but it could be that in the racial animosity of 1870's Tennessee, he simply was not in any position to make such a request.¹¹⁰

One Tennessee claim is a notable exception to this trend. Daniel Brazelton, the white unionist discussed in chapter three, who paid slaves to tear down the rebel flag in the town square of Tullahoma, was supported in his posthumous claim entirely by the testimony of four black witnesses. Luckily for his claim, Brazelton had lived in Franklin County, the one district in south central Tennessee which did not hesitate to accept blacks as character witnesses for whites. One of those witnesses, Joseph Brazelton, a former slave of Daniel's brother, told the Commission:

After the war was over they abused him a great deal for selling me an acre of land on which to build a school house, and then again for visiting the colored school. He gave me and other colored men the privilege to go on his farm and cut just such timber as we needed to build the school house and to cover it. I know that he afterwards sold colored men fifty-six acres adjoining the school house and we have a little village which we call Danielville after the deceased. If the colored people ever had a friend about Winchester it was Daniel Brazelton.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Claim of Calvin Crockett, #6895, Rutherford County, TN.

¹¹¹ Claim of John C. Brazelton, #8369, Franklin County, TN.

Another witness, William Huddleston, added, "...he often visited the school when it was dangerous for a white man to visit a colored school in this county, or for a colored man to teach a school."¹¹² Clearly, the black community around Winchester, Tennessee maintained a heartfelt devotion to Daniel Brazelton even after his death, a testimony to what it meant for them to have at least one white person in their lives who seemed to be on their side. The naming of their settlement in his honor leaves no doubt about their collective feeling. The choice of name has a further significance. Calling it Danielville rather than the more obvious Brazelton may suggest that they thought of him simply as Daniel, and perhaps even referred to him with such familiarity while he lived. In the hostile postwar period, it is ironic that the late Brazelton remained a more relevant ally dead than perhaps any white person living.

In claims testimony relating to former slave and free blacks, witnesses tended to pay a great deal of attention to the character of the claimant. No doubt this arose from a perceived need to counteract stereotypical perceptions about black people. White witnesses testifying for black claimants frequently used words like "honest," "loyal," and "humble." This is the language of paternalism, and even most white unionists seem to have regarded blacks as best measured in relation to their usefulness to whites. Black witnesses, well aware of the characteristics whites valued in black people, also used this language, frequently emphasizing the honesty and industriousness of black claimants. The use of the paternalistic language common to antebellum descriptions of slavery, even in the 1870s, is no surprise. Ingrained concepts of paternalism survived long after African Americans were a dependent class. It was a widespread white assumption that they

¹¹² Claim of John C. Brazelton, #8369, Franklin County, TN.

lacked moral fiber as a general rule, a prejudice that survives to some extent to the present day. This belief encouraged white witnesses to use language emphasizing the moral qualities of black claimants, and invoke these qualities with greater vehemence and frequency than when referring to white claimants. Worthy of note, however, is that the black men and women described in these terms would certainly not have been regarded as “honest” or “loyal” by most southern whites. They would instead have been regarded as representative of the most deceitful element of the black population, betrayers of the paternalistic relationship with their masters. The frequent indications of a paternalistic attitude toward black claimants by their white witnesses reminds us that, although many white unionists were genuine allies of their slave and free black unionist neighbors, their vocabulary and general view of blacks was still steeped in southern paternalism.

It might be assumed that the worsening racial environment of the late nineteenth century brought the relationships evidenced in the claims to a swift and sad end. Indeed, this may generally have occurred, severing many or most of the friendships and warm feelings evident in the claims. However, in Virginia at least, the story is not so simple. In 1879, as the operations of the Claims Commission were winding down, a remarkable political party gained rapid ascendance in Virginia, a party one historian called “the most successful political coalition of whites and blacks organized in the South between Reconstruction and the 1960’s.”¹¹³

The Democrats had been in firm control of the legislature for more than a decade, but their conservative policies included a refusal to repudiate the state’s pre-war debt, as most states had done. School and public works funding suffered as a result of the

¹¹³ Degler, 270.

Democrats refusal to compromise on the issue. As a result, a growing number of people became dissatisfied with Democratic policy and dominance. With the racial policies of the Republican Party not an attractive alternative to most white Virginians other than former unionists, these people coalesced into a new political faction. Called the Readjusters, they were led by the diminutive former Confederate general William Mahone. Besides the reduction of the state debt and funding for infrastructure and industry, the Readjusters advocated black education, including funding for higher education, and from their first meeting welcomed black Virginians. It was a true bi-racial movement, one which demonstrated the potential and practicality of a new way of dealing with race in the South. A letter sent to Mahone by one ordinary white Readjuster demonstrates the racial feeling of the party: "Success for the white man requires no injustice to the Negro. On the contrary we cannot do justice to ourselves if we are unjust to him...."¹¹⁴

Within the Readjuster's progressive racial views were the seeds of their downfall. The very aspects of Readjuster policy most beneficial to racial progress were attacked by their opponents as evidence of a plot to promote black rule. Many whites who may have supported the movement were swayed into opposing it, and their own interests, out of fear. "Every white man," one anti-Readjuster flyer warned, "who votes for Mahone and his gang goes for making the negro his equal socially, and gives Mahone a legislature to carry out the African plan.... A Mahone legislature will turn your wives and children over to mixed schools, mixed marriages and miscegenation."¹¹⁵ The rhetoric of racial fear is familiar and was as effective here as it was in eras before and since. The Danville Riot

¹¹⁴ Degler, 282.

¹¹⁵ Degler, 293.

of 1883 marked the end for the Readjusters as a viable party, as the Democrats used the violence to discredit them and effectively silence the political voice of black Virginians for decades to come.¹¹⁶

A different course prevailed in Tennessee, one perhaps predictable in light of the less racially cooperative atmosphere evidenced in the claims files. No parallel to the Readjuster Party developed in Tennessee, despite the state suffering similarly from economic depression. In the 1890s Populism gained no hold here, in contrast to its force not only in Virginia but in places like Texas and North Carolina. The primary factor that prevented the rise of populism in South Carolina and other areas was the presence of a black majority population, a factor simply too threatening to whites for any coalition to form. This condition did not exist in Tennessee, and so it might be expected to have been a fertile ground for at least some Populist support. Yet it was not. The racial atmosphere in Tennessee likely contributed to this. Tennessee unionists, especially East Tennesseans like William Brownlow and Andrew Johnson, had a reputation for overt racism, even as they were among the boldest champions of the Union cause. Desperate for electoral allies against the resurgent Democrats, Tennessee unionist legislators still only reluctantly voted for black enfranchisement in 1866, under pressure from Brownlow.¹¹⁷ The claims commission evidence, therefore, should be seen not as an anomaly in the progression of race relations in the post-war South, but as another piece of a larger narrative, a connecting thread between the brief time of racial possibilities preceding Redemption and the well-known multi-racial movements of Readjustment and agrarian Populism.

¹¹⁶ The so-called “Danville Riot” occurred on November 3, 1883, when an argument between whites and blacks on a town street escalated into gunfire. Five people died, four of them black.

¹¹⁷ Degler, 320; Noel C. Fisher, *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 169.

The experiences of black and white unionists are a network of parallel and intersecting paths, and common and unique values and motivations. The nature of the experience was more a shared one than it has often been given credit for. White unionists in the Shenandoah Valley and central Tennessee first experienced the shock of social ostracism and official persecution when the majority of their neighbors turned suddenly toward secession, leaving them an unwelcome and subversive element in their own land. The threats and fear surrounding the secession referendums in both states, and the emphasis placed on them in the testimony, indicate how formative these early experiences were for many white unionists. It was a jarring experience for people who had lived peaceful lives, and they adapted to it according to their character and situation, some keeping so low a profile that they had difficulty proving their unionism for the Commission, while others risked life and limb to aid the cause of the Union. In so doing, white unionists adopted some of the survival tactics with which black southerners were long familiar, such as verbal reticence in public, hiding people and valuables within their now commonly searched homes, and evading search parties. It is unlikely that they imitated black tactics consciously, but once multiple experiences had made obvious the similarity of their condition, it would seem that many were well aware of how much their situation resembled that of slaves. The explicit understanding of the unionist fugitive network as an “underground railroad” may be the most obvious example.

For slaves, the war brought new trials, but also new hopes. The language of former slaves in the Claims Commission records makes it clear that many slaves

recognized the Confederacy as an entity dedicated to their bondage, and the Union one that promised freedom. Indeed, as has been well established by the historiography of slavery and the Civil War, they recognized the Union as their savior long before the Union came to grips with that role. Slaves were keenly aware of the identities of local white unionists. Observing and conversing with them brought with it growing awareness of their common cause, and sympathy with their plight, aspects of which they recognized as similar to their own pre-war condition. Slaves thus forged working relationships with white unionists, and white unionists seem to have accepted their aid openly. For free blacks, the uncertainty of the war was a continuation of their precarious antebellum position. While slaves looked to the Union as the bringer of freedom, free blacks looked to Union victory as the one thing that would ensure their freedom against hostile local governments. Since many owned property of their own and were independent, they were in a better position than the slave to offer material assistance to white unionist allies.

The question of the extent of shared cause and experience between blacks and whites is dependent upon the question of motives. Were slaves and free blacks conscious unionists, or motivated only by a desire for freedom by any means available? Black unionists, slave and free, were certainly interested in the advancement of their own rights and opportunities and those of their race, but it is erroneous to dismiss them as unmotivated by ideas of devotion to the Union. The evidence from Virginia and Tennessee makes it clear that black claimants and witnesses saw the Union, the Federal Government, as the source and protector of freedom, and their words suggest an emotional element to this understanding. If unionism is to be measured by devotion to the Union as an entity, then the slaves and free blacks represented in the testimony were in

many ways the ultimate unionists. Not only was their loyalty more often unconditional, but slaves and free blacks probably did more collectively to aid the cause of the Union than self-professed white unionists.

Racial cooperation took many forms, but the understandings and respect built over time could manifest themselves in decisive action. This action usually took the form of cooperation in the effort to hide unionists or transport them north, or in the exchange of information vital to personal safety, but occasionally it exploded in more dramatic form, as when several black men were ready to engage in a physical confrontation alongside the white miller Samuel Mummaw. Such activities bred mutual respect, and in Virginia, at least, the unionist community seems to have regarded its black members as full partners, as evidenced by the unqualified inclusion of free-black Harry Roy in one white witness's list of local unionist men. In Tennessee, there is less evidence for racial cooperation on this level than in Virginia, though it should be noted that the smaller number of claims from free-blacks in Tennessee may affect the evidence. Regardless, the overall impression given by the mass of evidence from the two regions is that the sense of community between white and black unionists in southern central Tennessee, both during and after the war, was less harmonious than in the Shenandoah Valley.

The most obvious explanation for greater racial cooperation in the Shenandoah Valley is the presence of the Germanic Anabaptist religious element. While many of the claims from that region do involve ethnic Germans of the Mennonite or Baptist Brethren sects, many others do not. This study anticipated that a much greater quantity of evidence of racial cooperation would exist for the Shenandoah Valley than for central Tennessee. While the anti-slavery character of the German element has had some effect on the

evidence, it is offset by the fact that these religious sects also warned their adherents against excessive involvement with the secular world. This factor has likely worked to reduce the predicted high quantity of Shenandoah Valley cooperation evidence, and rendered the number of relevant claims there greater than those from Tennessee, but not by a wide margin. How these regions ultimately compare to others is difficult to gauge given the present state of scholarship relative to the Southern Claims Commission. While some regional studies have been executed, large areas of the archive remain largely unexamined. The need for further research, to reveal a broader picture and show the true extent of regional variation, is clear.

It would be satisfying to find evidence of more men like Dr. Shipley and Daniel Brazelton, men who chose to act for the benefit of slaves and who seemed to harbor no racial prejudice that we can detect. From the rarity of these cases in the record we might accept these examples as idiosyncratic deviations from the norm. Most white unionists were steeped in the racial prejudices of their time, and unthinkingly accepted a paternalistic view toward black men and women. However, the evidence provided us by the Claims Commission may only be a glimpse of a larger world of racial understanding between at least a small portion of the white community and their free and enslaved black allies. After all, numerous people with unionist sympathies never filed claims due to problems with money, intimidation, or simply from being unwilling to go through so much effort for relatively little return. There must be more stories, perhaps even many more, like those of Henry Shipley and Dorsey Washington. Even among those people who were not as open in their thinking, the claims often suggest a greater degree of respect and common cause than we might expect from people who viewed slaves and free

blacks as mere allies of convenience. For white witnesses testifying on behalf of black claimants, there was nothing to be gained and much to lose. Their neighbors had not forgotten their disloyalty to the larger community during the war. For former unionists to be so bold as to support the claims of assertive blacks was even more provocative than for them to pursue their own claims. For black witnesses to risk openly supporting white unionists, in a time when expressing any independence of political thought or action could be dangerous, is ample evidence of the depth of their feeling. That the two groups were willing to do this for one another is perhaps the clearest indication that the relationships built during the war were real. These were not simple alliances of convenience, or a coincidence of motives without shared understandings, but sympathetic and personal bonds.

Over the last several decades, historians have tried to identify the roots of the civil rights movement in examples of nineteenth-century racial cooperation. The alliance of white officers and black enlisted men in the Union army has been proposed as an inspiration. Others point to the Populist movement of the 1890s.¹¹⁸ Each example cannot easily be traced directly to the civil rights struggles of the twentieth century, nor was any one of them alone lasting or successful enough to be called the one true origin. It would be going too far to suggest that in the evidence of racial cooperation in the Claims Commission records we see the primary origins of the bi-racial alliance for equality. Yet in the stories of steadfast, sometimes heroic devotion to a common cause and to each other, the evidence of the claims deserves to take its place in the larger narrative of post-Civil War racial cooperation. “Fluidity theory,” first developed by historian C. Vann

¹¹⁸ William Freehling, *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 138-139.

Woodward, argued that there was a period of time between the war and the legal disenfranchisement of blacks in which racial progress was possible, and that this potential was based on indigenous southern support, rather than Federal force only.¹¹⁹ The findings of this thesis suggest the presence of another element of the white southern populace, one not necessarily overlapping with people who supported movements like Populism or the Readjusters, who were well on their way toward forming respectful and inclusive attitudes toward their fellow citizens of African descent. The testimony collected by the Southern Claims Commission offers us fresh insight into the evolution of race relations at a crucial time. It is a reminder of how, despite the opposition of a racist majority, many people were willing to set America on a more hopeful course, one which might have avoided a century and more of national wounds.

¹¹⁹ Daryl Michael Scott, "White Supremacy and the Question of Black Citizenship in the Post-Emancipation South," in *Creating Citizenship in the Nineteenth Century South*, William A. Link, et al., eds. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013): 232.

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