Camp Parapet: "Contraband" Camp

Enslaved African-Americans who freed themselves by escaping to Union army camps during the Civil War were called "contraband of war." Slaves from sugar plantations along the Mississippi made Camp Parapet a "contraband camp" after New Orleans was captured by the Union navy and army in the spring of 1862. The camp commander, General John W. Phelps, refused to return runaway slaves to their owners. The planters complained about General Phelps to General Benjamin F. Butler, overall commander of Union troops in the New Orleans area:

"My negro Sam and his wife Mary left my farm, about 2 miles above Camp Parapet, on the morning of the 19th instant, before daylight…I called on General Phelps…He could not give any redress, his views on the slavery question are different from any other I ever heard of on this subject before."

W. Mitthoff to General Benjamin F. Butler, May 21, 1862

"As the President of the Police Jury, Parish of Jefferson, Left Bank [East Bank], I feel it my duty to call your attention to the demoralizing effect on the serving population, not alone of this Parish, but of the whole state, by the course General Phelps adopted in refusing to return our servants."

W. Mitthoff to General Benjamin F. Butler, May 29, 1862

"Seven of my most valuable slaves have been for nearly a month at General Phelps' camp, and all my efforts to get them back have proved unavailing."

Polycarpe Fortier to General Benjamin F. Butler, June 4, 1862

"I am informed that two of my slaves, viz: Nancy, a negress, about 35 or 40 years old, and Louisa, a dark griff about 40 or 45 years old, are at the camp of General Phelps above Carrollton."

V. Kruttschnidt to General George F. Shepley, Military Commandant of New Orleans, June 9, 1862

General Butler asked the Lincoln administration for advice and received a response:

"Now, many negroes, slaves, have come within my lines…Loyal and disloyal masters have lost them alike…Now, what am I to do?"

General Butler to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, May 25, 1862

"He [President Abraham Lincoln] is of opinion that under the law of Congress they cannot be sent back to their masters; that in common humanity they must not be permitted to suffer for want of food, shelter, or other necessaries of life."

Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to General Butler, July 3, 1862

Next General Phelps wanted to raise troops from among the ex-slaves at Camp Parapet:

"I enclose herewith requisitions for arms…for three Regiments of Africans which I propose to raise for the defense of this point…They are willing to submit to anything rather than slavery."

General John W. Phelps to Capt. R.S. Davis, July 30, 1862

"The Commanding General wishes you to employ the Contraband in and around your camps in cutting all the trees, etc., between your lines and the Lake [Pontchartrain]…I have ordered the Quartermaster to furnish you with axes."

General Benjamin F. Butler to General John W. Phelps, July 31, 1862

"In reply I must state that while I am willing to prepare African Regiments for the defense of the Government against its assailants, I am not willing to become the mere slave driver which you propose, having no qualifications that way. I am therefore under the necessity of tendering the resignation of my Commission as an Officer in the Army of the United States."

General John W. Phelps to Capt. R. S. Davis, July 31, 1862

"The President of the United States alone has the authority to employ Africans in arms as part of the military forces…The President has not as yet indicated his purpose to employ the Africans in arms."

General Benjamin F. Butler to General John W. Phelps, August 2, 1862

Having said no to the raising of black troops, General Butler now receives hints from the Lincoln administration that it might be okay to recruit black soldiers:

"I have heard intimations from the President that it may possibly become necessary, in order to keep the [Mississippi] river open below Memphis, to convert the heavy black population of its banks into defenders."

Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase to Gen. Butler, July 31, 1862

"I…had an interview with the President and Secretaries of State and War…They said more troops were called for now in every Department, and it would be impossible to send them at present."

General George F. Shepley to General Benjamin Butler, August 2, 1862

"For my application for reinforcements…the only reply which I could extract from the Secretary of War was, 'Gen. Butler must recruit in New Orleans.' "

Colonel Henry C. Deming to General Benjamin Butler, August 4, 1862

General Butler began to raise troops from among "free men of color" in New Orleans- blacks who were free before the Civil War- and tries to justify recruiting African-American soldiers into the Union army:

"I shall call on Africa to intervene…I have determined to use the services of the free colored men who were organized by the rebels into the 'Colored Brigade'…They are free, they have been used by our enemies…and they are loyal."

General Butler to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, August 14, 1862

(They are "free," not slaves, and the "rebels," "enemies," had also recruited free men of color into the Confederate army.)

"I have kept clear of the vexed question of arming the slaves. I am fortified by precedents of a half century's standing."

General Butler to General Henry W. Halleck, August 27, 1862

(Butler is not "arming the slaves," he's arming free blacks, and a "half century" earlier General Andrew Jackson did the same thing to fight the British at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814-1815.)

"I shall have within ten days a regiment, 1000 strong, of Native Guards (colored), the darkest of whom will be about the complexion of the late Mr. [Daniel] Webster."

General Butler to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, September 1862

(These soldiers are light-skinned so they are not really "blacks.")

Eventually General Butler began to recruit soldiers from the slaves who had escaped to Camp Parapet, for which the Lincoln administration indicated its approval:

"Mr. Denison…says your administration is…getting on admirably with your free colored regiments; enlisting without much enquiry into the [free or slave] status prior to enlistment. This is well."

Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase to General Butler, September 23, 1862

The Lincoln administration also told General Butler to tell planters that if they want their slaves back they have to pay them to work on the plantation:

"I should at once, if I were in your place, respectfully notify the slave holders of Louisiana that henceforth they must be content to pay their laborers wages."

Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase to Gen. Butler, July 31, 1862

President Lincoln wanted to hear more about this experiment in free labor (if you pay someone to work, that person is not really a slave anymore):

"I was much interested by the information in one of them [letters from New Orleans] that some of the planters were making arrangements with their negroes to pay them wages. Please write to me to what extent, so far as you know, this is being done."

President Abraham Lincoln to General Butler, November 6, 1862

"Upon one of the plantations, where sugar is being made by the negroes who had escaped therefrom into our lines, and have been sent back under wages with the same negroes and the same machinery by

free labor, a hogshead & a half more of sugar has been made in a day than was ever before made in the same time on the plantation under slave labor."

General Butler to President Abraham Lincoln, November 28, 1862

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which made the abolition of slavery a goal of the Civil War and also called for the recruitment of African-Americans into the Union Army. But in southern Louisiana many blacks were already free and serving in the army. They had freed themselves by escaping to Camp Parapet, and many of their descendants still live in the area.

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