

“Wm. Higginbotham, a well-known free man of color, also returned on Saturday morning. He reached Manassas on the morning of the battle, but was denied the privilege of taking a gun and falling into the ranks. He then assisted in removing the dead and wounded, amid a shower of balls that fell around. Such deeds are highly meritorious and deserve much credit.”
Editor, Rome Weekly Courier, August 9, 1861

DAVID T. DIXON

TO LAUGH IN ONE HAND AND CRY IN THE OTHER

W. B. Higginbotham and the Black Community in Civil War Rome

In the aftermath of the first significant Confederate victory of the Civil War, the Rome, Georgia, press attempted to create the impression that the entire community, including black men like William Barton Higginbotham, was behind the new government, and eager to fight the “Lincolnites.” The truth was quite different. Higginbotham, a prosperous saloon operator at Rome’s Choice House hotel since the early 1850s,

did not go to Virginia imbued with a sense of patriotism for the new Confederate nation. He went to free his children.

Higginbotham’s wife and children were the slaves of Dr. Homer V. M. Miller, a surgeon in the 8th Georgia Regiment. Dr. Miller maintained that he would only sell Higginbotham’s children to their father if this proud black man would serve as Miller’s personal servant on the battlefield. Higginbotham



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agreed, and purchased his children in 1862. He was not allowed to purchase his wife.

Higginbotham was an unusual black man in antebellum Georgia. Born free in Virginia in 1817, he was living in eastern Mississippi when he removed to the new settlement at Rome in 1845. By 1860, he had amassed a personal estate worth more than \$10,000, and claimed to have loans of nearly twice that amount due to him.

Higginbotham's wealth placed him among the upper tier of Rome businessmen. "I was sort of a privileged character here at first," he boasted, "and had some influence with the rebels." On the day of the 1861 election of representatives to the secession convention, Higginbotham maintained that he changed some white voters' minds towards supporting the Union ticket.

Even if his political influence was not as great as he was eager to claim, Higginbotham's prominence in Rome's business community made him an important symbol to other blacks in the county. Dr. Miller's secret bargain was carefully crafted to use this black leader as a tool, not only to suggest Rome's Confederate solidarity, but also to help dispel persistent fears of a slave uprising in the area. The agreement may not have been as one-sided as it seems today. Higginbotham was an abolitionist and could use his money, influence, and even the feigned appearance of loyalty to protect himself from the most violent secessionists and keep himself and his family safe in dangerous circumstances.

Before the war began, Higginbotham used his wealth and freedom to travel extensively throughout the North and Canada, mingling with other abolitionists. White Union man William Payne of Floyd County, who never owned slaves, spoke freely to Higginbotham, and knew the true purpose of his visits to the North.

"I was superior in my education to a large majority of the colored people," Higginbotham later explained. He had arranged to have his nephew, William Thompson, tutored in secret by local white teacher Peter Sheibley. In 1860, Thompson enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio. He left school at the end of one term and enlisted in Company K of the 10th Ohio Cavalry, serving in the important battle at Chickamauga and during Sherman's Atlanta campaign.

Thompson's uncle remained at Rome and tried to balance his loyalty to the Union cause with his devotion to his business and family interests. It was a precarious juggling act. "I know we had to laugh in one hand and cry in the other," Higginbotham remembered, "when the Yankees were whipped or when the rebels were whipped." Higginbotham's color protected him from serving a Confederate cause he did not believe

OPPOSITE: This illustration from *Harper's Weekly* (April 13, 1867) depicts an African-American man proudly displaying a slip of paper labeled "A vote" while a disgruntled Confederate veteran looks on. The Confederate veteran, with frown on his face and hands in his pockets, has lost the right to vote as indicated by the torn slip of paper at his feet labeled "No vote," and the broadsheet bearing the notice: "Except such as may be disfranchised for participation in the Rebellion or for felony."



Before the Civil War, freedman William Higginbotham ran a successful bar in Rome's Choice House Hotel.

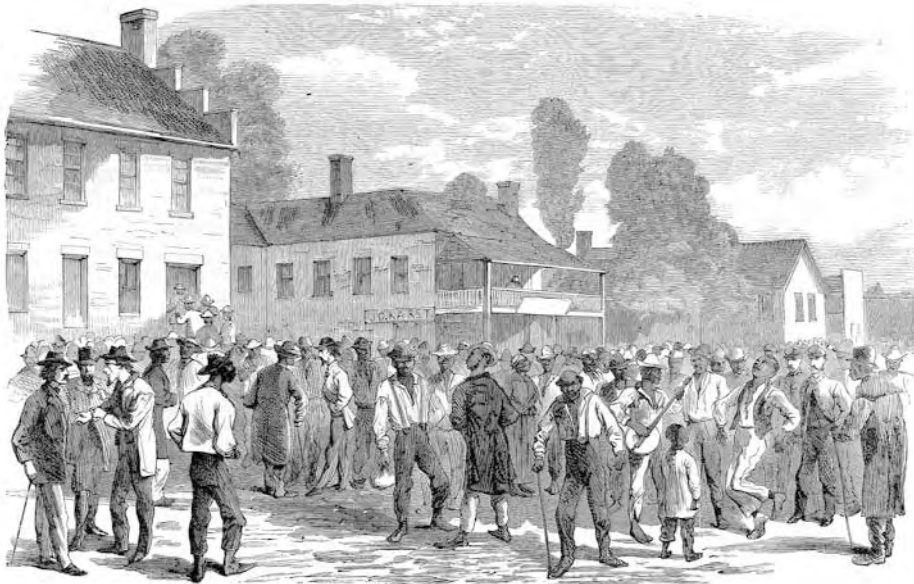
in. His freedom to move about and communicate with enslaved blacks during the war helped to sustain a black community that became even more threatened during such uncertain times.

The antebellum black community in Floyd County was much more cohesive than has been previously acknowledged by historians. Nearly forgotten today, a large brick Methodist Church stood on the highest point in the city limits of Rome, and served as a place for public worship and moral instruction for the blacks exclusively. The lot was purchased by a small black committee, headed by Higginbotham, and the church built at a cost of \$2,500, just a few years before the war.

Besides Higginbotham, Rome barber Billy Barrett, and a few orphans, the balance of the county's small free black community lived south, near Cave Spring. The area became known as Chubbtown, after a family named Chubb settled there some time earlier. The community supported a large number of slaves from neighboring plantations and became a thriving center for freedmen shortly after the war.

Networks linking free blacks and slaves helped many slaves to stay informed of wartime events, while remaining mostly helpless to contribute to the Union cause. Networks also existed between favored slaves and their white masters and friends. Recent scholarship suggests that property holdings by slaves existed at some level throughout the South. As Dylan Penningroth discovered, certain slaves in the Deep South were allowed to hire out their free time and accumulate money.

Property "owned" by slaves, although not legally recognized in title, was certainly validated by both white and black neighbors via "an informal system of display and acknowledgment to mark boundaries of ownership." This property was almost always purchased from whites with the proceeds of labor performed for whites. John Roberts, speaking of his father's slave Allen Witcher, claimed that Witcher "was allowed to own anything he wanted" and was "allowed to hire his own time." The elder Roberts often sent Witcher to North Carolina



This illustration from *Harpers Weekly* shows newly emancipated slaves registering to vote, “Their first necessary step toward securing the privilege of suffrage, which they estimate so highly.” William Higginbotham served as a registrar in 1867 in the Cherokee district. Most districts had both a black registrar and a white registrar appointed by the United States Army to maintain order during the process.

with substantial sums of money and “under different circumstances would trust him with everything he had.”

These practices showed that close bonds did exist at times between slaves and whites. Some of these connections would later play themselves out in ways that supported the Union cause in the war.

The affection of masters for their favorite slaves allowed some to live lives of relative independence. “We owned property before we became free,” said Penny Jet, whose master, Milton Haynie, allowed them to have it for being “good old and trusty servants.” Haynie entrusted Penny’s husband William Jet with more than \$5,000 in property and allowed him to make wagons for his own income when the mill he ran was not operating. Haynie’s son, who was nursed by Penny Jet as a baby, later said that he had “slept in the house with them [the slaves] more than I did with my mother and father until I was seventeen.”

According to the younger Haynie, William Jet was a popular man who “had all the privileges of free people,” and even “entertained company like white people.” Jet and his family made all their own supplies and had earned the complete trust of the Haynie family. While such examples were almost certainly exceptional, the depth of such intimacy laid the groundwork for the mutual trust needed between selected blacks and certain white Union supporters, as they worked to undermine the Confederate war effort

When the Federal army began to make incursions into northern Alabama and Georgia in late 1863 and early 1864, opportunities arose for area blacks to serve the Union cause. Albert Berrien, a slave who lived near Rome, was the son of former U.S. Senator Felix Grundy of Tennessee. He acted as an informal guardian to the minor children of his deceased master. He “owned” a small house on 10 acres, three horses and other property.

When the Federals occupied Rome in May 1864, “It opened up a way for me to do something,” Berrien recalled. Before then, “he could not do anything publicly for the Union cause.” After a few months, Berrien “felt free to act out his true Union inward sentiments.”

Berrien furnished the Federal post at Rome with fruit and vegetables and provided Union commanders with information about the county’s geography and loyal individuals. He was given protection papers and allowed to travel across Union lines at will. Despite his cooperation, Berrien’s house was torn down to make bunks for Captain Spencer’s 1st Alabama (USA) Cavalry; and his animals confiscated by the Federal army. As historian Mark Grimsley has demonstrated, countless such

actions by Federal soldiers showed that “utter disregard for blacks was the norm among Union troops.”

Berrien and other privileged slaves were closely connected to some white Union supporters. The practice of hiring out their time gave them freedom of movement and allowed them to communicate and even conspire with certain whites, especially those who were in hiding or otherwise suspected of being Union men. “As a slave, he [Berrien] was particularly cautious, but owing to his knowledge of me and my friendship for his class,” revealed teacher Peter Sheibley, “he spoke more freely to me.”

Berrien knew that Sheibley was a true Union man, “because we conferred upon special topics, strictly confidential.” Some of these contacts between white Unionists and black slaves contributed directly to the Federal Army’s efforts and were vital links in the Unionist network.

Willis Carr, a slave of Elijah C. Carr, played a key role in the Unionist network along Floyd County’s border with Alabama. One dark May night in 1864, Carr helped transport Elijah’s two sons 15 miles over land and across the Coosa River so that they could escape to the Federal lines. A few months later, Carr guided a Union spy named Joseph Smith across Floyd County to the house of William Matthews, another strong Union man.

Willis Carr’s master advised him that he need not run away, since the end of the war would result in his freedom. Although this white slave owner and his black slave may have had different motives for wanting to assist the Union cause, they relied on each other for protection in dangerous times. An informal exchange of privileges and services between certain slaves and white Unionists threatened by their Confederate neighbors was an important element in sustaining a dispersed Union minority in Floyd County.

For the vast majority of slaves not connected with Union

men, and not enjoying special privileges, the Federal occupation presented them with their first formal opportunity to aid the Union cause. In July 1864, a new Union regiment named the 44th Colored Infantry moved its headquarters to Rome and immediately sent recruiters into the countryside. The response was overwhelming. In a short time, more than 800 fugitive slaves had been recruited from farms and plantations across north Georgia and Alabama. The new recruits proved valuable in leading Sherman's army to the most productive sources of produce and livestock for his hungry soldiers. General George H. Thomas reported that the desertion rate among black soldiers such as these was surprisingly low, considering the fact that the ex-slaves were often cheated by bounty agents and mistreated by their white commanders.

Despite the support and assistance they rendered to the Union cause, many Floyd County blacks suffered depredations from both sides during the war. During the Federal occupation of Rome in 1864, the army used most public buildings for hospitals, warehouses and other military purposes. All the churches in town suffered some damage during this period, but the black-owned Methodist church was the only church in Rome demolished by the Federals, who built a fortification on the site.

Some slaves were confused by the actions of the Union army, whom they assumed would act as their liberators. "We colored people did not know as much about these things as your white people," explained Morris Berrien, a slave on a large plantation near Rome. When a soldier called Honest John and others with "stripes on their arms" asked Berrien to haul chickens and vegetables to the Federal post, he assumed that he was safe and secure. Instead, his master's land was stripped of practically everything of value. His fellow slave, Albert Berrien, was given a voucher for 40 bushels of wheat delivered to the commissary at Rome. The receipt was later stolen by robbers.

As war enveloped Floyd County, even free blacks like Higginbotham faced increased pressure from the community. Rome's few free blacks no longer enjoyed a relatively secure status by 1864. The editor of the Rome Weekly Courier had certainly changed his attitude towards Higginbotham from gratitude to resentment in two-and-a-half years:

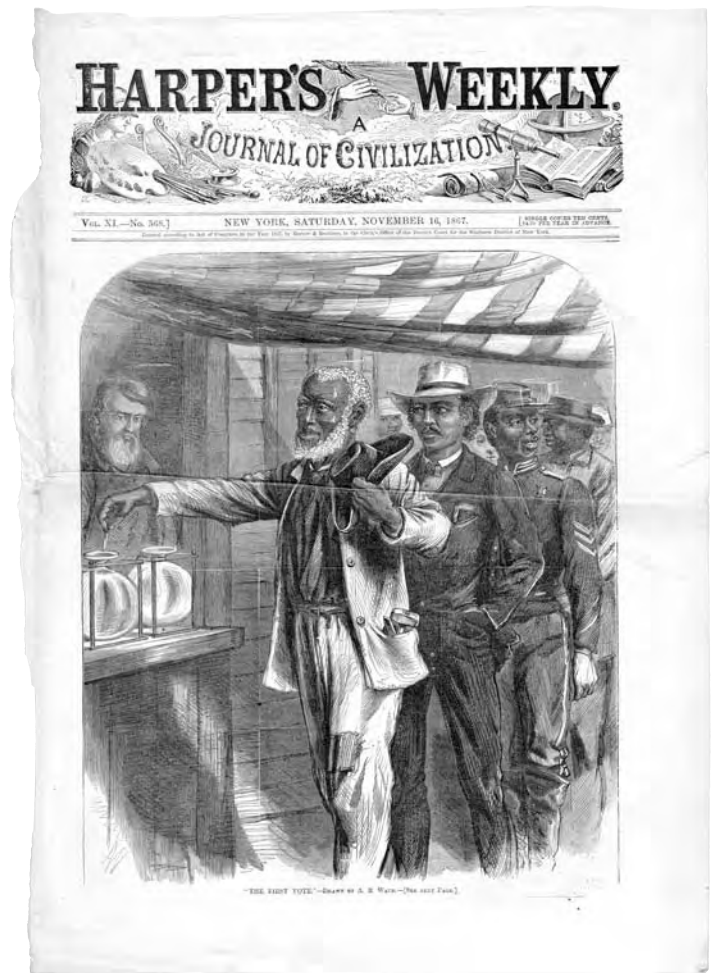
"It seems that free men of color have got to take a small part in the relief of the country as teamsters, laborers, &c. Higginbotham and Billy Barrett, the barber, were enrolled by Captain Gibbett, for service in the Nitre Bureau Department. These "gemmen of color" have made quite snug little fortunes since the war commenced, and it is no more than right, that they should do something for the government that protects them."

A.R. Waud's illustration of "the first vote" appeared in the November 16, 1867 issue of *Harper's Weekly*. The sketch depicts a queue of African-American men. The first, dressed as a laborer, is casting his vote. The second is dressed as a businessman, the third wears a Union army uniform, and the fourth appears to be dressed as a farmer.

What had not changed was the desire of the *Courier's* editor to alter appearances in order to influence public opinion. Higginbotham was hardly thriving in the wartime economy. He had made numerous loans in Confederate currency, most of which would never be repaid. He and Barrett were conscripted, under orders to be taken "dead or alive", and were only relieved from their forced service by the Federal occupation of Rome.

Higginbotham's property, like much commercial property in Rome, was damaged by the Union army during the occupation, and particularly upon the departure of Sherman's troops in November of 1864. A gang of outlaws and Confederate deserters led by Jack Colquitt soon moved in and committed depredations on rebels, Union men, women and children with no regard for politics or religion. Remembering these tragic events years later, Higginbotham remained cautious. "To tell half of what I know," he warned, "I could not live here 24 hours." Like many of his white Unionist neighbors, Higginbotham felt even less secure after the war ended, since his Confederate neighbors would harbor resentment towards Union men and blacks for generations to come.

Higginbotham used his money, position, and influence in the black and white communities to do what he could for the



Union cause, while retaining his principal loyalty to his family. In this respect, his experience was not unlike many of his white Unionist neighbors, who tried to balance political principles with the need to survive.

In 1867, General John Pope, military governor of Georgia, appointed Higginbotham and about 46 other blacks as district registrars for the upcoming election to the Georgia constitutional convention. Higginbotham organized the “colored” Union League in northwest Georgia in 1868 and served on the state’s Republican Central Committee. In 1872, he attended the Philadelphia convention as an at-large delegate from Georgia and was the district delegate to the 1876 and 1880 Republican national conventions. He must have been proud to see to see his son Archia attend Howard University’s new medical college and become a physician. William B. Higginbotham died at his home in Rome on December 16, 1881.

Despite their accomplishments, Higginbotham and others could do little to stem an emerging tide of virulent racism that threatened every black man in the area. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, the Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a relatively free reign throughout area, led by local notables such as retired lawyer and nationally known satirist Charles H. Smith a/k/a Bill Arp, and excused or tolerated by leading Union men, such as Augustus R. Wright

Blacks in Floyd County lived in fear at a time when they should have been protected by the government that they had risked their lives and property to support. In the four years following the war, the Rome District Freedman’s Bureau reported 31 separate instances of white on black murder or assault with intent to kill.

The plight of white Unionists, living in post-war Floyd County, next to neighbors loyal to the Confederacy who had lost husbands and children in the war, was extremely difficult; but their experiences paled in comparison to the danger and terror endured by black supporters of the Union cause.

Although Floyd County’s blacks had no real political or social standing, they made a small but important contribution to Unionist resistance during the Civil War. Afterwards, their black faces were a constant and painful reminder to white ex-Rebels, of a brutal war that changed race relations in their society forever. While some white Union men would eventually regain the trust and acceptance of their neighbors, blacks confronted a persistent racial animosity that could not be as easily erased. ■

David Dixon earned an M.A. in History from the University of Massachusetts and resides in Santa Barbara, California.

Endnotes

1. Claim #1498. Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of William B. Higginbotham. File now in USCC, docket #4997. Higginbotham’s allowed claim (#3650, 1872), like about 2000 others, was destroyed by mistake; but his testimony survives in at least ten other claims. He is also

listed as a “prominent Union man,” in response to interrogatory question number 61, in at least twenty claims.

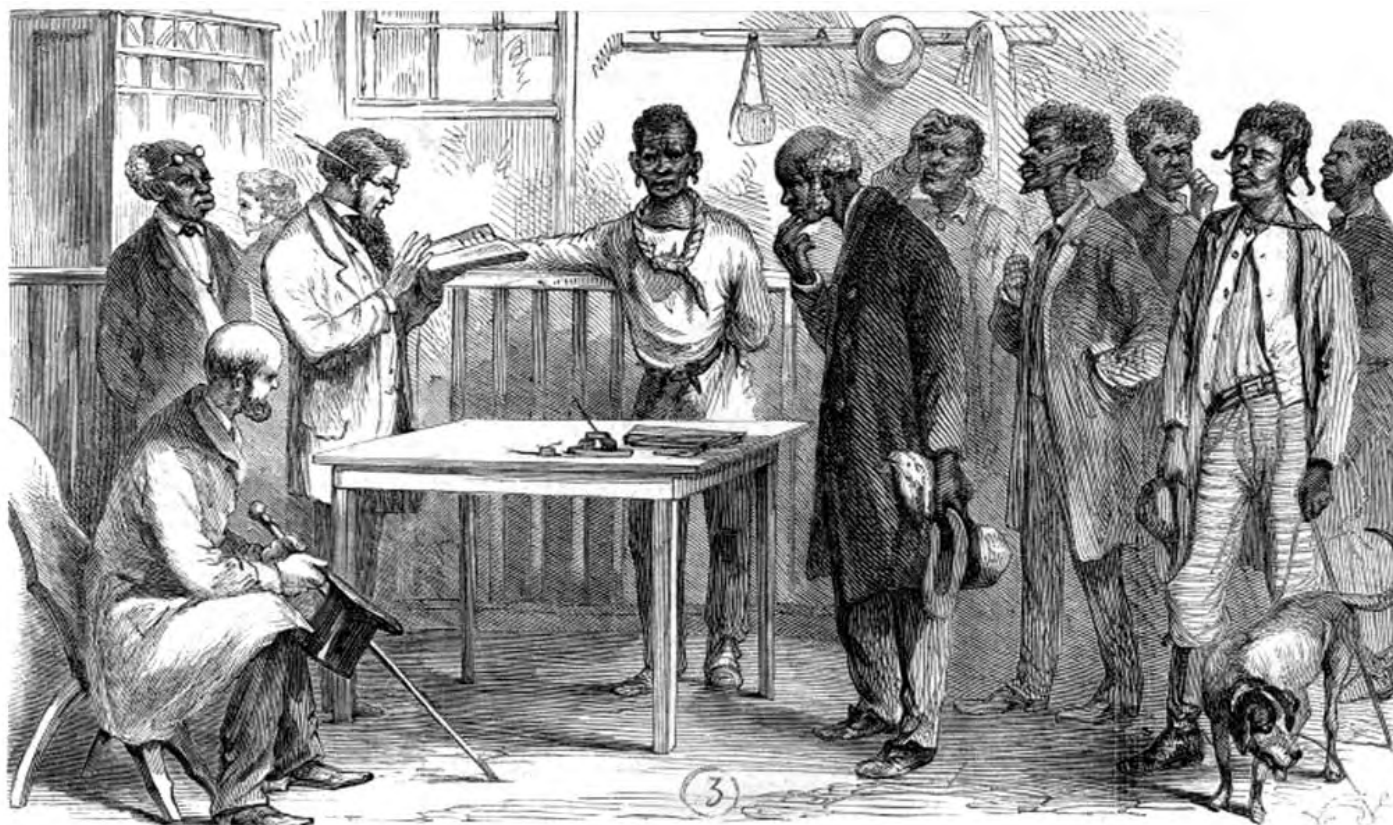
2. There were only thirteen free black residents enumerated in the 1860 Federal Census of Floyd County, Georgia. Loren Schwenger found that only about one in sixty free blacks in the South owned property worth in excess of \$2000. With a taxable estate of \$10,000, Higginbotham ranked number thirty-five out of ninety-six Rome merchants and businessmen. See Loren Schwenger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 100-141.

3. Claim #1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of William B. Higginbotham. File now in USCC, docket #4997. For rumors of slave uprisings in Floyd County, Georgia in 1860, see Rome Tri-Weekly Courier, August 9, 14, 21, 23; September 11, 14, 1860. A vigilance committee investigated the rumors and found them to be groundless, although a confession was exacted from the “guilty” slave, whose punishment was freedom and a promise to leave the state. See Rebecca Latimer Felton, *Country Life in the Days of My Youth* (Atlanta: Index Printing Company, 1919), 87.

4. Claim #15110. William Payne, Floyd County, 1879. SCC. Testimony of William B. Higginbotham. Claim # 1498, Peter M. Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of William G. Higginbotham. File now in USCC, docket #4997. Higginbotham’s claims about his nephew’s education and military service are confirmed in several other sources. Thompson was enrolled in Oberlin College’s Preparatory Department for one year, 1860-61, where he was trained to become a teacher, according to Tammy L. Martin of the Oberlin College Archives. William Thompson appears on the muster rolls of the 10th Ohio Cavalry, according to the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Search System, accessed January 27, 2003 at <http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss>.

4. USCC, docket #11071, Methodist Episcopal Church (Colored), Rome, GA, 1898. Petitions were sent to the Bureau of Freedmen as early as April 30, 1867, which denied them relief on the grounds that they were a charity, and beyond the scope of the Bureau’s authority. Twenty years later, the case finally reached the 55th U.S. Congress. By this time, most of the original petitioners were dead and the black community had built a new church in Chubbtown. Rome blacks attended white churches, or were forced to travel long distances to attend a black church. See Kenneth J. Jones, “The Chubbs of Chubbtown,” *Northwest Georgia Historical & Genealogical Quarterly* 3 (Winter, 1989) 3-7.

5. Dylan C. Penningroth, “Claiming Kin and Property: African American Life Before and after Emancipation,” PhD Diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999. In the case of ex-slave Albert Berrien, the Commissioner summarized this view: “Previous to his purchase of this place, Berrien seems to have



This illustration shows emancipated slaves registering to vote in Macon.

enjoyed special privileges as were occasionally granted to favorite servants, and to have acquired some little property. We see no reason to doubt his title to the supplies taken. It was such a title as the master recognized and being free in law at the time it was acquired he could have enforced his title in law. The claim is well-proved." Claim #3558, Albert Berrien, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Claim #17094, Allen Witcher, Floyd County, 1879. SCC. Testimony of John Roberts.

6. Claim #15129, Penny Jet, widow of William, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant and Milton H. Haney. The Commissioner, in his summary, writes, "His master was kind to them and let them earn money and own the horse. His ownership of the horse is well proved." Special investigator Thomas J. Perry, who spent much time reporting on the character of claimants and interviewing people not brought forward as witnesses, said, "She is of a good family of colored people and are respected by all who know them."

7. Claim #3558, Albert Berrien, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of claimant, W.B. Higginbotham, and P.M. Sheibley. Mark Grimsley, *The hard hand of war: Union military policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 196.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Claim #6828, William Matthews, Cherokee County, AL, 1874. SCC. Testimony of Willis Carr. Claim #7284, Melville Carr, Cherokee County, AL, 1874. SCC. Testimony of Willis Carr. Willis Carr, like most ex-slaves, made no claim of his

own against the U.S. Government.

10. Robert S. Davis, Jr., "White and Black in Blue: The Recruitment of Federal Units in Civil War North Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* vol. LXXXV, No. 3, 354-357. The commander of the Forty-fourth USCT, the German-born Lewis Johnson, was threatened with death by one of his men "if he did not stop kicking his soldiers," according to Davis.

11. USCC docket #11071, Methodist Episcopal Church (Colored), Rome, GA, 1898. Claim #3558, Albert Berrien, Floyd County, 1878 SCC. Testimony of claimant and Morris Berrien.

12. *Rome Tri-Weekly Courier*, February 11, 1864.

13. Claim #1498, Peter Sheibley, Floyd County, 1878. SCC. Testimony of William B. Higginbotham. File now in USCC, docket #4997. CIS, v. 2, n. 41, pt.6, 43-63, 88-149. Peter Sheibley, in his testimony to the Congressional Committee investigating the Ku Klux Klan, accuses Wright and other local leaders of not using their influence to discourage the terrorist group from operating in the county. Wright was placed in the unusual position of defending several Klan members, who had been accused of murder and denied the right of habeas corpus by military authorities.

14. Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Georgia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, RG 105, reel 32 (microfilm), accessed January 27, 2003, via internet at <http://freedmensbureau.com/georgia/gaoutrages4.htm>.