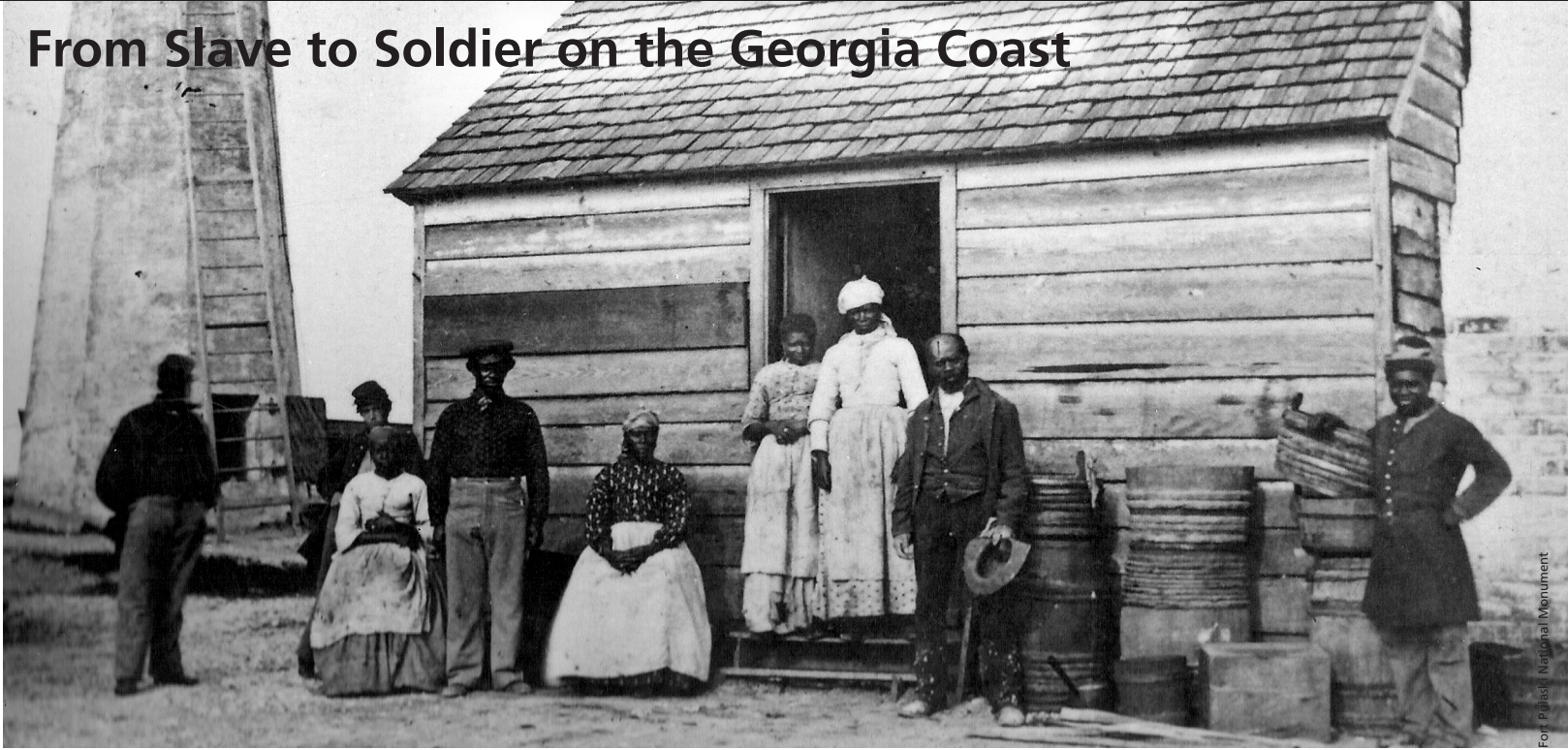




From Slave to Soldier on the Georgia Coast



With the fall of Fort Pulaski to Union troops in April 1862, the Union tightened its grip on the coastline of Georgia and South Carolina. A large population of former slaves was left behind on abandoned cotton plantations. Almost immediately, the Union quietly began testing the controversial use of African Americans as soldiers away from the media glare of Washington.

The Fort as Sanctuary

Almost as soon as the Union conquered Fort Pulaski, slaves began running away from nearby plantations. The slaves pictured above, some wearing cast-off soldier garb, were living in outbuildings at the fort.

The Union army put some of them to work as laborers around the fort. Union boat captains

also found the runaways helpful as navigators on the confusing network of creeks that meandered through the marshes around Savannah. But General David Hunter, commander of Union forces in Georgia and South Carolina, was an ardent abolitionist. He had bigger plans for the former slaves.

Hunter's Proclamations

Just two days after the battle for Fort Pulaski, on April 13, 1862, General Hunter issued an emancipation proclamation for all slaves on Cockspur Island. A month later, on May 9, 1862, Hunter issued another emancipation proclamation, declaring all slaves free in Georgia, South Carolina and Florida.

President Abraham Lincoln, learning of the proclamations through newspapers, immediately disavowed the May edict. The emancipation of slaves, representing millions of dollars of wealth for southerners, was to be handled at the highest levels of government, not by a general commanding troops in the field.

HEAD QUARTERS :--DEPARTMENT OF THE SOUTH.

PORT ROYAL, S. C., Aug: 4th 1862.

The bearer

Hard Times Middleton

is claimed as a slave, having been employed in hostility to the United States, is hereby, agreeably to the Law of the 6th., of August 1861., declared forever free. His Wife and his Children are also free.

D. Hunter

A certificate of freedom for a former slave, signed by General Hunter near Fort Pulaski.

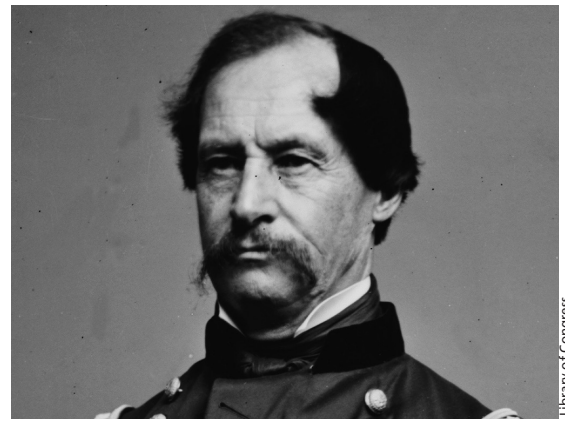
The Hunter Regiment

Undeterred, Hunter began recruiting soldiers from among the ex-slaves on nearby Hilton Head Island. Union officers circulated around the island enlisting ex-slaves. Some “volunteers,” who did not want to join the army, were recruited at gun point.

Hunter envisioned an armed force of ex-slaves living among the rest of the African-American population on the island. To distinguish his force of loyal soldiers, Hunter had the recruits uniformed in bright red trousers.

Hunter’s officers began training the new recruits while the general badgered Washington for gear and weapons for the new soldiers. But the War Department would have nothing to do with Hunter’s unauthorized experiment.

Lacking War Department support and money, Hunter disbanded the regiment within a few



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General Hunter was a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln, which may have saved the general’s career in light of his headstrong actions in coastal Georgia.

short months. The “volunteers” were sent back to their families without pay, and Hunter requested a new assignment. Yet within a few weeks, he would be vindicated as the War Department raised an official African-American regiment off the Georgia coast.

An Experiment Becomes Reality

In August 1862, the War Department sent General Rufus Saxton, a confirmed abolitionist, to the Georgia coast to oversee the large population of ex-slaves now under Union



Painting by Don Iroani, www.historicartprints.com

A modern image of a soldier wearing the red trousers of Hunter’s regiment.

control on the off-shore islands. Soon after arriving, Saxton got official permission to raise a regiment of African-American soldiers. Initially, his recruitment efforts were stymied by the bad experiences in Hunter’s old regiment. The lack of pay for the men was a big stumbling block.

But eventually, the 1st South Carolina Infantry was formed on Hilton Head Island. Thomas Higginson, a Massachusetts abolitionist, was named regimental commander. Colonel Higginson was fond of the men. He encouraged their efforts to learn to read and write in the evening hours when they had finished their military drill. “Their love of the spelling book is perfectly inexhaustible,” Higginson wrote.

Within three months, the regiment was sent on assignments along the coastline, skirmishing with small enemy forces. Higginson was pleased with the results. “They seem peculiarly fitted for offensive operations, and especially for partisan warfare; they have so much dash and such abundant resources, combined with such an Indian-like knowledge of the country and its ways,” Higginson wrote.

The 1st South Carolina continued its forays along the coast throughout the winter of 1863. By spring, the War Department in Washington was satisfied with their progress. The official roll-out of African-American regiments began soon thereafter. In a scene made famous in the movie “Glory,” the 54th Massachusetts Infantry paraded down the streets of Boston in May 1863 on their way to fight in the famous battle for Fort Wagner in Charleston, S.C.



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