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A Beacon of Hope: Contraband Camps, Harpers Ferry, and John Brown

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Abstract

Stereoviews were created by using a twin-lens camera that captured the same subject from two slightly different angles. The photographer then placed the two images on a stereoview card that could be inserted into a special viewer that merged the two images together and created a life-like, three-dimensional image. Stereoviews' low cost meant they were an inexpensive way to insert one's self into realistic three-dimensional scenes like the pictured contraband camp.

Keywords

African American History, Alex Andrioli, Civil Rights Movement, Contrabands, Harpers Ferry WV, John Brown, Photography, Special Collections, United States Colored Troops

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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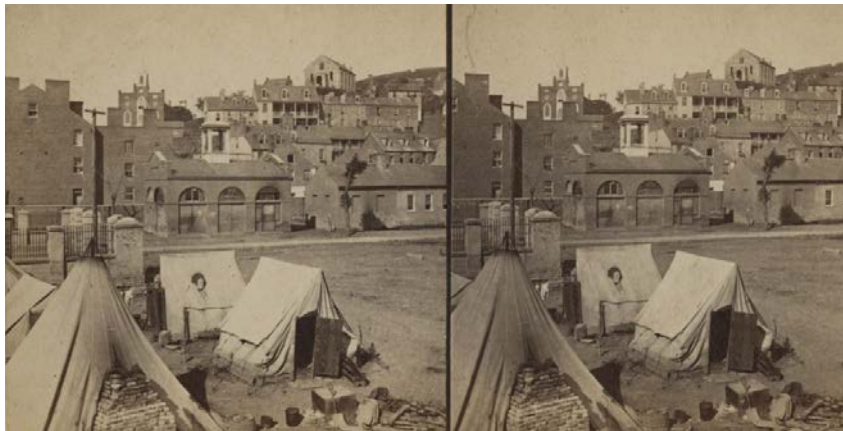
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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Beacon of Hope: Contraband Camps, Harpers Ferry, and John Brown

By [Alex Andrioli '18](#)



Contraband Camp at Harpers Ferry, WV. Stereoview card. The 3-dimensional stereoview and other photography brought the reality of the Civil War into civilian homes. This stereoview shows the rag-tag conditions of a contraband camp, erected just a few yards from John Brown's Fort in Harper's Ferry. Courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College.

Stereoviews were created by using a twin-lens camera that captured the same subject from two slightly different angles. The photographer then placed the two images on a stereoview card that could be inserted into a special viewer that merged the two images together and created a life-like, three-dimensional image. Stereoviews' low cost meant they were an inexpensive way to insert one's self into realistic three-dimensional scenes like the pictured contraband camp.

These camps, however, were far more real for the people who inhabited them. "Contraband" was a term used by the Union Army to describe runaway and liberated slaves that were hiding behind Union lines. In the first few weeks of the war, the Union had no policy for dealing with former slaves, so it was up to individual commanders to decide how to handle them. Some commanders put them to work for the Union on a low wage, while others returned them to their owners. Union General Benjamin Butler was the first to call former slaves "contrabands of war" in 1861, eagerly declaring that these men were "property" that had been legally taken from the Confederate States of America and which was not to be returned.

This stereoview of a contraband camp in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, poignantly details the Civil War's human cost, even with the total absence of people from the

photograph. This example of early, three-dimensional photography known as “stereography” was very popular during the Civil War era. So popular was the medium that an estimated 70% of all Civil War photos were shot as stereoviews. As a result, almost no better method existed for bringing images of the war’s human toll into people’s homes.

The formerly enslaved men and women flocking to Union lines created significant logistical challenges for Union forces. Army commissaries and quartermasters were not prepared to provide for the basic needs of the thousands of self-emancipated individuals who followed them to freedom. To alleviate this pressure, contraband camps were set up in Union garrison towns like Harpers Ferry, where runaway slaves could seek refuge. These camps were squalid, comprised of make-shift tents and abandoned buildings, and filled with “great sickness and mortality . . . especially among children.” However, the contraband camp in Harpers Ferry featured something unique which alluded to a more hopeful future: John Brown’s Fort.

Two years before the start of the Civil War, in October 1859, John Brown brought his war on slavery to Harpers Ferry. Brown’s plan to arm slaves failed and he and his cohort were captured in the “fort,” –then just a simple fire house. The abolitionists were executed for their failed uprising, but Brown’s legacy endured and became a symbol of the “cost of freedom.” After the war, the fort’s hallowed ground attracted civil rights groups like W.E.B. DuBois’s Niagara Movement, which visited in 1906. Three years later, the fort was placed on the campus of Storer College, a historically black college in Harpers Ferry that was open to anyone regardless of race, sex, or religion.

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