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## Finding Meaning in the Flag: Ex-Slaves and Newsies

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# Finding Meaning in the Flag: Ex-Slaves and Newsies

## **Abstract**

Thus far we've talked about predominately white Union and Confederate views of the Confederate flag, so for my last piece on perspectives during the war I want to talk about the views of African Americans. For African Americans, especially, the Civil War was tightly intertwined with the matter of slavery. They realized that the outcome of the war would be instrumental in determining the fate of slavery as an institution and believed that a Confederate victory would be detrimental to the prospects of their freedom. If Southerners had their way, [slavery would likely never die](#).

## **Keywords**

African American History, Confederate Battle Flag, Frederick Douglass, Memory, Olivia Ortman, Slavery, United States Colored Troops

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

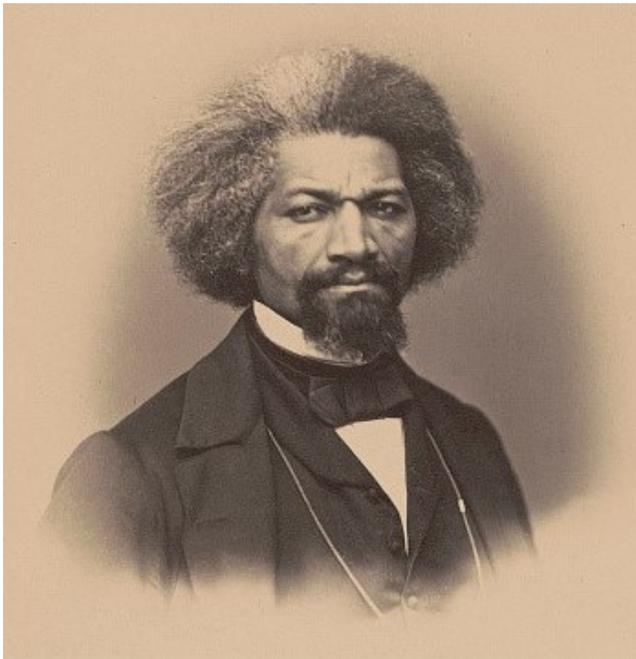
## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Finding Meaning in the Flag: Ex-Slaves and Newsies

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

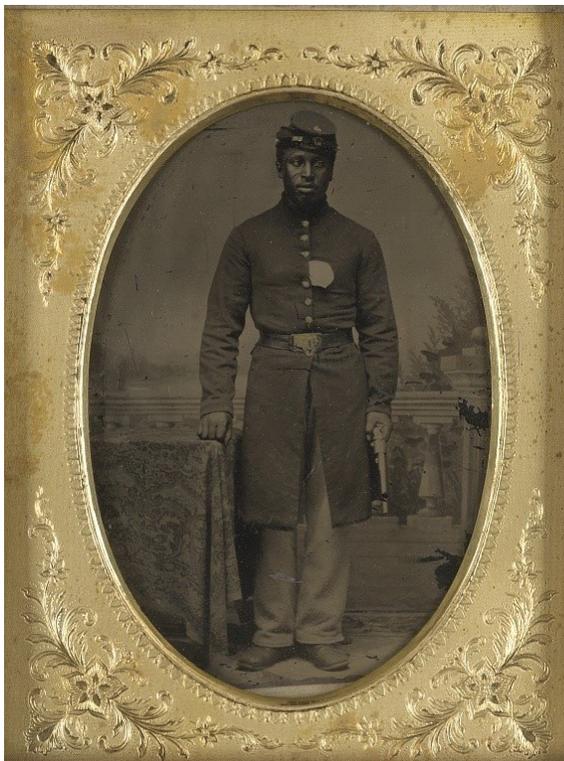
Thus far we've talked about predominately white Union and Confederate views of the Confederate flag, so for my last piece on perspectives during the war I want to talk about the views of African Americans. For African Americans, especially, the Civil War was tightly intertwined with the matter of slavery. They realized that the outcome of the war would be instrumental in determining the fate of slavery as an institution and believed that a Confederate victory would be detrimental to the prospects of their freedom. If Southerners had their way, [slavery would likely never die](#).



*Frederick Douglass in 1887, as photographed by J.W. Hurn. Via [Library of Congress](#).*

None express this better than Frederick Douglass, one of the most eloquent and influential African Americans of the time. In his newspaper, *Douglass' Monthly*, Douglass printed a copy of a lecture he delivered on June 30, 1861. He stated that slaveholders “have written piracy and robbery upon every fold of the Confederate flag” and that “they are for slavery, and for all its kindred abominations.” Douglass leaves no room to doubt that the flag stands for human atrocities. He also sees no difference between slaveholders and Confederates. They are one and the same to Douglass and many other African Americans.

An 1863 edition of the *Douglass' Monthly* connected the Confederate flag to atrocities in a much subtler way. The paper republished an article from the *Richmond Enquirer*, titled "Retaliation, or Submission – Which," on the topic of Northern war policies concerning African Americans. The author wrote about Northern demands that "insurgent negroes," or black soldiers, be treated equally to their white counterparts. "They intend to force us to adopt their theory of war, and accept their appreciation of the combatants," he complained. Even worse, the Union had committed to punishing Confederate prisoners of war for each black soldier they harmed, making sure these men would "never more charge in Confederate line, nor wave Confederate battle flag." *Douglass' Monthly* adds no commentary to the piece, allowing the original words to damn their author. It is clear to anyone who reads this article that the author and his brethren do not value the lives of African Americans, but he implies that Northerners do.



*Tom Strawn of Company B, 3rd US Colored Troops Heavy Artillery Regiment. Via Library of Congress.*

Northerners didn't always place as much value on African Americans as desired, though, and the Confederate flag served as an instrument for remedying that. While slavery was illegal throughout most of the North, Northerners by and large did not move as fast as African Americans would have liked in terms of guaranteeing black liberties. Use of the Confederate flag as a comparison was a way to push Northerners into action. In 1862, the *Christian Recorder*—an African American newspaper—published an article titled "War – Mobs." In the article, the author discusses the mobs of whites harassing black people throughout the North. He states, "no such disgraceful conduct can be found under the Confederate flag. No, sir; no such low, cowardly, and disgraceful conduct is

allowed under the Confederate flag.” An earlier article in *Douglass’ Monthly* exclaimed that “when the Government shall thoroughly convince the slave population that their friendship is to be repaid with enmity—that they have nothing more to expect from the Star Spangled Banner than from the Confederate flag—they will curse the very earth shaded by the presence of a United States soldier.” This is, in essence, a challenge for Northerners to do better. They have made claims that they are better than their Southern neighbors, now it’s time for them to put their money where their mouths are.

According to the 1860 federal census, the overwhelming majority of the African American population was enslaved. Even those who were free were still haunted by some connection to slavery. It was an injustice their people had suffered for centuries, and the Confederate flag became the prime symbol of that injustice. This is why 185,000 African Americans served in United States Colored Troops units. They were fighting against a symbol that caused them nothing but harm.

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