



## Emancipation jolts a slave and her mistress

By Stephanie McCurry

▲ **'Reliable contrabands,'** slaves who worked after hours in secret, greatly benefited the Union Army during the war

**The ink was barely dry** on the Emancipation Proclamation when two Union soldiers rode into the yard of Virginia slaveholder Sigismunda Kimball and demanded the release of the slave woman Farinda.

Kimball lived on a farm in the Shenandoah Valley near Berryville, about eight miles from Winchester. Her husband was in Stonewall Jackson's Corps in the Army of Northern Virginia, and she had been left to manage their two properties—and control the slaves—in his absence. This was no easy task: Kimball lived in a war zone. Winchester changed hands more than 70 times in the war, and Berryville with it. In November 1862 alone, her farm had been occupied alternately by two armies. And when the Union officers arrived in February 1863, two women—mistress and slave—were at the center of the emancipation drama that played out. In Berryville, as in so many other places in the Confederacy “stripped of men” by conscription, as one Southern woman put it, women were often the ones left on the frontlines as emancipation spread.

It is often said that the proclamation had no immediate meaning: It freed slaves in the seceded states—where the U.S. government had no authority—and exempted those in border states and parts of the Confederacy under Union control on January 1, 1863. As Richard Henry Dana wrote at the time, the proclamation amounted to “Slavery where we can emancipate and freedom where we cannot.” But after January 1, in areas *not* exempted from the proclamation, where the Union Army went, so went emancipation. Berryville was no exception. And, by

chance, in January 1863 a Union army had the upper hand in the area and Berryville was under Union military occupation.

It did not take long for the Emancipation Proclamation to find Kimball and Farinda and turn their lives upside down. As battles raged and the military fortunes of the Union and Confederate armies fluctuated throughout 1862, the people enslaved on Kimball's farms had struggled to harness, and their mistress to contain, the volatile new political possibilities of life in the war zone. With military reversals

constant, her slaves had proceeded cautiously. Even Union soldiers were unpredictable allies, as they had learned the previous April when Federal officers promised their mistress protection, and soldiers from a Michigan unit (men with no stomach for emancipation, as they put it) were posted at the farm as guards. A few seized their chance anyway: Three of Kimball's slaves, all men, escaped with Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Banks when he retreated from Berryville, stealing a wagon and two horses that they used to gather up family members from two other farms in the neighborhood. It seemed to be a family exodus. But because slave families typically were so dispersed in the Upper South, where slaveholding units tended to be quite small, they couldn't rescue all their family members before the window of opportunity closed and the slaves were again locked “in Dixie,” Kimball crowed.

The real drama of emancipation on Kimball's farm thus came nine months later, when two male relatives of Kimball's slaves returned. This time they fully possessed the awesome power of the federal government: the Emancipation Proclamation and Union officers to enforce it. High drama it was, too, when the Yankees rode back into Berryville and white soldiers “piloted by negro men” began to appear at local plantations with official orders from Maj. Gen. Robert H. Milroy, commander of the area's occupation force, to remove the men's wives





**Fugitive slaves flee across Virginia's Rappahannock River shortly before emancipation was declared for the Confederacy's 3 million slaves.**

and children. Kimball noted nervously the news of orders received by her neighbor to "release to Mr. John Washington his wife and six children...persons once slaves but now free by the president's proclamation of January 1st."

Kimball's turn came on February 24. That day two Yankees and two enslaved men she recognized appeared in her yard with a wagon, "dashed up to the Negro house," and began to load other slaves onto the wagon. Kimball was "too mad to speak," and sent her mother to confront the intruders. Her diary entry

records the exchange. "Mother said [to one of the white soldiers], I would like to ask what you came for. He replied, pointing to William [a slave who belonged to a neighbor] I came to take that man's brother's wife away, pointing now to Farinda." Farinda's husband, Phill, had run to the Yankees the previous week and sent his brother back with troops to get her.

"By what authority," Kimball herself now asked the officer. "The authority of the Commanding General, Gen. Milroy," the officer answered. Milroy "has no right to take them," Kimball stormed, "they do not belong to him." "O," the officer replied, a historical transformation condensed in a second, "they do not belong to any one, the government has fixed that." And with that he hitched up four horses to a wagon, loaded up Farinda and her child and prepared to go.

Asked by the white soldiers what plantation property she wanted to take

with her, Farinda—in her one appearance in the historical record as the teller of her own tale—replied memorably that "she did not want anything but herself."

It was the kind of moment repeated all over the South in 1863, 1864 and 1865 that made the Civil War a revolution in American social life. That day, when Phill sent his brother and the soldiers to get Farinda and Kimball went out to meet the enemy, historical positions were reversed and centuries of power turned upside down. To read Kimball's diary is like watching that revolution in real time: the fall of the planter class and the emancipation of the slaves condensed in the story of two Virginia women. □

*Stephanie McCurry is a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and author of the Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South.*

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