

'In the company' with **Susie King Taylor**

By **Stephanie McCurry**

▲ **After the war,** Susie King Taylor ran a school for former slaves in this building in Savannah, Ga.

In early April 1862, shortly after Union forces had taken Fort Pulaski in Savannah Harbor, 14-year-old Susie Baker was taken aboard a Federal gunboat and delivered, along with other fugitive slaves, to St. Simon's Island, Ga. Susie had been "born under the slave law in Georgia." In 1862 she became part of, and early witness to, the great historical transformation unfolding on the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands: the process by which, slowly, dangerously and bit by bit, slavery was destroyed, enslaved people emancipated and black men enlisted in the Union Army.

When the grown-up Susie Baker, now (Mrs.) Susie King Taylor, published her memoirs in 1902, she was more intent on telling the soldiers' story than her own. Her chronicle of the war and its aftermath was offered as a tribute to the memory and heroism of the men in Company E of the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, including her husband Edward King (whom she married at 14); "our boys," as she called them. But Taylor's account is equally—or more—valuable for the lesser known story she managed to tell, despite her modesty, of an African-American woman's Civil War.

Reminiscences of My Life in Camp With the 33rd United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers gives us a rare and extraordinary firsthand look at one enslaved woman's war experiences, of her work in the contraband

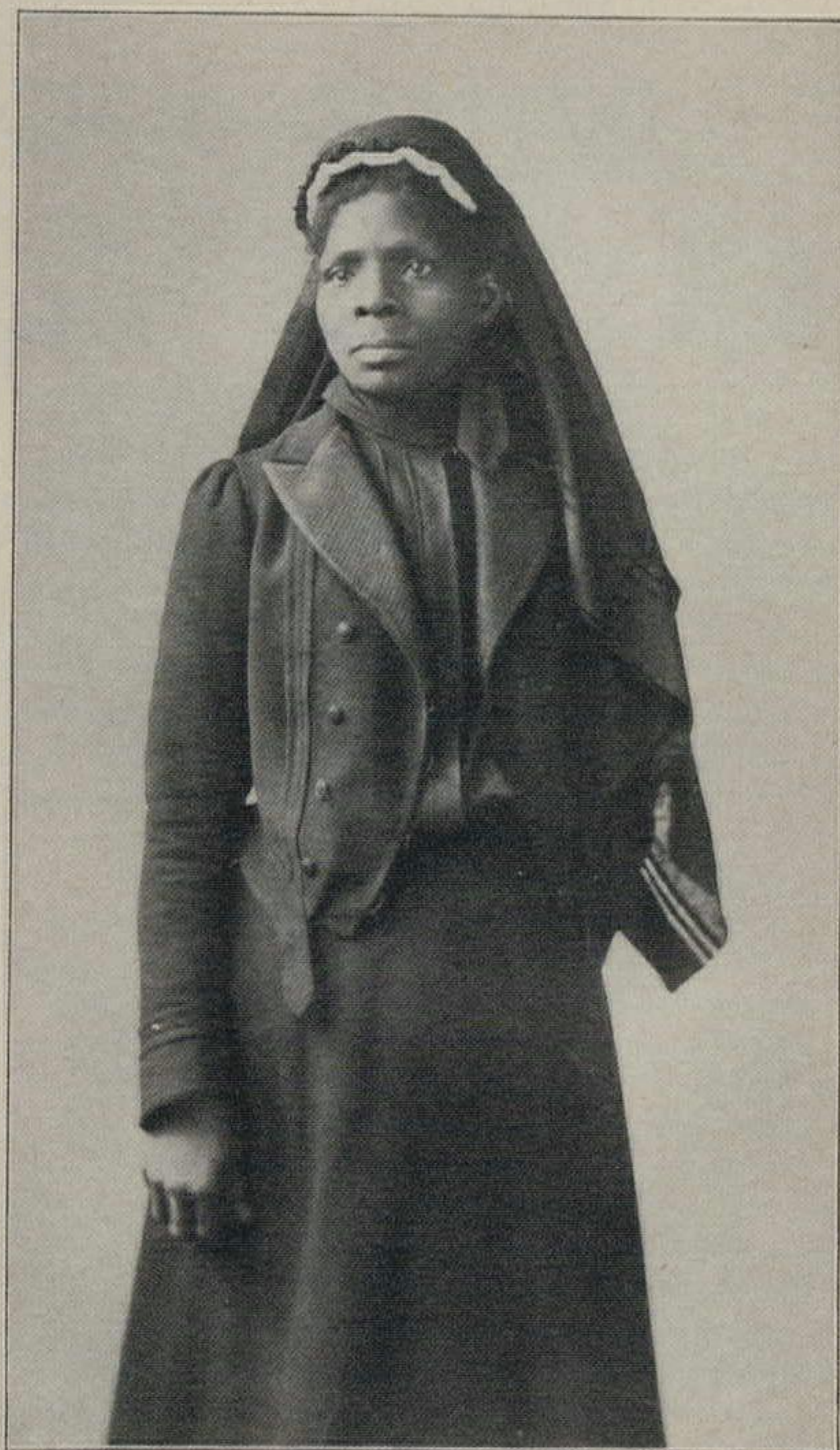
camps that figured so prominently in Union military emancipation policy, and especially of her service as a battlefield or front-line nurse to the troops.

When she disembarked from the gunboat at St. Simon's Island, she joined what eventually was a colony of refugees—600 men, women and children, "the women and children being the majority," she recalled. Contraband camps were vulnerable places, spaces of freedom but also of danger. Her camp was no different. There a population of mostly women and children lived smack in the midst of a guerrilla war, subject to Rebel attacks and the ever-present threat of death or recapture but with little military protection. When King's group was evacuated to Beaufort, S.C., the men were taken to Camp Saxton to be enrolled in the military. This military enlistment of black

men after the summer of 1862 turned contraband camps into largely female spaces.

The "first colored troops" did not receive any pay for 18 months, King points out, and then were offered half pay, which they famously refused. Left to fend for themselves, the women supported their large families all that time by their own labor, largely by doing laundry for the officers of the gunboats and the soldiers in camp, and by "making cakes and pies which they sold to the boys in camp." Black women in contraband camps like the ones Taylor knew, literally in transition from slavery to freedom, worked for their families and for the Union Army and Navy in a variety of roles.

But Taylor's service went far beyond the usual. She was not on the gunboat two hours, she said, when one of the officers discovered that she could read and write. Although she was officially hired as a laundress, she worked first as a teacher—for the black children in the camps and the soldiers who would come to her at night to learn to read—and as a nurse. Indeed Susie King not only nursed the soldiers and officers of Company E—"the company I was with" as she put it—through a small pox outbreak, but she also accompanied the troops as a combat nurse when they were deployed to Jacksonville, Fla., to Fort Gregg on James Island, S.C., and to other destinations.



Susie King Taylor

■ **Postwar struggles** Taylor, shown in the frontispiece of her memoir, remarried after her first husband died in 1866, and never stopped advocating for civil rights.

At Jacksonville she endured the shelling of the city by Rebel troops along with the rest of the company. After a hard battle to take Fort Gregg, she was there waiting at the landing. "My work now began," she said as the first wounded were carried off the boats—some with their legs and feet off or an arm gone. Susie King Taylor really was "in the company": Company E, 33rd U.S. Colored Troops. "I was enrolled as a company laundress but I did very

little of it," she wrote in her memoir. "I was always busy doing other things."

Taylor continued to serve the boys after the war. In 1866 she organized Corps 67 of the Women's Relief Corps, the women's auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic. And when she self-published her memoir in 1902, she was still fighting for her people, as she had during the Civil War, pushing back against the United Daughters of the

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Confederacy's sanitization of slavery in schoolbooks and calling white Southerners to account for the epidemic of lynching and violence visited on black men. "My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of Liberty!" It is hollow mockery," she declared, and bitter justice for the men who fought to save their country.

But in her own quiet way it is clear that Taylor also wrote her memoir to preserve the memory of the women who fought the war. The quiet strain of pride that runs through her book is finally, almost at the end, allowed to break the surface.

"There are many people who do not know what some of the colored women did during the war," she noted. Women slaves, at great risk to themselves, hid Union soldiers and helped them escape, or surreptitiously fed prisoners of war in the Savannah stockade, and assisted the Union Army in many ways. "These things should be kept in history before the people," Taylor wrote. Indeed. Her example reminds us to remain a little skeptical of the comprehensiveness of the military and historical records; the Civil War that black women such as Taylor fought still remains mostly untold. □

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