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Partners in Researching Fort Donelson's African American Past

Historians often downplay the importance of the campaign for Tennessee's Fort Donelson in February 1862, compared to the larger, bloodier battles at Shiloh, Antietam, and Chickamauga. This first major Union victory of the Civil War was significant, for the Army gained control of much of Middle and West Tennessee and of major waterways that flowed out of the Confederate heartland. The capital at Nashville eventually became a center of communications for the Union Army — a river and rail network that was vital to future wartime successes. Similarly, the significance of these battles for freedom-seeking slaves and their families has been ignored. By their own initiative, thousands of runaway slaves used the opportunity of Union victory to escape from their masters.¹

Now, 140 years later, we are learning more. Volunteers from the community, university professors, and local schoolteachers have provided valuable information and support to help the Fort Donelson National Battlefield staff document and interpret the African American experience at these battles. This volunteer initiative and enthusiasm has allowed the park to piece together the overlooked African American legacy. We now know that runaway slaves used Fort Donelson (and other forts) as safe havens, where they built

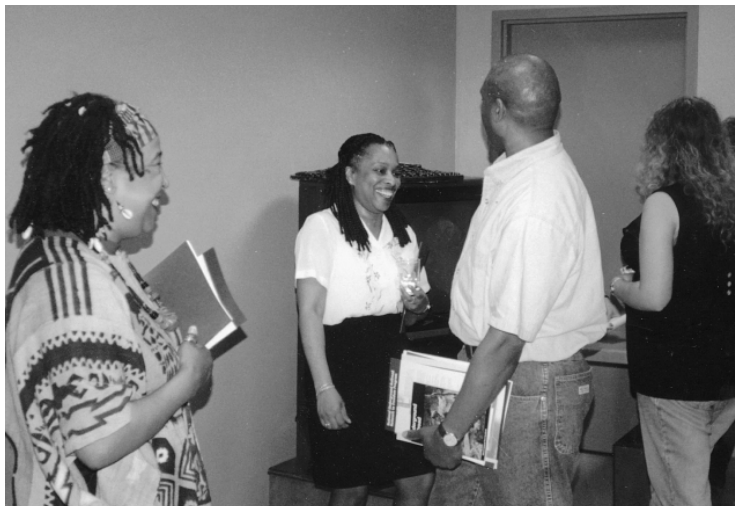
homes and schools, cared for their families near the forts, and enlisted as Union soldiers in African American units.

Research Partnerships

One of the first project supporters was John Cimprich, professor of history at Thomas More College in Crestview Hills, KY. His work, "Slavery's End in Tennessee, 1861-1865," documented some of the hardships that escaped slaves endured at Fort Donelson. His book was only one of the many contributions he made. Professor Cimprich continues to offer suggestions and sources for research; and he frequently reviews text for site bulletins, web pages, and future exhibits. He recently lectured to the local community about his research on the African American experience.²

View of Cumberland River overlooking the gun batteries at Fort Donelson NB. The river served as an escape route for freedom-seeking slaves. Photo by James P. Bagsby.





Barbara Tagger, National Park Service historian, Southeast Regional Office, Atlanta, GA, answers questions after her lecture on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program in Dover, TN. Tagger's lecture is just one way that Fort Donelson National Battlefield plans to educate the visiting public about the story of the Underground Railroad. National Park Service photo.

Our park has also benefited from the expertise and support of Barbara Tagger, National Park Service historian and Southeast Regional Underground Railroad coordinator in Atlanta, GA. With her guidance, Fort Donelson National Battlefield was named to the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program.³

Of course, research is never possible without financial support. Generous grant monies obtained from Eastern National Parks and Monuments funded an important research trip to the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC. This provided the park with documentary evidence of the existence of freedmen's camps and the recruitment of African American troops at Fort Donelson.

With a Little Help from Volunteers

Community support from local teachers and private individuals has perhaps been the most rewarding partnership. Betty Treherne-Harris, a 20-year Davidson County, TN, middle school teacher, spent time with park staff, explaining her ancestor's experience at Fort Donelson, his subsequent escape from his slave master, and his post-war success — just because she loves history and she wants her ancestor's story to be told. Other individuals in the community have either shared stories or offered to serve on review boards to help the National Park Service create new exhibits. Neighboring historic sites have expressed interest in learning about our research and how they can promote a better understanding of Civil War history. For the annual summer reading program, the local public library and Fort Donelson National Battlefield joined forces to educate students about the

Underground Railroad, using stories associated with the battlefield.

For the Future

What lessons can we learn by forging partnerships outside the National Park Service? What does this mean for other historic sites? First, it is important to build community support. Much of our park's success has come from the expertise, initiative, and guidance of volunteers. We have also learned that although the National Park Service is charged with the mission to educate and research, sometimes we must seek partnerships to help us achieve that mission. As stewards of our national treasures, it is equally important for museum professionals to listen to what visitors, teachers, and historians have to say. Historic scholarship changes, elementary classroom needs vary, and Americans differ in their opinions about the importance of historic sites. For schoolteacher Betty Treherne-Harris, the Union victory at Fort Donelson meant much more than the Union Army's strategic capture of the forts and rivers. Her understanding of this battlefield's history also involves her ancestor's eventual escape from his slave master as a result of the Confederate defeat at Fort Donelson in 1862. Sharing Mrs. Treherne-Harris' story is one way that we can make historic sites valuable to all Americans.⁴

Notes

- ¹ The battle at Fort Donelson was part of a campaign that also involved Forts Heiman and Henry. For an analysis of these battles, see Benjamin F. Cooling, *Forts Henry & Donelson: Key to the Confederate Heartland* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987) and Thomas Lawrence Connelly, *Army of the Heartland: The Army of Tennessee, 1861-1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967). For more information about the entire campaign, visit Fort Donelson's Web site at <www.nps.gov/fodo>.
- ² John Cimprich, *Slavery's End in Tennessee, 1861-1865* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1985).
- ³ For more information about the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, check out its Web site at <www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr>.
- ⁴ National Park Service Advisory Board Report, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2001 or <www.nps.gov/policy/futurereport/htm>.

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