African Americans have always been active participants in American history. Although most were in bondage prior to the Civil War, few were passive. Within the confines of a cruel, paternalistic system that was sustained by violence and the threat of violence, slaves created their own communities. They worked hard to shape their daily lives, and they influenced the very institution of slavery itself.

In 1860, more than 4 million slaves and free blacks lived in the South, making up almost 40 percent of the region’s population. In Tennessee, approximately 276,000 men, women, and children were enslaved. From the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, enslaved people throughout the South began to break down the bonds of slavery. The arrival of the Union army in slaveholding areas provided the necessary catalyst. Just one day after Union General Benjamin Butler reinforced Fort Monroe on Virginia’s coast in May 1861, three slave men escaped to the fort. Their owner had told them that he was going to send them to North Carolina to work on Confederate fortifications. General Butler called the escaped slaves “contraband of war” and refused to return them to their owners. The term “contraband” was used throughout the war to refer to former slaves.

As the Union army made inroads into Confederate territory, more slaves escaped to Union lines. In 1861-62, enclaves of former slaves developed in areas of Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, and the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Men, women, and children made their way to Union lines in a variety of ways. Some escaped as individuals; others left in family units. Some arrived with just the clothes on their backs, but many brought along bundles of clothing and tools. Some even brought livestock with them.

United States military policy toward the former slaves evolved as the war progressed. Despite Confederate propaganda to the contrary, the goal of the United States, as articulated by President Abraham Lincoln, was to preserve the Union, not to free the slaves. Early on, many Federal officers in the field allowed Southern slaveholders with Unionist sympathies to reclaim their slaves who had escaped to Union lines. In addition, although commanders readily found work for able-bodied men and some women, many Union officers defined the women and children who escaped to their lines as a problem.
As the war progressed, the assistance that slaves and former slaves gave to the Union army, particularly in guiding soldiers through enemy territory and providing information about Confederate forces, impressed military leaders. In addition, President Lincoln recognized the value of transferring the labor of African Americans in the South from the Confederate war effort to the Union war effort. After the Union victory at Antietam in 1862, the president issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, announcing that on January 1, 1863, slaves in Confederate territory would be free.

The Emancipation Proclamation was a war measure designed to promote Union victory rather than to abolish slavery. To that effect, the proclamation did not apply to Tennessee, southern Louisiana, or parts of Virginia. The Union army occupied much of this territory, and President Lincoln did not want to anger Unionist slaveholders who lived within it. Ironically, although the proclamation did not technically apply to slaves in these areas, many left their owners and claimed their freedom. In contrast, the majority of the slaves to whom the proclamation applied lived deep within Confederate territory and could not yet actually gain their freedom. Significantly, however, the proclamation also stated that African Americans could join the armed forces of the United States. In the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation, the U.S. Senate approved a constitutional amendment outlawing slavery in 1864, but the U.S. House of Representatives rejected it. Not until after the war would the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in December 1865, abolish slavery in the United States.

As the transition from slavery to freedom continued during the war, former slaves faced numerous challenges. Not the least of these were the instability and threat of displacement that came with living in a war zone. Contraband camps established near Union army outposts were impermanent settlements, and former slaves often had to build their own shelters. The large numbers of refugees crowding into the camps led to rampant disease and high mortality rates. Many ex-slaves preferred to find their own places to live rather than try to survive within the contraband camps.

Despite the many challenges they faced, former slaves made progress in establishing themselves as free persons during the war. Young and old attended schools established by missionaries and Northern aid societies. Women and men worked for wages for the Union army and for new institutions established with the assistance of the army, such as the “Memphis Colored Orphan Asylum.” The founder of the asylum, for example, wrote in her diary on Dec. 3, 1864, “Employed Ann, a colored woman, with two little boys, whose husband is in the Union army.”

Contraband camps provided prime recruiting grounds for soldiers for the United States Colored Troops. By the end of the war, some 20,133 black Tennesseans had served in the Union army. Tennessee ranked third among all states in the number of black troops who joined up. Black soldiers performed a variety of jobs, from constructing fortifications to guarding railroad lines. Their garrison duty along the railroads introduced them to combat against Confederate cavalry. Toward the end of the war, black
troops distinguished themselves in heavy fighting at the Battle of Nashville in December 1864. USCT troops also played an active role in recruiting new black soldiers and liberating slaves.

Interestingly, enslaved workers who lived near Union lines but did not choose to leave their owners still contributed to the demise of slavery. Many used the threat of escape to negotiate better working conditions or more free time. By the end of the war, slavery had all but disintegrated in and around Union-occupied areas. With the war's end in April 1865, all slaves in the former Confederacy claimed their freedom.

Ensuring that freedom would be different than slavery was a challenge during the years of Reconstruction. Patsy Hyde, a former slave who lived in Nashville and was interviewed as part of the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, recalled being turned out without anything when freed. Many former slaves worked for their former owners, often in agricultural jobs and usually for very little compensation. In other areas of their lives, freedpeople—as former slaves were often called—established greater independence. Continuing efforts begun during the war, they founded their own churches and schools throughout the South. Freedpeople also created self-help benevolent institutions, which were often associated with churches, and political organizations. Black men eagerly voted at the polls; men, women, and children participated in political rallies and Emancipation Day celebrations. Some whites used violence to oppose blacks’ efforts to exert their independence and claim their rights.

From 1865 to 1868, the Freedmen’s Bureau, a federal agency created by Congress at the end of the war, helped facilitate the transition from slavery to freedom. The bureau drew up labor contracts between former slaves and their employers, established temporary courts to hear complaints and mediate disputes, worked with missionaries and teachers to establish schools for former slaves, and provided some assistance in the form of clothing and rations for both blacks and whites. Many of the men who worked for the bureau were former Union soldiers, and they demonstrated a range of attitudes toward the former slaves and their former owners.

Emancipation retained a place in the public memory of African American communities for decades after the war. Former slaves and their descendents held Emancipation Day celebrations throughout the South into the twentieth century; the day of the celebration varied from place to place and included January 1, April 9 (the day of General Robert E. Lee’s surrender), August 8 (the day that President Andrew Johnson is said to have freed his slaves), and September 22, among others. Tennesseans in the middle and western parts of the state tended to celebrate January 1, while residents of the eastern counties chose August 8. One day that gained popularity in Tennessee and other states late in the twentieth century was June 19, known as “Juneteenth,” originally a celebration of the announcement of freedom on Galveston Island in Texas in 1865.
Focusing on how African Americans helped effect change during and after the Civil War is one way for teachers to share with students the difficult topics of slavery and freedom. Emancipation has often been portrayed as a top-down event, with a focus on Abraham Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth Amendment. Certainly, Abraham Lincoln was a hero to former slaves, and these federal documents were important in securing the end of slavery. All, however, are best understood when placed in the context of the people who experienced freedom. This helps to show how emancipation was more of a process than an event, with freedom first claimed during the Civil War, worked out during Reconstruction, and more completely fulfilled one hundred years later during the Civil Rights movement (often called the Second Reconstruction).

RESOURCES

- Emancipation Proclamation: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/scsmbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(scsm001016))
- Frederick Douglass: Online Resources: http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/douglass/
- Furman, Jan, ed. Slavery in the Clover Bottoms: John McCline’s Narrative of His Life During Slavery and the Civil War (1998).
- Thirteenth Amendment: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=lsl&fileName=013/lsl013.db&recNum=596