

### The Peninsula Campaign & the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans & the Fight for Freedom

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## Review

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**Brasher, Glenn David** *The Peninsula Campaign & the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans & the Fight for Freedom*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3544-9

Who won the Peninsula Campaign?

The fact that the Confederate army won the Peninsula campaign of 1862 has not been disputed by scholars. It is a well-known story. George B. McClellan inched his way up the Virginia Peninsula, arrived at the gates of Richmond and, in a singularly unfortunate bit of accurate shooting, a Union soldier wounded the Confederate commander Joseph E. Johnston. In his place, Robert E. Lee took command of the Army of Northern Virginia and drove Union forces back and saved Richmond. Glenn David Brasher in his remarkable study, *The Peninsula Campaign & the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans & the Fight for Freedom*, manages to breathe new life into what has become a well-worn tale.

While scholars' attentions have been on soldiers' actions or, in the case of McClellan, inaction, Brasher focuses his study on the exploits of civilians, particularly free and enslaved African Americans. The status of African Americans in this campaign is not unknown; however, the story usually begins and ends when Benjamin Butler declared escaped slaves at Fort Monroe, Virginia, contraband. Butler's actions have been central to both the military necessity explanation for emancipation and an important historiographical argument related to the end of slavery. Was it white men like Butler and Union soldiers who freed the slaves, or did the slaves free themselves when they crossed over into Union lines? The role of black Americans in their own liberation has been a contentious one and the subject of much heated debate among scholars.

Brasher's study occupies a middle ground in this debate. He rejects the notion that "the activities of slaves and free blacks were the primary force that

determined the outcome of the Peninsula Campaign and brought about the liberation of slaves" (7). Brasher does so because he recognizes both the importance of Union leaders who made decisions about strategy and tactics, and the decisions made by Union Soldiers to protect fleeing slaves. Common soldiers could have rejected these men and women and returned them to their masters. Moreover, he does not believe that it was solely the action of black Americans who fled to Union lines that explains emancipation. Ironically, he argues that it was the activities of African Americans who supported Confederate forces, those who were unable to flee to Confederate lines, that convinced Northerners of the necessity of emancipation. Union soldiers, politicians, and civilians knew that slaves provided labor that materially aided the Confederacy. The Peninsula Campaign provided a tangible demonstration of the military importance of their labors—the fortifications used to slow the Union advance toward Richmond. Less tangible, but no less real, at least to Northerners, reports of black southerners fighting for the Confederacy. The most significant contribution of this book is to document how tales of African Americans fighting, not just laboring, for the Confederacy affected Federals' view of emancipation. Union soldiers recorded a number of instances in which they observed African Americans marching in units dressed as southern soldiers or serving as Confederate snipers. Many Northerners decided that if Confederates were using African American as soldiers, military necessity demanded that this asset be taken away from them.

While Brasher does an outstanding job of explaining how reports of African Americans serving as soldiers—what we would call today black Confederates—influenced Northerners' views on emancipation, he should have been more skeptical of the accuracy of these statements. Brasher documents these reports and does not comment on the extent to which any individual account is true. Instead, he argues that while "we often do not quite know what to make of such testimonials . . . Collectively, however, the sheer number tell us that in fact, to at least some small degree, this was happening early in the war" (5-6). I do not agree that the accuracy of these reports should be assessed based on quantity, particularly since some of this testimony was found in contemporary newspapers. Nineteenth-century newspapers take the notion of political bias in journalism to new heights. Brasher acknowledges the uses of the accounts as propaganda in contemporary political debates. Other sources, soldiers' eyewitness accounts seem more credible. Union soldiers testified to the presence of African Americans either in white units or in their own all-black units and the

most surprising observation: that black Virginians served as Confederate snipers and killed Union soldiers.

While Brasher sees these reports of black marksmen as adding weight to the argument, I see it as proof that these accounts should be handled skeptically. While the existence of black Confederate army units need not be dismissed out of hand, the reports that black men were snipers can be regardless of eyewitness accounts. It is impossible to imagine that the Confederate army would recognize an African American as able to perform this mission; in gendered language, as “man enough” to serve in this role. Moreover, a sniper must be an excellent shot and familiar with firearms; under what circumstance would an African American be trained to perform this task in the Antebellum South? If Union soldiers observed a phenomenon that goes against everything one might expect, what explains these soldiers’ observations? I would like to suggest the work of the great European historian, Marc Bloch, who served in the French Army during both World Wars. In his final work, *The Historian’s Craft*, written before he was executed for his work in the French resistance, he discussed a phenomenon he saw in World War I, the false rumor. In this 1917 case; French soldiers made outlandish claims about German espionage. He describes how in the trenches “the error of a single witness. . . [became] that of many men . . . Transformed into a false rumor.” He explains that this type of error “does not spread, does not take on life, unless it harmonizes with the prejudices of public opinion.” Bloch believes that this false rumor may be useful to a historian because it reflects the “collective consciousness” of the soldiers who believe it.<sup>1</sup> The hysterical rhetoric about black confederate soldiers may tell us more about wartime anxieties than the reality of peninsula operations. Finally, these anxious, inexperienced, soldiers in their first campaign may have interpreted black corpses, the color of decomposing bodies, as former black soldiers.

None of this takes away from the value of this book, rarely does an author merge so seamlessly in one study a military history—a particular campaign, social history—slavery and history from the bottom up, and political history—the origins of the Emancipation Proclamation. Glen Brasher’s study answers the question, “Who won the Peninsula campaign?” It was enslaved and free African Americans who made the fate of freedom central to the fate of the Union.

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Notes:

(1) Marc Bloch, *The Historians Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 106-107.

*Barbara A. Gannon is an assistant professor of history at the University of Central Florida. Her first book, The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic, received the Wiley-Silver Prize (2012) for the best first book on Civil War history.*