“THE FOURTH OF JULY IS OURS”:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDEPENDENCE DAY IN THE CIVIL WAR
SOUTH

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On July 4, 1865 Americans gathered together to mark their 89th year of independence from Britain, celebrating with the traditional speeches, music and readings of the nation’s founding documents. However, in many ways this Independence Day was unlike any that had come before. Forced to reevaluate their relationship to the holiday over the course of the Civil War, many Southerners, recently defeated, stayed home. Instead, the streets were filled with newly freed blacks celebrating their liberty for the first time. Leisure is synonymous with freedom, and southern black participation in this national day of rest speaks volumes about their American identities. These exuberant individuals were joining in a multiracial conversation about freedom, citizenship and national identity which Northern blacks had been inciting for decades with their own public celebrations. As Americans renegotiated their national identities in the wake of secession, the rapidly growing free black population dramatically transformed the Fourth of July to suit a nation of new citizens.

Beginning with the first celebrations in 1776, the Fourth of July served as a chance for Americans to assert their nationalism and enact their citizenship. In antebellum America, July 4 was celebrated communally with parades, orations, readings of the Declaration, toasts and fireworks. These celebrations were public declarations of unity, but several scholars have shown that they also functioned as contentious battlegrounds in a rapidly changing nation. Even today, the nation’s various groups compete for legitimacy surrounding the Fourth of July. As Paul Quigley asserts, “The Fourth of July has quickly become an occasion to define and negotiate the meanings of American national identity.”¹ From its inception this holiday, infused with religious and

nationalistic symbolism, has been a site of political and social confrontation and exclusion. Although early celebrations seemed to follow a narrow pattern, traditional symbols like the Declaration could be “imbued with whatever ‘meaning’ the celebrants wished.”

As the country continued to grow in the nineteenth century, Americans often used the holiday to debate their collective future: politically, socially and especially racially. These “contests for power and domination,” though exclusionary, were therefore also opportunities for various groups to assert their status as Americans.

In the North, free black citizens were among those who used public celebrations to assert their American identity. Building on a rich tradition of slave holidays, the black community began to organize independent “freedom festivals” to celebrate African-American culture and support communal goals.

Historian Shane White has shown that black celebrations were a significant part of city life throughout the year, even as they became more controversial over time. As Genevieve Fabre points out, “It seemed appropriate that blacks who had participated in the fight for independence should want to celebrate the spirit of 1776,” and some did speak at early Fourth of July celebrations, participating in the colonial jubilee without controversy. However, as racial conflicts intensified in the nineteenth century, “black leaders consciously modeled their

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2 James Stephen Elliot, “The Other Fourth of July: The Meanings of Black Identity at American Celebrations of Independence, 1770-1863” (PhD. diss., Harvard University, 1997), 129.


commemorations on the well-established July Fourth tradition, adapting it for their own purposes." The already powerful date served as a stage on which black leaders, like community leaders throughout America, enacted the concerns of the group.

These Black Freedom Days were political statements and disruptive uses of shared space in the antebellum North. As African American communities began to hold public marches in the streets around the Fourth of July, they became impossible to ignore. According to White, “The nineteenth-century parades, with their overtly public and political cast, prominently, even intrusively, displayed the newly freed Northern blacks to whites and to themselves as both African Americans and citizens of the new nation.”

These claims to belonging were political acts from second-class citizens. They indicated the refusal of these particular free Americans to be increasingly pushed to the outskirts of national history. The marchers choose instead to be “concerned with forcing change and creating a more viable future.” On this holiday when all Americans reflected on the founding ideals while claiming their own citizenship, the stakes were remarkably high for African Americans.

For many Northern African-Americans, those stakes induced an interrogation of their participation in the Fourth of July at all. By the nineteenth century, the holiday had become a target of racism and segregation, prompting Frederick Douglas to deem it “the white man’s Fourth of July.” In addition, the celebration’s origin in the Declaration of Independence seemed little more than cruel hypocrisy while millions remained enslaved

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6 Kachun, Festivals of Freedom, 25.
in America. As white orators read the document at gatherings each year, abolitionists increasingly vilified the holiday. Frederick Douglas best developed this argument in a July 4 speech in 1852. Speaking to a crowd of abolitionists, he famously asked,

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham… mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy -- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.10

Douglass’s moving words turned the tables on a nation of whites who consistently mocked black festivals as false gatherings of the uncivilized. For Douglass and many others, the Fourth of July was not a truly national holiday while so many remained in bondage.

Rather than celebrate the birth of a nation that oppressed them, many free blacks chose other dates to wield the political power that came with public celebration. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Northern blacks celebrated their freedom on July 5, July 14, January 1 (the date of the abolition of the foreign slave trade) and August 1 (the date of British emancipation in the West Indies).11 White argues that these alternate celebrations came out of a community debate about both the hypocrisy of Independence Day and the practical safety of blacks on July 4.12 Alternate celebrations offered a chance for the black community to compare their events favorably with traditional Independence Days, which were notoriously drunken and violent. Douglass was particularly influential in the establishment of August 1 as a traditional, orderly celebration of African-American history and culture, noting: “If these occasions are conducted wisely, decorously, and orderly, they increase our respectability in the eyes of

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10 Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” 350.
the world, and silence the slanders of prejudice.”¹³ Douglass was reacting to white fears of disorder at integrated celebrations. These criticisms had become especially pronounced when black participants attempted to voice their political opinions on issues like slavery in the West Indies. However, these celebrations were not simply secondary options in the face of racism. They had meaning as both rejections of white hypocrisy and as community events focused solely on black freedom. As Fabre writes, “This fluctuation from one date to another…offers evidence of the determination with which blacks pursued their quest for a national commemoration.”¹⁴ While the Fourth represented the flawed state of their nation, these individuals would not cede their American identities. For them, the Fourth was not the path to citizenship that it represented for so many other Americans, but Northern blacks continued to celebrate the nation’s founding ideals.

These black freedom celebrations were not limited to the North. Just as slave owners celebrated July 4, Southern slaves were also often given this day off after the crops were “laid by.” Like modern celebrations, these were days filled with food, music and community building.¹⁵ However, as White explains in reference to Northern festivals, “We may be relatively confident about white reactions, but working out what slave participants thought they were doing as they celebrated these festivals is another matter altogether.”¹⁶ Some scholars have seen a deliberate reference to the principles of Independence Day in the slave revolts planned for festival days, including those

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orchestrated by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner.\textsuperscript{17} It seems likely that the parallels between the enslaved colonies and their own condition not lost on the slaveholding community. In response to Vesey, a South Carolina pamphlet urged “the prohibition of negroes from attending Fourth-of-July celebrations.”\textsuperscript{18} As Eugene Genovese notes, the holiday, “had unusual characteristics, for it often gave the slaves access to political speeches not suited to their condition. Words and phrases like ‘freedom,’ ‘independence,’ ‘revolution,’ and ‘death to tyrants’ did not escape their ears.” Whether these holidays actually spurred revolt or were instead used to control slaves (as Douglass argued), the annual event concerned slaveholders.\textsuperscript{19} Just as had happened in the North, “white Americans came to fear Fourth of July festivities,” as their own hypocrisy became hard to ignore.\textsuperscript{20}

White discomfort with multiracial celebrations of freedom's holiday was evident as they attempted to exclude blacks from the holiday altogether, physically and ideologically. In the North, black celebrations were greeted with intense public mockery, threats and sometimes violence.\textsuperscript{21} In the South, in addition to banning slaves from provocative orations, slave owners sought to maintain the whiteness of the holiday by reframing America’s founding ideals. Jefferson’s “false and foolish” Declaration was a particular target.\textsuperscript{22} Some, like Virginian George Fitzhugh, argued that abolitionists were

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\textsuperscript{17}Waldstreicher, \textit{In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes}, 315.
\textsuperscript{20}Fabre, “African-American Freedom Commemorative Celebrations,” 76.
\textsuperscript{21}White, “It Was a Proud Day,” 38.
\textsuperscript{22}William Kauffman Scarborough, ed., \textit{The Diary of Edmund Ruffian} (Baton Rouge: 1972-1989), 90 quoted in Quigley, “Independence Day Dilemmas in the American
simply misreading the document: “We agree with Mr. Jefferson, that all men have natural and inalienable rights…We conclude that about nineteen out of every twenty individuals have ‘a natural and inalienable right’ to be taken care of and protected,” – a convoluted reading which conveniently condoned slavery. Many embraced the Constitution, a tacitly pro-slavery document, instead. The antebellum period also saw the popularity of the American Colonization Society, whose promise of emigration was supported by whites who hoped to fulfill the Founder’s ideals by erasing the last stain on the American identity: the nation’s race problem. The Society’s most profitable collection day was the Fourth of July. These attempts to segregate Independence Day illustrate the power of the holiday in the new nation. And while slavery persisted, black Americans could not fully claim the holiday as their own. Even so, black communities across the United States continued to celebrate freedom festivals in the face of slavery, believing that the founding ideals of 1776 remained “their deepest claim to citizenship.”

As the threat of disunion began to envelope the nation in the 1850s, the South’s relationship to the Fourth of July began to shift. The Civil War, and the subsequent emancipation of America’s slaves, disrupted the white Southern claim to Independence Day. Significant scholarship has chronicled the heated debate over Independence Day that was played out in Southern newspapers throughout the period of disunion. Paul Quigley has shown the marked ambivalence toward the Fourth on the part of white

25 David W. Blight, Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory and the American Civil War (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 37.
Southerners, many of whom thought a celebration incongruous with the ideals of secession, considering that the day “belongs to the history of a union which no longer exists.” In 1861, the day was not celebrated in parts of North Carolina, and by 1863 it was reported that Georgians were also hesitant to recognize the anniversary. That year a newspaper in Augusta voiced the case for rejection: “Let the Yankees have the stars and stripes and the Fourth of July.” Writers like these were declaring their national identity on the Fourth, as they had done for years. A rejection of the Union in favor of the new nation seemed consistent with tradition. Even as the Civil War divided the nation, the Fourth of July continued to be at time to reflect on one’s citizenship and identity in relation to the United States.

The best way to declare Confederate identity remained up for debate. One group argued that South Carolinians, like Northern blacks, should pick an alternate day to celebration—perhaps the date of secession. However, these suggestions were never enacted, perhaps because so many Confederates believed that they retained a claim to the Fourth of July. Some seemed to have retained their national identity, claiming: “The Yankees have robbed us of too much already. We have no idea of giving up the national anniversary—not a bit of it. The Fourth of July is ours.” But many others echoed a familiar argument about the origins of the principles of 1776. On the same day when the


29 Bond, “Competing Visions of America,” 36.

Augusta paper rejected the holiday, the *Macon Daily Telegraph* claimed it: “The South made that holiday, and around it will always cluster some of the proudest achievements of her heroic soldiers and her great statesmen…In one word, we believe the Fourth of July belongs to the South, and she should keep it as her national holiday.”31 Southerners were proud of their rebelling (and slaveholding) forefathers, and they found the Fourth of July perfectly aligned with their own “second war for independence” against the tyrannical North. 32

Of course, the annual reading of the Declaration of Independence forced Southerners to address its claims of equality as they built a nation from slavery. Many began to focus on the Constitution, while others continued to practice selective readings of the Declaration itself. As mentioned above, the document was attacked in many Southern newspapers. The Charleston *Courier* asserted, “We reject utterly the barefaced and transparent fallacies in which the production of MR. JEFFERSON opens.”33 Similarly, the *Daily Richmond Examiner* bemoaned the pesky beginning of the world’s most famous pro-rebellion document: “Would that [the Founders’] useless preamble, their absurd pretexts and transcendental theories had been as harmless as they were sonorous.”34 Despite their censure, these commentators clearly believed that total acceptance of the Declaration was ultimately nonessential to this politically valuable celebration of rebellion. This heated debated is reflected in a Confederate textbook which, under the topic of “Fourth of July” simply asked, “Ought not its observance to be

perpetuated?”

Most Southerners would likely have answered in the affirmative, even as the realities of war put an end to active celebrations. The region's newspapers continued to claim a right to Independence Day, and their “rhetoric suggested that jubilant Fourth of July celebrations would resume once the South finally secured its independence.” This emphasis on post-war Independence Days was reasonable in a time when “the institutional embodiments of American nationalism remained in Northern hands,” making Southern claims to American history problematic. Despite the inconsistencies of championing a holiday that celebrated the union the rebels chose to escape, Southerners remained committed to keeping their claim to July 4 alive throughout the war, revealing the political and emotional power of the holiday.

The importance of Independence Day was powerfully amplified for the millions of individuals who had been freed from slavery by July 1865. Almost immediately, freedmen and women enthusiastically took up the holiday that celebrated a freedom that had long been denied to them. Columbia, South Carolina resident Emma LeConte wrote in her diary about the first post-emancipation Fourth of July when “four or five thousand negroes assembled in Columbia.” She witnessed an “immense procession,” several orations, a “dinner on a grand scale,” the explosion of “fireworks while a brass band

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35 Levi Branson, First Book in Composition, Applying the Principles of Grammar to the Art of Composing: Also, Giving Full Directions for Punctuation; Especially Designed for the Use of Southern Schools (Raleigh, NC: Branson, Farrar, 1863), 117-118 quoted in Quigley, Shifting Grounds, 176.
36 Bond, Competing Visions of America, 41.
37 Quigley, “Independence Day Dilemmas in the American South,” 258.
played continuously” and dancing which went on until midnight. Soon large-scale black celebrations had spread throughout the South. Confederate soldier Samuel Pickens witnessed festivities in Alabama that were mirrored all over the former Confederacy, noting in his diary, “This is a grand occasion with the Yankees & negroes…troops paraded & declaration of Independence & Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation read to them. There was a large barbecue…Slight pyrotechnic display.” In Charleston the whites “turned [the Fourth of July] over to the tender mercies of the colored people,” and in Atlanta, the day was marked by a parade featuring costumes, horses and banners. Fletcher Green notes that blacks presided over the Fourth of July in the South throughout the nineteenth century, and as late as 1900 one commentator complained that African Americans obviously believed that “the abolition of slavery and the Fourth of July are in some way mixed up.” For individuals who had lived so long without the rights promised to all by America’s founding documents, the two events were inevitably linked.

These celebrations disrupted the white Southern claim to Independence Day, and were therefore greeted with mockery, fear and violence. Many whites characterized these newly integrated celebrations as counterfeit copies of their own traditions. LeConte assuaged her fears by questioning the authenticity of the 1865 party, writing, “Most of the gentlemen of the town were invited, but of course not one real gentleman was present.”

She goes on to lament the “horrid degradation” of the College Hall, the site of past Confederate celebrations, where in 1865 “that former gay and refined audience was replaced by a motley throng of negroes” who paled in comparison to the “orators of yesterday!” Black celebrations were often ridiculed by local journalists, who described the events as “ludicrous” and employed stereotypical dialects to reduce the processions of new citizens to a joke. Shane White has chronicled similar printed reactions to celebrations in the North, which left readers “with an image of the city’s blacks as less than human, as objects of derision, and most important, as a group who were getting ideas beyond their station.” These characterizations of post-war celebrations allowed the true Fourth of July to remain untarnished by integration and black control. Although they could no longer prevent blacks from celebrating the Fourth, whites often worked to delegitimize their festivities, and therefore black claims to citizenship.

Southerners also attempted to portray post-emancipation integrated celebrations as dangerous threats to community order. LeConte isolates the newly freed individuals as particularly disruptive, complaining that, “Hundreds of voices singing strange negro songs and hundred of feet dancing weird negro dances made a terrible noise,” and were only lessened by a Union soldier who, “has tried to reduce the anarchy and confusion to something like order.” The soldier, with whom LeConte once shared her citizenship, is on the side of peace, while the newly freed are tinged with chaos. These attacks were what so concerned Douglass in the 1850s. However, the newly freed community in Columbia was faced with a sudden choice just months after emancipation, isolated from

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42 LeConte, “5 July, 1865,” 81-82.
44 White, “It Was a Proud Day,” 35.
45 LeConte, “5 July, 1865,” 82.
the debates that had been raging among Northern blacks for years. It is impossible to
know whether their choices were consciously political or simply an expression of joy.
They were likely both. Their exuberance incited hypocrisy from the white community (an
infamously violent group on the Fourth) and opened the black community up to criticism.
It also issued a powerful statement to whites like LeConte, who were forced to accept a
widening definition of freedom and citizenship.

Some white Southerners were so disturbed by this new reality that they employed
violence to try to maintain antebellum power dynamics around the Fourth of July. In
1864, Mississippi soldiers “hunted” and killed many in a group of Yankees and blacks
who were celebrating the Fourth, horrifically concluding, “we, too, sometimes have our
holiday fun.”46 As former beneficiaries of a slave society founded on violence, whites
like these soldiers compensated for their diminishing economic and political power
through force. Texas historian Randolph Campbell writes that,

A celebration at Huntsville ended when a sword-wielding man on horseback cut a
Negro woman nearly in half on the street. According to Dave Byrd, the ‘patter
rollers’ whipped one hundred celebrants in Crockett. When John Mosley’s master
told him of freedom, the slave jumped into the air to express his delight,
whereupon the master pulled a pistol and fired several shots between his legs.47

The violence continued in the 1870s, when whites murdered blacks celebrating the
Fourth in Mississippi and South Carolina.48 While white Southerners, especially those
under Union control, could not prevent former slaves from displaying their power in the
streets each year, they were able to inject fear and illegitimacy into these events,
foreshadowing the methods of control that would characterize Jim Crow rule.

48 Kachun, Festivals of Freedom, 182.
Despite these efforts, white Southerners were unable to stem the tide of new citizens wishing to participate in a national rite of citizenship. Their participation forced former Confederates to reevaluate their relationship to the holiday and the nation. By 1865, Southerners had largely disowned the Fourth of July, implying the impossibility of the holiday’s integrated existence. The *Hillsboro Recorder* summed up this sentiment in an 1874 piece that read, “The whites of the South have no interest in this day. The suggestions of the freedoms fought for and won by a whole people’s united efforts have no charms for those who feel themselves conquered, and in many parts of the South, still subject to a conqueror’s capricious rule.”

LeConte is among many who chronicled this rejection of the Fourth, writing: “The white people shut themselves within doors and the darkies had the day to themselves - they and the Yankees.” To her and many others, the inclusion of blacks among the free people of the United States invalidated the principles of the holiday altogether. A black, Yankee Fourth of July was so oxymoronic that white southerners denied any connection to the celebrations happening in their communities.

While they were unwilling to celebrate a nation in which blacks were citizens, Southerners did not abandon their claim to the holiday’s origins. Much of the rhetoric of rejection described a lost holiday, belonging to a permanently lost slave society. One Virginian imagined this ruined nation in terms of a dangerous, slave sexuality, lamenting that “The Fourth of July now reminds us of some once noble, lovely and virtuous maiden, who, having been deprived of her fair name, now flaunts by us a painted Jezebel, with draggled garments, tarnished fame, brazen face and loud unwomanly voice.”

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50 LeConte, “5 July, 1865,” 81.
Richmonder was more literal, remarking that “Washington and Jefferson, if alive, would ‘find it difficult to ascertain by what strange freak of national lunacy the negro has been permitted to monopolize the Fourth of July.”\textsuperscript{52} This emphasis on a “lost” Fourth of July allowed Southerners to hold on to their American identity, even while they boycotted America’s most patriotic holiday. It also allowed them to fully reject the profoundly political statement being made on the streets that they used to fully control.

Southerners like Emma LeConte experienced Reconstruction Independence Days under the watchful eyes of Union soldiers, while being forcibly reintegrated into the United States. One would imagine that most of southerners’ discomfort with the holiday would stem from its commemoration of the Union's birth. And while complaints of Northern tyranny did exist, the many other criticisms of integrated post-war Independence Days reveal just how important the institution of slavery was to the Confederate cause. Rather than rejecting the holiday for its Unionist symbols and message, many occupied whites voiced their distaste in racial terms. LeConte’s short diary entry makes clear that she sees the problems of Reconstruction in racial, rather than regional terms. Writing, “Yesterday the negroes had their grand celebration which has been talked of for the past two months. The white people shut themselves within doors and the darkies had the day to themselves - they and the Yankees,” she consistently refers to the celebration in terms of race, echoing Mary Chesnut, whose diary entry dated “Black 4\textsuperscript{th} of July---1865” indicates that racial transition has fully transformed the holiday in her eyes.\textsuperscript{53} For Chesnut and LeConte, the Yankees were merely an

\textsuperscript{52} Richmond Times, July 4, 1866 quoted in Hay, “Freedom’s Jubilee,” 269.

afterthought. LeConte goes on to describe her fear when “hundreds of voices singing strange negro songs and hundred of feet dancing weird negro dances made a terrible noise.” Although the Fourth had long been a time of music and noise, LeConte tags this particular music as “negro,” and therefore separate and threatening. As she justifies the lack of violence that day, LeConte reveals how clearly she sees the event as a racial issue:

> They were still dancing when Col. Haughton returned about twelve o'clock and put an end to their frolic, when we were able to sleep. We are very fortunate in having Col. Haughton here. As far as lay in his power he has tried to reduce the anarchy and confusion to something like order. He has been all kindness and consideration to the citizens. The negroes dislike him, and say he is no Yankee but half a rebel. It goes against the grain to admit anything good of a Yankee, but I have to own that he has acted well towards us.⁵⁴

LeConte sees a member of the conquering army, an army that burned her city and left her barely alive just months earlier, as one of her own—a “rebel” because of his white skin. As an agent assisting in attempts to curtail black control of public space, Haughton has suddenly switched allegiances. The political implications of this characterization are clear: only “us citizens” have the right to celebrate the true Fourth. Historian David Blight describes this abandonment of regional animosities in the face of emancipation, arguing: “Sectional fear had become racial fear for white southerners.”⁵⁵ This racialization of the Fourth of July allowed Southerners to continue to reject the new Fourth, painting it as something entirely alien, dangerous and un-American.

> Black freedom festivals were especially disruptive because they usurped previously white spaces. In Richmond, Virginia (the capital of the Confederacy), freedmen and women took pains to occupy “public spaces that were either traditionally off-limits to blacks or especially hallowed for whites… black paraders continued to

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⁵⁴ LeConte, “5 July, 1865,” 81-82.
⁵⁵ Blight, Beyond the Battlefield, 43.
challenge white pride by marching through the parts of Richmond most associated with Confederate memories.”\textsuperscript{56} The profound impact of this first celebration was evidenced in The Richmond Dispatch, reporting: “They took complete possession of the day and of the city; the highways, the byways, and Capitol square, were black with moving masses of darkeys.”\textsuperscript{57} After living in fear of slave revolts and prospering on the servitude of these very individuals, whites now watched as former slaves controlled the spaces built to ensure their perpetual bondage. This dramatic shift in power invalidated the very systems the Confederacy was built on, leaving white witnesses like LeConte feeling “humiliated.”\textsuperscript{58}

A lack of accounts from the black revelers themselves means we cannot know for sure how it felt to publicly lay claim to the former sites of oppression. Union soldiers were typically present at these events, and their accounts give us some insight into the meaning behind the festivals. Many celebrations were held at former plantations, like one chronicled by Union soldier Robert Gould Shaw, who asked,

Can you imagine anything more wonderful than a coloured-Abolitionist meeting on a South Carolina plantation? Here were collected all the freed slaves on this Island listening to the most ultra abolition speeches that could be made; while two years ago, their masters were still here, the lords of the soil & of them.\textsuperscript{59}

This dramatic transfer of power was even more evident at Jefferson Davis’s family home in 1864, where former slaves hosted abolitionists for the Fourth of July. At this former “temple of slavery” the Declaration was read aloud. The writer reporting on the event in the abolitionist newspaper The Liberator assumed this to be the first time the freedmen

\textsuperscript{56} Fitzhugh, The Southern Past, 67.
\textsuperscript{57} “The Fourth of July in Richmond,” The Richmond Dispatch, July 6, 1866 quoted in Bond, “Competing Visions of America,” 63.
\textsuperscript{58} LeConte, “5 July, 1865,” 82.
had heard these principles of equality. Perhaps he was unaware of the Declaration's importance to the Confederate rebellion. The newspaper’s lengthy coverage indicates the symbolic importance of the site-specific celebration of a holiday devoted to symbols of nationalism. Although it tells us little about the thoughts of the black participants, it does indicate the political nature of this simple picnic. A “pattern of black challenge and white response” characterized these new competitions for contested space, challenging the formerly white nature of the Fourth.

While these public uses of space clearly disrupted the mythology of the Fourth of July for many white southerners, their implications for former slaves is murkier. White Union soldiers had significant control over the celebrations in Columbia and at the plantation, Davis Bend. LeConte reports that the freedmen “had asked Col. Haughton's permission to follow the example of the Charleston negroes and bury slavery with pomp and ceremony, but the Colonel refused, advising them to wait till they were absolutely certain that they were free permanently before burying slavery.” This dialogue suggests a conditional freedom, rather than a total racial transformation of the holiday: slavery was not yet buried. This white narrative is equally evident in *The Liberator*’s description of the event, which focuses almost exclusively on lauding the abolitionists who visited the plantation. Although it is unclear, the account suggests that the Northerners were served dinner by the former slaves, who were then subjected to several didactic orations.

White, moralistic speakers were often featured in these early-integrated celebrations,

60 “Fourth of July at the House that Jeff Built,” *The Liberator*, July 29, 1864.
61 White, “It Was a Proud Day,” 34.
62 LeConte, “5 July, 1865,” 82.
including the one witnessed by LeConte.\textsuperscript{64} White control over early celebrations calls into question whether former slaves were truly making a claim to citizenship when they celebrated their first July 4 free from slavery. To understand the true implications of these early celebrations, one must look beyond these early explorations of freedom.

Although early-integrated Independence Days were diluted by white control, black southerners quickly established ownership over the Fourth of July. As late as the 1890s, when Mamie Garvin Fields was a child, it was standard procedure for Charleston whites to “ignore” the holiday while black residents “took over the Battery for a day.”\textsuperscript{65}

How did this black tenure come to be? As early as 1866, former slaves began drawing on the rhetoric of citizenship familiar to Northern freedmen. Their arguments asserted the role of blacks as full citizens by emphasizing their equal claim to American history and nationalism. As they fought for emancipation, black intellectuals in the 1850s “believed they were replenishing a great tradition, not inventing one; they found deep in the bitter well of American irony their own deepest claims to citizenship.”\textsuperscript{66} That great tradition was celebrated each year on July 4, making the holiday an ideal time to claim American identity. At a parade in Atlanta in 1866, blacks marched through the streets wielding a banner depicting Charles Sumner standing on Plymouth Rock, a woman representing the Genius of America, and a illustration of a black American eagle positioned next to the words: My God, My Duty, My Self. In Savannah, black lawyer Aaron Bradley emphasized the bravery of black soldiers in the Civil War.\textsuperscript{67} These symbols, which wove

\textsuperscript{64} LeConte, “5 July, 1865,” 82.
\textsuperscript{66} Blight, \textit{Beyond the Battlefield}, 37.
African-American history with traditional national symbols, demanded that African-Americans be accepted as true Americans. As has been discussed, the Fourth of July has long functioned as a time for various groups to make claims to recognition. When African-Americans inserted themselves into the nation’s revered past, festivals of freedom represented “concerted attempt to forge a mythic place for blacks in the national memory, to assert their citizenship and nationhood.”

Even as African-Americans used the Fourth of July as an opportunity to claim a place in America’s past, they also established their right to access America’s future. Thus, the marchers who consciously occupied Confederate spaces in Richmond, VA each year established themselves as arbiters in a new nation. Rather than hosting a reading of the Constitution or an edited Declaration, they insisted on emphasizing Jefferson’s call for equality and Lincoln’s fulfillment of that call with his own Proclamation. Refusing to ignore the history of violence in white America, Aaron Bradley boldly declared: “The colored man was superior to his white brother,” at a Savannah celebration. America would be improved, rather than degraded, by the influx of black citizens. Before the war, African-Americans wondered “whether they even had a place in [America’s] future.” As they took to the streets, the answer was clear. At these events they were emphatically declaring their presence and stake in what lay ahead. These celebrations of the Fourth of July, far from being simply social affairs, were intensely political, as this holiday had always been. These individuals knew there was much work to be done. Litwicki, in her study on African-American emancipation days, asserts,

68 Blight, Beyond the Battlefield, 101.
70 Blight, Beyond the Battlefield, 33.
Festivals] combined the celebration of freedom with the continuing need to show the disparity between American principles and the realities, if no longer of slavery, then of racism and second-class citizenship. African Americans continued to agitate at emancipation celebrations for the rights and liberties promised by the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation.\(^{71}\)

By choosing to “take over” and transform the Fourth of July in the South, African-Americans asserted their claim to citizenship in the rapidly changing nation.

Mamie Garvin’s Field’s memories are significant because later generations saw no such phenomenon. As the country emerged from Reconstruction, “black control of the Fourth of July had in fact virtually ended by 1900.”\(^{72}\) The end of the black commemoratory festival tradition, which included African-American Fourth of July celebrations, was a result of several developments as blacks continued to define their place as citizens. In the South, celebrations were certainly threatened by consistent white violence, especially as Jim Crow began to take hold. As they began to establish a new system of racial control, white Southerners began to equated rejoining the Union with reclaiming Independence Day. The political power of the celebrations was valuable to a region trying to prove its Americanness, and whites were no longer content to stay indoors on July 4. However, the event was also contentious among the black community. Disagreements about tone, the proper dates to celebrate and the relevance of such a tradition in the modern age induced a lack of enthusiasm in many communities. Others felt American hypocrisy threaten again as African-American freedoms were being rapidly curtailed. Still others found commemorating slavery and the community’s fight for freedom to be too much to bear on a holiday. Mitch Kachun sees this trajectory as an


\(^{72}\)Quigley, “Independence Day Dilemmas in the American South,” 264.
“adaption” rather than a reason for nostalgia, arguing that the political and community energies previously devoted to these holidays was redirected toward other methods of preserving collective identity. Even so, celebrating July 4 remained an American rite, and African-American control remained an important episode in a new national mythology.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, it was clear that America’s national holiday had undergone a transformation. African-Americans had taken ownership of the Fourth of July, using it to declare their American identity and campaign for community interests. This tradition of large and public black Independence Days throughout the nation meant that African-Americans had a place American history and memory. Former slaves refused to ignore the powerful implications of a day celebrating the nation’s commitment the freedom. The result was powerful, even as Southerners worked tirelessly to exclude blacks from these meaningful celebrations: times to assert their citizenship and negotiate their national position. In this goal the white community failed—instead they ceded the holiday for almost half a century. Their attempts to stigmatize an equality-focused holiday are forgotten in our modern parades, even as the legacy of white fear remains when African-Americans congregate publically. The holiday has been absorbed, a relic from a period of self-definition after emancipation. And although we still embrace fireworks and barbecue, the Fourth of July celebrated by our founders did not survive the Civil War.

73 Kachun, Festivals of Freedom, 182, 234, 260.
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