

Tennessee

Contraband camps took different forms in different places. For instance, while in Memphis camps were created, often from the ground up, along or in the Mississippi River, in South Carolina many camps existed on the same plantations where blacks had been slaves. Still other camps simply consisted of a number of blacks resident at Union encampments. Especially in the case of newly-built camps, the populations were ever-changing since fugitives arrived daily, men were recruited into service, and women were often sent to work on abandoned farms or plantations. Some of what is known about these makeshift communities comes from official record while important details have been provided through the writings of various people—often associated with religious groups or benevolent organizations—who visited them. The most remarkable of these first-hand accounts is provided by Quaker Levi Coffin, who transitioned from his work on the Underground Railroad directly to fundraising for the contraband. Two other witnesses to camp life were Michigan Quaker and Underground Railroad operative Laura Haviland, and John Eaton, Jr. General Superintendent of Freedmen.

African American fugitives from small towns in Tennessee were sent to Nashville, Memphis, and Chattanooga.¹ Superintendent Eaton wrote of the condition of the Freedmen's Department under his charge. He also reported of the camps, the number of people in them, their locations, etc. Eaton once wrote that in the last week 3,700 people had been moved from the camps to the plantations. He added that since January 9,000 people had been moved yet there were as many people in the camps after this large transfer as there were before it.² African Americans living at the camp at Corinth, Mississippi were moved to Memphis after Gen. Van Dorn's raid on Holly Springs, Mississippi.

Bolivar

(Referenced by General Webster). Residents of this camp in Hardeman County were moved to Memphis.

Clarksville

Fort Defiance: by 1864, this camp is believed to have housed over 3,000 blacks. As at other camps, several schools were constructed. Blacks recruited at Clarksville served in the 12th, 13th, 16th, 17th, and 101st United States Colored Infantry.³

Fort Pillow

While there technically was no camp at Fort Pillow, slaves did arrive there. Quaker Laura Haviland wrote of seeing several reach the Union lines. She wrote: They had traveled all night to get to our lines. They took two mules and two carts to bring their bundles and little folks. Men, women, and larger children walked twenty-five miles, to get to Fort Pillow.⁴ These fugitives were sent to Island No. 10, according to Haviland.

LaGrange

¹ Bobby Lovett, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. (*The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture* (<http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?EntryID=C137>))

² John Eaton, Vicksburg, March 14, 1864, M1914 (Department of Mississippi), Roll 1.

³ http://ftdefianceclarksville.com/?page_id=81

⁴ Haviland, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/wlwrk10.txt>.

Coffin visited this camp in May of 1863. Earlier, he sent supplies including “school-books, clothing, blankets, and farming utensils.”⁵ By 1863, he reports, many blacks were in government service. A hospital for blacks had been created from an abandoned mansion. A black regiment was being organized. While visiting this camp, Coffin witnessed the arrival of a large number of women and children and learned that, unfortunately, no shelter could be provided them. They described their journey to the camp as being very difficult, yet they expressed joy at having escaped slavery.⁶ Another group arrived escorted by “a company of calvary scouts.” Grant wrote, “Citizens south of us are leaving their homes & Negroes coming in by wagon loads.” Apparently, blacks brought with them cotton that they had picked, for Grant asked Halleck what he should do with it. Gen. Henry Halleck, at the time Grant’s superior, answered the next day that the secretary of war directed Grant to employ them as teamsters and laborers, as employees of the Quartermaster’s Department and to pick and otherwise gather cotton.⁷

Grand Junction

The first contraband camp is said to have opened here in August of 1862. The opening of this camp corresponded with John Eaton’s assignment as Superintendent of Freedmen.

Jackson

Coffin wrote that he was a member of a party that escorted a group of contraband to Jackson. The group had been gathered at “a way station” between Corinth and this city.⁸ According to Coffin, the blacks had been brought to the station by “a company of soldiers.”

Memphis

↻Camp Bethel

Quaker Laura Haviland mentions the time she spent at this camp, as well as at Camp Shiloh (which could be viewed from Bethel). Haviland wrote that she witnessed twenty couples being married by Eaton at Bethel.⁹

↻Camp Fiske

⁵ Coffin, 631.

⁶ Coffin, 632.

⁷ Grant to Halleck, from LaGrange, November 15, 1862: Telegram received, DNA, RG 94, Generals’ Papers and Books, Telegrams Received by Gen. Halleck, in Simon, John Y., Ed. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, Vol. 6, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1982, 315.

315.

⁸ Coffin, 637.

⁹ Haviland.

Eaton assigned Chaplain A.S. Fiske of the 4th Minnesota Superintendent of Colored People at Memphis. Camp Fiske became in Eaton's words "the chief settlement for contraband at Memphis."¹⁰ Along with Camp Shiloh, Camp Fisk was located in the southern part of the city. Also according to Eaton, blacks at Camp Fiske were armed before the order came down to raise black regiments.¹¹ Blacks, he states, were also armed at other camps where the practice was to use freedmen as guards.

☛ Camp Shiloh

This camp was located in South Memphis. Families of men stationed at Fort Pickering are believed to have been housed at this camp. Coffin visited this camp in May of 1863 and found it guarded by blacks.¹²

☛ Camp Chelsea

Contraband from Holly Springs and Corinth, over 1600, are believed to have been transferred to this camp.¹³

☛ President's Island

This island camp, also known as Camp Dixie, should be thought of as Eaton's testing ground for black self-reliance through farming. The experiment which Eaton set up here continued after the war. References have been made to several farms and camps on the island. Quaker Levi Coffin reported attending a meeting on the island, where "a large colony had lately been established."¹⁴ At that point, according to Coffin, all of the freedmen, women, and children were living in tents, and their school and church were of brush. This camp, like Shiloh, was protected from raiders by a guard of black men. Coffin wrote that he attended here "a large and interesting meeting of the freedmen, which was held in the shade of the trees."¹⁵

☛ Holly Springs Camp

It is unclear if this camp was located in Memphis or in Holly Springs, Mississippi, but it is referred to by freedman and soldier Africa Bailey as he serves as a witness for the wife of a fellow member of his regiment.¹⁶ One might reason from this information that this camp was located in or just south of Memphis. Further, Quaker Levi Coffin wrote of visiting this camp, which, according to information

¹⁰ Eaton, 30.

¹¹ Eaton, 57.

¹² Coffin, 629.

¹³ Lovett.

¹⁴ Coffin.

¹⁵ Coffin, 638.

¹⁶ M1911, Tennessee, Roll 53, National Archive record, Africa Bailey, witness for pension application of Ann Davis, wife of Frank Davis, who he said lived with his wife at the Holly Springs camp. Bailey himself was a member of the 63rd Regiment, Co, K, raised in Memphis.

provided by him, appeared to be near the picket lines. Coffin described the camp's structures: teachers occupying tents, "a long shelter, covered with clapboards" for religious services.¹⁷

Nashville

☞ Edgehill: located in the southern part of the city.¹⁸

☞ Northwest Camp: located in the western part of the city.

☞ Edgefield: located in the eastern part of the city.

Other camps are known or believed to have existed in Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Hendersonville, Gallatin, Clarksville, Pulaski, Jackson, Somerville, and Columbia. Another is thought to have existed in Brentwood in Williamston.

¹⁷ Coffin.

¹⁸ Lovett.