

Sutton, Angela. "Enslaved and Free Black Builders of Nashville's Civil War Fortifications, 1862-1863: A List from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers." *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 2, no. 3 (2021): 9-16. <https://doi.org/10.25971/CDYH-CR03>.

Enslaved and Free Black Builders of Nashville's Civil War Fortifications, 1862-1863: A List from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

Builders & Defenders: The Black Nashville Civil War Database is a digital project that seeks to transcribe and make searchable the identifying information of the enslaved and free Black people of Middle Tennessee before, during, and shortly after the U.S. Civil War. The city of Nashville and its surroundings was one of the key areas of the Civil War, particularly for African American participation. All of the U.S. military fortifications and supporting railroads were built with the labor of nearly 3,000 enslaved and free Black men, women, and children impressed and recruited by Union military officers and engineers. When finished, many laborers enlisted in the segregated regiments of the U.S. military, the United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.). Over 15,000 Black servicemembers defended these fortifications and fought at the Battle of Nashville in December of 1864. After the war, many of the formerly enslaved laborers and soldiers remained in the city, founding Nashville's first postwar freedmen's community of Black neighborhoods and institutions.¹

This dataset is often informally referred to by local historians as the "Labor Rolls" or the "Fort Negley Labor Rolls" since Fort Negley, a UNESCO site, was the largest inland stone fort built during the war and is the sole remaining intact fortification in the city's center. In the 1860s, it was connected to Fort Gillem, Fort Morton, Fort Casino, Fort Houston, and several smaller redoubts and batteries through a system of trenches, works, and other defenses that encircled the fortified State Capitol, all built by enslaved and free Black laborers.

This dataset catalogs the laborers who built Nashville's fortifications in the Civil War. In February of 1862, Nashville became the first state capital to fall to Union troops. That spring and summer word of the capture spread and many enslaved people in the Southeast fled toward the city hoping to break through Union lines and find protection from captivity. The U.S. military put these self-emancipating men, women, and children to work building Nashville's war defenses and more broadly supporting the Union war effort. The laborers performed a variety of roles related to creation of the defenses, from masons and bricklayers who worked closely with the engineers, to teamsters and blacksmiths who were crucial to the logistics of moving vast quantities of materials into place for the builders. Those who had no prior experience in these fields were considered unskilled laborers, although, of course, their prior work while enslaved left them anything but unskilled in labor.

To boost numbers, Union troops raided plantations from all over Middle Tennessee for able-bodied workers. Enslavers, fearing "army influences upon their chattel," attempted to hide those they enslaved or forced the enslaved to flee the Union-occupied territory with them. In response, the Union military waited for Sunday to raid the local Black churches mid-sermon for people to impress (Fig. 1).²

¹ Bobby L. Lovett, "Nashville's Fort Negley: A Symbol of Blacks' Involvement with the Union Army," in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Spring, 1982), 3-22.

² John Fitch, *Annals of the Army of the Cumberland: Comprising Biographies, Descriptions of Departments, Accounts of Expeditions, Skirmishes, and Battles* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1864), 619-620.

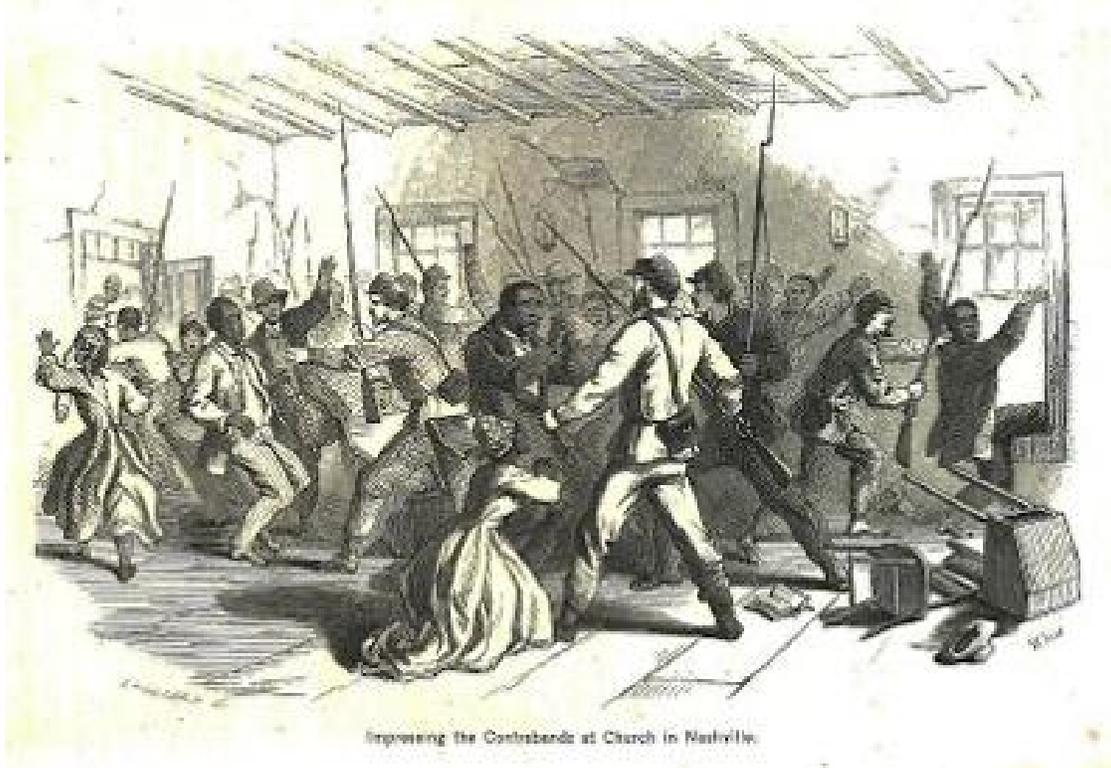


Fig. 1: "Impressing the Contrabands at Church in Nashville," in John Fitch, *Annals of the Army of the Cumberland: Comprising Biographies, Descriptions of Departments, Accounts of Expeditions, Skirmishes, and Battles* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1864).

Both self-emancipating and impressed groups of formerly enslaved people were considered "Contrabands" under the Confiscation Act of 1861 and congregated in "contraband camps" attached to Union outposts, where soldiers guarded them from re-enslavement. The building site on St. Cloud Hill that would become Fort Negley harbored one such camp. The so-called contrabands were soon joined by a small number of Free Blacks, some of whom were also coerced into the work and others who came willingly seeking fair wages for their skilled labor.

Thousands of enslaved and free Black laborers worked on Nashville's forts in arduous conditions, and more still on the trenches, railroads, and hospitals that supported them. In other places in the United States where this occurred, historians have demonstrated that the enslaved held a wide variety of viewpoints regarding contraband camps, impressment, and working for the U.S. military. For many the prospect of freedom was the main driver of their actions, though often the enslaved hesitated out of fear that their enslavers might not lose the war and/or retaliate. Still, many organized on plantations and used the opportunity of Sunday visits and prayers to share news of the war's development and to make collective plans for escape to federal lines. Other enslaved people waited until the military began impressing them so that they could escape punishment for helping the Union cause.³ By the time combat came to Nashville, most of the enslaved were aware of the Union victories at multiple significant battles in Virginia,

³ See Glenn David Brasher, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

and at Shiloh and Gettysburg, and they behaved as if cautiously optimistic that the Union would succeed. Many were hopeful or even convinced that the enslaved population of Middle Tennessee would deal the final death knell to the Confederate forces.

Nashville's builders of the defenses worked hard; several accounts of the white soldiers who supervised them expressed amazement at their tireless work ethic. Due to the unsanitary conditions of the contraband camps, an estimated 600-800 laborers, or around a quarter, died from diphtheria, malnutrition, and exposure to the elements during the construction of these defenses, yet they were completed in record time. This, perhaps more than anything, hints at the motivations among enslaved people, who were no strangers to the everyday resistance to slave labor in which most of them engaged prior to working on the Union defenses. Their achievements and the Union officers' remarks about them contrast starkly with the recorded sentiments of Southern enslavers, who attributed the enslaved people's day-to-day resistance to "Black laziness."⁴ Social conditions in Middle Tennessee under the Union occupation made it increasingly difficult for enslavers to exercise the same degree of control over the enslaved as before. For the majority of the laborers, the chance at a better life for their children, and for a nation free from the horrors of slavery, overshadowed the risks of potential repercussions from their enslavers if they ran to Union lines.⁵

One formerly enslaved Nashvillian's pride at his work with Union soldiers highlights some of these complex feelings. In an interview with the *Nashville Globe* in 1913, Mr. James Harding, the son of the enslaved Jane Harding and her enslaver Thomas Harding's son, Beale Harding, relatives of Nashville's Belle Meade Plantation Hardings, said:

After the war started I ran off to the Yankee Camps, 10th Tennessee Regiment, which camped where Hoffman Hall now stands. They shot at me while I was attempting to get away and took me upstairs at their house and chained me to the stairway, made me take my blue clothes off and swear that I would never put any more on, but in a few days I ran off again. Col. Andrew Johnson fed and kept about 200 of us under the State Capitol and marched us to Fort Negley and laid that fort with all of us. I helped haul every stick of wood that was put in that fort from my master's woods and drove a six-mule team. There were 50 teams in the gang. I carried a pistol to my side every day for protection from my master.⁶

Major General Stearns, the Commissioner for the Organization of the U.S.C.T. in Middle and East Tennessee, later recounted the details of the building of Nashville's defenses to the *Boston Liberator*, a weekly antislavery newspaper, in 1864. He said,

⁴ See Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), and Jaime Amanda Martinez, *Confederate Slave Impressment in the Upper South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

⁵ See Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006).

⁶ James Harding, "James Harding, One of Nashville's Oldest Citizens, Tell Interesting Story – Helped Build Fort Negley," *Nashville Globe*, January 31, 1913. For more information about James Harding and four of his living descendants, the Johnson siblings, see *Johnson Family Descendants of James Harding, Sr.*, directed by the Fort Negley Descendants Project, 2019, <http://ftnegley.digitalprojects.network/exhibits/show/johnsons/johnsons-video>.

When I went to Nashville, colored men, free and slave, were hunted daily through the streets, and impressed for labor on fortifications, railroads, and in hospitals, and although promised ten dollars per month, it was rarely paid, and many of them worked from twelve to fifteen months without any pay. Let me give you one case of several that came under my notice. When our army occupied Nashville, in August 1862, calls were made for slaves to work on the fortifications. About 2700 were employed. A large number ran from their masters. Many Union men sent their best hands, and some were impressed. These men, working in the heat of the Autumn months, lying on the hillside at night in the heavy dews without shelter, and fed with poor food, soon sickened. In four months about 800 of them died; the remainder were kept at work from six to fifteen months without pay. Then all who were able-bodied were forcibly enlisted in the 12th U.S. Colored Troops. Many of them had families, who were destitute of the necessaries of life. Why? Because the War Department would not decide whether the slave or his owner should have the money.⁷

The U.S. military routinely engaged in nonpayment, underpayment, and delayed payment of African Americans during and after the Civil War. This dataset would benefit greatly from being read alongside a collection of documents indirectly referenced by Major General Stearns, between lawyers of the War Department and the engineers who coerced or hired and managed the laborers, regarding payment of the labor force that built the city's fortifications. These arguments were predicated on the fact that many of the laborers were legally enslaved at the time they were "confiscated" from their place of enslavement and brought by Union soldiers to the fortifications. As enslaved people were still legally considered chattel at the time the fortifications were built, despite other interpretations of the "contraband" policy elsewhere, several of the lawyers argued that the "owners," or enslavers, should be paid for this labor. Brigadier General Morton, the engineer in charge of the fortifications' construction, advocated for payment of the workers directly, arguing that the U.S. military had promised pay to all of the builders of the fortifications, who worked at maximum capacity at great personal risk with insufficient food and in unsanitary conditions. He argued that all should be paid for their time, whether at the time they were captive enslaved, self-emancipating, or legally free.⁸ These documents, when read together with this dataset, allow the tracking of payments and the lack thereof.

It is also important to note that there is considerable overlap between this dataset and the group of U.S.C.T. at the Battle of Nashville because most of the male laborers who survived the building of the forts were coerced into enrolling in the 12th regiment of the U.S.C.T. That data is forthcoming, to be included in a wider dataset of the roughly 13,000 soldiers enlisted in the eight U.S.C.T. regiments that fought at the deciding Battle of Nashville.

⁷ Major General Stearns, *The Liberator* (Boston), May 6, 1864, <https://lccn.loc.gov/sf87092542>.

⁸ See "Payments Engineer Corps. March 1863-Nov. 1864" in George Burroughs, *Corps of Engineers Correspondence (1863-1867)*, Microfilm #1910, Reels 1-3, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

Dates of Data Collection

2018-2021

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Nashville, Tennessee

Temporal Coverage

1862-1863

Document Types

Register

Sources

List of laborers employed August 1, 1862 to April 1, 1863 on the fortifications and their owners, Documents of Lieutenant George Burroughs, Microfilm #1797, reel 2, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

Methodology

In the 1860s, officials in the military generated a document for each person employed on Nashville's fortifications, plus a ledger of each laborer's first and last name, and the names of their current or former enslavers. The transcriber used the ledger to create a spreadsheet of each laborer, then filled in additional remarks from each record. Each line corresponds to the information related to one of the laborers. This ledger lists a total of 2,869 entries.

In 2017, the Nashville City Cemetery Association and the board of the Friends of Fort Negley voted to use funds from an anonymous donation to perform research on the people who constructed Fort Negley. Fletch Coke coordinated the project and hired Natalie Goodwin, project archivist at the Tennessee State Archives at the time, to transcribe this microfilm for the use of public historians as well as the descendant community. In 2020 the author received permission to include this dataset in the *Builders & Defenders: The Black Nashville Civil War Database* project. The author and the project's undergraduate intern for 2020, Preston Hausser, cleaned the data and broke it down into comma separated values (CSV) to make it suitable for ingestion to the Spatial Historian platform. Krista Castillo at the Fort Negley Visitors Center shared research regarding the history of payments and documents of the War Department to help contextualize this dataset.

The dataset is an XLS spreadsheet of 2,869 entries. The entries are from the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Microfilm #1797, Roll #1, "List of Negroes Employed on Nashville Fortifications." The volume start date is August 1, 1862, and the volume end date April 1, 1863.

Each entry is one row with thirteen columns, or values. The first three values correspond to provenance: *Page #*, *File #1* and *File #2*. These were created by the transcriptionist and left in the dataset for anyone who wants to cross-check an entry against the originals in microfilm.

In addition to these are seven categories of information directly related to each person: *last name*, *first name*, *enslaver's last and first names* (in the dataset enslavers are listed as "owner" as they were in the original), *time employed* (this ranged from one and one-half months to 8 months and also included values like "deserted" or "released"), *rate of pay (in USD)* (this value gives insight into what type of work the laborers did. Skilled workers, such as teamsters, masons, bricklayers, and blacksmiths were paid at a higher rate), and *total amount (in USD)* (this refers to the total amount that would be due based on the time employed and the rate of pay). Sometimes, the same laborer name is listed twice in the dataset, but with different start and end times; though it is highly likely they are the same person who left and then returned to work, rather than two separate people, we chose to leave them as separate entries (as they were originally entered in the ledger) instead of merging them.

The last three columns contain categories named "*Signatures*," "*Witness*" and "*Remarks*." The "*Signatures*" column, rather than containing signatures, contains any number of possible values, ranging from a blank space, to a check mark, to a set of dates and/or numbers, to just the word "paid," to more detailed information such as "Paid July 22d 1860 JWB," to the puzzling "Probably paid," and on a few occasions "dead." On a few of the later entries, this column is used to allude to other documents which are no longer available, such as "Paid see Voucher No. 58 Capt. Morton 4th Dr. 1863," which gives us an insight as to how the military kept track of the payment of enslaved and free Black builders of Nashville's fortifications. The original transcriber who copied information from each separate sheet into the ledger also used this column to note where names were crossed off on the original documents.

The column labeled "*Witness*" was left blank. The column labeled "*Remarks*" was often left blank, but occasionally contains miscellaneous data. This column was also where military officials tracked when a legally free person performed this labor. This column was also used to note some corrections made to the ledger, such as when the person or their enslaver's name was incorrectly entered, or to identify possible duplicate entries.

Date of Publication

December 2021

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse [<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UTPZMZ>]

Linked Data Representation: *Enslaved.org* [Summary Visualization](#)

Acknowledgments

National Endowment for the Humanities

National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program

Cite this Article

Sutton, Angela. "Enslaved and Free Black Builders of Nashville's Civil War Fortifications, 1862-1863: A List from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers." *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 2, no. 3 (2021): 9-16. <https://doi.org/10.25971/CDYH-CR03>.

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