THE CIVIL WAR, SLAVERY, AND JOHN WILDER

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by

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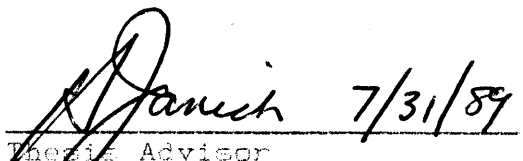

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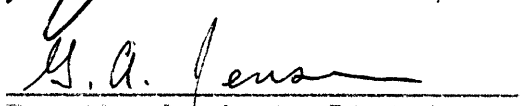

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PREFACE

The status of blacks changed soon after the American Civil War began. Blacks had to make the transition from slavery to independence and this was not easy since there were Unionists who were against Emancipation. Many Union officers, for example, mistreated blacks in Virginia because they thought of blacks as "slaves"--that is, things--rather than human beings. The blacks in Virginia were able to persevere with the help of some abolitionists, who protested when Union officers abused blacks.

Tension over slavery had been growing in the United States long before the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Government leaders tried to make compromises that would appease slaveholders and abolitionists but none of the agreements lasted.

Many Southerners wanted to secede from the Union after Abraham Lincoln was elected president in November 1860 because they thought he would abolish slavery, even though Lincoln had promised that he would not interfere with slavery where it already existed. Seven Southern

states immediately seceded from the Union; Virginia did not.

Virginians were willing to give Lincoln a chance to prove himself; they changed their minds after Sumter was attacked. Lincoln's reaction to the attack was the thing which shocked most Virginians. He called up volunteer militia to protect Washington. Virginians considered this policy aggressive and warlike.

In May Union troops from Massachusetts arrived at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula in order to reinforce Fort Monroe, one of the largest and strongest fortifications in the United States. Controlling the fort and waterways around, the government thought it might help keep the Virginians in line.

Confederate sympathizers who lived near Fort Monroe evacuated the area when Union troops arrived. The whites who left the area told some of their slaves to stay and guard their homes. Three slaves, owned by a particular individual, did not listen to their master; they ran away and met with Union pickets guarding Fort Monroe. The pickets took the fugitives to see the commanding general, Ben Butler. The blacks told Butler that their master was going to put them to work as laborers in the Confederate Army. Butler had to figure out what to do with the slaves. According to the Fugitive Slave Law he was supposed to return them to

their master, but Butler decided to charge things. He would not return the three slaves, he would seize them as "contraband of war." Butler was not an abolitionist; he had no intention of setting the blacks free. In his mind, blacks were war goods who could be used illegally by the states who were fighting against the Union. Butler's contraband analogy was both simple and logical. He reasoned that blacks were property owned by Confederate soldiers, and according to the International Law of Nations, all property used by the enemy for military purposes could be seized. The Secretary of War gave Butler permission to continue this policy on May 30. In August, Congress passed a law in accordance with Butler's contraband proclamation.

Blacks began to flock to Fort Monroe and surrounding areas when they heard that the Union Army gave asylum to blacks. By July 1861 Union officers had over 900 contrabands to deal with. Army officers supervised blacks but they often abused them.

Abolitionists read about Butler's experiment at Fort Monroe in the newspapers and they wanted to help care for the slaves. Lewis Tappan, one of the founders of the American Missionary Association, an evangelical abolitionist organization, contacted Butler and offered to send a missionary to educate blacks near Fort Monroe.

Butler agreed to the American Missionary Association's proposition. The first missionary, Len Lockwood, arrived at Fort Monroe in September 1861. Many Union officers resented missionaries like Lockwood because they complained when blacks were treated like slaves.

Charles Wilder, another missionary, arrived at Fort Monroe to help Lockwood in March 1862. That month, Charles was appointed "Contraband Superintendent" by the commanding general. Charles had a difficult time managing all the blacks; he was shorthanded. He wrote to his nephew, John Wilder, and asked him if he could come to Fort Monroe to help him care for the blacks.

Young Wilder arrived at Fort Monroe in April 1862. He was one of the several people who helped blacks become more autonomous. He observed the blacks while they adjusted to their new lifestyles. He came to admire those he found intelligent, honest, and hardworking. He thought blacks should be legally able to bear arms, marry, and raise their own children because they were no different than the whites he worked with.

Blacks made priceless contributions to the Union war effort. Almost 200,000 blacks labored in the Union Army. They worked as carpenters, cooks, mechanics,

nurses, and scouts. There were 178,985 black soldiers; 37,300 of them died during the war.

Some of the problems in Virginia are described in Wilder's letters which are stored in Yale University's Sterling Library. Wilder left behind over six feet of correspondence, only a small portion of which relates to his days at Port Monroe.

The Massachusetts State Archives has letters that Wilder wrote to the governor of Massachusetts, John Andrew. It also has letters written to Wilder by the governor and his adjutant general, William Schouler. Letters written by General Dix, who was in charge of Port Monroe and Wilder's uncle, Charles Wilder, who was a missionary at the fort, are also in the state archives. The Massachusetts Military Archives has letters written by Wilder, Charles Wilder, and Governor Andrew. Yale University's Sterling Library has the records of the American Missionary Association, the organization which sent Wilder and his uncle to Port Monroe.