



## Following Tubman's Trail: Unveiling Stories of the African American Quest for Freedom

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**[00:00:00] Tanaya Tauber:** Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates hosted by the Center in-person and online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, the senior director of Town Hall programs. In this episode, we explore the history of the African American fight for freedom during the Civil War and reconstruction periods. This conversation presented in celebration of Black History month features historians, Edda Fields-Black, author of the new groundbreaking book, *COMBEE: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War*. And James Oakes, prize-winning author, known for work such as *Freedom National*, and *The Crooked Path to Abolition*. Thomas Donnelly, chief content officer at the National Constitution Center moderates. Here's Tom to get the conversation started.

**[00:00:58] Thomas Donnelly:** Hello, friends, and welcome to the National Constitution Center and to today's convening of America's Town Hall. I'm Thomas Donnelly, the chief content officer at the National Constitution Center, and I'm delighted to be with you here for this amazing talk between two of the nation's leading historians about the battle to end slavery during the Civil War. So, first we have Edda Fields-Black. She's an associate professor at Carnegie Mellon University specializing in pre-colonial and West African history. She's written extensively about the history of West African rice farmers, and is the author of *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora*, and the co-editor of *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*. Her magnificent new book, and I really mean it, it's such an amazing read. And so it's such a rich set of stories that we're hoping to draw out on our program today.

**[00:01:46] Thomas Donnelly:** And she's gonna discuss, it's called *COMBEE: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War*. And then James Oakes is a distinguished professor emeritus of history at the Graduate Center for the City University of New York. He's the author of numerous books and articles on the history of slavery, anti-slavery, and emancipation, including the radical in the Republican Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the triumph of anti-slavery politics, *The Crooked Path to Abolition: Abraham Lincoln and the Anti-Slavery Constitution*. And finally, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States*. Thank you so much for joining us, Edda Fields-Black and James Oakes.

**[00:02:23] James Oakes:** Glad to be here.

**[00:02:25] Edda Fields-Black:** Thank you for having us.

**[00:02:26] Thomas Donnelly:** So let's start with you, Edda Fields-Black, the most gripping part of your book, and, and so much of it is, is just an amazing read, is just when you tell the story of the Combahee River Raid itself. So I'd really like to just start there and place the raid itself on the table. We'll eventually turn to some of the great details you have about Harriet Tubman's Civil War Service, also about many of the individual freedom seekers that are part of this story. But I just wanna first place the Combahee River Raid itself on the table. You describe it as quote, "the largest and most successful slave rebellion in US history." That's such a powerful way of putting it. Can you just share a bit about the broad outlines of the story with our audience to get our conversation kicked off?

**[00:03:08] Edda Fields-Black:** Absolutely. So the Combahee raid takes place on Ju- starts on June 1st of 1863. And if you remember, this is after the Battle of Port Royal, which took place in November of 1861. The US Navy drove its armada up the Port Royal sound and the planters flee, and the enslaved people are no longer enslaved, but not free, right? And the US Army occupies Beaufort, the Sea Islands in Port Royal. I characterize Beaufort then from that point on as a harbinger for freedom. The planters on the Combahee who were 20 miles away, they know what's going on. They know the US Army is in Beaufort, and on the Sea Islands, and the enslaved people know it also. So people who could push, pull, drag, float, take makeshift watercraft to get to Beaufort, knew they could be free. I say this because we know, I know.

**[00:04:17] Edda Fields-Black:** I was able to trace people who had formerly been enslaved on the Combahee, actually in Beaufort, some of them working for the US Army quartermaster before the raid takes place. So the raid is fomented in Beaufort. Harriet Tubman is in Beaufort. We know that Tubman was working in the refugee camps and gathering intelligence. I also was able to find that Tubman found the enslaved man who put, enslaved men who were forced to put the torpedoes on the Combahee river. Her group of spy scouts and pilots removes them and opens the river for the US Army gunboats. So these gunboats leave Beaufort, the downtown wharf on the night of June 1st. And because it's June, you know, it gets dark pretty late. They leave about 9:00 PM. It is the full moon. It is the flood tide. And the tide is always very important in coastal South Carolina.

**[00:05:24] Edda Fields-Black:** Very important to rice, very important to transportation, important for everything. So it's that tide and the amplitude of the tide that enables these gunboats to get up this very Coosaw River. And so, they leave from, on June 1st about 9:00 PM, lighted by the full moon, the light of the full moon with three gunboats. These gunboats go up through the Coosaw River. They could have gone the long way, and I think that was probably the original plan was to go around through Saint Helena Sound. But they took a risk. And one of Tubman's spy scouts and pilots I've been able to document was actually born on the Coosaw.

And so he may have played a large role in making that risky decision. It was a decision that saved time, but the Coosaw was also lined with sandbars. And so running a ground on the Coosaw was a very high probability.

**[00:06:28] Edda Fields-Black:** And one of the ships did run a ground, and because of the tide, they didn't have time to wait for the next high tide to push it out, so they left it behind, and it was one of the transport steamers. So about half as many people, they could only take half as many as they anticipated. They go up the Coosaw River, they get to the mouth of the Combahee, they encounter the Confederate pickets at Fields Point, and the pickets run away. And so they proceed up the Combahee and leaving one company there. Another company is left at Tar Bluff, and then they go up the Combahee. In all, they rated seven rice plantations, okay, that area of, of the Combahee Rivers surrounded by rice plantations. And the first boat, which was the Harriet Awe stops at Long brow plantation.

**[00:07:27] Edda Fields-Black:** And I have this wonderful account. He wasn't the owner, but he had a life interest in Long Brow. He was the widower of the owner. And he's talking about what happens that morning when he's awakened at 5:00 AM by the enslaved driver, and told that the US army is parked at his boat landing, right? And he runs, tells the driver to go to the woods, I'm sorry, to go to the rice fields and get the people. He goes and tries to get the house slaves and tells them to go with him and hide, hide in the woods. And they completely ignore him, defy him, and they go to the boats. The second boat, the John Adams, which is actually the gun boat, the John Adams proceeds that the Combahee, and it docks at Combahee Ferry. And today, Combahee Ferry is the Harriet Tubman Bridge, right?

**[00:08:22] Edda Fields-Black:** So anyone down there driving over Highway 17 from Charleston to Beaufort is gonna cross the highway, the Harriet Tubman Bridge, right when you, right about the county line between Colleton and Beaufort Counties. And there's a historical marker there. So it parks there. And because it's a gunboat, it has guns. They're not very big. This is not the US Navy Armada, but they're more than what the Confederates have. So it parks itself, it commands the causeway, as they call it, and it's, it's shooting at the Confederates, coming by land and also coming, if they were to come by water. And they had also encountered Confederate pickets at Combahee Ferry.

**[00:09:08] Edda Fields-Black:** So from this point at these two points, Long Brow and the Combahee Ferry about 250 soldiers disembark, and Black soldiers from the second South Carolina volunteers, there's also the third Rhode Island heavy artillery. And so some of those soldiers are getting out and getting on land onto the plantations. They're also working the guns on the John Adams. They're, they're manning some of the guns, so the soldiers go out on the plantations, right? And important to remember, and I personally, because I'm a specialist in rice, I found it fascinating that when they first arrive at Long Brow, it's 4:00 AM, the enslaved people are in the rice fields, towing rice at 4:00 AM. It's pitch black. You would have to walk probably a mile from the slave quarters down to the rice fields in the dark in the summer where people

down there would say everything is out right. Every kind of snake you can imagine, cottonmouths, water moccasins, they're standing in the rice fields, the water is drawn down, but alligators, it's still dark nocturnal, doing their thing.

**[00:10:32] Edda Fields-Black:** It's a time when the eggs would've just hatched, so they're young who are out with their mothers, and the mothers are very territorial about their babies. To be standing in a rice field at 4:00 AM, it just kind of blows my mind. So the boats blow their whistles, right? The newspaper accounts talk about the uninterrupted steam whistle, and people begin to run to the boats from the rice fields. Another account that I have is from Minus Hamilton, and I'd love to talk more about Minus Hamilton, but an 88-year-old enslaved man who was in the rice fields with his wife. And he talks about his escape from slavery, his escape from bondage during the raid how they get to the boat, how he feels about getting to the boat, what he sees. It's really a phenomenal, really phenomenal account.

**[00:11:29] Edda Fields-Black:** So 756 people are taken aboard. The US didn't lose a single life. There were moments where they skirmished with the Confederates, but the Confederates are really sending... the pickets are really sending for reinforcements. And the reinforce- some of the reinforcements arrive, but the majority of them do not. And so the Confederate army spends most of its time helping the planters to try to get people off of the plantations and into the woods. And in that process, the Confederate army is assisting one of the overseers, and the overseer shoots a girl. He shoots an enslaved girl, shoots an and kills. But the US didn't lose a single life. And the people are, are herded onto these two boats, one transport steamer, the Harriet A. Weed, and the gunboat, the John Adams, with the soldiers with Tubman.

**[00:12:35] Edda Fields-Black:** And there are also scenes of people being left behind, right? People who didn't get to the boat on time, people who are arriving as the boats are leaving, and who are just in anguish because they are left behind in bondage on one plantation where the overseer and the Confederate army were able to prevent people from getting to the boats. Those people were left behind. So scenes of anguish as well as scenes of triumph as the boats pull off. They sailed all night, and arrived back in Beaufort, downtown Beaufort the morning after the raid. And just, again, very dramatic scenes and emotional scenes of the Combahee freedom seekers parading down Bay Street in downtown Beaufort.

**[00:13:27] Edda Fields-Black:** And if you think about it, just to go back to what Beaufort would've looked like, you had Black people in Beaufort who were free since November of 1861. And since then, you've had these overlapping waves of refugees coming into Beaufort, right? As people came in by themselves or as the US Army, had expeditions and brought people in, some very small, some pretty large, but people were free. They were settled. And, of course they were actually free by that time because of the Emancipation Proclamation. And before that, because of the Confiscation Acts and to see these 756 people who were straight outta slavery, they were straight out of the rice fields, they were skin and bones. It's the way they're described in their field suits of dirty gray is just mind-boggling. And they marched proudly down the street and

went to a church and downtown Beaufort, where both Colonel Montgomery, who was the commander of the Expedition, and Harriet Tubman, gave a speech. And 150 of the men aged 14 to 60 enlisted in the Second South Carolina volunteers that day. And they went on to fight for the freedom of others.

**[00:14:57] Thomas Donnelly:** Amazing. What a great way to frame the entire discussion here. Thank you for that, Edda Fields-Black. James Oakes, now thinking about the Combahee River raid that took place in June, 1863, can you place that date in context for us? When it comes to the Civil War, where were we at that point? How would you sort of describe the, the sort of the surrounding context?

**[00:15:18] James Oakes:** Well, the biggest surrounding context is actually what happens within a couple of weeks of the Combahee River raid, because the combined battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg are major. They happen in July, and they are perhaps the major turning point in the war. I think you could say at that point, Northern military victory, strictly military victory was virtually inevitable by that point. It doesn't mean that the South couldn't have succeeded in gaining its independence by political means. It did not mean that emancipation was over and complete. The Emancipation Proclamation is a major step, but the kind of thing we're seeing that, that Edda Fields-Black shows so beautifully is, is going on in smaller ways all across the south, wherever the Union Army shows up, and the accumulated effects of that are dramatic by the end of the, by the time Lee surrenders to Grant at Appomattox in early 1864, some 500,000 enslaved people are within union laws.

**[00:16:33] James Oakes:** That's a staggering number. And, and by some reckonings that makes, that makes the destruction of slavery all but inevitable by that time. It'll take a few more things to get that done, but really it's, it's the kind of event that that Combahee represents that cumulatively will bring about the ultimate destruction of slavery, I think. And it's very important, it's very important to emphasize the degree to which the policy of the anti-slavery policy adopted by the Union Army early in the war, in the Confiscation Acts presupposed and depended upon the, the enslaved people taking their own freedom by coming to Union Lines, by coming into Union lines. And so you see this beautifully in, in Edda Fields-Black's book, I think.

**[00:17:29] Thomas Donnelly:** Excellent. Thank you for that, James Oakes. Edda Fields-Black, we're already getting some questions in on the Q&A about Harriet Tubman, who you mentioned in your initial answer. She's obviously a key part of your story. Can you just talk a little bit... First, just remind us about her, her broader legacy, but also really go into some detail about the different things you learned and you, you could teach us about her service during the Civil War.

**[00:17:52] Edda Fields-Black:** Sure. So thinking about Harriet Tubman growing up in bondage in the Maryland Eastern shore and liberating herself in 1849, and then making approximately 13 trips back, and again, how do you get your mind around the fact that this is a person who took the risk twice actually, and the second time was successful in, in self liberation, who then went

back into the belly of the beast, or as, as I borrowed from Frederick Douglas, back into the prison house of bondage to rescue other people and bring them to freedom. So she's risking her own life... I'm sorry, she's risking her own freedom in order to do that 13 times, and freeing approximately 70 people, and gave specific instructions to, for another approximate 70 to liberate themselves. Before the war, Tubman had become very well-known by abolitionists in the north, particularly in Massachusetts, Boston, and also in Philadelphia.

**[00:19:14] Edda Fields-Black:** She was very much a part of those abolitionist communities by the late 1850s. And during this period, after the Battle of Port Royal, and the beginning of the Port Royal experiment, when northern abolitionists who had been lecturing about slavery and organizing about abolition, I mean, ending slavery, where they actually had something that they could do, right? There are 8 to 10,000 enslaved, formerly enslaved people who are in Beaufort, the Sea Islands, Port Royal. And so, the largest social movement to date in history abolitionists began to organize for that.

**[00:19:59] Edda Fields-Black:** So Tubman is not, she's not volunteering to teach, she's not volunteering to supervise labor or be a missionary. She's sent by the governor of Massachusetts, John Andrew, to be a spy for the US Army. And she goes down and she's primarily in the urban areas, right? So the Port Royal experiment is more in the rural areas on the Sea Island cotton plantations, but Tubman is working in the refugee camps in the camps where people who are coming from Confederate territory where they sort of land first, and where their needs are assessed, and they are then sent on either to work or to a plantation to do agricultural work, or they need rations, et cetera.

**[00:20:48] Edda Fields-Black:** So these people are coming fresh from Confederate-owned controlled territory. And Tubman, in talking with them, is able to get intelligence that she then gives to the US Army. And it's interesting because Tubman's role in the Civil War, I think, has been little known, the details of it in large part because it doesn't appear anywhere in the military record, right? Her role in the Combahee Raid doesn't appear anywhere in the military record.

**[00:21:22] Edda Fields-Black:** But there are these other nuggets that I was able to find, and one of which is a letter by William Lloyd Garrison's son, George, Sergeant George Garrison, who writes about Tubman and this interview process where she was the one who the formerly enslaved people trusted, the freedom seekers trusted her, and confided in her, and she's able to get, he says more intelligence from them than anybody, and she hands that over to the Union. I was also able to find a letter in a private collection, which really has not seen the light of days, so we had to publish it in Combahee that was about a conversation among the architects of the Port Royal experiment, where they said they really didn't want Tubman to come, right? Because she was too radical. They didn't want any of that underground stuff in Buford because they wanted to continue with President Lincoln's gradual approach, right?

**[00:22:28] Edda Fields-Black:** And they didn't want anything that was gonna rock the boat. She couldn't teach, she wasn't literate. What good would she be here other than to stir up the slaves formerly enslaved people? And we also know, from a letter, and again, because nothing is written about her, there's actually very little written by the US Army in the official military record about the raid. The one paragraph that's written by Colonel James Montgomery, who was the mil- who was the commander of the Second South Carolina, and the third Rhode Island heavy artillery two batteries, is not in the official record, right?

**[00:23:08] Edda Fields-Black:** So it's primarily the Confederate record. Anyway a letter from Frederick Douglas's son written to his fiance days after the Combahee Raid, where he says that Harriet Tubman's men piloted Colonel James Montgomery and his men upped the Combahee River in the US, the most successful rate of the US Army.

**[00:23:34] Thomas Donnelly:** Amazing James Oakes, Professor Fields-Black, there are references to Abraham Lincoln in her answer there. And, and you've written a lot about Lincoln, the constitution, the battle to end slavery. You have a great quote in, in your, your magnificent book, Freedom National, where you say of Lincoln, there's too much hyperbole in the way we talk about Lincoln. He was neither the great emancipator who strode his times and brought his people out of the darkness, nor was he in any way, a reluctant emancipator held back by some visceral commitment to white supremacy and the evolution of wartime anti-slavery policy. Lincoln was neither quicker nor slower than Republican legislators. Instead, they seemed to move in tandem.

**[00:24:11] Thomas Donnelly:** Can you talk about your book really deals a lot with the relationship between the Republican Party, Republican Congress, Abraham Lincoln, and then what's actually happening on the ground among freedom seekers, and then eventually African American soldiers. And can you just sort of give us a sense of how we think about, how they re-how those relationships, how those actors together move towards the destruction of slavery during the Civil War?

**[00:24:35] James Oakes:** Well before I do that, can I just comment on something Professor Fields-Black said, because I think it's important, the role that Harriet Tubman plays as a spy. The Combahee Raid may not be in the official records, but the official records are full of indications that all across the south, Union officers and soldiers were relying heavily on the information provided to them by enslaved people on the ground. And I don't think we have a history of that yet. I don't think anyone has yet combed through those records to do it the way it deserves to be done, because we can't evaluate the larger significance of it. So, I appreciate the way in which Combahee brings that out in a way that I think hopefully will inspire others.

**[00:25:28] James Oakes:** As for Lincoln and the Republicans, my book in some ways compliments and, and touches on many of the issues that Combahee be raises. But I got interested when I wrote my book on Frederick Douglass, I got interested in the way he became

interested in anti-slavery politics, and I started getting interested in anti-slavery politics. And one of the things I discovered was that Congress played a much bigger role in the move toward emancipation, then we think. And that it's not that the Emancipation Proclamation isn't a major turning point in the evolution of that policy, but the policy starts much earlier. And you need to know what the Republicans were doing with the First Confiscation Act, then the Second Confiscation Act, then the law making it a crime for anyone in the Union Army or Navy to return fugitives to their owners, things like that.

**[00:26:25] James Oakes:** A whole series of laws that preceded the Emancipation Proclamation. And in fact, the Second Confiscation Act is what required an Emancipation Reformation, right? It gave the President 60 days, right? And a few days after he signed it, he comes to the cabinet with the first draft that says, on the basis of the First Confiscation Act. And then when he does issue it, 59 days after the law was signed, it says, "By the power vested in me by the Congress in the Second Confiscation Act, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." So I was trying to show the degree to which it's not Lincoln all the time. It's not Lincoln. There's too much denigration of Lincoln for being too slow, and there's too much adulation of Lincoln for and I tried to put it in a larger political context.

**[00:27:21] James Oakes:** And one of those contexts that I think is crucial for understanding what's happening at Combahee is the degree to which from the late 18th century onward northerners didn't like returning fugitive slaves. They just didn't. And they were passing laws in the 1780s making it hard to get slaves back. And the secessionists complained that the fugitive slave law of 1850 is a dead letter of the 10,000 estimated slaves who escaped to the North in the 1850s, maybe 3 or 400 got returned, right? And so, going into the war, we have a long history of legal extralegal, Black communities, absolutely slave catchers would not dare go into a Black community to get a slave.

**[00:28:06] James Oakes:** Northern Sheriffs wouldn't return them. State legislatures are passing laws making it hard. So you need to understand that when the Union passes these confiscation Acts in early, in July, as early as July of 1861, they're basing it on a long history of knowledge that slaves are going to run to Union lines. They've always tried to escape, and we've got to develop a policy that accommodates them. You read through Combahee and you see all of these amazing people. It's not just the stories of the enslaved that she tells, which is a remarkable reconstruction, but, but of the planters and the background of their family and the geography, but also of the Union Army people, right?

**[00:28:59] James Oakes:** I knew most of those people, but I didn't know all of them. And then I see them, and they're doing what Congress has told them to do, which is, slaves come to your lines, you do not return them. You do not return them. And they do. The whole policy works because decades of experience taught them that enslaved people don't like being enslaved, then they will run for their freedom when they get the chance.



**[00:29:25] Thomas Donnelly:** Thank you so much for that context James Oakes. And Edda Fields-Black, so we've talked a bit about Harriet Tubman, the raid at large. I'd love it if you could share some of the stories of some of the other freedom seekers who were part of this story. I have a question here from Jackie Wiggins who says, "Can you talk just a bit more about those enslaved people who, at 4:00 AM in the morning, were working the rice fields and their physical and mental states? You also mentioned Minus Hamilton, who's a great person in your story. Anything you wanna say about the important role of really those scouts, pilots, spies that you've mentioned a bit in your early answers, but did as many of, some of those stories to give us a sense of who beyond Tubman are the key people animating sort of just the power of this entire of this entire narrative?"

**[00:30:13] Edda Fields-Black:** Okay. I'd be happy to. So I'm gonna start with Tubman's spy scouts and pilots. And prior to writing the book, we knew their names because in Tubman's pension file and in her, in her subsequent attempts through Acts of Congress to get compensated for her Civil War service those names were written in those papers. But they've, to date really only as well as in her autobiography, they've been names on a page. And so I wanted to find out as much about them as I possibly could. And I learned that one of them actually joins the US Army after a raid that the army conducts, I'm sorry, the Navy conducted on the Santee River which is north going towards Georgetown. And the interesting thing about that is that that plant up there, one of the Combahee planter families actually also owned a plantation. okay?

**[00:31:16] Edda Fields-Black:** So these are two cousins who own one plantation on the Santee, one on the Combahee. And there was a will, grandfather's will was split. And so there were some Combahee people up there who were brought down on from the Santee. I found a document a Freeman's bank account of one of Tubman's spy's scouts and pilots, in which he said in this, in his Freedman's banking application, that one of the Combahee planters was actually his father, that he was the illegitimate son of William C. Hayward. We had to print that document, also. And then a life history the abolitionists who were a part of the Port Royal experiment, many of them would amuse themselves, I think, by collecting songs. They would collect proverbs, and they would collect life histories of the freedom seekers they met. And so I was able to find a life history of one of Tubman's spy scouts and pilots, and his son actually also joined the US colored troops and had a pension file.

**[00:32:28] Edda Fields-Black:** One of the benefits of COVID, I guess, was that I had a chance to get into the pension files of the men who fought in the raid, and this would be the second South Carolina regiments, A through F. And to really understand more of who they were. Prior to Combahee historians really focused on the first men who Colonel James Montgomery recruited being from Key West. They were from Key West, but in companies A through F there were a lot of men from Beaufort and a lot of men from the Sea Islands. And I think about a man by the name of William Fields who testified that he didn't wanna join. He had just gotten married, but several people he knew had joined, and the soldiers came and got him, and so he went, right. And he's not related to me.

**[00:33:25] Edda Fields-Black:** However, my second, my third great-grandfather, my great, great great grandfather, Hector Fields, was one of the men who liberated himself after the Battle of Port Royal and joined the Second South Carolina volunteers and fought in the raid and for the Combahee people. One of the places where I came to this book and where I decided, "Hmm, once I found this evidence in the pension files that maybe there is something new to say here about Tubman's life and about the Combahee River raid." Because the Combahee people, the veterans, the widows, their dependents, and their neighbors testified about the details of the raid.

**[00:34:14] Edda Fields-Black:** Now, it's not pervasive, it's not throughout, but I kind of got lucky in my first trip to the National Archives, in which I was trying to figure out if there was any there or there to actually pull files that talked about the raid. And so you look at someone like let me see a good one, Neptune Nichols, who talks about, they would talk, they would speak in language of, in relationship to another person. I grew up with that person since boyhood, we were enslaved on this plantation together until we got on the gunboat. We got on the gunboat together, we went to Beaufort, and we joined the Army together, okay?

**[00:35:01] Edda Fields-Black:** And so they would often name the people with whom they got on the gunboat and named the men, these are veterans would name the other men with whom they went to Beaufort and with whom they joined the army. The women, and I'm thinking here of Sarah Osborne, talked about getting on the gunboat, but then the men were going to war, right, when we got to Beaufort, our men were going to war. My husband's going to war. Her husband was in his late 50s, but he went to war.

**[00:35:37] Edda Fields-Black:** I said, the oldest man was 60. He was really 60 when he joined, right? You had a whole string of 50-year-old men who enlisted in the Second South Carolina Volunteers. Many of them were discharged early, but they joined, right? They were ready to fight for freedom. There are also a group of people who, for whatever reason, did not get on the boat. And I'm thinking of Elsie Jones Higgins, who says that she was in a delicate state, and so she could not get on the boat. I suspect that she had recently given birth. That phrase is used by other women at other moments in time. And I don't think that she was pregnant. I don't think that she was necessarily in the advanced stages of pregnancy, because there's a woman Phoebe Frazier, who has a baby on the boat coming back. She gives birth on the boat, and they name her Daughter Seabird.

**[00:36:39] Edda Fields-Black:** And this is when they're coming back at the end of the war. So I don't think that if she had been extremely pregnant, I think she would've still gotten on the boat. I think she had recently given birth. There are a group of people on William Kirkland's Plantation, whom Kirkland had hired out a practice, which is, which is unusual for the low country. But he had hired them out to, up to the upcountry, to the Camden area where he and his wife's families were originally from his father's family and his wife's family. And so there are people who had been hired out who also tell their stories about the raid and other people's pension files.

**[00:37:27] Edda Fields-Black:** And there's one, another person who didn't get on the boat. His name is John Savage. John A. Savage who testifies that he was William Kirkland's deer hunter. This was an enslavement. This is big hunting territory, right? Deer, duck, you name it. He was the deer hunter on the plantation. And Kirkland was in white, Charleston white drag goons, right? And so they were very upper class men who needed the comforts of home [laughs] when they were in camp. And they hunted, right? They raised horses, they did a lot of things. But John A. Savage was with William Kirkland Pocotaligo when the raid happened. And he talks about how he would walk home every week to visit his family. So he walked home one week to visit his wife and children, and he walked back. He came back the next week and they were gone. And he recounts everything that happened because he heard about why his family wasn't there.

**[00:38:39] Edda Fields-Black:** Peggy Simmons is a woman who was on William C. Hayward's Plantation. And she talked about, in her husband's pension file, how the boat came. And it went right up to William C. Hayward. It went right to Cyprus Plantation. And there's several clues in the sources that led me to believe that William C. Hayward was one of the targets of the raid. The US Army had a way of going after what they call the notorious rebels. And Hayward would've been considered a notorious rebel. He was the commander of troops at the Battle of Port Royal, right? So he was somebody who was known. His family certainly knew that his plantation was at Combahee Ferry, one of two at Combahee Ferry, that they drove those gunboats up there to blast them out.

**[00:39:43] Edda Fields-Black:** And she talks about the people who got on when the US Army landed at Cyprus, not only from Cyprus, but from Newport Plantation, which is across the river. And the wonderful accounts in the pension files about the people on Cyprus in Newport. They are across the river, but they are a community, and they have been a community since everybody can, alive can remember. And they got on the same gunboat together. The last person I wanna talk about is Minus Hamilton, who says that he is 88 years old when the raid happens. He probably was a little younger, but he remembers being 88 years old. He remembers being enslaved by old master Lowndes. And old master Lowndes turns out to be James Lowndes, who is the uncle of Charles T. Lowndes, who owned one of the plantations that was raided, okay?

**[00:40:44] Edda Fields-Black:** So I go through this process of showing how Minus Hamilton and the other Combahee people, my main characters, get to the Combahee plantations, right? So he's enslaved. He's sold multiple times. Minus Hamilton talks about how the enslaved people were in the rice fields when the gunboats came. And the overseer was on horseback, surveilling their labor, and the overseer tells them to run to the woods and hide. He hides, and he's shouting at them to come and to join him or to come and follow him, and everyone ignores him and goes to the boat. Minus Hamilton talks about how he felt when he saw Black, young Black men in uniform in US Army uniform. And he calls them Debrak Soldiers, so presumptuous, these young men who held their heads up and proceeded to burn everything in sight, burn it to the ground, and he's telling his life story to Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who was the commander of the first South Carolina volunteers.

**[00:42:02] Edda Fields-Black:** And Higginson asks him, "Well, how did you feel to see Lowndes House go up in flames?" And I'm sorry, he was not on, he was in Paul, how did you feel to see the planter's house go up in flames? And he said, "I didn't care anything at all. I was going to the boat." and talks about he and his wife going to the boat. He regrets he couldn't go back and get his blankets, which were all that he had. But they went on to freedom and they went slowly. The old folks have to go slowly, but the young folks can go fast.

**[00:42:38] Thomas Donnelly:** That's remarkable. What a great, what a great series of characters and stories. And James Oakes to, to bring, bring you back in. I mean, you've been in your, your responses so far, stress the importance of not just policy, but of freedom seekers being ready to seize their freedom precisely as they did in Combahee and another key part of your story as you tell it here, is also how all of this connects to the Republican Party and anti-slavery folks and their reading of the Constitution. The very title of your book, Freedom National, referring to the Republican Party's vision, but also the ways in which the theory of military emancipation is so important to a lot of the policies that also enable freedom seekers to seize their freedom, that it's that interaction between policy and agency that leads to the destruction of so much of slavery during the Civil War.

**[00:43:31] Thomas Donnelly:** Can you talk a little bit about the constitutional vision and, and how it intersects with our Combahee story and similar things we see throughout the nation?

**[00:43:38] James Oakes:** Sure. It's a big, long story, but, once again, it goes back to the late 18th century when, throughout human history, war was the single most important source of slaves, right? Armies, raid areas and enslaved populations. I mean, Caesar did it and it happened all the time. Alexander the Great did it. It's normal for war to produce slaves. It's not normal for war to produce emancipation. And the shift in using war to free slaves comes in the late 18th century when both the British troops, the British and the Americans offer freedom to slaves who would come and fight for their side, right?

**[00:44:36] James Oakes:** And this becomes something that is accepted as legitimate under the laws of war in the United States. You can see they signed three and the United States signed three different treaties with Britain over the next several decades, all of which acknowledged the right of belligerence to emancipate slaves in an effort to win a war and, and and or suppress a rebellion. And so this is understood to be part of the war powers of the Constitution going into the Civil War. And the Republicans accept it. They don't wanna say that in the 1850s, 'cause they're being accused of being disunion, and they're not gonna say, "Oh, but wait, when we have a war, we'll free the slaves." They go, they're not gonna say that. But almost immediately with secession, they start saying, they start quoting John Quincy Adams saying, "During the war, in the peace time, the Union, the federal government has no power over slavery in the state, but if there's a war, then we can start emancipating."

**[00:45:38] James Oakes:** And he says, Congress can do it, so, right. He doesn't say it's the President, he says, it's Congress. And it is Congress that doesn't. So the Republicans are heirs of a long series of precedents and legal arguments that say that in wartime, it is legitimate to win a war or suppress an insurrection by offering freedom to slaves who come into mostly fight for the Union. We know 180,000 African Americans did ultimately fight for the Union. But also just coming into union laws, as I mentioned in, in a previous answer, by the end of the war, we have a half a million enslaved people have come in Union lines and emancipated themselves. So it's something the Republicans accept as, as a given coming into the war, whether it's going to lead to the abolitionist slavery, no one knows, and no one's assuming that at the beginning. But the more radicalizes northern anti-slavery politics, until you get them advocating an abolition amendment that no one in 1860 and '61 was advocating.

**[00:46:49] Thomas Donnelly:** Excellent. Thank you for that, James Oakes. And back to you, Edda Fields-Black. We have some questions from Michael Khan. Just asking about your method of how you constructed these stories. I think our audience would be fascinated to know just sort of the historians craft and you've given some indications of the sorts of sources you were looking at. It's kind of extraordinary how many things you're drawing upon. I'd love to hear a little bit more about your process of constructing the stories you're able to construct in your book.

**[00:47:21] Edda Fields-Black:** Sure. So the stories of freedom seekers are found primarily in the pension files. So these are the files of the men who joined the Second South Carolina before the raid and fought in the raid. These are the stories of the men, the Combahee men who joined the Second South Carolina volunteers after the raid. I collected the files. I collaborated with the International African American Museum and their Center for Family Histories, USCT Pension File Project. And this is after I made the first discovery and decided I gotta get these pension files. I need as many as possible. I actually need files for both regiments that were formed after the raid companies G and H. That's really expensive. My research budget wouldn't handle it, so I had to make new friends.

**[00:48:21] Edda Fields-Black:** So IAAM Center for Family History is collecting the pension files for the South Carolina Black Regiments. And I partnered with them, and I tried to read each and every file and not only read it, but transcribe it and then enter it into my database so that I could keyword search it. My method for getting the files was not at all alphabetical. I started with the first group of files. This was a side project, and I was looking for family members that I thought had escaped in the raid. And I chose a set of files. And in those files, I happened to get lucky and find more than one file in which people were testifying about the raid.

**[00:49:09] Edda Fields-Black:** I made this decision pretty early on to transcribe the whole thing. Some were 30 pages, some were 300 pages. And to enter my transcriptions into a database, and as I read and transcribed the questions, were developing in my mind. So those were part of my database. And I would branch out so that then try to request the files and read the files of the people who testified in the previous file. So, as opposed to going in alphabetical

order, I used more of a network approach. And that would lead me to more files. It would also add details to my database. My goal, by the time I finished reading a file, was to find out where somebody was enslaved. And there were many times I would read 200 pages of cursive and not come away with that prize.

**[00:50:09] Edda Fields-Black:** And that was disappointing. But because I was building this database, because I would just, file, after file, after file, I would compile these details in a way that I could go back and retrieve them. And one of the things, for example, if a veteran and a widow married before the war and the name of the preacher who married them, but not the plantation where they were married with that name, I could search it and would often come up with other files who were married by other files of couples married by the same man. So capturing those details and being able to get to access them was really important. I discovered in this process that a substantial number of the people in my database were not born on the Combahee.

**[00:50:58] Edda Fields-Black:** And that piqued my interest. And one of the early files I read, I talked about Johnny Savage talked about these people coming from the Ogeechee River, and I was like, "What?" There was another file where they talked about the man being born 15 miles away on the Ashley River, right? That's a Middleton plantation. That's Middleton place today in Charleston. So what I, what became clear pretty early on is that all of these Combahee people weren't from the Combahee, where, or they were not from the Combahee plantations from which they escaped. I wanted to know where they were from. They were all from rice plantations. This is where I guess I got the notion to try to trace the freedom seekers backwards into slavery and forward into freedom.

**[00:51:52] Edda Fields-Black:** And the way that I did that was, I had my database, and I began to see the people who were testifying about the raid and the people who had, whose, whose pension files had a lot of detail. We then, with my research team tried to go forward in time and identify family members and people in the pension files testify about their families. Some going back multiple four generations in some cases. And I'm capturing that information also. But then, lo- creating another database of these people who I think I can track and trying to layer on top of that, Freeman's bank accounts, census documents, primarily from after the war with those in the pension files where people are naming their family members.

**[00:52:49] Edda Fields-Black:** From that, we were able to identify family groupings; parents, children, spouses, siblings. And then I went backward in time and tried to find, just scouring the planter records, wills, estate records, marriage settlements, mortgages, bills of sale. I think that covers it. Where the planters were listing the enslaved people and often listing them in family groupings. So when I say that I know who Minus Hamilton escaped with in the raid, that's because I've tracked them backwards, right? I've tracked them back to, to an 1839 bill of sale, and then to an 1859 bill of sale, right?

**[00:53:49] Edda Fields-Black:** And it's the same family grouping. Sometimes there are a couple family members, there's a daughter who's missing. And I was able to do this for each and every one of the main characters. So I wanted to know who they were, where they came from, with which family members did they get on the boat. And in this process, I'm also uncovering all kinds of stories about the humanity of the enslaved of their marriages, of their weddings the births of their children, the praise house, who went to the praise house with whom, just all of the ways that enslaved people formed relationships, I'm getting and mining from the pension files. And my goal then became to know who got on the boat, and with which family members, and went off to freedom in Beaufort.

**[00:54:45] Thomas Donnelly:** Wow. That's quite an amazing process.

**[00:54:48] James Oakes:** It's staggering.

**[00:54:50] Edda Fields-Black:** I actually forgot one source. I just want one more source. How can I forget? So, after the raid, three of the seven Combahee planters filed for compensation from the Confederate government, right, for their losses during the raid. And they listed the names of the enslaved people who escaped. And in most cases, they listed their ages. Sometimes they listed their occupations, and other times, they listed the names of the children with their mothers and the child's age. So I have the pension files on one hand where people are attesting to their family members, their occupations approximately when they were born. I have the planter's records on the other hand, when they're listing the people they lost. So I know who escaped in the Combahee River.

**[00:55:52] James Oakes:** Can I say for listeners who, for whom they've never done a lick of historical scholarship. This isn't a run-of-the-mill piece of research. This is, this is a really stunning piece of historical reconstruction that, of the likes of which I can't quite think of anything in comparison to it. That's only part of the book. It's only part of the book, but we're talking about 750 some people who were illiterate and, therefore, didn't leave us Letters, didn't leave us diaries, didn't leave us autobiographies for the most part. So, the way Edda Fields-Black has reconstructed these people's lives is truly extraordinary. I hope everyone will go out and buy this book because it's an amazing story.

**[00:56:52] Edda Fields-Black:** Thank you.

**[00:56:52] Thomas Donnelly:** Well, James Oakes, I can't think of a better way to end this extraordinary conversation, though. I could, I could talk to both of you for hours more. But the book, again is COMBEE: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom during the Civil War by Edda Fields-Black. And if you wanna check out James Oake's classic work on the destruction of slavery during the Civil War, it is called Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, which again, I have learned so much from, and I've learned so much

from both of you. So, Edda Fields-Black, James Oakes, thank you so much for this just extraordinary conversation. It is a treat.

**[00:57:26] James Oakes:** Thank you very much.

**[00:57:26] Edda Fields-Black:** Thank you.

**[00:57:26] James Oakes:** It was great to be here.

**[00:57:32] Tanaya Tauber:** This program was streamed live on February 15th, 2024. This episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Bill Pollock, and me, Tanaya Tauber. It was engineered by Greg Sheckler and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Yara Daraiseh, Cooper Smith, Samson Mostashari, and Lana Ulrich. Check out our full line of exciting programs and register to join us virtually at [constitutioncenter.org](https://constitutioncenter.org). As always, we'll publish those programs on the podcast, so stay tuned here as well. Or watch the videos. They're available in our media library at [constitutioncenter.org/media-library](https://constitutioncenter.org/media-library). Please rate, review, and subscribe to live at the National Constitution Center on Apple Podcasts, or follow us on Spotify. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Tanaya Tauber.