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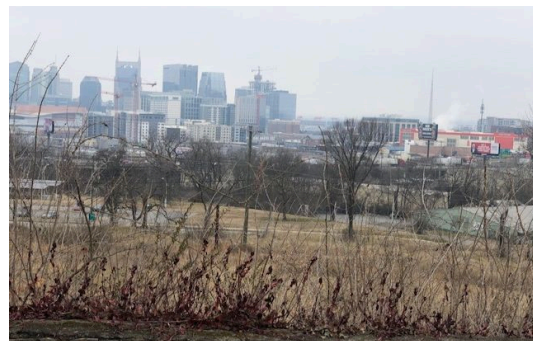
February 2021

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## *Finding Freedom License Plate to the Shadows of Fort Negley*



*For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nashville was Tennessee's second largest slave port with the majority of Black Americans arriving between 1779 and 1862 in chains. This battlefield preservation supporter explored Fort Negley, site of one of three Nashville contraband camps where, before Union occupation, many Black Americans found a brief respite before they continued their journey to enslavement in the deep south. A sketch from Harpers Weekly overlays the 2021 view of the imposing Fort Negley structure.*



*Formerly enslaved Black Americans likely had this view as they slept in the shadow of the Fort. In the opposite direction, with a view to Nashville today, the grassy area is believed to be the site of the camp.*



*The fort was built by conscripted free black laborers, hired out enslaved persons, and people fleeing enslavement. While the forts around Nashville were finished by the winter of 1862, residents of the camps continued to provide labor for their upkeep. Many of the able-bodied men enlisted in the US Colored Troops (USCT). (Harpers Weekly Image)*

For many freedom-seeking Black Americans, Nashville's contraband camps offered them their first taste of freedom. The camps were created to accommodate the flood of people using the fall of Nashville as an opportunity to escape enslavement and house laborers for the city's defenses. For many of them their first taste was bittersweet as they lost track of loved ones, lived with exposure to the elements, lacked needed supplies, and watched loved ones get sick and die. Death was a common feature in these camps. One observer of the Nashville camps in 1862 reported he saw wagons loaded with at least 30 "coffinless" corpses departing the camps daily.

Threats of being kidnapped by Nashvillians - those resolved to keep African Americans in chains - persisted. Union soldiers uncovered a gang of men out of east Nashville who patrolled the camps at night seeking to kidnap formerly enslaved children. Once acquired, they reported that the children would be shuffled down to Franklin, TN, and later to Alabama where they were sold according to their body weight.

Many of the formerly enslaved Black Americans ultimately settled in the Edgehill community - one of Nashville's most storied African American communities. The culture, notions of liberty, and commitment to freedom of those who sought refuge in these hastily created camps figured prominently in the creation of Nashville's image as the Music City and Athens of the South. Their legacies contribute to the city we know and celebrate today.

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