

Cleburne's Proposal to Arm the African Americans during the Civil War

By Robert Jenkins, August 25, 2020



Sergeant A.M. Chandler of the 44th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, Co. F., and Silas Chandler, family slave, with Bowie knives, revolvers, pepper-box, shotgun, and canteen | Library of Congress

On Thursday, July, 14, 2011, the Georgia Historical Society conducted a dedication service to unveil a marker commemorating Confederate Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne's proposal to arm enslaved individuals in exchange for their freedom. Cleburne's plan was to provide manpower for the South to face the ever-increasing Federal army, which was beginning to recruit Black soldiers and which continued to swell its ranks with immigrants, particularly from Germany and other parts of Europe. It was becoming increasingly clear to southern officers

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Europe. It was becoming increasingly clear to southern officers during the winter of 1863–64 that the South was fast running out of men to continue the war. After much thought and discussion among several like-minded junior officers, Cleburne wrote out his proposal while the Confederate Army of Tennessee remained in camps in and around Dalton, Georgia. On January 2, 1864, Cleburne presented it to Commanding Gen. Joseph E. Johnston and the Division and Corps Commanders of the Army of Tennessee during a meeting at Johnston's headquarters, the Huff House located at 314 North Selvidge St., which since has been donated by the Boring family to the Whitfield–Murray Historical Society to be held for all to enjoy its rich history in perpetuity.



Confederate Gen. Patrick Cleburne

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While the Confederate High Command in both Richmond and Dalton dismissed the proposal as outrageous, in 1864 U.S. armies were beginning to recruit and deploy Black troops in mass. By mid-May of 1864, Dalton had fallen into Federal hands and, during the Summer of 1864, many runaway enslaved individuals from Northwest Georgia found their way into Chattanooga to join the ranks of the 14th and 44th United States Colored Troops Vice infantry. Had Cleburne's proposal been taken seriously and adopted in January 1864, it is possible that some of these men could have served for the South in exchange for their freedom. Instead, they fought for liberty on the side of the North for the liberation of all people, not solely for their personal freedom. In August and October 1864, these two Black regiments saw action in Dalton in two separate events, the only fighting in the State of Georgia during the Civil War in which African-American troops were engaged. By war's end, over 200,000 African-Americans enlisted in the Army and Navy for the North.

Ironically, the South eventually passed a bill to arm the slaves. In February 1865, CSA President Jefferson Davis appointed Robert E. Lee as Commander of all Confederate Armies, not just those in Virginia, and Lee's first act was to recommend Cleburne's proposal to arm slaves in exchange for their freedom. In March 1865, just weeks before the end of the war, the Confederate Congress passed legislation approving the use of slaves in the armies, but the bill did not promise freedom in exchange for service as had been recommended by Cleburne and Lee. While some have estimated the number of Blacks who served in the Confederacy at 32,000 (a figure derived from postwar pension applications that likely included applications for servants and laborers, as very few, if any, African-American Confederates

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laborers, as very few, if any, African-American Confederates were used in combat roles), it is clear that the decision to arm the enslaved individuals for the South came too little and too late, and it failed to yield any measurable results for the Confederacy.

NOTE--OTHER SOURCES INDICATE THAT AS MANY AS 13,000 BLACKS MAY HAVE BEEN ACTUAL COMBAT SOLDIERS.