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## Crucial Contraband

Lexington, KY—African American slaves played a crucial role in both the Confederacy and Union during the Civil War, a fact often overlooked by many historians. As Southern men left their homes to fight, the Confederacy used many slaves to provide manual labor for the war effort, to supplement military service, and to maintain agricultural production—actions deemed necessary to maintain the fundamental infrastructure of Southern economy. However, the Union had a plan for disrupting this critical arrangement that was preventing the Confederate society from collapsing.

When the United States passed the First Confiscation Act of 1861 authorizing Union forces to seize property used in the Confederate war effort, slaves were willingly impressed into paid service by the Union Navy. This action significantly weakened the Confederacy and greatly contributed to Union success, particularly in blockading the Confederate Atlantic ports. Called “contraband” in reference to the First Confiscation Act, these slaves performed a wide range of tasks that helped to progress the war in the Union’s favor. In *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy*, Barbara Brooks Tomblin explores the complex relationship between this group of fugitive slaves and the Union Navy.

Tomblin focuses primarily on the North and South Atlantic Blockading Squadrons and the mutually beneficial relationship which grew between the Union Navy and fugitive slaves. In a seemingly symbiotic connection, the fugitive slaves provided the Union with manpower and expert knowledge of the local landscape, while the army offered them legal protection from slavery. In this way, the two groups were able to achieve their own goals and advance the North’s progress in the war.

*Bluejackets and Contrabands* takes a thorough look at several aspects of this arrangement, including the contraband colonies that helped provide vital services such as cooking, farming, river navigation, and skilled mechanical work. Tomblin also examines the thousands of contrabands who served as part of the Union forces and the key successes that they helped accomplish. Through her detailed research, she provides readers with a thorough account of the contrabands’ contributions to the Civil War.

In her research, Tomblin used diaries or memoirs of the war kept by white senior naval officers, commanders, sailors, and soldiers, as well as some accounts written by the contrabands themselves. One such memoir is that of contraband William B. Gould, whose excerpts Tomblin includes throughout the book. He describes how he joined the Union Navy and details his experiences in joining other fugitive slaves who helped gather crucial intelligence on the movement of Confederate troops. He describes the fighting engagements of his ship, the *Cambridge*, and even comments on the comfort of his uniform.

Tomblin has provided readers with the first in-depth study on contrabands and their crucial function in the Civil War. In doing so, she has shed new light on an overlooked portion of our nation’s history.

**Barbara Brooks Tomblin** is the author of *With Utmost Spirit: Allied Naval Operations in the Mediterranean, 1942-1945* and *G.I. Nightingales: The Army Nurse Corps in World War II*.

## BLUEJACKETS AND CONTRABANDS AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE UNION NAVY

Barbara Brooks Tomblin

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