

The Principle of Equality

Cannons boomed in celebration across the South toward the end of the Civil War. In Little Rock, Arkansas, Nels Knutson described a 100-cannon tribute to General Philip Sheridan's victory in the Shenandoah Valley in October 1864. In Alabama, Christian Christensen noted a 100-gun salute to celebrate the victory over Lee's army in April 1865 and a 200-gun salute when Mobile fell.¹ In New Orleans, Elers Koch, who had been forced to serve in the Confederate cavalry for part of the war, described a "great illumination" and salute "on account of the surrender" and added: "I feel like I want to Hurrah all the time, I feel so elated by the Federal success."²

But euphoria soon turned to sorrow. With news of Lincoln's death, troops such as the 54th Massachusetts in Charleston, South Carolina, "lowered flags, fired guns, tolled bells," and a "silent gloom" fell over the Union Army's encampments while military and civilian buildings were draped in black.³ As far north as New Denmark, Wisconsin, Fritz

¹ Nels Knutson, "Little Rock Ark October 4th 1864," in *Copies of Letters written by Nels Knutson, Moline, IL, during the Civil War. SSIRC. SAC P:315* (Augustana College, 1864). See also C. T. Christensen, "Headquarters, Army and Division of West Mississippi, Mobile, Ala., April 16th, 1865. General Field Orders, No. 23.," in *General Frederick Steele Papers, M0191* (Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA, 1865). See also Christopher Columbus Andrews, *History of the Campaign of Mobile; Including the Cooperative Operations of Gen. Wilson's Cavalry in Alabama* (1867) (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1867), 230.

² Elers Koch, "New Orleans April 17th 1865," in *Christian D. Koch and Family Papers, Mss. 202, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections. Box 2* (LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA, 1865).

³ Quoted in Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 57–58.

Rasmussen's father noted the "great general mourning" associated with the "murder," and his son-in-law, Celius Christiansen, years later described a similar experience in Missouri.⁴ "Never will I forget the impression, I got, by seeing the great city, St. Louis, in a mourning garb," Christiansen wrote: "Everything was draped with black cloth even down from all the church spires. Thousands of dollars had been spent in this city alone to express the people's deep mourning of the president."⁵

The Confederate capitulations, Lincoln's assassination, and the attempt at Secretary Seward's life, along with all the other "events over the last month," led to a sense at *Emigranten* that April 1865 had surpassed "everything that has thus far taken place in the continent's history."⁶ With Lincoln's assassination, thoughts of retribution, for a moment, supplanted thoughts of reconciliation.⁷ Writing from Nashville, Tennessee, in late April or early May, Norwegian-born Julius Steenson struggled to find the words to describe his feeling of "horror" and "vengeance" toward "the assassin Booth" in a letter to his cousin Mary.⁸ Steenson was glad that the "murderer" had been caught but sorry that Booth was killed in the process, feeling that "to die so quick was not enough punishment for such an act as to kill that man of so great private life and public worth."⁹

Retribution was also on Edward Rasmussen's mind: "You have probably heard that they have caught the traitor Jeff. Davis and I hope that before you receive these lines that he is strung up in a gallow as high as

⁴ Edward Rasmussen, "New Denmark, Brown Co. Den 29. Maj 1865 Wis.," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁵ Celius Christiansen, *En Pioneers Historie (Erindringer Fra Krigen Mellem Nord-Og Sydstatene)* [A Pioneer's Story: Memoirs from the War between North and South] (Aalborg: Eget forlag, 1909), 55.

⁶ "Emigranten. "Madison, 17de April 1865," *Emigranten*, April 24 1865. See also "Forfærdelige Efterretninger – Præsidenten Og Statsministeren Myrdede [Terrible News: The President and Secretary of State Murdered]," *Emigranten*, April 17, 1865.

⁷ Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 12. White notes that there was "little violence against Confederate sympathizers," but feelings of vengeance were clearly expressed; see Julius Steenson, "Cousin Mary I Would Say Some Thing About the Assassination of Our President," in *Kestol Family Papers* (In family possession, 1865).

⁸ Steenson, "Cousin Mary I Would Say Some Thing About the Assassination of Our President."

⁹ *Ibid.*

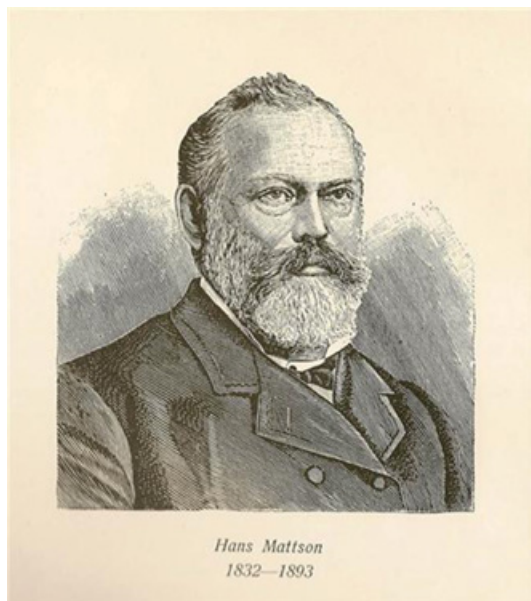


FIGURE 11.1 Hans Mattson became one of the best-known Swedish-American Civil War officers and later one of the best-known Scandinavian-born politicians in the United States.

Haman's," Rasmussen noted with an Old Testament reference, in a letter to his son Fritz.¹⁰ In a similar vein, the Swedish-born colonel Hans Mattson, stationed in Jacksonport, Arkansas, wrote to his wife that several "persons were shot dead by soldiers at Little Rock for rejoicing [sic] over Lincoln[']s murder – it served them right."¹¹

Mattson's letter alluded to the simmering tension and the potential for violence between former Confederates and the Union Army tasked, in part, with ensuring public safety, not least that of freedpeople. Guerrilla attacks, robberies, Union soldiers' own looting, and attacks on the formerly enslaved at times found their way into accounts, demonstrating both prejudice and empathy toward freedpeople among Scandinavian soldiers.

Maintaining law and order proved difficult in numerous instances during this early part of Reconstruction. Norwegian-born Ole Stedje,

¹⁰ Fritz Rasmussen, "New Denmark, Brown Co. Den 29. Maj 1865 Wis."

¹¹ H. Mattson, "Sunday Morning Apr 23. 1865," in *Hans Mattson and Family Papers. Box 1* (Minnesota Historical Society, 1865). See also Donald J. Simon, "The Third Minnesota Regiment in Arkansas, 1863–1865," *Minnesota History* (1967): 292.

writing from Duvall's Bluff, Arkansas in March 1865, noted the importance of winning over the local population in a larger effort against paramilitary bands, and Danish-born Wilhelm Wermuth described "violence so common here that there is not much to say about it," after falling victim to guerrillas in Kansas.¹²

Fritz Rasmussen, who spent the majority of his one-year service in Alabama, also witnessed instances in which tension between white southerners and freedmen likely turned violent. Describing a boat being loaded with confiscated rebel weapons, Rasmussen on August 2, 1865, saw one gun go off and hit "a negro in one side of the abdomen," tearing a "hideous" hole to the intestines.¹³ "Several people thought that the carpenter aboard had shot him," Rasmussen noted, "as it was known that they had exchanged words."¹⁴

While Rasmussen did not specifically note the carpenter's ethnicity, the fact that he, unlike the victim, was not described as "a negro" possibly makes it an instance of a white laborer shooting a Black man. If so, it was part of a larger pattern during the early part of reconstruction. As Carole Emberton has noted, "the violence recorded by the [Freedmen's] Bureau attests to both its pervasiveness in postwar society as well as the indeterminacy of power relations in everyday life."¹⁵ In Missouri, Rasmussen's brother-in-law Celius Christiansen contemplated violence and the consequences of slavery when he arrived at "Væverly" (Waverly); in his memoirs he recounted the aftermath of a guerrilla attack in 1865:

They had so little respect for the military that they, in broad daylight a Sunday afternoon, attacked a plantation close to town. Here they shot three negroes, whereof one died immediately, and the two others survived by pretending to be dead. I spoke to one of them who had three bullets in his head and someone had

¹² O. O. Stedje, "Fra Arkansas. Duvall's Bluff, Arkansas, 2den Marts, 1865," *Emigranten*, April 3, 1865. See also Wilhelm Wermuth, "Atchison Kansas D 20 Maj," in *Håndskriftsafdelingen. Ny Kongelig Samling 2719. II. Folio. Karl Larsen's Collection, Unused material. Wilhelm Adolf Leopold Wermuth, USA (Soldat, guldgraver, mine-ejer)* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Bibliotek, 1865). The Danish-born veteran had left Chicago around Christmas of 1864 and hoped to make money further south but lost all. "It pains me that I can not send you some money but I have had bad luck myself," Wilhelm Wermuth wrote to his mother from Kansas in May 1865. "These guerrillas took it from me and I barely escaped with my life."

¹³ Fritz W. Rasmussen, "August Den 2de 1865," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 80.

knocked his teeth in, so it was horrible to watch. That such an outrageous attack frightened the black population is quite natural and I remember that I felt great compassion with them by hearing their lamentations and seeing their misery and sadness.¹⁶

Christiansen claimed the attack was committed by the famed outlaw brothers Frank and Jesse James, who had returned to their family farm in nearby Clay County, Missouri, in late 1865, but the chronology does not quite add up, as the 50th Wisconsin left Waverly in the summer.¹⁷ It is, however, possible that Christiansen did witness the aftermath of an attack by bushwackers in the summer of 1865, as Waverly was situated in a “triangle of counties” where the anti-Unionist – and by extension anti-Black – sentiment, according to T. J. Stiles, “was fiercest.”¹⁸

Importantly, Christiansen’s memoir also revealed a certain ambivalence about race and ethnicity in the post-war moment, as he expressed sympathy for “the poor black slaves” who suffered in bondage, disdained the many shabby slave huts he encountered, and applauded abolition of “the gruesome slavery” but also, to an extent, admired ex-confederates and supported American Indians’ removal.¹⁹ Christiansen became “intimate friends” with an alleged former bushwacker and later praised a victory against Lakota people that opened up “large expanses of the best lands.”²⁰

Christiansen’s story exemplifies the complexities on the ground in the post-war South but indicates Scandinavian immigrants’ lack of postbellum reflection regarding Native people and freedpeople’s precariousness in the

¹⁶ Christiansen, *En Pioneers Historie (Erindringer Fra Krigen Mellem Nord-Og Sydsterne)* [*A Pioneer’s Story: Memoirs from the War between North and South*], 62–63.

¹⁷ T. J. Stiles, *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 160–167.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁹ Christiansen in his memoirs also described the economic advantages based on exploitation that the planter class enjoyed: “Little wonder that the property-owning class were so reluctant to give up the privileges they were born with. They had usurped power to such an extent that they just sent people out to survey the richest and best land to then acquire it, but the greatest advantage was the cheap labor as the poor black slaves were not given anything else than often paltry food and clothing.” See Christiansen, *En Pioneers Historie (Erindringer Fra Krigen Mellem Nord- Og Sydsterne)* [*A Pioneer’s Story: Memoirs from the War between North and South*], 58, 73–74.

²⁰ Christiansen, *En Pioneers Historie (Erindringer Fra Krigen Mellem Nord-Og Sydsterne)* [*A Pioneer’s Story: Memoirs from the War between North and South*], 58–65, 73–74. Speaking to Scandinavian immigrants’ concern with a quick return to post-war life without explicitly engaging issues of racial equality, Christiansen recalled that Waverly became a better place when Confederate soldiers returned because of the returned soldiers’ hospitality. See also Stiles, *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War*, 164.

face of violence as well. Yet, even as Scandinavian-born soldiers often abhorred violence against freedpeople, few examples exist of them proactively fighting for Black citizenship, voting rights, and equality in the Civil War's immediate aftermath.

War service in the South helped transform some perceptions of race among Scandinavian-born soldiers, as was the case for a correspondent who wrote to *Hemlandet* in October 1863 from Helena, Arkansas, to express his admiration of the service performed by a "Corps d'Afrique."²¹ Moreover, in *Emigranten* on April 25, 1864, Ole Stedje from the Army of the Cumberland wrote: "When one, as we do, move about down here for a longer period of time, and can see all of slavery's conditions revealed, the thought forces itself upon one that even if one previously was a stiff Democrat, slavery has been the South's most depraved institution."²²

Christian Christensen's wartime interaction with future freedpeople likewise revealed racial attitudes that set him apart. According to an 1865 letter from fellow officer and fervent abolitionist Brigadier General John Wolcott Phelps, Christensen's "bearing towards the negro race was peculiarly gratifying" and "indicative of a generous heart and an enlarged and liberal understanding."²³ To Fritz Rasmussen, military service underlined the immorality of slavery. In his diary post from July 23, 1865, Rasmussen wrote about the wealthy planters' "arrogance" that led to war and added his thoughts on abolition:

What joy I felt the other day when "the provisional Governors Proclamation" was brought into the tent and Ed. Daskam, among other, read: "There is no more a slave in Alabama." Yes, what indignation I feel every time something catches my eye related to the depravity of slavery. This afternoon I went to church in a big negro church, as it is called here, and precious and beloved, relatives and friends, the feelings I suffered or went through there are impossible for me to describe.²⁴

Expression of admiration and sympathy for the formerly enslaved, however, seldom translated into concrete action or enthusiasm when

²¹ "Fra Helena, Arkansas Oktober 1863," *Hemlandet*, November 11, 1863.

²² O. O. Stedje, "Fra En Norsk Frivillig i Cumberland-Armeen [From a Norwegian Volunteer in the Army of the Cumberland]," *Emigranten*, April 25, 1864.

²³ Christian Thomsen Christensen, "Provost Marshals Office. April 22d 1862," in *Papers of Christian T. Christensen. Christensen (Christian Thomsen) Collection. 1862-1876. Box 1* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1862). See also John Wolcott Phelps, "Brattleboro, Vermont. June 19, 1865," in *Papers of Christian T. Christensen. Christensen (Christian Thomsen) Collection. 1862-1876. Box 1* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1865). Phelps, "Brattleboro, Vermont. June 19, 1865."

²⁴ Rasmussen, "Camp at Montgomery, Ala. Juli Den 23de 1865."

Scandinavian immigrants later debated or acted on the question of freedpeople's civil rights. For every Stedje, Christensen, and Rasmussen, there were Danielsons, Winslows, and HEGS who used the phrase "niggers" even while expressing some support of abolitionism.²⁵

Important clues to understanding the ambiguity of equality expressed in the soldiers' letters, diaries, and memoirs are found in the Scandinavian-American press. The issue of land redistribution was for example broached in *Emigranten* on April 10, 1865, when General William Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15 was described in positive, yet prejudiced, terms:²⁶

At a previous occasion, "Emigraten" has reported on an order from General Sherman which concerns setting aside islands and a part of the coast line in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida for the freed slaves' disposal. There they could build a home, manage cotton growth, agriculture or all together such operations as they from their youth are trained to do and understand . . . The government has chosen a good and completely comprehensive plan to provide for "Sambo" and his colored family . . . It is hereby demonstrated that the Negro can provide for himself as soon as he is put to work and this is all one can require.²⁷

The expectation of freedpeople providing for themselves through agricultural work as soon as possible was a common refrain in the Scandinavian-American press. Still, when President Andrew Johnson by September 1865 directed the commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, General Oliver O. Howard, in Eric Foner's words, to order "the restoration to pardoned owners of all land except the small amount that had already been sold under a court decree," the issue was no longer at the forefront of Scandinavian immigrant newspapers, whose pages were filled with local election coverage with almost no discussion of racial issues.²⁸

²⁵ Christiansen, *En Pioneers Historie* (Erindringer fra Krigen Mellem Nord- Og Sydstatene) [A Pioneer's Story: Memoirs from the War between North and South], 73–74. See also Mathilda Cassel Peterson Danielson, "Helena, Arkansas November 5, 1862"; Ferdinand Sophus Winslow, "Pacific, Mo. 15 January 1862," in *Ferdinand Sophus Winslow letters, September 1861–February 1862* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, Special Collections Department, 1862); Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Colonel Hans Christian Heg* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1936), 57.

²⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 70.

²⁷ Carl Fredrik Solberg, "Emigranten. Madison, 7de April 1865," *Emigranten*, April 10, 1865. See also Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, 70.

²⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, 159–160. See, for example, "Fædrelandet. Thorsdag 2ode September 1865," *Fædrelandet*, September 21, 1865.

In November 1865, for example, “Wisconsin was among the first of fifteen states and territories where white men had the opportunity to enfranchise their black counterparts” and, as Alison Clark Efford reminds us, “declined to do so.”²⁹ Scandinavian immigrants, who often professed to have come to the United States because of liberty and equality, were likely on the side that declined.

Despite the opportunity to advocate for extending the right to vote (with its implied connection to citizenship), no letters to the editor appeared in the main Scandinavian newspapers, and discussions of race were also almost completely absent from the editorial page. On the eve of the election, *Emigranten* did, however, in a longer piece manage to squeeze in one sentence criticizing the Democratic gubernatorial candidate’s complete opposition to freedpeople’s rights when it pointed out that “Union men grant each other the right to be for or against giving the Negroes the vote in Wisconsin,” but the Scandinavian paper did not elaborate on its own position.³⁰ *Fædrelandet* also spent very little ink on the election but was a little clearer than *Emigranten* on November 16 when it noted the Union Party’s “splendid victory” and also the “rejection” of the suffrage proposal.³¹ On the question of Black men’s right to vote, *Fædrelandet* added:

The time is probably not right either to answer this question in the affirmative, but we hope that the time is not distant when any friend of freedom and human rights will say: “now the time has come, now the negro is worthy of admittance as citizen.”³²

Though it is difficult to assess opinions on the ground in Scandinavian enclaves, Susannah Ural’s point that “editors could not stay in business if they failed to address the interest of their communities” does at the very least indicate a split even among Republican-leaning Scandinavian voters on the Black suffrage question.³³ Among German immigrants in

²⁹ Alison Clark Efford, “The Appeal of Racial Neutrality in the Civil War-Era North: German Americans and the Democratic New Departure,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 1 (2015): 69.

³⁰ “Harrison C. Hobart, ‘Demokratiets’ Guvernørkandidat i Wisconsin [Harrison C. Hobart, ‘Democracy’s’ Gubernatorial Candidate in Wisconsin],” *Emigranten*, November 6, 1865; “Afvigte Tirsdag Den 7de Var Valgdag [Last Tuesday the 7th Was Election Day],” *Emigranten*, November 13, 1865. *Emigranten* omitted any mention of Black men’s suffrage when describing the Union Party’s victory a week later.

³¹ “Fædrelandet,” *Fædrelandet*, November 16, 1865. ³² *Ibid.*

³³ Susannah J. Ural, ed., *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity and Identity in America’s Bloodiest Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 9.

Wisconsin, the split was likely even more pronounced. As Efford has demonstrated, “German Republican leaders in Wisconsin were firm on suffrage,” but the German leaders’ position differed from the position of most German-born “Wisconsinites, the majority of whom voted Democratic,” and it was also more forward-thinking than was the case for Scandinavian-born editors.³⁴

In a Republican Party that, according to Richard White’s assessment, was the party of “nationalism, economic improvement, personal independence, and more tentatively, universal rights,” the Scandinavian press generally sided with the (white) nationalism and economic improvement faction.³⁵ The question of citizenship, and by extension suffrage, was central to the struggle among Republican factions, and the central arena was Washington, DC.

As such, Lyman Trumbull, still chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, was questioned about citizenship and skin color in early 1866. Would the proposed 14th amendment guarantee citizenship for “persons born in the United States . . . without distinction of color?” Democratic Senator James Guthrie of Kentucky and Republican Senator Jacob Howard of Michigan asked.³⁶ The answer, Trumbull explained, was yes and no: mostly “no” for Indians (“We deal with them by treaty”), but mostly “yes” for everyone else.³⁷ Trumbull’s answer, which included “the children of Chinese and Gypsies” as potential citizens, surprised Republican Senator Edgar Cowan, who argued that an immigration influx from China could “overwhelm our race and wrest from them the dominion of that country.”³⁸

The use of the phrases “our race” and “dominion of that country” was telling, and Cowan in his next comment denied that children of Chinese immigrants could be considered citizens as of right now. This led Trumbull to ask, is “not the child born in this country of German parents a citizen?” To which Cowan replied: “The children of German parents are citizens; but Germans are not Chinese; Germans are not Australians, nor

³⁴ Alison Clark Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Washington, DC: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121.

³⁵ White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896*, 24.

³⁶ I am grateful to Stephen Kantrowitz for bringing this debate to my attention; J. Rives and F. Rives, eds., *The Congressional Globe: Containing the Debates and Proceedings of the First Session of the Thirty-Ninth Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Globe Office, 1866), 498–499.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 498. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 498–499.

Hottentots, nor anything of the kind. That is the fallacy of his argument.”³⁹ To this reply, Trumbull simply stated, “The law makes no such distinction.”⁴⁰

Scandinavians also were not Germans, but in the discussion over citizenship, the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish ethnic elite actually considered themselves superior to competing European ethnic group such as the Germans – and even more so in relation to nonwhites. As an example, a mixed news and opinion piece, likely penned by Solberg, in *Emigranten* on August 13, 1866, asked: “Who is white?”

The question, the writer pointed out, had caused considerable trouble in Michigan, as it was “suspected” that someone “having a mix of ‘black’ blood in his veins,” had voted.⁴¹ Yet, the blood, according to the *Emigranten* editor, distinguished “us free Americans” from other groups:

African blood is “black,” European “white” and if a man wants to be somebody, there cannot be a trace of “black” blood in his veins. Enthusiastic about the idea about freedom and equality, we Norsemen did indeed protest slavery’s monstrous motto that “the Black man has no rights which the white man is bound to respect,” but what was simply meant by this protest was the right to not be a slave against one’s will.⁴²

In short, while the editor explicitly distanced himself – and Scandinavians more broadly – from the wording of the 1857 Dred Scott decision in a case revolving around a Black man’s freedom from bondage, the ideas behind the decision, that Black people were inherently inferior and could neither be equal nor citizens seemed acceptable.⁴³ In terms of political citizenship, only “fullblooded” Europeans, who “stood as high above anyone with mixed blood in the veins as the pure thoroughbred over the simple draft animal,” should have the right to vote in the United States, *Emigranten* argued.⁴⁴

Thus, even as Scandinavian immigrants professed their admiration for American ideals and wrote home about “the principle of equality” being “completely recognized and entirely implemented,” as one Norwegian correspondent did to an Old World newspaper on September 28, 1866, the principle of equality was still far from recognized or implemented on

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 498. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ “Hvem Er Hvid Og Hvem Er Ikke Hvid? [Who Is White and Who Is Not White?],” *Emigranten*, August 13, 1866.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 566–573.

⁴⁴ “Hvem Er Hvid Og Hvem Er Ikke Hvid? [Who Is White and Who Is Not White?].”

the question of suffrage extended to nonwhites and, as we shall see, women.⁴⁵

In rural Scandinavian immigrant enclaves, gender roles by 1865 were still very much tied to Old World perceptions and practices. As Jon Gjerde has argued, paternalist European family patterns “based on Scripture and ‘correct’ behavior” often “informed the relationship between husband and wife,” as well as that “between parent and child.”⁴⁶

Yet returning veterans, some physically or mentally ill, came home to communities where women had run the households for months if not years. Thus, the Civil War’s end ushered in a transition period where traditional roles within and outside the home by necessity were in flux and at least implicitly forced community members to reassess and renegotiate gender roles.

For most of 1865, Fritz Rasmussen’s wife Sidsel worked so hard at the farm in New Denmark, while raising three little girls, that she could hardly find time or energy to write in the evening. Still, Sidsel sent regular letters to her husband.⁴⁷ On June 12, Sidsel wrote about the difficulty of collecting her thoughts given the demands of childcare but still dutifully described events on the farm and also engaged Fritz Rasmussen’s apparent criticism (his letter to her has not been preserved) that she had not overseen farm work closely enough.⁴⁸

Ten days later, Sidsel noted that Union soldiers were slowly starting to return (“two Germans came the other day”) and added that “Olsen and Christen ‘Carpenter’ would follow in a few days.”⁴⁹ These returning soldiers gave reason for optimism that Fritz Rasmussen also would soon return home, and Sidsel therefore decided, contrary to her husband’s request, that it did not make sense to send the money south.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ While the writer specifically referenced the 1866 “killings in Memphis and New Orleans,” he or she made no reference to the freedpeople victims or the white supremacist ideology behind the violence. See “From Faribault, Minnesota, 1866 [*Aftenbladet*, September 28, 1866],” in *America Letters and Articles, 1860–1890*. P435. Box 2 (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1866).

⁴⁶ Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West 1830–1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 177.

⁴⁷ Sidsel Rasmussen, “Mai Den 29,” in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834–1942*. *Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁴⁸ “Juni Den 12 1865,” in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834–1942*. *Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁴⁹ Sidsel Rasmussen, “Juni Den 22,” in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834–1942*. *Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Sidse's letters in the summer of 1865 expressed hope that his return would lead to a happy long-term family life; they also revealed the amount of labor she was doing. "It is high time to get out and milk and do the chores," Sidse concluded her June 22 letter; her letter of June 29 noted that it was difficult to write as "little Gusta also wants to join."⁵¹

By July 23, Rasmus "Sailor" as well as Anton and Johan Hartman had returned home; added Sidse: "I should so wish that you could also come tiptoeing home to us."⁵² As the soldiers started returning, however, it was also clear to the community's civilians that the veterans often were physically weakened. Norwegian-born John Arvesen, who had served in the 50th Wisconsin Infantry, "came back from the hospital in Madison" so ill that the doctor, according to Fritz's father, did not expect him to live.⁵³ Arvesen died shortly thereafter; and Marcus Pedersen, who was drafted in the fall of 1864 with Fritz Rasmussen, also passed away soon after returning home to New Denmark.⁵⁴

With Pedersen's death, Sidse's thoughts immediately turned to his widow. "I can hardly hold back the tears at the moment thinking of what Markus' poor wife has gone through," Sidse wrote. "[He] was lying there in the greatest misery imaginable. He had almost decayed before he let go of this life."⁵⁵

And in New Denmark the story of illness, exacerbated by persistent outbreaks of smallpox, continued throughout the summer and regularly

⁵¹ Ibid.; Sidse Rasmussen, "Juni Den 29," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865). As an example of the physical and emotional toll of separation, Sidse wrote about receiving a photo from Fritz in which he likely wore a uniform and showing it to their six-year-old daughter Rasmine, who responded, "Papa, it looks like Papa's face, but it does not look like Papa's coat." See "Juli Den 12," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁵² "Juli Den 23," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁵³ Edward Rasmussen, "New Denmark 25 Juni Brown Co. Wis. 1865," *ibid.*

⁵⁴ "New Denmark Den 25 July 65," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865). See also Rasmussen, "Record! Of Scandinavians, Who Have Been Settled and Lived in the Town of New Denmark." According to a later account by Fritz Rasmussen, for Pedersen – a "good, honest man," had contracted chronic diarrhea in the service and been hospitalized just one week before the Confederates surrendered at Appomattox.

⁵⁵ Sidse Rasmussen, "Søndag Den 31 Juli," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

left women the healthiest and strongest in the household. "Most of the enlisted have been ill, Cillius and Rasmus 'Carpenter' have been very sick but are now improving," Sidsel wrote.⁵⁶ Fritz's brother James added on August 27 that "cousin Rasmus" had come home with the "fever," which was a common sight: "most of the discharged soldiers become ill or indisposed when they return."⁵⁷ James attributed the health issues to the changing climate, but Fritz in his reply on September 14 seemingly also alluded to a mental health aspect: "I am not surprised that the returning soldiers are a little out of balance when they return home. I myself expect my share of indisposition if I ever see the home again," Rasmussen wrote from Alabama.⁵⁸

Yet, just as Sidsel had hoped, her husband came home and surprised the family on Tuesday, October 24, 1865. "About 9 O'clock P.M. I tapped at my own door & immediately fondly & reverentially greeted my dear & beloved Wife," Rasmussen wrote.⁵⁹ Seeing his children was equally powerful. "The emotions I felt of hearing my little Daughter prattling Papa! Papa!! were even nearer to overcome [my] selfpos[s]ession."⁶⁰ Such a meeting was unforgettable. "Home! Home! Home!! Home!!!" he wrote and noted that in this exact moment he could have died a happy man.⁶¹ But instead of death, Fritz's return brought life. A little over nine months later, July 19, 1866, the couple's fourth child and first son, Edwin, arrived and filled Rasmussen's diary with bliss:

Happy day for Me! A Day that I have long anticipated with sore forebodings; but, Thanks thanks! to Thee oh Lord! For undeserved mercy & blessings! . . . I have this day been blessed with a new Subject for my own individual family-circle; and, not that one Sex; would [not] be as Kindly received as another, I do declare, that, it did turn a variety this time, from the usual run, so that the first I know of, was the exclamation from both of the old Ladies: "Oh! It is a --- Boy! A Boy!!" Yes! It is a Boy! My Boy.⁶²

⁵⁶ "August Den 20," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁵⁷ James J. Rasmussen, "New Denmark T. O. Brown Co. Wis. August 27th/65," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Correspondence, 1834-1942. Green Bay Mss 4. Box no. 1* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁵⁸ Fritz W. Rasmussen, "Camp at Mobile, Ala: September the 14' 1865 6 O'clock P.M.," *ibid.*

⁵⁹ "The 12" 1865 [November]," in *Rasmussen, Fritz. Additions, 1860-1918. Green Bay Mss 4. Box 9* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* ⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Fritz W. Rasmussen, "The 19th Thursday [July]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856-1876. Green Bay Mss 4. Box 8* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1866).

Yet the joy of homecoming was mixed with the complexity of homecoming. Rasmussen's delight at finding the family in good health, the farm in good condition, and the harvest better than expected turned to concern toward the end of 1865. Sidsel had for some time not been feeling well, and her illness seemed "more and more suspicious."⁶³ The recently returned veteran had hoped that the couple's wartime separation would have helped their relationship, but on December 22, 1865, likely not knowing about Sidsel's pregnancy and the significant discomfort it caused her, he wrote that he felt his wife's "coolness" toward him acutely.⁶⁴

Sidsel was so ill that for several days leading up to Christmas she could not get out of bed to take care of the household chores her husband expected. Childcare thus became one of Fritz's responsibilities, a task he found boring and felt ill-equipped to carry out ("I am no 'woman-man' [*qvindeman*]," Rasmussen had written in 1864).⁶⁵ In his own words, proof of Rasmussen's lack of domestic ability came on Christmas morning, when it turned out that he had forgotten to prepare gifts for his three daughters and thereby significantly disappointed the family's youngest.⁶⁶

During his military service, Rasmussen harbored "elysian dreams" about what life would be like if only he survived, but the realities of marriage, fatherhood, and community life proved harder to handle.⁶⁷ In addition to the economy, family demands created tension in Fritz and Sidsel's marriage. Sidsel experienced physical discomfort during pregnancies to such an extent that, when she found out in late 1862 that she was pregnant with the couple's third child, she was "bathed in tears" and, to her husband's dismay, attempted to "contradict nature" by requesting a remedy for an abortion.⁶⁸

⁶³ "Den 25de Mandag [December]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. GB Mss 4. Box 8* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁶⁴ Fritz W. Rasmussen, "Den 25de Mandag [December]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. GB Mss 4. Box 8* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁶⁵ "Den 27de Søndag [November]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1857–1876; Account Books, 1856–1909; "Record of Scandinavians Who Have Been Settled and Lived in the Town of New Denmark, Brown county, Wisconsin."* Box no. 8 (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1864).

⁶⁶ "Den 24de Søndag," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. Green Bay Mss 4. Box 8* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁶⁷ Rasmussen, "Den 25de Mandag [December]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. GB Mss 4. Box 8* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1865).

⁶⁸ Fritz W. Rasmussen, "The 18. Thursday [December]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. Green Bay Mss 4. Box 8* (Wisconsin Historical Society,

A baby girl, Augusta, arrived on August 11, 1863, but the tension between Fritz and Sidsel during the pregnancy, and the continued domestic and reproductive expectations put on Sidsel, spoke to women's roles in rural Scandinavian enclaves and larger society. "The family itself," as Stephanie McCurry reminds us, was a "realm of governance."⁶⁹ Despite Fritz Rasmussen's assertion that "one Sex" would be "as Kindly received as another," boys were valued more than girls from birth, as evidenced by Rasmussen's description of his first son's arrival ("A Boy!! Yes! It is a Boy! My Boy"), in contrast to the more measured acknowledgment of the arrival of his first child, Rasmine, on November 29, 1858 ("a beautiful little girl and daughter").⁷⁰ Twenty years and seven children later, Sidsel would eventually lose her life at the age of forty, a few weeks after having given birth to a baby boy, Sidselius, on April 4, 1878 ("that it is a boy is for us doubly satisfactory," Fritz Rasmussen noted immediately after the baby's arrival).⁷¹

Before then, despite their frequent expressions of affection for each other, Rasmussen also regularly described heated arguments with Sidsel. On July 26, 1867, after a conflict over farm work, in which Fritz had declined Sidsel's offer to help as he thought it would be too hard on her, she remarked, "That is a new thing, if you would always exempt me so, it would be pleasant!"⁷² The exchange, which according to Fritz was also tied to Sidsel's desire for more material comfort, and the fact that Sidsel had demonstrably started working in the field anyway led Fritz to dejectedly write:

Such is the world: Some living through it easy and comfortable; others simi-slaves [sic], in indigency and want; Some basking in Sublimest loves blisfullness [sic] and content, others in a Simi-hell [sic]. But where is the alternative, when providence or

1862). Rasmussen wrote, "When I came home, I found Wife bathed in tears, which, after that I found the cause, I both, pitied and dispised [sic]."

⁶⁹ Stephanie McCurry, *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 11–14.

⁷⁰ "The 19th Thursday [July]." Also "Novbr 29 Mandag," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. Green Bay Mss 4. Box 8* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1858).

⁷¹ "Den 24de Onsdag Formid Kl: 9 [April]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers, 1834–1943. Green Bay mss 4. Box 2* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1878); "Record! Of Skandinavians, Who Have Been Settled and Lived in the Town of New Denmark." After her first son's arrival in 1866, Sidsel became pregnant twice with three-year intervals before passing away shortly after having given birth to her seventh child in 1878.

⁷² Fritz W. Rasmussen, "The 26th Friday [July]," in *Fritz William Rasmussen Papers. Diaries, 1856–1876. Green Bay Mss 4. Box 8* (Green Bay: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1867).



FIGURE 11.2 After his wife's death in 1878, Fritz Rasmussen named their newborn son Sidselius and lived the rest of his life in and around New Denmark surrounded by his children. Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.

predestination so ordains . . . if it was not, that it [writing] seemingly helps to dispell my troubled thoughts . . . then, I say, that I should rather fling both paper and pen into the fire – and, often in mind, to follow myself.⁷³

Sidsel's insistence on grasping moments of autonomy, possibly shaped in part by her wartime experience of running the farm and resistance to Fritz's insistence that she limit work outside the home, challenged the Northern European Old World gender roles that many rural Scandinavians and also Germans in America modeled their households after. As Efford has noted, the "dominant constructions of ethnicity

⁷³ Ibid.

suggested that women's rights would undermine the immigrant community and endanger pluralism," and the "fear that politics would distract women from their domestic role" was prevalent.⁷⁴ Similar tropes about women's sole fitness for domestic duties appeared regularly in the Scandinavian-American press. For example, *Hemlandet* on May 15, 1866, ran a piece under the title "On the Woman's Emancipation" that cautioned against a movement for expanded women's rights in Sweden.⁷⁵ In the following years, the Scandinavian press regularly critiqued women who wanted to "forsake family life for public life," and one anonymous correspondent compared women to hens, insinuating that they had lighter brains and were happiest when they "hurried home to bring order to the household."⁷⁶

These articles pointed to the uneasy relationship that existed between Scandinavian immigrants' profession of liberty and equality and issues of economic inequality, gender, and race in postwar American society.⁷⁷ Even the few articles and editorials that did advocate for women's rights revealed fault lines of class and race when attempting to bridge gender divides. For example, *Skandinaven* ran a piece on October 5, 1869, that argued women were just as well suited to voting as men and that they understood political issues as well as "the masses of white voters," given that most white women, the writer implied, "in intellectual and moral advancement stand above Negroes, Indians, and the Chinese."⁷⁸

In short, Scandinavian editors' positions, as well as the letter writers they admitted into their newspapers, were generally conservative on questions of racial and gender equality. The Scandinavian-American press leaned more toward a return to a perceived economic and rural antebellum stability, now that abolition had been achieved, rather than

⁷⁴ Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era*, 48.

⁷⁵ "Om Qwinnans Emancipation [on the Woman's Emancipation]," *Hemlandet*, May 15, 1866; "Sweriges Presterskab Och Sändebudet [Sweden's Clergy and The Messenger]," *Hemlandet*, May 1, 1866.

⁷⁶ The quote "forsake family life for public life" appears in Arlow William Andersen, *The Immigrant Takes His Stand: The Norwegian-American Press and Public Affairs, 1847–1872* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1953), 123. See also En Rebel, "Kvindens Stemmeret [The Woman's Right to Vote]," *Skandinaven*, March 3, 1869.

⁷⁷ As a case in point, *Hemlandet* by April 20, 1869, ran a laudatory piece on J. D. Fulton's *The True Woman*, which argued against women's right to vote based on the Bible and recommended that all its female readers read it. See "The True Woman," *Hemlandet*, April 20, 1869.

⁷⁸ D. S., "Kvindens Stemmeret [The Woman's Right to Vote]," *Skandinaven*, October 5, 1869.

using the Civil War as a stepping stone to reinventing and extending citizenship rights to freedpeople, Native people, and women.

Such positions became increasingly apparent as Scandinavian-born leaders enthusiastically embraced the Republican Party's laissez-faire arguments in the post-war moment and simultaneously silenced voices arguing for a broader definition of equality within American borders.