

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Right, Equity, and Justice: Rev. Henry McNeal Turner and Black Chaplaincy in the Civil War Era

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Keywords: Chaplain, Chaplaincy, Civil War, Henry McNeal Turner, African American, Union Army, Military

<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.142503>

Military Chaplaincy Review

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2025

As the first African American chaplain appointed to the Union Army, Reverend Henry McNeal Turner redefined the chaplaincy in the Civil War Era. The experiences of Black chaplains reflect the complex intersections of race, gender, and military service. Turner's role as chaplain demands we examine the intersections of gender and race with the chaplaincy, as well as considering how his mission extended beyond the spiritual. As a correspondent to the *Christian Recorder*, Turner's ministry was amplified beyond the troops directly under his purview. Turner approached the chaplaincy as an opportunity to provide far-reaching and multifaceted support that reflected his belief in the centrality of piety, masculinity, and education as pathways to African American citizenship and political equality in the post-war period.

On the eve of the Emancipation Proclamation during the American Civil War, Reverend Henry McNeal Turner – minister of Israel Church in Washington, D. C. – issued a proclamation of his own. "A new era, a new dispensation of things, is now upon us – *to action, to action*, is the cry," he wrote, "We must now begin to think, to plan, and to legislate for ourselves."¹ Turner embodied this call to action as the first African American chaplain appointed in the Union Army. The Reverend prayed, preached, and perspired alongside thousands of African American soldiers as a member of the First Regiment of United States Colored Troops (or USCT) from 1863 to 1865. In this role, he fought for the preservation of the Union and the relegation of slavery to "an eternal nonentity" with hope for a future of universal equality.²

As an African American chaplain in the Union Army, Turner represented a small but incredibly significant subset. Assigned exclusively to African American regiments, only twelve Black men could be counted among the

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¹ Henry McNeal Turner, "A Call to Action," *The Christian Recorder*, October 4, 1862.

² Henry McNeal Turner, "Our Washington Correspondent," *The Christian Recorder*, November 1, 1862.

2,300 chaplains in the armed forces during the Civil War.³ Unlike their White counterparts, who were paid \$100 a month in salary, African American chaplains received \$10 a month, the same amount as enlisted privates.⁴ Black chaplains served alongside both free born and formerly enslaved men, taking on outsized risk when entering the Confederate-controlled South. Their experiences therefore reflect the complex intersections of race, gender, and military service. Turner's Civil War service combined his spiritual, community, abolitionist, political, and civil rights advocacy to support the Union war effort.

Rev. Henry McNeal Turner's role as an African American chaplain in the Civil War era demands we examine the intersections of religion, gender, race, and civil rights activism within the chaplaincy in the Union Army. His mission extended beyond the religious and spiritual to encompass a broader rhetorical undertaking to strengthen arguments for Black intelligence, capability, and male citizenship rights tied to military service. He approached the chaplaincy as an opportunity to provide far-reaching and multifaceted support to formerly enslaved enlisted men. Turner led three services on the Sabbath, preached and led prayer meetings every night of the week, ministered to the sick and wounded, and buried the dead. On the front, he also marched into the fray of battle arm-in-arm with his compatriots. Turner recognized the performative value of military service, referring to the USCT as "colored dignitaries" swathed in "Uncle Sam's paraphernalia."⁵

In addition, as the "Washington correspondent" for *The Christian Recorder* from March of 1862 through August 1865, Turner's ministry magnified beyond the troops directly under his purview. Turner himself testified to the magazine's readership, eagerly seized upon by African American soldiers.⁶ Exhausted, aggrieved, or wearied combatants gleefully absorbed a range of reading material, including religious literature, pocket-sized Bibles, newspapers, and political pamphlets for information and entertainment.⁷ Newspaper pages – slowly disintegrating as they were folded, unfolded, stuffed in pockets, and traded for others – represented crucial links to families, communities, and the Union home front. Focusing on his publications in the *Christian Recorder* allows me to center Turner's spiritual

3 Ed. Jean Lee Cole, *Freedom's Witness: The Civil War Correspondence of Henry McNeal Turner* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2013), 10; Herman A. Norton, *Struggling for Recognition: The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1791-1865*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Chaplains Department of the Army, 1977), 94-95.

4 Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 56-57.

5 Henry McNeal Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, May 27, 1865.

6 Henry McNeal Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, September 3, 1864.

7 Rachel Williams, *Tabernacles in the Wilderness: The U. S. Christian Commission on the Civil War Battlefield* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2024), 65-75; Madeline Zehnder, "'Adapted to the Soldier's Pocket': Military Discipline, Religious Publishing, and the Power of Print Format during the U. S. Civil War," *Book History* 27:1 (Spring 2024), 79-104; Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 4-5. Zehnder examines in particular the "surge of small-format books" that allowed soldiers to carry, frequently consult, and share a variety of texts. See Zehnder "Adapted to the Soldier's Pocket," 81.

and rhetorical voice. His Civil War ministry reflected his belief in the intersections of piety, masculinity, and education as a pathway to African American citizenship and political equality in the post-war period.

Scholarship on Henry McNeal Turner is limited considering the scope and breadth of his impact. M. M. Ponton's *Life and Times* (1917) and Stephen Ward Angell's *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (1992) are the only full length autobiographies of Turner, although Andre E. Johnson's *The Forgotten Prophet* (2012) also examines his life with emphasis on his evolving prophetic and rhetorical style.⁸ Johnson highlights Turner's skill as a speaker, debater, and orator, arguing he drew from both religious and cultural touchpoints to challenge ritual practices.⁹ Few scholars dwell on Turner's experiences during the American Civil War despite it being a pivotal period in both his intellectual and spiritual life.¹⁰ Work on organizations like the United States Christian Commission – institutions that supplied, supported, and funded army chaplains – also provides important scaffolding for my discussion of Turner.¹¹

I echo recent work by acknowledging the lack of scholarly emphasis on the religious history of the Civil War and African American spiritual traditions, as well as the army chaplaincy.¹² In addition, the radicalism, significance, and far-reaching impact of Black chaplains has not received appropriate attention. In contrast to White chaplains, African American spiritual leaders in the armed forces took on outsized risk in their service, faced sometimes violent racial discrimination, and performed a range of additional duties that included

8 M. M. Ponton, *Life and Times of Henry M. Turner: The Antecedent and Preliminary History of the Life and Times of Bishop H. M. Turner. His Boyhood, Education, and Public Career, and His Relation to His Associates, Colleagues, and Contemporaries* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970); Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*; Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012). See also: Stephen W. Angell, "A Black Minister Befriends the 'Unquestioned Father of Civil Rights': Henry McNeal Turner, Charles Sumner, and the African-American Quest for Freedom," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 85:1 (Spring 2011), 27-58; Tunde Adeleke, "Henry McNeal Turner: The Cultural Imperative of Imperialism," in *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Andre E. Johnson, "God is a Negro: The (Rhetorical) Black Theology of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner," *Black Theology* 13:1 (2015), 29-40; Anthony B. Pinn, "Double Consciousness": in *Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalism: Reflections on the Teachings of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, *Journal of Religious Thought* 52:1 (Summer/Fall 1995), 15-26; Aaron Miles Treadwell, "A Third Wave of Black Church Revolution: How the AME Church Evolved from 1841 to 1877, Narrated by the Life Experiences of Daniel Alexander Payne and Henry McNeal Turner" (PhD diss., Howard University, 2017).

9 Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 2-3, 7.

10 Cole, *Freedom's Witness*. See also work by Edwin S. Redkey including *Respect Black!: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner* (New York: Arno Press, 1971); "Black Chaplains in the Union Army," *Civil War History* 33 (December 1987), 331-350; "Henry McNeal Turner: Black Chaplain in the Union Army" in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

11 Warren B. Armstrong, *For Courageous Fighting and Confident Dying: Union Chaplains in the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); James O. Henry, "History of the United States Christian Commission" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1959); Theresa R. McDevitt, "Fighting for the Soul of America: A History of the United States Christian Commission," (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1997); David Alan Ramey, "In the Lord's Army: The United States Christian Commission in the Civil War," (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2001); Williams, *Tabernacles in the Wilderness*.

12 George Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Matthew Harper, *The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Joy R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Ed. Doris L. Bergen, *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2004); Israel Drazin and Cecil B. Currey, *For God and Country: The History of a Constitutional Challenge to the Army Chaplaincy* (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, 1995).

educating formerly enslaved men. Scholars like Le'Trice D. Donaldson have connected their service to the civil rights movements at the turn of the century.¹³ Scholarship on Black enlistment sheds light on the experiences of African American soldiers like Turner who struggled to define, justify, and make sense of their service to a country that failed to recognize their full humanity.¹⁴

Born free in Newberry Court House, South Carolina in 1834, Henry McNeal Turner spent the majority of his youth living and working in conditions similar to those of enslaved African Americans in the antebellum South. Like many living in states that denied people of color literacy, he crafted an ad-hoc education while employed as a teenager at a law firm in Abbeville, South Carolina.¹⁵ In 1853, at the age of nineteen, Turner obtained his preaching license and traveled throughout the South as an itinerant preacher.¹⁶ Joining the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Church in 1858, he took the pastorate of several churches in Baltimore before relocating to Washington, DC, where, in 1860 as pastor of Israel Church, he achieved the rank of deacon.¹⁷

Although merely twenty-nine years old when he became the first African American chaplain in the Union Army in 1863, Henry McNeal Turner had built a significant reputation in Washington, DC prior to his enlistment. As pastor of Israel Church, Turner likely joined the Prince Hall branch of independent Black free masons in D.C. He led fundraising efforts, spearheaded improvement projects, and built upon critical reform networks in the free Black community while also cultivating relationships with central Republican figures like Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, and Salmon P. Chase.¹⁸ Like many African Americans, Turner had long reflected on the centrality of abolition and universal freedom in the coming of the Civil War. Writing to the *Recorder* in August of 1862, he declared:

13 Le'trice D. Donaldson, *Duty Beyond the Battlefield: African American Soldiers Fight for Racial Uplift, Citizenship, and Manhood, 1870-1920* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2020), 21-22, 38-40.

14 Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012); Holly A. Pinheiro Jr., *The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2022); Brian Taylor, *Fighting for Citizenship: Black Northerners and the Debate over Military Service in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Justin Iverson, *Rebels in Arms: Black Resistance and the Fight for Freedom in the Anglo-Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2022); Smith, *Black Soldiers in Blue*; John David Smith, *Lincoln and the U. S. Colored Troops* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013); Leslie A. Schwalm, *Medicine, Science, and Making Race in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

15 Ponton, *Life and Times of Henry M. Turner*, 34-35; Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 10. Ponton suggests Turner pursued his education through free access to books, lectures, and intellectual culture, Angell states his employers, as a result of his aptitude, educated him in arithmetic history, law, and theology.

16 Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 23-25.

17 Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 35.

18 Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 35-36.

Many of us have now concluded that the judgement of God will never cease its plagues upon this nation, till slavery and oppression shall be foiled, and right, equity, and justice shall be seen in all its grand regalia, leading on its triumphant conquest the victories of humanity.¹⁹

Not only linking the abolition movement to the present conflict, Turner drew on prophetic tradition to view the death, destruction, and disorder of the war as Biblical retribution.²⁰

Fearful of Confederate invasion, and witnessing the influx of refugees, rebel prisoners, and wounded soldiers on their city streets, residents of Washington, D. C. were no strangers to the violent effects of war. Turner wrote extensively about the formerly enslaved flooding into the city. He visited refugee camps, welcomed freed people into his congregation, and hosted them in his own home. They recounted “scenes of suffering” including sickness, starvation, and the travails of unhoused people facing the bitter winter months.²¹ His experiences laboring alongside enslaved African Americans as a child in South Carolina impressed the virulence of racism and tenuous notion of freedom upon Turner, despite his free status. Through the pages of the *Recorder*, Turner combated charges that refugees were lazy by reflecting on their “highly commendable” enterprise, many seeking immediate employment.²² Occupying a position of public advocacy at Israel Church, Turner served as an important link between formerly enslaved people, Black community members, and prominent Republican members of Congress.

In 1862, he consistently criticized the overly cautious and often ineffective policies of the Lincoln administration regarding refugees and Black military service. Scholars like Brian Taylor and Holly Pinheiro Jr. have explored the complexity of African American military service in recent scholarship, arguing against romanticizing or simplifying Black men’s decision to enlist. Although universally acknowledged as a path to citizenship, military service contributed to financial hardship and family dislocation, as well as emotional, physical, and psychological trauma.²³ Similarly, the decision to enlist was complex, reflecting broad community discussions over the meaning of Black military sacrifice and service in the Civil War era.²⁴ Rumors that the United States government would soon authorize Black recruitment were met with

19 Henry McNeal Turner, “Washington Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 30, 1862.

20 For more on Turner’s prophetic persona, see: Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet*, 16-17.

21 Henry McNeal Turner, “Untitled,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 13, 1862; “A Call to Action,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 4, 1862.

22 Henry McNeal Turner, “The Condition of the Contrabands in Washington,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 6, 1862.

23 Pinheiro Jr., *The Families Civil War*, 3.

24 Taylor, *Fighting for Citizenship*, 4-6. Taylor refers to the process of Black enlistment as a “nonlinear, uneven process with irregular results” during which community debates were fundamental. He uses the term “politics of service” to refer to debates over enlistment and the war as part of the Black community’s political activism.

skepticism, not celebration. “They will have a hard time raising negro regiments to place in front of the battle or anywhere else,” Turner wrote, “unless freedom, eternal freedom, is guaranteed to them, their children, and their brethren.”²⁵ He continued, “I suppose no colored man in the nation would have any objection to going anywhere, if this government pay them for their two hundred and forty years’ work.”²⁶

Following Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, Turner abandoned his critiques of the administration and emerged as a top military recruiter in Washington, D. C. “The proclamation of President Lincoln has banished the fog, and silenced the doubt,” he declared.²⁷ The First Regiment of United States Colored Troops was organized largely as a result of his efforts, using Israel Church as a de-facto recruiting station.²⁸ Initial optimism that Black enlisted men would be treated fairly and equally drove early recruitment efforts.²⁹ However, they were soon disproven. Indeed, African American soldiers faced unsanitary conditions, subpar uniforms and equipment, inequitable pay, and insufficient medical care. Although enlisting at higher rates compared to free White Americans, they were assigned to less desirable campaigns and barred from the ranks of commissioned officers. In addition, Black enlisted men were plagued by mistreatment from White soldiers and discriminatory commanding officers.³⁰ Many Black leaders retracted their recommendations when faced with this disparate treatment by the end of 1863. Despite this, African American military recruitment proved exceptionally effective.

On January 4, 1863, Turner once more exhibited his prophetic vision, writing “I would not be surprised to see myself carrying a musket before long.”³¹ President Abraham Lincoln appointed Turner chaplain of the First Regiment of United States Colored Troops in the fall of 1863. Union Army chaplains served a variety of functions, chief among them ministering to the spiritual needs of enlisted men. Although a nondenominational position, many army chaplains imbued their role with an evangelical function. Established by George Washington in 1791, the army chaplaincy expanded and contracted with the size of the U. S. army. In August of 1861, Congress authorized a chaplain for every regiment, although their qualifications,

25 Henry McNeal Turner, “For the Christian Recorder,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 19, 1862.

26 Turner, “Washington Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 30, 1862.

27 Turner, “A Call to Action,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 4, 1862.

28 Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 52.

29 Taylor, *Fighting for Citizenship*, 69-78.

30 Smith, *Lincoln and U. S. Colored Troops*, 55-59. African American soldiers received \$10 per month, with \$3 deducted for clothing, compared to the \$13 per month salary offered to White soldiers. African Americans soldiers also did not receive the \$100 bounty awarded to White soldiers. Inequitable pay would not be rectified until Congress passed an order granting all African American enlisted men (formerly enslaved and free born) retroactive pay in March of 1865.

31 Henry McNeal Turner, “Washington Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, January 10, 1863.

appointment, salaries, and duties were not standardized.³² Army revivals, increasingly popular as the war progressed, reflected the evolving role of religion within the Union army.³³ However, chaplains were not universally supported. The ambiguous and precarious nature of the position, in addition to its distinction as a commissioned role, contributed to negative opinions of the chaplaincy. Despite this – and the fact that many regiments were left without a chaplain – the number of army chaplains skyrocketed from thirty at the start of the war to over two thousand by its close.³⁴

As an African American Union Army chaplain paid significantly less than White chaplains, Reverend Henry McNeal Turner was less likely to be perceived as entitled by enlisted men. He consistently wrote about the fellowship shared among the regiment. He mocked the chaplain's uniform specified by the Secretary of War to include a herring bone black braided buttons and a gold unbraided wreath as “too fine” and “pretty expensive dressing,” wearing instead a simple frock coat.³⁵ Turner navigated the internal politics of African American regiments consisting of formerly enslaved, freeborn, northern, southern, literate, and illiterate men. He also frequently interacted with the national organizations that made the Union army chaplaincy possible. Although not mentioned within their published records, Turner doubtless relied upon the support of reform organizations like the United States Christian Commission whose work was closely intertwined with that of army chaplains.

The Christian Commission formed in 1861 “to promote the spiritual and temporal welfare of the officers and men of the United States army and navy, in cooperation with chaplains and others.”³⁶ Unlike the Sanitary Commission, a secular organization that received official government sanction the previous June, the USCC entreated “Christian Associations and the Christian men and women of the loyal States” to support the war effort.³⁷ Each volunteer delegate received a railroad pass, a memorandum book, a haversack filled with personal supplies, and a collection of spiritual publications to distribute to soldiers. Commission organizers believed in the power of Christian zeal not only to inspire Unionists to the war effort but to support the “loftier task of proving before all gainsayers how an

32 Norton, *Struggling for Recognition*, 1, 83-89

33 Scott D. Pickard, “Co-Workers in the Field of Souls: The Civil War Partnership Between Union Chaplains and the U. S. Christian Commission, 1861-1865,” (PhD diss., Kansas State University, 2013), 3-4. Pickard does not mention Henry McNeal Turner in this dissertation.

34 Williams, *Tabernacles in the Wilderness*, 22-23,

35 Henry McNeal Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 8, 1864.

36 *United States Christian Commission for the Army and Navy. Work and Incidents. First Annual Report* (Philadelphia: February 1863), 5. The USCC formed in New York during a meeting of the Young Men's Christian Association, and remained closely associated with the members and goals of that organization.

37 United States Christian Commission, *First Annual Report*, 6.

improvised army and an improvised navy may effectually assert for a republic its national rights and its energetic life.”³⁸ These political goals, as well as spiritual, remained central to the organization’s work throughout the war.

The Christian Commission also fulfilled the role of “effective moral police.”³⁹ Commission organizers saw Union soldiers – far removed from the influences of home – as vulnerable to numerous forms of immorality. The frontlines were chaotic, violent, and largely homosocial spaces. Mobile libraries transporting bibles, hymnbooks, and sermons to troops also served as conduits for pornography and other salacious materials.⁴⁰ Enlisted men drank, smoked, brawled, solicited prostitutes, and contracted venereal diseases. The Commission viewed their delegates and chaplains as powerful balancing agents against rising tides of vice. Turner reflected on the challenge of maintaining a spiritual perspective in such an environment. “It is no easy matter to stand flinted and steeled to all the demoralizing influences which are brought to bear upon a man in the field,” he wrote, “From morning till night one’s ears are continually contaminated with the most vulgar oaths and obscene language ever uttered by mortal beings.”⁴¹ Soldiers had been “hurled ... headlong into the vortex of irrevocable profanity, vulgarity, and impoliteness.”⁴² By distributing spiritual pamphlets and injecting Christian values into camp life, chaplains were to give “a new moral face” to the army.⁴³

Although recognizing the authority of the United States government to appoint chaplains to army regiments, as well as the contributions of the Sanitary Commission to Union troops, the USCC argued their efforts were “imperfect and ineffective.”⁴⁴ The church, they declared, “[was] abundantly willing to supply this lack of service by sending its ministers from time to time, fresh and frequent from home.” In part, chaplains were to make “all possible provision for their preservation from demoralization and destruction, and for their present and eternal salvation.” Those supplied by the USCC came bearing scriptures, hymns, psalms, and “the best issues of the religious press in every form.”⁴⁵ Chaplains, although particularly prominent members of the Commission, represented merely one branch of its labors. Christian Commission stations, set up in large army camps and near permanent hospitals, served as sites of cross-denominational communication.

38 United States Christian Commission, *First Annual Report*, 83.

39 United States Christian Commission, *First Annual Report*, 83-84.

40 Judith Ann Giesberg, *Sex and the Civil War: Soldiers, Pornography, and the Making of American Morality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

41 Henry McNeal Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, February 18, 1865.

42 Henry McNeal Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, May 27, 1865.

43 United States Christian Commission, *for the Army and Navy. For the Year 1863. Second Annual Report* (Philadelphia: April 1864), 98.

44 United States Christian Commission, *First Annual Report*, 83.

45 United States Christian Commission, *Second Annual Report*, 14-15, 19-20.

In Helena, St. Louis, army chaplains held a “chaplain’s convention” where for two hours they “knit our hearts together, revived hopes, quickened graces, created friendships, revealed moral desolations in the army, alarmed fears, and inspired new resolutions of devotion, toil, prayer, and faith.”⁴⁶ However, more frequently, army chaplains were few and far between.

Conditions on the front lines were harrowing. For the majority of delegates, chaplains, and enlisted men “suffering was unparalleled and appalling. Despondency and despair, aided by cold, hunger, filth, vermin, and disease, settled heavily upon thousands of hearts.”⁴⁷ “Very exhausting both to mind and body were these incessant labors,” reported one delegate from Falmouth Village in Virginia, “Nearly every delegate became worn out by excessive fatigue, and some barely escaped the grave.”⁴⁸ Although their chief aim was to facilitate religious services, spiritual ministry, and to distribute publications, Union Army chaplains by necessity aided surgeons, nurses, cooks, and performed manual labor required to sustain the troops.

Turner joined the First Regiment of United States Colored Troops in November of 1863, but as he immediately contracted small pox, did not rejoin until the spring of 1864.⁴⁹ He spent the remaining year and a half of the war traveling and fighting side-by-side with his regiment. In July of 1864, he reminded his readers, “I am actually on the field of battle,” writing further “a man thinks very little about the niceties of literature when bombs and balls are flying around his head.” During the long siege of the Second Battle of Petersburg, Turner found himself “[lying] under the galling fire of the rebel forts and sharp-shooters for nearly eight hours.”⁵⁰ He wrote about the “protracted dryness of the weather, the intensity of the heat, the clouds of dust, which neither respect eyes nor clothes, and the swarms of flies” that plagued soldiers on the front lines in Virginia.⁵¹ When stationed in North Carolina, Turner administered medicine to sick refugees, distributed foodstuffs, and even bestowed his “surgical skill” on injured men.⁵² In 1870, Turner described the war as “a contest of blood and carnage ... which was destined to crimson acres of land with human gore, and cover hundreds of

⁴⁶ United States Christian Commission, *First Annual Report*, 100-101.

⁴⁷ United States Christian Commission, *First Annual Report*, 50.

⁴⁸ United States Christian Commission, *Second Annual Report*, 42.

⁴⁹ Cole, *Freedom’s Witness*, 119.

⁵⁰ Henry McNeal Turner, “A Very Important Letter from Chaplain Turner,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 9, 1864.

⁵¹ Henry McNeal Turner, “Letter from Chaplain Turner,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 27, 1864.

⁵² Henry McNeal Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 4, 1865.

battle fields with putrescent carcasses and bleaching bones.”⁵³ It was in this environment that he ministered to reflect the centrality of piety, racial uplift, and education.

Turner’s prime responsibility was the spiritual wellbeing of his troops. The chaplain praised the frequency of religious services and reported the partial organization of an AME church in Harrison’s Landing, Virginia, writing, “there is quite a religious element in our regiment.”⁵⁴ By the fall of 1864, Turner licensed a member of the regiment as a preacher to assist him with his duties. The first A. M. E. Church in the state of North Carolina organized under Turner’s charge.⁵⁵ Several men requested baptism by immersion, a service the chaplain was all too eager to accommodate.⁵⁶ This action represented both a literal and figurative cleansing and rebirth, also symbolizing the birth of the new nation many African American soldiers fought to create. As chaplain, Turner provided an outlet for spiritual expression and listened as enlisted men reflected on their early Christian experiences. “I am trying to establish a religious nucleus around which to gather the religious and moral,” he wrote in 1865, identifying these elements of piety as crucial to Black achievement in the Reconstruction South.

Military service had long been linked to claims for citizenship and political equality. Turner likewise believed African American enlistment would allow “the negro [to] engrave his bravery so deep in the rock of history, that the most corroding elements of time will never efface it.” Black men would prove their honor, effectiveness, and competence through bloodshed on the field of battle. Notions of African American manhood and masculinity were therefore closely tied to citizenship claims in the Civil War era. “Let me front my enemy and then demand my courage,” he wrote prior to enlistment.⁵⁷ Turner expressed concern that White commanders of United States Colored Troops would eclipse African American accomplishment, stating only then “if we deserve any merit [will it] stand out beyond contradiction.”⁵⁸ When praising formerly enslaved men in “contraband camps,” he argued freedom immediately “infuse[d] into [them] all the manhood and energy necessary for any purpose of life.”⁵⁹ Unable to claim military sacrifice as a pathway to citizenship, African American women contributed through Colored Ladies

53 Henry McNeal Turner, *Fifteenth Amendment: A Speech on the Benefits Accruing from the Ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, and its Incorporation into the United States Constitution. Delivered at the Celebration Held in Macon, Ga., April 19, 1870, by Hon. Henry M. Turner*. N.p., 1870.

54 Henry McNeal Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 24, 1864; “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 8, 1864. In October, he wrote “a glorious revival is going on in our regiments, and stronger appeals for mercy were never heard from human lips.”

55 Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 4, 1865.

56 Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 24, 1864.

57 Henry McNeal Turner, “Washington Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, January 31, 1863.

58 Henry McNeal Turner, “Washington Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, February 14, 1863.

59 Henry McNeal Turner, “From Chaplain Turner,” *The Christian Recorder*, June 25, 1864.

Aid Societies, Contraband Relief Associations, and home front service. By framing racial uplift around African American men's military service, Turner's writing reflected a limited perspective on citizenship claims in the post-war period.

The realities of military service were exceedingly different for African American enlisted men than for their White compatriots. The Christian Commission remained ambivalent about questions of slavery, emancipation, and racial equality, appointing only White delegates but extending services to refugees and African American soldiers.⁶⁰ USCT troops complained of unequal pay, mistreatment by army officials, and insufficient resources.⁶¹ Black soldiers faced the additional threat of enslavement and slaughter by Confederate troops who refused to apply the same standards of military exchange to Black men. Turner viewed reports that Confederates would acknowledge African Americans as prisoners-of-war with skepticism, suspecting "some deep-laid treachery."⁶² Turner also ministered directly to wounded or captured Confederate soldiers, and asked rebel officers how they treated African American soldiers. While acknowledging that "slaves ... were treated as house-burners and robbers," the southern men insisted that Turner "would get the same treatment as other Yankee officers."⁶³ Turner remained skeptical. No doubt these realities contributed to his emphasis on the courage and bravery of African American troops.

Perhaps the Reverend's most important contribution was to serve as a conduit for knowledge and education. In addition to teaching formerly enslaved enlisted men to read and write, Turner distributed spelling books, newspapers, and religious pamphlets. "There never was such an anxiety to learn to read and write as there is now in the colored regiments," he wrote, witnessing "the spelling-book clamor" whenever materials entered camp.⁶⁴ Entreating readers of the *Christian Recorder* to send primers, spelling-books, and reading material to front, Turner declared the men eager "to prepare for whatever position the future may offer them."⁶⁵ Leisure hours combined spiritual and educational pursuits, bringing men together "in mutual benefit" while "preaching, [in] prayer meetings, choir-singing, reading, spelling, writing."⁶⁶ Between January and July of 1865, Turner reported efforts to establish schools for formerly enslaved adults and children, as well as enlisted

⁶⁰ Williams, *Tabernacles in the Wilderness*, 20-21.

⁶¹ Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, May 27, 1865. Turner described the tension among troops being sent on furlough as many had not received pay for ten months.

⁶² Henry McNeal Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, September 17, 1864.

⁶³ Henry McNeal Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, February 4, 1865.

⁶⁴ Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, October 8, 1864.

⁶⁵ Henry McNeal Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, December 17, 1864.

⁶⁶ Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, September 3, 1864.

men.⁶⁷ He viewed his role as chaplain as critical to intellectual achievement and political consciousness. In addition to spelling books and primers, Turner requested copies of the Emancipation Proclamation, Congressional enactments, and legal documents to educate Black Southerners on their rights in freedom.⁶⁸ “I still hope to leave my regiment with every man in it reading and writing. If I can accomplish that, I shall say to myself, well done!” he wrote in July of 1865 after the war’s close.⁶⁹

In the post-war period, Turner emerged as a leading voice for the Reconstruction party as a chaplain for the Freedman’s Bureau and was elected to the Georgia state legislature in 1868. The political battles he faced, however, only soured his hopes of achieving racial equality in the United States. Rising in the ranks of the A. M. E. Church, Turner increasingly embraced emigrationism, traveling to Africa four times in the 1890s. Despite his brash reputation and controversial positions, Turner maintained national respect for his ministry. In 1896, several articles in *The Freeman* reflected on the achievements of then Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. They proclaimed him to be “the greatest living Negro” and “to the Negro race what Washington was to his country.”⁷⁰ When Turner passed away in 1915 at the age of eighty-one, he was hailed by vanguards Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois as “a man of tremendous force and indomitable courage.”⁷¹

Near the end of his term of service, Turner speculated about the significance of the Civil War, emancipation, and promises for a united future. Although praising the bravery and accomplishment of Black regiments in his final *Christian Recorder* publication, he cautioned against idleness. “There is a broad arena of work still lying before us,” he wrote, “Theoretical, if not practical, freedom has been secured to the colored race, and the nation pledged to its maintenance.” It did not go unnoticed that freedom had necessitated much sacrifice, death, violence, and suffering. Referring to the immediate post-war United States as a “superficial freedom,” Turner recognized that emancipation, uplift, and political equality would require hard-fought battles.⁷² As the first African American chaplain in the Union Army, Turner’s ministry extended well beyond the spiritual and religious to prepare enlisted men for a future as citizens and civil rights advocates. He therefore approached the chaplaincy as an opportunity to provide far-reaching and multifaceted support particularly for formerly enslaved enlisted

67 Henry McNeal Turner, “Notes by the Way to Wilmington, N. C. (continued),” *The Christian Recorder*, January 14, 1865; “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, February 25, 1865; “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 22, 1865.

68 Henry McNeal Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, May 6, 1865.

69 Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 22, 1865.

70 A. L. Ridgel, A. B., “Greatest Living Negro!” *The Freeman*, March 14, 1896; Rev. J. G. Robinson, “Outlook of Two Bishops!” *The Freeman*, August 22, 1896.

71 Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 248-251.

72 Henry McNeal Turner, “Army Correspondence,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 5, 1865.

men. Turner harnessed rhetorical strategies centered on spiritual tradition, piety, manhood, racial uplift, and education as pathways for African American political equality in the post-war period. Exploring the intersections of religion, gender, race, and civil rights activism within the experiences of African American chaplains during the Civil War not only reframes our understanding both of the chaplaincy and of African American military service in this period, but provides an important framework for considering the role of spiritual ministry in the post-war period.

Submitted: December 17, 2024 EDT. Accepted: July 23, 2025 EDT. Published: August 04, 2025 EDT.



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