

Meunomennie L. Maimi, The Meaning of the War

African-American soldiers viewed the Civil War as nothing less than a conflict between slavery and freedom. They believed that their participation would help to bring about the death of the "peculiar institution." This perspective is poignantly articulated in the following letter from Meunomennie L. Maimi (1835-?), a light-skinned Connecticut black serving in the 20th Connecticut Volunteers in Virginia, to his wife at home. In 1863 Maimi transferred to the all-black Massachusetts 54th Colored Infantry.

Buckingham Legion, Co. I 20th Regt., C.V.
Camp near Stafford C. H.

March 1863

My Dear Wife:

When I wrote you the last letter I was quite sick, and did not know as I should ever be able to write you again; but I am better now and write to relieve your mind, in case you might worry too much about me. When I wrote my last letter, I did not expect to write another; but some good news which I received and the kind usage of a few friends, who came to my hut and did what was needed for me, have saved you your husband, and I am enabled to write again. There is one thing your selfish love for your husband has made you forget, and that is, that he is naturally a soldier, and in time of war, and particularly in times like the present, a good soldier has something else to do besides enjoying himself at home with his family. I shall come, if permitted to go home, but as soon as my health will admit, I will return to duty.

Do you know or think what the end of this war is to decide? It is to decide whether we are to have freedom to all or slavery to all. If the Southern Confederacy succeeds, then you may bid farewell to all liberty thereafter and either be driven to a foreign land or held in slavery here. If our government succeeds, then your and our race will be free. The government has torn down the only barrier that existed against us as a people. When slavery passes away, the prejudices that belonged to it must follow. The government calls for the colored man's help and, if he is not a fool, he will give it. . . .

[Slaveholders] are my enemies, my flag's enemies, the flag I was born under, have suffered so much under—the enemies to God and our government. It is they who have struck down the flag which so long has defended their institutions before they left our Union. It has by them been cast to the earth and trampled under foot, because it professed to be the flag of liberty and freedom, although it was only liberty for the white man. . . . They tore that flag from its staff and in its place put their rebel rag, and swore by it that freedom should die. But they shall find that it cannot die, that its black sons as

* *Weekly Anglo-African* (New York), 18 April 1863

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well as its loyal white sons are faithful, and will shed the last drop of blood in defense of the starry banner that is to be the emblem of freedom to all, whether black or white. . . .

I do not blame you altogether for what you said about returning home, as it was cowardly in me to complain to you of . . . bad usage. I forgive you, as it was prompted by your too-selfish love for your husband. But I want you to remember hereafter that you are a soldier's wife, a warrior's bride—one who has not a single drop of cowardly blood in his veins, and who will not desert his flag, or country, or his brother in bonds, not even for his dearly beloved wife, the friend of his bosom. Ponder this well; take the right sense of it and be proud that you have such a man for a husband. What is money but trash? And is trash to be compared to a country's and my own liberty? If the government gets so poor, before the war ends, that it cannot pay but \$10 per month and no bounties, I will take that and fight on. That will buy bread for you and my poor old grandmother. If I return at all, let me come back to your arms a free man, of a free country and a free flag, and my brothers free, or else let me rest in death on the battlefield, with my face to the slaveholders, a continual reproach and curse unto him, as long as the world shall stand or a slaveholder breathe. This from your soldier-husband.