



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Back from Canada: Rights, Society, and Difference for the African North Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction

Institution: Manhattan College

Project Director: Adam Arenson

Grant Program: Fellowships

Back from Canada: Rights, Society, and Difference for the African North Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs recalled his return to the United States with ambivalence. Born free in Philadelphia, Gibbs had sought his fortune among the 49ers in California, before fleeing to Victoria, British Columbia, to escape the hardening racial attitudes in the wake of the Dred Scott decision. Content and prosperous, Gibbs nevertheless was enthralled by the Emancipation Proclamation, the defeat of the Confederacy, and the promise of Reconstruction. In 1870, he decided to return south.

“En route my feelings were peculiar,” Gibbs recalled. “A decade had passed, fraught with momentous results in the history of the nation. I had left California disfranchised and my oath denied...I had left politically ignoble; I was returning panoplied with the nobility of an American citizen.”¹ Canada has been understood as a Promised Land for tens of thousands of slaves, escaping via the Underground Railroad. Yet discrimination often awaited African North Americans, those men and women redefined by having spent time in both the United States and Canada. After the Emancipation Proclamation, at least 3,000 African North Americans returned to the United States. Would equal rights be possible for those born enslaved, those fugitives for freedom, and those who returned to work for its promise?

Back from Canada takes a story of the Underground Railroad—familiar to many U.S. and Canadian residents—and reverses our perspective, asking crucial questions about the era of emancipation from the perspective of transnational studies. It recovers the experience of African North Americans who left Canada determined to grasp their freedom, examining their choices during an era of changing notions of government and citizenship. This is a story of political awakening and economic advancement, of broken promises and cultural struggles. Through the recovery of forgotten stories, *Back from Canada* will document how these African North Americans saw both countries anew. It will use their experience to deepen our understanding of the U.S.-Canada border in world history.

Back from Canada is the first comprehensive study of these returning African North Americans, and the first study to consider how international soldiers of any race who enlisted in the Union Army experienced the war and its aftermath differently. It argues that time in Canada gave African North Americans the power of comparison: When struggling for access to social and political participation in the United States, these individuals had a reference point in British North America (Canada), a similar but distinct Anglo-American society with a different history of slavery, emancipation, and claims for equal rights. Thus African North Americans could introduce new arguments into debates about the meaning of citizenship and the basis for equal rights, changing the formulations of freedom and liberty during the Civil War, in the Reconstruction amendments to the U.S. Constitution, and beyond.

By reconsidering African North American political actions and cultural arguments within a transnational context, *Back from Canada* provides a new understanding of the source of political and cultural currents in U.S. history from the beginnings of the Underground Railroad to the death of the emancipation generation (roughly 1830-1920), expanding the geographic scope of Reconstruction and of African American history northward. In line with the goals of the *Bridging Cultures* initiative, *Back from Canada* argues for the importance of the U.S.-Canada border to African North Americans, and emphasizes the significance of this border within U.S. history generally.

In their research, Eric Foner and Steven Hahn have placed African Americans at the center of the history of emancipation and Reconstruction—but neither has considered African North American networks in Canada. Paul Gilroy theorized about the formulation of African global identities in *The Black Atlantic*, but his vision also ignored Canada. *The Blacks in Canada*, by the late Robin Winks, remains the go-to reference for African Canadian history in the Civil War Era, but the book was published in 1971. Michael Wayne, the preeminent Canadian historian of American slavery, has called out for work, like *Back from Canada*, to revise and expand Winks’s findings in light of the past forty years of scholarship, and to look beyond studies of all-black communities to the much larger populations of African North

¹ Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, *Shadow and Light: An Autobiography with Reminiscences of the Last and Present Century* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1902), 109-110.

Americans who lived integrated into American and Canadian cities. *Back from Canada* will thus engage the existing scholarship but go beyond it by arguing that African North Americans in the United States and Canada were constantly intertwined, and their history deserves to be told in one integrated analysis.

This project will provide insight into what political and cultural factors—in both countries—shaped African North American experiences, opportunities, and beliefs in the generations after slavery, building on the latest research techniques in related fields. Projects such as *After Slavery* and *Visualizing Emancipation* have been using digital scholarship tools to map and analyze trends in emancipation, and *Back from Canada* will build on their advances, applying this research to the U.S.-Canada border as an emerging geography of slavery and freedom. Don Shaffer and other scholars have probed the medical, social, and political insights to be found in the Civil War pension files generally, for soldiers white and black, but *Back from Canada* argues there is a special insight about borders, transnational allegiances, and international definitions of rights to be found in those pension files from African North Americans specifically.

Utilizing U.S. and Canadian Census records, Civil War pension files, newspapers, letters, and memoirs, and grounded in archival records in both countries, *Back from Canada* is a wide-ranging study of transnational political and cultural trends. It provides a history of African North American communities in Canada and the United States with broad implications for the history of race, migration, and international relations between the United States and Canada.

The vast majority of the African North Americans who traveled between the United States and Canada were illiterate, and only a few of the most prominent individuals left significant papers. To track the movements and actions of African North Americans, I have pursued three tracks: first, the few individuals with paper collections; then, the narratives of the Civil War pension files for the U.S. Colored Troops; and finally, the family data from in the U.S. and Canadian censuses.

While Mifflin Gibbs wrote the only memoir about this return migration, other prominent African North Americans also participated in political and educational activities in both countries. For example, Mary Ann Shadd Cary edited and published Ontario's *Provincial Freeman* before the war, advocating reforms from antislavery to temperance, and later she and Martin Delaney spoke often on behalf of political causes in Reconstruction-era Washington, D.C. I have analyzed the Gibbs Papers at Yale University and the recent biographies of these figures, but with this fellowship I plan to explore the papers of Shadd Cary and Delaney, split between archives in the United States (Library of Congress, Howard University, Schomburg Center, Tulane University) and Canada (Library and Archives Canada, Chatham-Kent Museum, Toronto Reference Library). This NEH fellowship will allow me to reconnect the lives of these individuals on both sides of the border.

In the Civil War pension files, veterans (or their survivors) describe their needs, submit to medical examinations, and provide documentation about their character, family structure, employment, and migration histories, often through depositions. Working in collaboration with Canadian scholar Richard Reid, I have identified 835 members of the U.S. Colored Troops who listed a birthplace in Canada, and we estimate that roughly a quarter have pension files. In Summer 2011, I saw more than 140 of these files, reading of their motivations for return and the framing of their lives through this journey. Three more months at the National Archives, funded by this NEH fellowship, will allow me to complete research in the remaining pension files for this population.

Finally, while U.S. Census forms ask no questions about temporary residence in another country, only birthplace and current residence, the censuses combined with other governmental records, such as regimental muster rolls, nevertheless offer hints on how to track this population and recover their stories—lessons that are applicable to the study of many groups underrepresented in traditional sources. Using those marked as “Black” or “Mulatto” with birthplaces in the United States to find migrants to Canada, and those African North American children marked as born in Canada in the U.S. Census to find their parents, this database allows me to track migrations, geographic clusters, and kinship networks. Michigan and New York hold the largest numbers of these listings, with concentrations in Detroit, Buffalo, and Niagara Falls, suggesting the importance of Great Lakes ties for this research.

A full-time, year-long NEH fellowship will provide me the concentrated time I need to travel to

these far-flung archives, spread across two countries. My work plan—three months in the National Archives, Library of Congress, and Howard University archives in Washington, D.C.; three months in the archives of slavery and freedom in Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina; three months in the Great Lakes archives of Ontario, New York, and Michigan; and three months, spread in between, dedicated to continued analysis of the stories I find and the individuals I can track in my database—will allow me to complete the necessary research. Such a major leap forward will open the door to more conference, journal, and Internet venues to discuss this research, as I work to complete the full book manuscript within two years after the completion of my NEH fellowship.

Back from Canada is under option with Harvard University Press, the publisher of my award-winning first book on borders, the Civil War Era, and Reconstruction, centered in St. Louis. My past articles demonstrate my research expertise in both U.S. and Canadian archives. I have presented preliminary research findings for this project at the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States conference, as an invitee to the Borderlands/Borderlines symposium at the Library of Congress, and in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of American Ethnic History*. The planned table of contents is:

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| Introduction | A Visit to the Underground Railroad Museum: What Happens “Beyond Freedom”? |
| 1 | Fake Canadians: Canada in the African American Imagination |
| 2 | Ending the Sojourn and Returning to Fight: Foreign Origins for the U.S. Colored Troops |
| 3 | Fighting for My Country, or Another?: Wartime Experiences of African North Americans |
| 4 | Children of Freedom in their Parents’ Land: Canadian-born African Americans Fight for Citizenship |
| 5 | Proving My Life: Pension Applications and the Challenge of Documenting Transnational Lives |
| 6 | Setting Off Again: Seeking Freedom in Mexico, the Caribbean and West Africa |
| Conclusion | The Meaning of Canada for African North Americans |

In each chapter, I will combine eloquent personal stories from the pension narratives and prominent individuals with analysis of the patterns found in the Census data, weaving the literate and illiterate, known and unknown into a wider story of African North American migration and political action during the Civil War and after. For example, the “Fake Canadians” chapter argues for the significance of Canada even for African Americans who had never been there. These men claimed birth or residence in Canada to ease their entrance into the U.S. Colored Troops, masking their status as legally held slaves in a Union slave state like Missouri, their desertions from another unit, or their effort to hide from their parents or guardians. Pension files describe how and when these individuals reveal the falsehood of their claims—and suggest when white officers for the U.S. Colored Troops were willing to accept this lie in order to enroll another soldier. Analysis of the Census patterns and regimental muster rolls will consider how large a population of fake Canadians moved through the Union Army, and how they affected general perceptions about the size of the Underground Railroad or returnee populations.

Other chapters will provide similar multi-sourced analysis of the debate over the eligibility of Canadian-born or Canadian-residing African Americans for the U.S. Colored Troops; the Fourth of July debate over extending the (lily-white) Naturalization Act “to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent”; and the ideological justifications offered by returnees for their choices during Reconstruction. Finally, in Reconstruction and after, some of these African North Americans returned to Canada; some persevered in the United States; and some journeyed again, to make another claim for liberty in Jamaica, Liberia, or elsewhere in the Caribbean or West Africa. African North Americans bridged two (or more) national cultures, and they experienced the political gains and painful retreats of Reconstruction with the knowledge that other options existed, and the equal right to citizenship they so desired might be better attained elsewhere.

The African North Americans of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era bridged national cultures. This project will recover their stories, to enrich our understanding of rights and citizenship in an increasingly globalized United States.

Selected Bibliography: *Back from Canada*

Primary Sources

[Given extreme space constraints, I can only list names of archives, rather than their specific collections of papers for U.S. Colored Troops, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Martin R. Delaney, Mifflin Gibbs, and the scholarship of African Americans in Canada and the Underground Railroad.]

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