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Civil War anniversary: Cleburne's proposal to arm, free slaves (<http://daltondailycitizen.com/local/x66808406/Civil-War-anniversary-Cleburnes-proposal-to-arm-free-slaves>)

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On Thursday, July 14, at 10 a.m.. the Georgia Historical Society will be conducting a dedication service to unveil a marker commemorating Confederate Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne's proposal to arm slaves in exchange for their freedom.

Cleburne's plan was to provide manpower for the South to face the ever-increasing Federal Army which was beginning to recruit black soldiers and which continued to swell its ranks with immigrants, particularly from Germany and other parts of Europe.

It was becoming increasingly clear to Southern officers during the winter of 1863-64 that the South was fast running out of men to continue the war. After much thought and discussion among several like-minded junior officers, Cleburne wrote out his proposal while the Confederate Army of Tennessee remained in camps in and around Dalton. On Jan. 2, 1864, Cleburne presented it to Commanding Gen.

Joseph E. Johnston and the Division and Corps Commanders of the Army of Tennessee during a meeting at Johnston's headquarters, the Cook-Huff House at 314 N. Selvidge St.

This marker, along with Dalton's key role in African-American Civil War history, provides tremendous irony. While the Confederate High Command in Richmond and in Dalton dismissed the proposal as outrageous, in 1864 U.S. armies were beginning to recruit and deploy black troops in mass. By the spring of 1864, Dalton had fallen into federal hands and, during the summer of 1864, many runaway slaves from Northwest Georgia found their way into Chattanooga to join the ranks of the 14th and

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44th United States Colored Infantry.

Had Cleburne's proposal been taken seriously and adopted in January 1864, it is possible that some of these men could have served for the South in exchange for their freedom. Instead, they fought for liberty on the side of the North for the liberation of all people, not solely for their personal freedom.

In August and October 1864, these two black regiments saw action in Dalton in two separate events, the only fighting in Georgia during the Civil War in which African-American troops were engaged. By war's end, more than 200,000 African-Americans enlisted for the North.

Before the year was out, Gen. Johnston, who had commanded the Confederate forces in Dalton and who had dismissed the proposal, would be dismissed from command; Gen. Cleburne along with many of the persons who signed it, would be killed in combat; Gen. William Henry Talbot (W.H.T.) "Shot Pouch" Walker, who was the chief opponent of the proposal, along with many others who opposed it, would also be killed in combat, and a year later, and President Jefferson Davis, who was ultimately responsible for dismissing the proposal to free those in captivity in exchange for their Confederate service, was himself made captive (jailed) for two years for his Confederate service.

Ironically, the South eventually passed a bill to arm the slaves. In February 1865, Davis appointed Robert E. Lee as Commander of all Confederate Armies, not just those in Virginia, and Lee's first act was to recommend Cleburne's proposal to arm slaves in exchange for their freedom.

In March 1865, just weeks before the end of the War, the Confederate Congress passed legislation approving the use of slaves in the armies, but the bill did not promise freedom in exchange for service as had been recommended by Cleburne and Lee. While some have estimated the number of blacks who served in the Confederacy at 32,000, (a figure derived from post-war pension applications which likely included applications for servants and laborers as very few black Confederates were used in combat roles), it is clear that the decision to arm the slaves for the South came too little and too late and it failed to yield any measurable results for the Confederacy.

This article is part of a series of stories about Dalton and life in Dalton during the Civil War. The stories run on Sunday and are provided by the Dalton-Whitfield Civil War 150th Anniversary Committee. To find out more about the committee go to www.dalton150th.com. If you have material that you would like to contribute for a future article contact Robert Jenkins at 706-259-4626 or robert.jenkins@robertdjenkins.com.

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