

Callie Hawkins: Hi everyone, this is Callie and Joan from Q & Abe, a podcast by President Lincoln's Cottage.

Joan Cummins: As we strive to answer the questions for the show, we've encountered a wide variety of stories, conversations, and discoveries, not all of which fit directly within the main episode. However, we don't want to keep all this good stuff to ourselves.

CH: This episode accompanies Episode 2: Is it okay to call her Aunt Mary?, so if you've not yet listened to that episode, it might be a good place to start.

JC: As we were talking to Adena Spingarn about the evolving perceptions of Uncle Tom, I asked her why she thinks minstrelsy and minstrel shows aren't fully in the popular consciousness, even though they were widespread forms of entertainment in earlier periods of American history. Here's what she had to say.

Adena Spingarn: So I actually do, I have a lot of thoughts about that and because the project, the second book that I'm working on right now is about race in Hollywood, and it's actually about censorship of - censorship of racial material in, in Hollywood films. But anyways, I think one of the reasons that we don't really remember minstrelsy it is that its major figures were very easily and seamlessly incorporated by radio and the movies. So, if you think about the kind of major figures of the minstrel show, you had a kind of comic black figure, or a comic blackface figure, and you'd also have a sort of slave figure pining away for the old plantation home, kind of menial figure, and then the comic figure, and these are sort of the two kinds of roles that existed for black actors in the early years of Hollywood and, and really continued for a long time, and that was what in the 1940s the NAACP was really trying to push against, the sort of exclusive casting of black actors as, in, in comic roles or menial roles. So the minstrel show doesn't disappear so much as get recycled.

JC: I found myself thinking about conversations I've encountered about the representation of people of color, including African Americans, on film and TV today, and the ongoing efforts to expand the roles people are "allowed" to play.

CH: We've also got an excerpt to share about playing a different kind of role entirely. Chandra Manning told us about the ways that black women in contraband camps asserted their presence, and their right to be present, beyond what Union soldiers expected of them.

JC: Once black people, especially black women I think, arrived at these camps, what kinds of things were they doing once they got there?

Chandra Manning: Yes, black women arriving at camps in particular are defying expectations, defying the sort of boxes that the Union government, that the Union Army, and that white guys in general, want everybody to fit in. They arrive and their priorities are pretty clear: they don't want to be slaves anymore, and they have children to protect, and if they have been separated from anybody they want to put those families back together. The exact same things they've always wanted, but in the past, the power of the US government was not on their side, it was on the side of the slave holders trying to

prevent them from doing those things. So what women perceive is, the big guns have switched sides here.

JC: I can get them to back me up.

CM: Yes, yes. And, and that's precisely what happens and so they set about, many of them set about, making themselves useful. The notion of utility, the notion of usefulness to one's community, is so essential to how 19th century Americans thought about citizenship, thought about belonging, thought about relationship with the national government. I do not mean to suggest that enslaved women have read treatises on citizenship or anything, but they quickly grasped that usefulness, making oneself useful is...

JC: A way of gaining respect.

CM: A way of gaining respect, it's a way of gaining access to a source of power that might be able to ally with their desires and not their owners' desires. And so they cook, and they nurse - and nursing is a big deal. More Civil War soldiers, many more, die of disease than battle wounds, as is well known - what is less well known is that the chief determinant in terms of mortality hospital to hospital throughout the Civil War is the presence or absence of nurses, has everything to do with sanitation I suspect. So the fact that, that many of them nurse is actually a direct contribution to the war effort. Another thing they do in droves is laundry. Which sounds sort of, oh isn't that cute, there they are, you know, scrubbing, but it is not cute at all, it is A), a monumental task, and B), again, directly connected to the stopping of the spread of disease.

JC: Yeah.

CM: Some serve as spies, and they sometimes serve doing the exact same things men do. They load and unload cargo when it comes in by rail, or by boat, they - especially in the Mississippi Valley theater, when the, when the US government starts putting acres back into cotton cultivation - they're in the fields, that's who's tending the fields, especially after black enlistment happens, that's who's hoeing, and that's who's hoed anyway, that's who knows how to plant cotton, so they - but they're doing it for the US government. So they force a reckoning for white Union soldiers and white Union officials who want women to fit into particular boxes, and those boxes don't include "useful contributor to the national government." This is, these women put themselves in those boxes, they put themselves in those boxes, they break the box actually, but they put themselves in that position. And they really are able to extract a wartime recognition, from the US government, of themselves as useful contributors that was unimaginable before the war and sadly would sort of disappear after the war, but in this moment of crisis, when the nation's life is on the line, and all of a sudden this white Provost Marshal has to choose between the claims of some white rich guy, who used to be able to claim the protection of the Union government, U. S. government, or a black woman who's doing laundry in aid of that government - all of a sudden, her claim trumps his claim, and he goes home empty handed, and that is different.

JC: That's so cool!

CM: It is new, it is so different from before the war.

JC: We hope you've enjoyed this little something extra, we'll see you in two weeks with our next full episode! This episode was produced by me, Joan Cummins, and Callie Hawkins. Music for Q & Abe was written, performed, and is copyrighted by, Clancy Newman.

CH: Q & Abe is possible thanks to generous supporters of President Lincoln's Cottage. To find out how you can support this podcast and other programming, visit [www.lincolncottage.org](http://www.lincolncottage.org). You can also write to us at [podcast@lincolncottage.org](mailto:podcast@lincolncottage.org), or tweet at us [@LincolnsCottage](https://twitter.com/LincolnsCottage).

JC: President Lincoln's cottage is a home for brave ideas. Stay curious!