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# “A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation”: The Word “Contraband” and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States

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In his 1888 history of black military service during the Civil War, the African American historian George Washington Williams reminded readers that early in the war, the Union general Benjamin F. Butler had made the “startling and revolutionary” decision to label slaves fleeing to Union army lines “contraband of war.” Williams narrated a story of policy making on the ground that was already legendary and remains a staple of histories of the Civil War. In late May 1861, just weeks after the war began, three enslaved men escaped to Union-occupied Fortress Monroe, on the central coast of Virginia. Their owner, a Confederate colonel, had planned to send them south to labor for the Confederacy and soon ordered an aide to collect them. Butler, commander at the fort, was reluctant to return such valuable resources to the Rebels and recognized that the men's...

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