

United States Colored Troops - A Brief History

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Who were these individuals? Where did they come from? What role did they play in reshaping the socio- political and military structures in the United States of America? Answers can be found in the following essay.

Before Fort Sumter, South Carolina was fired upon on April 12, 1861, seven states in the deep south had seceded from the Union, and a Convention was held in Montgomery, Alabama which adopted a Constitution and elected Jefferson Davis as President of the Confederate States of America. Shortly thereafter, four more states seceded, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Slave states remaining in the Union were Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware.

President Abraham Lincoln began to prepare to put down what he thought would be a minor insurrection with little opposition by blockading Confederate Ports and calling for 75,000 volunteers. Thousands flocked to the recruiting centers in the north as well as certain areas in the south controlled by Federal forces. Among the prospective volunteers were thousands of free Blacks in the north and newly escaped slaves in the south. The Blacks were told that this was a White man's war? and their services were not needed. A request was made to Governor David Tod (Todd) of Ohio who rejected the idea by echoing President Lincoln's position and stating that this is a White man's government and that they were able to defend and protect it.?

As strategies were being developed on both sides and battle lines were drawn during the latter part of 1861 and into 1862, President Lincoln and the War Department realized that they had vastly underestimated the strength and determination of the Confederate forces but refused to alter its policy. During this period, heavy casualties were suffered on both side with the Confederate being the victors in many campaigns.

At Bull Run (Manassas), Virginia, the Union forces were defeated in July 1861. Less than a month later on August 10th the Confederates recorded another victory at Wilson's Creek, Missouri. In early 1862, the Confederates claimed a big victory in the West with the defeat of Union Forces at Valverde, New Mexico on February 21, followed by the near defeat of Union forces on April 6 and 7 under General Ulysses S. Grant at Shiloh Church and Pittsburg Landing, Tenn. Each side suffered 10,000 casualties including Confederate General A.S. Johnston. And then came the defeat of Union forces at Shenandoah Valley on May 8, and the single bloodiest day of the war where both sides fought to grisly standstill at Antietam, 6,000 were killed and 17,000 wounded. Of course, there were many other battles during this period where both sides claimed victory and suffered heavy losses.

Throughout this period, President Lincoln steadfastly refused to alter his policy on enlisting men of African descent. He was attempting to save or preserve the Union without dealing with the question of slavery and he did not want to alienate the border slave states that remained in the Union. However, groups including some military commanders defied the policy or lack of policy in regard to utilizing a readily available force.

In Cleveland, Ohio a newly organized military corps of Blacks declared that they were ready to do battle as in times of 1776 and the days of 1812. In New York City, blacks formed a military club. The first organization of blacks took place in Cincinnati, Ohio, a pro-slavery city in which prejudice was cruelly manifested. The Black Brigade was organized and due to the irate attitude of the White citizens was forced to disband shortly thereafter. The Proprietor of the place selected as the recruiting station was forced to remove the American flag. The Proprietor of another meeting place was told by the police: "We want you damned niggers to keep out of this; this is a white man's war."

The most persistent advocate of arming blacks was the outspoken abolitionist Frederick Douglass, probably the greatest black leader this country has ever had. "Colored men," he complained, "were good enough to fight under Washington, but they are not good enough to fight under McClellan." He further stated: "The side which first summons the Negro to its aid will conquer."

Thousands of fugitive slaves flooded the Union lines wherever federal forces penetrated new areas in the south. Without a general governmental policy, many commanders tried to send the fugitive back to their masters, forbade them to enter Union lines, or permitted masters and their agents (slave catchers) to enter Union lines to retrieve their property.

When fugitive slaves took refuge within the federal lines near Fortress Monroe, Virginia, General Benjamin F. Butler learned that they had been utilized in building Confederate fortification. He declared them contrabands of war, a phrase that stuck, and put them to work building fortification for wages. He further stated that he was not obligated to return property to a foreign government. By the end of 1861, large number of ex-slaves were constructing Union fortifications, working as teamsters, cooks or carpenters. In some units they served as spies and scouts.

Early in the fall of 1861, Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts, a strong abolitionist, declared: "It is not my opinion that our generals, when any man comes to the standard and desires to defend the flag will find it important to light a candle, and see what his complexion is, or to consult the family Bible to ascertain whether his grandfather came from the banks of the Thames or the banks of the Senegal."

General David Hunter, Commander of the Department of the South, issued an Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slave in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida in May 1862. The act was repudiated by the Lincoln administration. Shortly thereafter, General Hunter, without permission began recruiting ex-slaves from the Sea Islands area for formation into the 1st Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers. The regiment attracted much attention and helped prepare the country to accept black troops. However, President Lincoln and the War Department forced the disbandment, with the exception of one company.

In July 1862, President Lincoln called for 300,000 volunteers of which the response was rather poor. He still refused to utilize blacks in combat roles even after Congress revoked the provision in the militia law that excluded blacks and authorized the President to use blacks in the army as laborers or in other capacities. Also, during the same month, Brigadier General John W. Phelps, an ardent abolitionist, resigned when permission to organize three regiments from refugees in Louisiana was denied by General Benjamin Butler who had been assigned the Commander of the Department of the Gulf. In August 1862, General Jim Lane, an abolitionist and who some called an outlaw and renegade, over the opposition of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, organized a black regiment in Kansas. The 1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry Regiment was made up of ex-slaves from Arkansas, Missouri, and the Indian Territory. The regiment fought its first battle on October 27 and 28 at Island Mound, Missouri before

being mustered into federal service. The regiment was mustered in service on January 13, 1863, and in 1864 was redesignated the 79th United States Colored Infantry Regiment (New).

Later in August 1862, General Benjamin Butler reversed his position and decided to recruit free blacks, however, no one asked the recruits whether they had been free men of slaves before the war. Despite War Department specific approval, General Butler quickly mustered into federal service the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of the Louisiana Native Guards. It was reported that the commanders of the units had offered their services to the Confederacy and was turned down. The leaders, Free Persons of Color, were wealthy, well educated, property owners, and some were slave owners, and at the time while offering their services to the Confederacy were afraid the Union forces would confiscate their property. During the Summer and into the Fall of 1862, President Lincoln gradually and steadily altered his view of the war and issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September. Possible motives were centered around forestalling European intervention on the side of the Confederacy; attempt to undermine the Southern economy; reassert control over the Republican Party; and furnish a prelude to the enlistment of black combat troops. In late August, the War Department in a radical policy shift, officially sanctioned the recruitment of blacks with a policy statement: "All slaves admitted into military service, together with their wives and children, were declared forever free."

After the official issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, a vehicle was set into motion that allowed the establishment of regiments with black enlistees and white officers. The edict was only directed to the states that had seceded and very few slaves were voluntarily freed. As far as the Confederacy was concerned "the Proclamation was not worth the paper it was written on." However, thousands of slaves were freed by the invading Union forces and many others escaped into the Union lines.

In a drastic reversal of position, President Lincoln and the War Department sanctioned and allowed the Governors of the northern free states and the military commanders in the south to organize and muster into federal service able blacks within their jurisdictions. Frederick Douglass appealed to "Men of Color, to Arms," in which he argued that "liberty won only by white men would lose half of its luster." Later he insisted that military service offered "a genuine opportunity to achieve first-class citizenship." Douglass along with black abolitionism Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, Charles Lenox Redmond, and others toured the North recruiting to fill the ranks of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment that was being organized by Governor John Andrew. After the regiment had mustered in, trained, and departed for the South, the 55th Massachusetts Infantry was organized and assigned to the Department of the South. In early 1864 the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry was organized and transferred to Virginia.

On March 26, 1863, Secretary of War issued an order directing Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas to organize black regiments in the Mississippi Valley. On May 22, the War Department established a Bureau of Colored Troops to handle the recruitment, organization, and service of the newly organized black regiments commanded by white officers. Governor Tod of Ohio reversed his position and employed John M Langston, a black abolitionist, as a recruiting agent for the 127th Ohio Volunteer Infantry.

State designations were assigned to the regiments except in Louisiana. The regiments in that state were mustered into federal service with Native Guard and Corps d'Afrique designations. A few units were assigned state designations and mustered into service, such as the 9th Louisiana Volunteers (African

Descent). In early 1864 all regiments with State, Corps d’Afrique, or Native Guard designations were redesignated numerically as United States Colored Troops.

For instance, the 1st Mississippi Colored Cavalry Regiment was redesignated the 3rd United States Colored Cavalry Regiment. The 1st Regiment Alabama Siege Artillery was redesignated three times, to the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, to the 7th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, and finally the 11th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment. In the North for example, the 127 Ohio Volunteer Infantry was redesignated the 5th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment and the 1st Regiment Michigan Volunteers was changed to the 102nd U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment.

Exceptions to the redesignation policy were accorded the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Volunteers, the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry and the 29th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. The four regiments maintained state designations throughout the war. After the redesignation policy, all regiments organized thereafter were assigned as United States Colored Troops.

The enlistees came from thirty-five states and territories, the District of Columbia, Canada (Afro-British North Americans), Caribbean, and some were born in Africa. Many were slaves one day and the next day or a few days later they were wearing the uniform of the country that had allowed them to be enslaved and were being trained to fight against the secessionist government that had enslaved them. They were mostly laborers, however many possessed skills as farmers, laborers, blacksmiths, carpenters, cooks, groomers, teamsters, etc. The vast majority were illiterate, and their demeanor was best described by an officer in the 1st South Carolina Volunteers: “The average plantation Negro was a hard-looking specimen, with about as much of the soldier to be seen in him as there was in the angel in Michelangelo’s block of marble before he applied his chisel.” But, after drilling and teaching, “the plantation manners, the awkward bowing and scraping . . . with hat under arm and with averted look, were exchanged for the upright form, the open face, the gentlemanly address, and soldierly salute.” By no means were they welcomed with open arms by all of their white northern comrades. Many whites in the north as well as soldiers were outraged that blacks, especially ex-slaves, were now wearing the uniform of “their” country. This attitude coupled with the alleged Confederate order by President Jefferson Davis that stated no black soldier or white officer leading them would be taken prisoner made military life extremely difficult, but they were determined to fight and preserve their freedom at all costs. This interpretation apparently was derived from President Davis’ proclamation branding Generals Hunter and Phelps as outlaws and the soldiers under the command of General Butler as being robbers and criminals, deserving death. Before going into battle, many were warned by their commanders that they would not be taken prisoner if they were forced to surrender, therefore, knowing that they had to fight until death. After the Fort Pillow, Tennessee and Poison Springs, Arkansas massacres of April 1864, they adopted the battle cries “Remember Fort Pillow” or “Remember Poison Springs.” If any Confederate suffered out of the ordinary, it was apparently due to the reaction of their government’s alleged policy. However, research shows there were black soldier taken prisoner and just how they were treated is unknown.

Between 160 and 170 regiments of infantry, cavalry, heavy artillery, and batteries of light artillery were organized. The exact number is difficult to pinpoint due the reorganization early on in the recruiting cycle and the subsequent redesignations. Also, some units were deactivated or consolidated. The total number of enlistees vary from 176,000 to over 200,000 thousand, depending on the data sources. The compiled index lists approximately 178,000 names. Approximately 135,000 were recruited from the states that seceded and the border slave states. States furnishing the largest numbers were Louisiana (24,052), Kentucky (23,703), Tennessee (20,133), and Mississippi (17,869). There were over 7,000 white

officers. Not included in these numbers are the 100,000 to 200,000 civilians (according to various data sources) who served in numerous capacities with the U.S. Colored Troops as well as all-white units as scouts, spies, cooks, corpsmen, nurses, teamsters, and various other positions. Very few records were maintained on these individuals except in personal papers of the officers.

There were no organized black units at Gettysburg or many of the other major battles so prominent published. In many of those battles there were probably more blacks serving with the Confederates as body servants, teamsters, etc., than with the Union forces. Before July 1, 1863 and the Battle of Gettysburg, units of black soldiers engaged the enemy in numerous battles and major skirmishes throughout the South, with the most intense engagements taking place in Louisiana at Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend.

The United States Colored Troops participated in 449 engagements in which 39 were major battles. The most active units in the South and West were the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry (79th USCI) - 14 engagements, and the 1st Mississippi Cavalry (3rd USCC) - 10 engagements. Three regiments participated in the Battle of Olustee, Florida on February 20, 1864, in which the Union forces were defeated. Hundreds of lives were lost, and many were captured and sent to the Andersonville, Georgia prison. Nine regiments participated in the Battle of Fort Blakely, Alabama from March 31 to April 9, 1865.

In Virginia, twenty-two regiments participated in the Siege of Petersburg from June 15, 1864, to April 2, 1865. One cavalry and twelve infantry regiments engaged the enemy at Chapin's Farm (New Market Heights), just outside of Richmond on September 29 and 30, 1864. Thirteen U.S. Colored Troops were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Let the record state clearly that people of African descent, thousands who were once held in bondage and forced to remain illiterate, sought their freedom, fought and died for the freedom of all Americans. They were by no means all shiftless and lazy as many misleading and biased historians would have you believe.

(For a complete list of battles and major skirmishes see United States Colored Troops 1863-1867 and/or Men of Color, by William A. Gladstone, Thomas Publications, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.)

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