

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Black Soldiers in the Civil War

By The National Archives  
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*The American Civil War (1861-1865) was a war fought within the United States. After the election of Abraham Lincoln for president, eleven states withdrew from the United States to form the Confederate States of America, while the remaining states formed the Union. As one of the aims of the Civil War was the abolishment of slavery, many African Americans struggled for the right to fight in the war for their freedom. As you read, take notes on the different ways that African Americans experienced unfair treatment in the army during the Civil War.*

*"Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship." - Frederick Douglass<sup>1</sup>*

- [1] The issues of emancipation and military service were intertwined from the onset of the Civil War. News from Fort Sumter<sup>2</sup> set off a rush by free black men to enlist in U.S. military units. They were turned away, however, because a Federal law dating from 1792 barred<sup>3</sup> Negroes from bearing arms for the U.S. army (although they had served in the American Revolution<sup>4</sup> and in the War of 1812).<sup>5</sup> In Boston disappointed would-be volunteers met and passed a resolution requesting that the Government modify its laws to permit their enlistment.

## TO COLORED MEN!

### FREEDOM,

#### Protection, Pay, and a Call to Military Duty!

On the 1st day of January, 1863, the President of the United States proclaimed FREEDOM to over THREE MILLIONS OF SLAVES. This decree is to be enforced by all the power of the Nation. On the 21st of July last he issued the following order:

### PROTECTION OF COLORED TROOPS.

"WAR DEPARTMENT, ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,  
WASHINGTON, July 31."

"General Order, No. 233.  
"The following order of the President is published for the information and government of all concerned:—  
EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON, July 30.  
"It is the duty of every Government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color, or condition, and especially to those who are duly organized as soldiers in the public service. The law of nations, and the usages and customs of war, as carried on by civilized powers, permit no distinction as to color in the treatment of prisoners of war as public enemies. To sell or enslave any captured person on account of his color, is a relapse into barbarism, and a crime against the civilization of the age.  
"The Government of the United States will give the same protection to all its soldiers, and if the enemy shall sell or enslave any one because of his color, the offense shall be punished by retaliation upon the enemy's prisoners in our possession. It is, therefore, ordered, for every soldier of the United States, killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy, or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works, and continued at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to prisoners of war.  
"ABRAHAM LINCOLN."  
"By order of the Secretary of War.  
"E. D. TOWNSEND, Assistant Adjutant General."  
That the President is in earnest the rebels soon began to find out, as witness the following order from his Secretary of War:  
"WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON CITY, August 9, 1863.  
"Sir: Your letter of the 3d inst., calling the attention of this Department to the cases of Orlin H. Brown, William H. Johnston, and Wm. Wilson, three colored men captured on the gunboat Isaac Smith, has received consideration. This Department has directed that three rebel prisoners of South Carolina, if there be any such in our possession, and if not, three others, be confined in close custody and held as hostages for Brown, Johnston and Wilson, and that the fact be communicated to the rebel authorities at Richmond.  
"Very respectfully your obedient servant,  
"EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War.  
"The Hon. GIDEON WELLES, Secretary of the Navy."  
And retaliation will be our practice now—man for man—to the bitter end.

### LETTER OF CHARLES SUMNER,

Written with reference to the Convention held at Faneuil Hall, July 15th and 16th, 1863, to promote Colored Emancipation.  
BOSTON, July 15th, 1863.  
"I don't if, in times past, our country could have expected from colored men any patriotic service. Such service is the return for protection. But now that protection has begun, the service should begin also. Nor should relative rights and duties be weighed with nicety. It is enough that our country, aroused at last to a sense of justice, seeks to enrol colored men among its defenders.  
"If my comments should reach such persons, I would say: enlist at once. Now is the day and now is the hour. Help to overcome your cruel enemies now battling against your country, and in this way you will surely overcome those other enemies hardly less cruel, here at home, who will still seek to degrade you. This is not the time to hesitate or to hizzle. Do your duty to our country, and you will set an example of generous self-sacrifice which will conquer prejudice and open all hearts.  
"Very faithfully yours,  
"CHARLES SUMNER."

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1. Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was an African American abolitionist, public speaker, and writer. Douglas was a strong believer that African Americans should be allowed to fight in the Civil War because an aim of the Civil War was ending slavery.
2. The attack on a U.S. fortress, Fort Sumter, in 1861 was the beginning of the Civil War.
3. **Bar (verb):** prevent or forbid the entrance of movement of someone or something
4. An armed conflict between Great Britain and the thirteen North American colonies, in which they declared themselves independent from Great Britain.

The Lincoln administration wrestled with the idea of authorizing the recruitment of black troops, concerned that such a move would prompt the border states to secede.<sup>6</sup> When Gen. John C. Frémont in Missouri and Gen. David Hunter in South Carolina issued proclamations that emancipated slaves in their military regions and permitted them to enlist, their superiors sternly revoked their orders. By mid-1862, however, the escalating number of former slaves (contrabands), the declining number of white volunteers, and the increasingly pressing personnel needs of the Union Army pushed the Government into reconsidering the ban.

As a result, on July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation and Militia Act, freeing slaves who had masters in the Confederate Army. Two days later, slavery was abolished in the territories of the United States, and on July 22 President Lincoln presented the preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to his Cabinet. After the Union Army turned back Lee's<sup>7</sup> first invasion of the North at Antietam, MD, and the Emancipation Proclamation was subsequently announced, black recruitment was pursued in earnest. Volunteers from South Carolina, Tennessee, and Massachusetts filled the first authorized black regiments. Recruitment was slow until black leaders such as Frederick Douglass encouraged black men to become soldiers to ensure eventual full citizenship. (Two of Douglass's own sons contributed to the war effort.) Volunteers began to respond, and in May 1863 the Government established the Bureau of Colored Troops to manage the burgeoning numbers of black soldiers.

By the end of the Civil War, roughly 179,000 black men (10% of the Union Army) served as soldiers in the U.S. Army and another 19,000 served in the Navy. Nearly 40,000 black soldiers died over the course of the war — 30,000 of infection or disease. Black soldiers served in artillery and infantry and performed all noncombat support functions that sustain an army, as well. Black carpenters, chaplains,<sup>8</sup> cooks, guards, laborers, nurses, scouts,<sup>9</sup> spies, steamboat pilots, surgeons, and teamsters<sup>10</sup> also contributed to the war cause. There were nearly 80 black commissioned officers. Black women, who could not formally join the Army, nonetheless served as nurses, spies, and scouts, the most famous being Harriet Tubman,<sup>11</sup> who scouted for the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

- [5] Because of prejudice against them, black units were not used in combat as extensively as they might have been. Nevertheless, the soldiers served with distinction in a number of battles. Black infantrymen fought gallantly<sup>13</sup> at Milliken's Bend, LA; Port Hudson, LA; Petersburg, VA; and Nashville, TN. The July 1863 assault on Fort Wagner, SC, in which the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers<sup>14</sup> lost two-thirds of their officers and half of their troops, was memorably dramatized in the film *Gloria*. By war's end, 16 black soldiers had been awarded the Medal of Honor for their valor.<sup>15</sup>

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5. The War of 1812 was a conflict between the United States of American and the United Kingdom from June 18, 1812 to February 18, 1815.
  6. **Secede (verb):** withdrawing formally from membership in a federal union, an alliance, or a political organization
  7. Referring to Robert E. Lee, an American general who commanded the Confederate Army of Norther Virginia.
  8. A clergyman, such as a minister or priest, who is connected to and preaches in an institution, such as a hospital, prison, military, or school.
  9. A "scout" is a person sent out ahead of a main force to gather information about the enemy.
  10. A driver of a team of animals.
  11. Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) was an escaped slave, American abolitionist, and humanitarian who used the Underground Railroad to help slaves to freedom.
  12. An African American infantry division that served in the Union Army.
  13. **Gallant (adjective):** brave; heroic
  14. One of the first official African American units that served for the Union Army.
  15. **Vallor (noun):** great courage in the face of danger, especially in battle

In addition to the perils of war faced by all Civil War soldiers, black soldiers faced additional problems stemming from racial prejudice. Racial discrimination was prevalent even in the North, and discriminatory practices permeated the U.S. military. Segregated units were formed with black enlisted men and typically commanded by white officers and black noncommissioned officers. The 54th Massachusetts was commanded by Robert Shaw and the 1st South Carolina by Thomas Wentworth Higginson — both white. Black soldiers were initially paid \$10 per month from which \$3 was automatically deducted for clothing, resulting in a net pay of \$7. In contrast, white soldiers received \$13 per month from which no clothing allowance was drawn. In June 1864 Congress granted equal pay to the U.S. Colored Troops and made the action retroactive.<sup>16</sup> Black soldiers received the same rations and supplies. In addition, they received comparable medical care.

The black troops, however, faced greater peril than white troops when captured by the Confederate Army. In 1863 the Confederate Congress threatened to punish severely officers of black troops and to enslave black soldiers. As a result, President Lincoln issued General Order 233, threatening reprisal<sup>17</sup> on Confederate prisoners of war (POWs) for any mistreatment of black troops. Although the threat generally restrained the Confederates, black captives were typically treated more harshly than white captives. In perhaps the most heinous known example of abuse, Confederate soldiers shot to death black Union soldiers captured at the Fort Pillow, TN, engagement of 1864. Confederate General Nathan B. Forrest witnessed the massacre and did nothing to stop it.

*Editor's Note:* The document featured with this article is a recruiting poster directed at black men during the Civil War. It refers to efforts by the Lincoln administration to provide equal pay for black soldiers and equal protection for black prisoners of war.

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16. **Retroactive (adjective):** taking effect from a date in the past

17. **Reprisal (noun):** an act of retaliation

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
  - A. African Americans who served in the Civil War were treated differently than white soldiers.
  - B. Frederick Douglass encouraged African Americans to serve in the Union military so they could be granted citizenship.
  - C. The Confederate Army treated African Americans soldiers in the Union Army harshly to discourage slaves from escaping to the North.
  - D. African Americans made up a relatively small amount of Civil War soldiers, making their impact small.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
  - A. "The Lincoln administration wrestled with the idea of authorizing the recruitment of black troops, concerned that such a move would prompt the border states to secede." (Paragraph 2)
  - B. "By the end of the Civil War, roughly 179,000 black men (10% of the Union Army) served as soldiers in the U.S. Army and another 19,000 served in the Navy." (Paragraph 4)
  - C. "The July 1863 assault on Fort Wagner, SC, in which the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers lost two-thirds of their officers and half of their troops, was memorably dramatized in the film *Glory*." (Paragraph 5)
  - D. Racial discrimination was prevalent even in the North, and discriminatory practices permeated the U.S. military. (Paragraph 6)
  
3. PART A: What is the meaning of "heinous" in paragraph 7? [RI.4]
  - A. Forgiving
  - B. Evil
  - C. Fictitious
  - D. Startling
  
4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
  - A. "Black soldiers received the same rations and supplies." (Paragraph 6)
  - B. "Confederate Congress threatened to punish severely officers of black troops" (Paragraph 7)
  - C. "the threat generally restrained the Confederates," (Paragraph 7)
  - D. "Confederate soldiers shot to death black Union soldiers" (Paragraph 7)

5. How does paragraph 6 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.5]

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your opinion, how does Frederick Douglass's quote before paragraph 1 contribute to the text as a whole?
2. In the context of the text, how are we changed by war? In addition to abolishing slavery, how did the Civil War further alter race relations? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? Even during the limited time of the Civil War – what changes occurred in America? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of the text, how does a person overcome adversity? How did African Americans win their right to fight for their freedom? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.