

Black Soldiers in the Civil War

IT IS UNFORTUNATE that historians have paid so little attention to the role of black troops in the Civil War. According to government records, a total of 178,895 black men served in the Union Army. The federal government was slow in making a decision to allow blacks to serve in the Union Army, and it was not until more than two years after the beginning of the Civil War that action was taken to organize black regiments. General Order No. 143, dated 22 May 1863, authorized the raising of black regiments through the Bureau of Colored Troops, and the 1st Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops, was mustered in on 30 June 1863 in Washington, D.C.

A number of states had formed black regiments much earlier in the war. The 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers, composed mostly of fugitive slaves from Missouri and Arkansas, was organized in mid-1862 by General James H. Lane, a well-known leader of the Jayhawkers. The 1st South Carolina Colored Volunteers was organized at Beaufort, South Carolina, also in mid-1862, by Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a former captain in the 51st Massachusetts Infantry. The uniform of the 1st South Carolina was red trousers and blue coats. Both these regiments were mustered into federal service in January 1863.

In August 1862 General Benjamin Butler, the controversial Union commander at New Orleans, under his own initiative organized three black regiments and named them the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments, Louisiana Native Guards. These regiments, also known as the Corps d'Afrique, were mustered into federal service in September, October, and November 1862, respectively, and they became the first black troops officially mustered into the Union Army.

The northeastern states, somewhat more liberal than the other states in their racial attitudes, also moved to form black regiments. The 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery and 54th and 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiments, all black regiments, were organized in 1863. Another black regiment, the 29th Connecticut Infantry, was formed in 1864.

The most illustrious of these black regiments, the 54th Massachusetts, was commanded by dynamic, twenty-five-year-old Col-

onel Robert Gould Shaw, a former captain in the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry. Norwood P. Hallowell, a former captain in the 20th Massachusetts Infantry, was named lieutenant colonel. Both these men were dedicated officers who provided excellent leadership for the regiment. Men were recruited from all over the North to fill its ranks. Frederick Douglass, the well-known black abolitionist, had two sons, Charles Douglass and Lewis Douglass, who served in the 54th, with Lewis becoming the regiment's first sergeant major. The regiment was transferred to Hilton Head, South Carolina, in June 1863 and participated in a raid up the Altamaha River to Darien, Georgia, which was burned. On 16 July 1863, the 54th Massachusetts had its first real battle on James Island, suffering 45 casualties – 14 dead, 18 wounded and 13 missing. Two days later the regiment was the lead assault unit in the federal attack on Fort Wagner. It reached the parapet of the fort before being repulsed with heavy casualties – 34 men killed, 146 wounded, and 92 missing – a total of 272. Among the dead was Colonel Shaw, who was buried with his dead troops by the Confederates.

The 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment – the state's second black regiment – was organized at Readville and was mustered in on 22 June 1863. It was soon moved to South Carolina where it did fatigue duty at Forts Wagner and Gregg and on Morris Island. It was subsequently transferred to northern Florida, and then to Hilton Head, South Carolina. It participated in expeditions up the South Edisto River, to James Island, to Bull's Bay, and up the Santee River. In the spring of 1865 it did provost duty at Orangeburg, South Carolina. The regiment was discharged on 23 September 1865 at Boston, Massachusetts.

The 55th Massachusetts fought in only one battle – a fierce little engagement at Honey Hill, South Carolina, on 30 November 1864. In this action it had more casualties than any other Union regiment engaged – 31 killed, 112 wounded, and 1 man missing. The regiment also suffered casualties in a number of skirmishes. During its term of service the 55th Massachusetts lost a total of 3 officers and 64 enlisted men killed in action. It also lost 2 officers and 128 enlisted men from disease and accidents.

Although the federal government was now willing to allow black men to fight for their freedom, a considerable amount of prejudice still existed. For example, the government was generally

unwilling to allow blacks to serve as commissioned officers, and practically all the officers of the black regiments were white men, mostly experienced noncommissioned or junior commissioned officers who were offered promotions in black regiments. However, some of the noncommissioned officers were black. Black troops were also discriminated against in the matter of pay. They were not paid bounties as were the white troops. A private in a white regiment received thirteen dollars a month, while a black private received only ten dollars, of which three dollars was deducted for clothing. The following table compares the pay of black and white troops:¹

	White	Black
Sergeant Major	\$ 21	\$ 7
First Sergeant	20	7
Sergeant	17	7
Corporal	13	7
Private	13	7
Hospital Steward	30	7
Chaplain	100	7

With the formation of the Bureau of Colored Troops in 1863, all existing black regiments raised by the various states were redesignated U.S. Colored Troops (USCT), with the exception of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts and the 29th Connecticut, which were allowed to retain their original names. For example, the 1st South Carolina Colored Volunteers became the 33rd USCT; the 1st Louisiana Native Guards became the 73rd USCT; the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers became the 79th USCT; and the 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery became the 11th Heavy Artillery, USCT.

By the end of the war, 166 black regiments had served in the Union Army – 145 regiments of infantry, 7 of cavalry, 12 of heavy artillery, 1 of light artillery, and 1 of engineers. About 60 of these regiments actually saw combat, while the remainder performed garrison, construction, and labor functions.² A total of 2,751 black men and 143 of their white officers died in battle, and another 29,658 died of disease. Total deaths from all causes in all black regiments were 36,847 – over 20 percent of the men who served.³ Obviously, a far greater percentage of black troops died from disease than did white troops.

The life of a black soldier was usually a hard one. Poor food, little or no medical care, hard labor, and uncaring or hostile white officers all contributed to the high death rate. Many black regiments were used primarily as laborers on such construction projects as fortifications and roads and saw little or no fighting. Others, however, saw a great deal of combat and suffered many battle casualties. If captured, both the black soldier and his white officers were usually subjected to harsh treatment. In some cases, captured black soldiers were executed or sold into slavery.

Black troops were significantly engaged in a number of the major battles of the Civil War. In the battle of the Crater at Petersburg, Virginia, on 30 July 1864, the 19th, 23rd, 27th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st, 39th, and 43rd U.S. Colored Regiments, all assigned to Ferrero's Division, were involved in the hardest fighting in the crater. These nine regiments suffered 1,327 casualties in a few hours' fighting. At Chaffin's Farm, on 29 September 1864, the 4th, 5th, 6th, 36th, and 38th U.S. Colored Troops sustained terrible losses in fierce fighting. The 6th USCT lost 209 men of 367 men engaged, a casualty rate of 57 percent.

In June 1863 the Union garrison at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, consisted of three black regiments – the 9th and 11th Louisiana and the 1st Mississippi – and a white regiment – the 23rd Iowa. On 7 June 1863 the garrison was attacked by General Walker's Confederate forces. In savage fighting the Union troops were driven back to the Mississippi River, where two gunboats came to their assistance. The Union forces then made a countercharge and regained possession of their works. Milliken's Bend was proof positive that black troops could and would fight, and fight bravely. The cost of victory was terrible to the Union troops. The 9th Louisiana suffered 192 casualties of about 300 men engaged, the 11th Louisiana had 150 casualties, and the 1st Mississippi 24 casualties.

Their Confederate adversaries were astonished at how well the black troops fought at Milliken's Bend, in the eyes of some observers performing better than the white regiments. In a report written on 8 June 1863, Confederate Brigadier General Henry E. McCulloch, a brigade commander in that battle, observed that

The [Confederate] troops charged the breastworks, carrying it instantly, killing and wounding many of the enemy by their deadly fire, as well as the bayonet. This charge was resisted by the negro portion of the enemy's force with considerable obstinacy, while the white or

true Yankee portion ran like whipped curs almost as soon as the charge was ordered. There were several instances in this charge where the enemy crossed bayonets with us or were shot down at the muzzle of the musket.⁴

Fort Pillow, Tennessee, overlooking the Mississippi River, was manned by 295 men of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry (U.S.), a white regiment, and 262 men of the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery. The Union-held fort was attacked by Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest's troops and surrendered on 12 April 1864. Evidence indicates that after the fort's surrender several hundred black troops were massacred. As a result, some black units fought to the death in later battles rather than risk capture by Rebel forces. During the Reconstruction, Forrest became notorious as the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BLACKS IN THE CIVIL WAR

The amount of available information regarding black men from Champaign County who served in the Union Army during the Civil War is very limited. In some instances the records show that a man was "colored," but in many instances, the fact that he served in a black regiment is the only evidence of a soldier's race. For these reasons, the following list of black men from Champaign County who served in the Civil War is almost surely incomplete.

Black Soldiers Listed in the *Roll of Honor* as Being Buried in Champaign County⁵

Homer GAR Cemetery

Samuel Persons, Pvt, Co F, RSCT (USCT)

Mt. Hope Cemetery, Sidney

Isaac Beard, Pvt, Co C, 13th USCT

Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana

J. Anderson, Pvt, 28th U.S. Volunteers (28th USCT)

Jas. H. Bell, Pvt, Co D, 29th USCT

W. G. Blackburn, Pvt, Co I, 50th USCT, died 20 January 1893

Elijah Gibbs, Cpl, Co H, 55th MA Vols

G. W. Johnson, Pvt, Co K, 118th US Inf (118th USCT)

David Johnson

John C. Louis, Sgt, Co D, 28th USCT
 Martin McDermot, Pvt, US gunboat *Hastings*
 John R. Merrick, Pvt, Co I, 55th MA Vols
 John Moss, Pvt, Co H, 55th MA Inf
 Ruff Phillips, Pvt, Co C, 48th MO Vol, and Drummer, 7th IL Cav
 J. E. Riley, Pvt, Co K, 29th USCT
 Stephen Roey, Pvt, Co C, 110th USCT
 Simon Ross, Pvt, Co K, 49th USCT and Co I, 11th USCT
 Wm. Summerville, Pvt, Co G, 29th USCT
 L. H. Walden, Pvt, Co I, 55th MA Vols
 James Walker, Pvt, Co K, 118th USCT
 W. P. Winn, Cpl, Co. D, 18th USCT
 Stephen Winston, Co C, 110th USCT, died 4 May 1900

Old Homer Cemetery

J. C. Cone, 54th US Cav (54th USCT)

26th U.S. Colored Troops

The *Report of the Adjutant General* shows the following men as recruits assigned to the 26th U.S. Colored Troops.

Bryor Bell, Urbana	Enl 21 Feb 1865
Thomas Benton, Champaign Co.	Enl 21 Feb 1865
James S. Keines, Champaign Co.	Enl 8 Feb 1865

29th U.S. Colored Troops

The 29th U.S. Colored Troops was the only black regiment raised in Illinois. The regiment was organized at Quincy in late 1863 and early 1864 by Lieutenant Colonel John A. Bross, former captain of Company A, 88th Illinois Infantry. It was mustered into federal service on 24 April 1864. Although the regiment's commissioned officers were white, its noncommissioned officers were black men. Company A was organized in Adams County, Companies B and C were organized in Cook County, Company D was formed with men from both Cook and Adams Counties, Company E was made up with men from the state at large, and Companies F through K were composed of men from other states. The 29th USCT participated in the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, and was heavily engaged in the Crater, suffering 124 casualties – 21 dead,

56 wounded, and 47 missing. Among the dead was Lieutenant Colonel Bross. The regiment also saw action in the Appomattox Campaign. After Lee's surrender, the 29th was transferred to Texas, where it saw duty on the Rio Grande until its muster-out in November 1865. During its term of service the 29th USCT lost 2 officers and 45 men in battle, and 1 officer and 164 enlisted men died of disease, accidents, and Confederate imprisonment.

An examination of the muster rolls of the 29th U.S. Colored Troops as found in the Illinois *Report of the Adjutant General* shows the following men with addresses in Champaign County. However, the majority of the men shown on the rolls of the regiment do not have addresses listed.

Privates

Payton Colwell, Champaign	Co I; died at New Orleans 23 Aug 1865
J. Clemans (Clements), Homer	Co K; died at sea 2 June 1865

Recruits

All men listed were from West Urbana.

Pvt. Dennis Jackson	Enl 15 Feb 1865
Pvt. George W. Johnson	Enl 15 Feb 1865
Pvt. William Kelley	Enl 15 Feb 1865
Pvt. Jerry Pinney	Enl 15 Feb 1865
Pvt. James Walker	Enl 15 Feb 1865

Champaign County Men in Other Regiments

Four black men are among those who recorded their military discharges in the records of Champaign County. The Soldiers Discharge Records of Champaign County are compiled in Chapter 23, and the reader should consult that chapter for further information on the men listed below.

Elijah Gibbs	Co H, 55th MA Inf
John Morse (Moss?)	Co H, 55th MA Inf
Jess E. Riley	Co K, 29th USCT
Larkin N. Walden	Co I, 55th MA Inf

Biographical Sketches

Information for the following biographical sketches was obtained from various sources, including United States census re-

cords, the newspaper files of The Urbana Free Library, and public records of Champaign County. The biographical sketch of Joseph Stocks was obtained from the records of Colonel Nodine Post No. 140, GAR.

James H. Bell was born on 1 May 1847 in Tennessee. During the Civil War he served in Company D, 29th USCT. In about 1867 he came to Illinois and lived in Champaign the rest of his life. He was a minister from 1872 to 1902. Bell died on his sixty-fourth birthday on 1 May 1911 of tuberculosis. The funeral was held on 4 May at the Salem Baptist Church, with interment at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.⁶

Elijah Gibbs was born in Morgan County, Alabama, about 1836 and came to Champaign in 1861. During the Civil War he served in Company H, 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. After the war he returned to Champaign and resided at the corner of University Avenue and Fourth Street. Gibbs died on 22 June 1876 and is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.⁷

David Johnson was born a slave in Prince William County, Virginia, on 11 May 1822. As a boy he was brought to Missouri by his owners, a family named Hose. About 1848 he married Harriet Harbison, and they became the parents of thirteen children. Johnson subsequently moved to Illinois and rented and worked on farms near Mattoon and Neoga. He and his family came to Champaign in 1863. During the Civil War, Johnson was a wagoner in the Union Army. At the end of the war he returned to Champaign and worked as a laborer, and after the death of his first wife, married Anna Washington. Johnson died on 9 November 1908. The funeral was held at Second Baptist Church in Champaign, with burial at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.⁸

George W. Johnson was born around 1831 in Missouri. During the Civil War he served in Company K, 118th USCT, a black regiment organized in Baltimore that participated in the siege of Petersburg and the occupation of Richmond. After the war Johnson moved to Champaign and worked as a day laborer. He died on 23 January 1885 and is buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.⁹

John C. Lewis (Louis) was born around 1832 in Canada. During the Civil War he served as a sergeant in Company D, 28th USCT. That regiment was organized at Indianapolis early in 1864 and served in the defenses of Washington and the siege of

Petersburg. It fought in the battle of the Crater and participated in the occupation of Richmond. The 28th also guarded Confederate prisoners at City Point, Virginia, and served in Texas during the summer of 1865. Lewis came to Urbana in 1865 and worked as a plasterer. He died of dropsy on 17 September 1886 and is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹⁰

Martin McDermit (McDermot) was born around 1847 in Arkansas. During the Civil War he served aboard the U.S. gunboat *Hastings*, a 293-ton, side-wheel vessel carrying eight guns. After the war he moved to Champaign County and for a time was a tenant farmer in Section 26 in Condit Township. He subsequently lived in Rantoul Township and then moved to 212 East Elm Street in Urbana. He operated a fruit stand for a time and also worked as a teamster and laborer. He died of typhoid fever at his home on 21 November 1898. Funeral services were conducted at the Bethel AME church under the auspices of the Masonic Order and Black Eagle Post No. 129, GAR, with interment at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹¹

John R. (James) Merrick was born around 1843-44. He served in Company I, 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. After the war he came to Urbana and worked as a laborer. He was a member of Black Eagle Post No. 129, GAR, in Urbana. Merrick died on 14 January 1890 of pneumonia resulting from influenza and is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹²

John C. Moss was born on 10 April 1842 in Columbus County, Kentucky. He served in Company H, 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. After the war he came to Champaign and opened a barbershop at 51 North Walnut Street. He was a member of Colonel Nodine Post No. 140, GAR. Moss died at his home at 204 East Church Street on 14 July 1906 due to rheumatism and hemorrhage of the lungs. The funeral was held at the AME Church, with burial at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹³

Samuel Persons was born on or about 31 May 1844 in Ohio. He served as a sergeant in Company F, 23rd USCT. Persons moved to Homer after the war and operated a barbershop. He died on 5 July 1893 of "lung fever" and is buried in the Homer GAR Cemetery.¹⁴

Ruff Phillips served in Company C, 48th Missouri Volunteers, and as a drummer in the 7th Illinois Cavalry. The 7th Illinois participated in operations in Tennessee and Mississippi, including the

famous Grierson's raid. After the war he moved to Champaign, where he was employed for a time by John Moss. He died of consumption in Danville on 16 February 1879 and is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹⁵

Jess (James) E. Riley was born in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, on or about 16 March 1834. He served in Company K, 29th USCT, during the Civil War. After the war he lived in Champaign and worked as a laborer. He died on 14 June 1892 and is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹⁶

Stephen Roey (Roy), born around 1842-45 in Tennessee, served in Company C, 110th USCT. That regiment was originally organized as the 2nd Alabama Colored Infantry and served in Tennessee and Northern Alabama doing garrison and railroad guard duty. In about 1873 he came to Champaign and was employed as a laborer. Roy died on 13 August 1893 as the result of a hernia. The funeral was held at the Second Baptist Church, with interment at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹⁷

Simon Ross, born in South Carolina around 1830, served in Company K, 49th USCT. That regiment was originally organized as the 11th Louisiana Infantry (African Descent) and performed garrison duty at Vicksburg. He also served in Company I, 11th USCT, for a time. After the war Ross came to Champaign and worked as a laborer. He died on 15 February 1883 and is buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.¹⁸

Joseph Stocks was born on 1 February 1841 in Tensas Parish, Louisiana. On 9 December 1863 he enlisted at Vicksburg as a private in Company H, 50th U.S. Colored Troops. He was discharged 20 March 1866, having attained the rank of first duty sergeant. Stocks was involved in action at Bruinsburg, Snyders Bluff, Fort Blakely, and Mobile. He was wounded in his eye at Fort Blakely and was hospitalized at Vicksburg and Jackson, Mississippi. Questioned about the hardships of his military service, Stocks described a hard march from Florida to Mobile, on which the troops were on the verge of starvation, having nothing to eat but half-cooked meat and parched corn, and on one occasion wading through neck-deep water for more than a mile. Joseph Stocks came to Champaign in about 1894, where he lived and worked as a day laborer until about 1906.¹⁹

Larkin H. Walden was born about 1830 in Tennessee. During the Civil War he served in Company I, 55th Massachusetts Volun-

teer Infantry. He came to Champaign about 1865 and was a laborer. Walden lived at 606 East Springfield Avenue and was one of the founders of Bethel AME Church. He died on 24 May 1900 of rheumatism and an abscess of the spine and is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.²⁰

James Walker was born around 1842 in Maryland. He served in Company K, 118th USCT, during the Civil War. That regiment was organized in Baltimore, Maryland, in October 1864 and participated in the siege of Petersburg and the occupation of Richmond. It also served at Brownsville and on the Rio Grande in Texas. After the war Walker came to Champaign and worked as a day laborer. He died on 1 May 1894 and is buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.²¹

William P. Winn was born in Tennessee around 1846 and served in Company D, 18th USCT, during the war. The 18th USCT was organized in Missouri in 1864 and participated in the battle of Nashville. It also guarded railroads at Bridgeport, Alabama, and at Chattanooga. After the war Winn moved to Monticello, where he worked as a barber. He was also a member of the Monticello GAR Post. He died in Monticello on 26 January 1901 and is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Urbana.²²