

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

African American Soldiers

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In the twenty-first century, Civil War classes always include a segment on African American soldiers; however, these men's service is often treated as a sidebar—an important point separate from the war's central narrative. One reason for this treatment, black soldiers played no role in some of the war's best-known battles, such as Antietam and Gettysburg. Moreover, Confederates won some of the best-known battles involving black soldiers, such as the assaults on Fort Wagner and Port Hudson, suggesting that African American military efforts were not important to Northern victory. This assessment reflects a limited understanding of how wars are won or lost; individual victories or defeats are less important than how any action fits into a larger strategic framework. African American soldiers mattered because their service advanced a broader and unstated strategic necessity—white Northerners accepting emancipation as a means of winning the war, if not as an end in and of itself.

Voluntary recruitment of black soldiers began in 1863, just as the North began the involuntary service of white soldiers—the draft. While Northern whites welcomed a new source of soldiers, many doubted black soldiers' willingness to fight. As a result, loyal citizens scrutinized African Americans' conduct in their first battles, victory or defeat mattered less than their fighting spirit. Moreover, during the last critical year, 1864, when casualties were at an all-time high and Northern morale at an all-time low, black soldiers fought some of their most critical battles. In that same year, the presidential election represented a referendum on the Lincoln presidency, including his decision to free and arm the slaves. It is unlikely that white Northerners, soldiers and civilians alike, would have supported either Lincoln or emancipation, if they believed that black soldiers were unwilling to fight for their own freedom.

At the beginning of the Civil War, few white Americans, Northerners or Southerners, believed that the United States would need black soldiers, particularly since this was supposed to be a white man's war. Southerners rejected recruiting African Americans for obvious reasons, though they were willing to use slave labor to support their military effort. Northerners' refused to use African Americans, freemen or slaves, because rejecting black recruits demonstrated that this was a war to preserve the Union only, slavery and all. A war for Union also reflected an early strategic necessity, keeping the slave-holding Border States in the Union. Moreover, Lincoln and his government knew that many loyal citizens in Free states rejected abolition as a war aim, particularly in the Midwest. War in a democracy requires the support of at the very least a majority of

its citizens. In 1861, a war for freedom would have been a war supported by the minority of loyal Unionists.¹

Moreover, most white Americans rejected black service early in the war because they did not believe these men would be an asset. White northerners shared white Southerners racial views. In their mind, African Americans were biologically inferior and incapable of being effective soldiers. Some Northerners disagreed; abolitionist army officers formed black regiments. In Kansas, James Lane, who fought for a free state in the Kansas as a “Jayhawker,” recruited the 1st Kansas (Colored). Similarly, in South Carolina, David Hunter armed slaves based on laws written to facilitate the recruitment of laborers. Among the first commanders of one of these units was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an abolitionist who provided financial and moral support to John Brown for his attack on Harpers Ferry. Ultimately, the need for more soldiers fighting for the Union and fewer slaves working for the Confederacy convinced many Northerners to accept African Americans in the Union Army.²

Ironically, the Confederate States of America’s use of slaves made the United States recruitment of African American soldiers more palatable. As early as November, 1861, the very first challenges to Union policy regarding slavery occurred when enslaved men and women escaped to Union lines. Federal law and the Constitution suggested that they should be returned to their masters. Many Northerners, particularly soldiers, rejected the role of slave catchers. General Benjamin Butler, commander at Fort Monroe, decided that these slaves were “property” and liable for seizure as enemy “contraband.” Initially, this applied to refugees working for the Confederate military, later it expanded to include all slaves of “rebel” masters. By the spring and summer of 1862, the use of slave labor by the Confederate military could not be ignored. During the Peninsula Campaign in spring and summer of 1862, white Northern soldiers witnessed slaves at work building fortifications that blocked their advance on Richmond. The ultimate defeat of the Union Army in this campaign, and the many bloody defeats that followed that summer, prompted a reassessment of Northerners war aims. Northerners who rejected emancipation as a war aim accepted it as a military measure to save the Union. While defeat prompted Northerners to consider emancipation, only victory allowed the U.S. government to act. In the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam, Lincoln issued an executive order that freed the slaves in areas considered in a state of rebellion—the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. One section of this order allowed the Army to begin recruiting slaves for military service. Ultimately, 180,000 African Americans served in the Union army and approximately 18,000 served in the Union Navy.³

¹ William C. Harris, *Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011); and Jacque Voegli, *Free but Not Equal: The Midwest Negro during the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

² Joseph Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle, the Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991) 6-10; and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment and Other Writings* with an introduction and notes by R.D. Madison (New York: Penguin, 1997).

³ Glenn David Brasher, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Chester G. Hearn,

While the story of these almost 200,000 soldiers and sailors appears to have been forgotten; this amnesia was really only true in the first half of the twentieth century. Pioneering black historians, such as William Wells Brown, Joseph Wilson, and George Washington Williams, told the story of black Civil War service in the decades after the Civil War. It was not until the turn of the century that Americans forgot African Americans' wartime sacrifices as part of a broader amnesia concerning the role of slaves and slavery in the Civil War. Many Americans accepted the idea that it had been an all-white brother's war fought for states rights on one side and Union on the other side. While forgotten for the first half of the twentieth century, with the notable exception of W.E. B. Dubois seminal work *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, by the second half of the century, some historians recovered the almost lost story of black Civil War service. Starting with Dudley Cornish's *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865*, a number of books in the 1950s and 1960s chronicled the "Negro's" Civil War. The use of the term "Negro" by distinguished historians, scholars like Benjamin Quarles and James McPherson, dates interest in black Civil War service to before the Americans replaced "Negro" with other terms, such as black or African American. More recently, Noah Trudeau's *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War 1862-1865* and William A. Dobak's, *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862-1867* explored the service of these men. In addition to these macro studies, African American soldiers have been the subject of a number of micro studies. Among the most innovative, Richard Reid's study of black soldiers in three North Carolina regiments, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era*. These more recent studies have been materially improved by recovering sources that document black voices; earlier studies often relied almost solely on white soldiers' views. Ira Berlin and his colleagues discovered African American soldiers' letters in the National Archives, Edward S. Redkey found others in contemporary black newspapers. Today, the historiography of black soldiers in the Civil War is robust and represents an important effort to place the African American experience at the center of Civil War studies.⁴

When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1963); and Allen C. Guezlo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

⁴ William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion His Heroism and His Fidelity* (1867; Reprint, New York: Citadel Press, 1971); George Washington Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion 1861-1865* (1886; Reprint, New York: Bergman, 1968); Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: African-American Soldiers in the War of Independence, the War of 1812 and the Civil War* (1890; Reprint, New York: DeCapo, 1994); W.E. B Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935; Reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1995); Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army 1861-1865* (1956; Reprint, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987) Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (1953; Reprint, New York: DeCapo, 1989); James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (1965; Reprint, New York: Vintage, 2003); Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy and Leslie S. Rowland. *The Black Military Experience*, 2d ser., Vol. 1 of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Noah Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War 1862-1865* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); John David Smith, ed. *Black Soldiers in Blue:*

In contrast, the black soldiers' story is not as well known in the popular memory of the Civil War. Many Americans learned about black Civil War soldiers in the movie *Glory*, an Oscar award-winning movie that portrays the recruitment, training, and first battles of the 54th Massachusetts—the first African American regiment recruited in a Northern state. While this movie represents a critical breakthrough in the popular memory of the war, it leaves the impression that the totality of the black military experience consisted of one regiment that was destroyed in one battle. In fact, the 54th was only one of more than one hundred black regiments and it was not a typical African American unit. While the state of Massachusetts organized three black regiments—the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Infantry and the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry and Connecticut recruited the 29th Connecticut Infantry, most black soldiers served in federal volunteer regiments—the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Colored regiments included the same mix of units found in the rest of the Union Army including over one hundred infantry regiments, cavalry units, heavy artillery and light artillery organizations, and an engineering unit. Moreover, *Glory* does not accurately depict the experience of this particular regiment, since it portrays its members as mostly former slaves. Instead, the unit was composed of free men from the North; among these recruits, were the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass' sons. Despite these flaws, *Glory* does an excellent job portraying important aspects of the broader African American soldier experience, including the type of discrimination suffered by black soldiers.⁵

Racial prejudice shaped the experience of black soldiers in state and federal units. Since most Americans believed that African Americans were inferior, they served in separate units commanded by white officers; only a handful of black soldiers received commissions. Second, to begin with African American soldiers earned less than their

African American Troops in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Howard C. Westwood, *Black Troops, White Commanders, and Freedmen During the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992); Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers during the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002); and William A. Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862-1867* (New York: Skyhorse, 2013). For studies of specific regiments, see Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Edward A. Miller, *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-Ninth U.S. Colored Infantry* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998); James M. Paradis, *Strike the Blow for Freedom: The 6th United States Colored Infantry in the Civil War* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Books, 1998); Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2008); Versalle Washington, *Eagles on Their Buttons A Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999). For sources that record black soldiers' voices, see James Henry Gooding, *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front*, Edited by Virginia M. Adams (New York: Warner Books, 1992); William Benjamin Gould, IV, ed. *Diary of a Civil War Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Sailor* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002); Noah Andre Trudeau, *Voices of the 55th: Letters from the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers, 1861-1865* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1996); George E. Stephens and Donald Yacovone, *A Voice of Thunder: The Civil War Letters of George E. Stephens* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Edwin S. Redkey, ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵Gary W. Gallagher, *Cause Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

white counterparts; the government equalized pay only after black soldiers and their white officers protested this injustice. Finally, the same racial attitudes that demanded that these soldiers prove their fitness for freedom made it more difficult; many USCT regiments served in support roles, either guarding supply lines or performing manual labor because white officials questioned their courage and fighting mettle.⁶

In contrast, African Americans who served in the Union Navy received better treatment, though they also served under white officers. In contrast, to their comrades on land, black sailors served on integrated ships alongside white sailors. If African American sailors ran afoul of military law, Union officials treated black sailor as well as their white counterparts in judicial proceedings. In contrast, the majority of Union soldiers executed for mutiny were African Americans. Integration at sea may have been possible because sailors in this era included a wide-variety of racial and ethnic groups. Ironically, people today know more about black military service, as opposed to naval service, because of segregation—all-black regiments facilitated identifying African American's wartime activities. In fact, only a careful examination of individual service records allowed scholars to determine how many African Americans served in the Civil War U.S. Navy.⁷

While the U.S. government has, at best, a mixed record on the treatment of African Americans, the same cannot be said for the Confederate government; Southern officials refused to treat these men in accordance with their status as enemy soldiers and sailors. Confederates threatened to hang their white officers, enslave black soldiers, and refused to treat captured African American as POWs. Sadly, Southerners did not stop at enslaving black soldiers; instead they murdered these men after they surrendered. The best known incident occurred at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. In April 1864, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest surrounded the garrison at Fort Pillow on the Mississippi River. He demanded the garrison's surrender and threatened to kill the fort's defenders if they refused to capitulate. The commander refused this demand; eventually Forrest captured this position. Eyewitnesses, including Southern soldiers, described the massacre of black and white soldiers after this defeat. Evidence that a massacre occurred at this location, the final casualty report listed twice as many killed as wounded; Civil War battles almost always featured more wounded than killed. Similarly, at the Battle of Poison Spring in Arkansas, many more black soldiers were killed than wounded. Black soldiers retaliated for this massacre at Jenkins Ferry, Arkansas, and gave no quarter to Confederate soldiers.⁸

⁶ Joseph Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle, the Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991).

⁷Michael Bennett. *Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Barbara Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009); and Steven Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens, African Americans in the Union Navy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); and Howard C. Westwood, *Black Troops, White Commanders and Freedmen during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 125.

⁸George S. Burkhardt, *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007); John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow: A Civil War Massacre, And Public*

Focusing on Fort Pillow and other such atrocities, suggests that black soldiers were victims; instead the record shows that they were victors, even if they did not always fight on the winning side in a particular battle. In the context of the Civil war, defeat in a single battle meant little; white Union troops had been defeated often enough by Southern soldiers that Northerners did not always expect victory. Instead, white Northerners evaluated black soldiers based on their courage and not as much on their competence. While fighting well was not as important as dying well, in their first two major battles, Port Hudson and Fort Wagner, African Americans proved that they could do both.

Black troops fought their first major battle at Port Hudson, Louisiana in 1863. Located south of Vicksburg, Port Hudson sat at a critical location on the Mississippi River; taking this fortification brought U.S forces one step closer to control of this vital artery. The African American units that participated in this campaign included both former slaves and free people of color from New Orleans. The Crescent City hosted a large free-black community, some of whom traced their ancestry back to French and Spanish Louisiana. Both before and during Confederate rule, some of these free men belonged to a volunteer militia; initially, they offered their services to the Confederate government. When U.S. forces captured New Orleans, some of these men offered their services to the Army. These militia men joined newly recruited black soldiers and become the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Louisiana (Colored) Infantry—better known as the Louisiana Native Guards.⁹

For many Native Guards, their first battle was their last. The 1st and 3rd Louisiana participated in one of the two assaults that punctuated the six-week siege at Port Hudson. Some died under the command of black officers. In May 1863, these units attacked Port Hudson as part of an ill-coordinated frontal assault on an entrenched position; in the Civil War, this rarely turned out well and this attack was no exception. According to a Wisconsin soldier who witnessed this charge, “Negroes fought like devils, they made five charges on a battery that there was not the slightest chance of taking, just to show our boys that they could and would fight.” This soldier believed that these men understood the importance of their blood sacrifice. The *New York Times* described the performance of these soldiers in an editorial on black soldiers. “This official testimony settles the question that the Negro race can fight with great prowess. Those black soldiers had never before been in any severe engagement. They were comparatively raw troops, and were yet subjected to the most awful ordeal that even veterans ever have to experience -- the charging upon fortifications through the crash of belching batteries. The men, white or black, who will not flinch from that, will flinch from nothing. It is no longer possible to doubt the bravery and steadiness of the colored race, when rightly led.” The editorial

Memory (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Andrew Ward, *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2005); Gregory J. W. Urwin ed., *Black Flag over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); and Mark K. Christ “*All Cut to Pieces and Gone to Hell*”: *The Civil War, Race Relations, and the Battle of Poison Spring* (Little Rock, AR: August House, 2003).

⁹James G. Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

writers' qualification, "when rightly led," may explain why the Army removed all African American officers from Native Guard regiments. As one black officer explained "prejudices [were] so strong against Colored Officers, that no matter what be their patriotism and their anxiety to fight for the flag of their native Land, they cannot do it with honor to themselves." Lack of education cannot be used as a reason for this removal, even when black officers passed a test given by an examining board they resigned their commands due to racial prejudice. It may have been this short-lived experiment in black leadership that explains why Port Hudson is not as well-known as other battles involving African American troops.¹⁰

While most people have never heard of Port Hudson, many know about black troops' second major battle at Fort Wagner in July 1863—dramatized in the movie *Glory*. In addition to its role introducing black Civil War soldiers into the popular memory of the war, the movie focuses on the larger strategic importance of African American soldiers and the need to convince racist white Northerners that these men would fight for their own freedom. The movie begins well before the unit's first major battle and highlights the many challenges an all-black regiment faced even before their first engagement, including racism and discrimination. In one scene, members of this unit respond to the Confederate government's refusal to recognize them as combatants. In another, they protest the fact that formerly enslaved black soldiers will receive less pay than white soldiers. After the 54th completed its training, it joined units attempting to capture Charleston, S.C. While much of this campaign consisted of siege warfare, surrounding the city with trenches and guns, the commander of U.S. forces around Charleston decided to frontally assault Fort Wagner—a key defensive position guarding the city. His plan assumed that a naval bombardment would soften the fort's defenses, making the attack possible. The 54th's white commander, Robert Gould Shaw, realized that his regiment needed to prove itself in combat. As a result, he requested permission to lead the attack in an assault along a very narrow strip of beach. Unfortunately, the artillery assault did little damage to the earthen works; when the barrage ended Confederate soldiers came out of their bunkers and fired on attacking U.S. soldiers. In the face of deadly artillery and small arms fire, the 54th made it as far as the fort before retreating. Ultimately, the regiment sustained almost fifty percent casualties; among the dead, Robert Gould Shaw. He fell near the fort and was buried in a mass grave with his men; usually each side returned senior officers who had been killed. Confederate Army officials tied this treatment to his status as the commander of a black regiment.¹¹

¹⁰Franklin D. Harding, *Letter to his Father*, June 14, 1863, *The Civil War and Northwest Wisconsin*, University of Wisconsin-River Falls Archives, <http://thecivilwarandnorthwestwisconsin.wordpress.com/2013/06/14/1863-june-14-our-regiment-is-horribly-cut-up-we-lost-our-colonel-and-most-of-the-line-officers/> (accessed January 3, 2014); "Negro Soldiers the Question Settled and its Consequences," *The New York Times*, June 11, 1863; Berlin et al., 306, 327; Edward Cunningham, *The Port Hudson Campaign, 1862-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); and Lawrence L. Hewitt, *Port Hudson: Confederate Bastion on the Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

¹¹ *Glory*, directed by Edward Zwick (1989; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD. For information on the Fifty Fourth and Shaw, see Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: History*

While Confederate officials likely believed that the defeat at Fort Wagner would discourage Northerners and harm the Union war effort; in reality, these and other losses may have had the opposite effect. George Washington Williams, a pioneering African American historian and Civil War veteran, explained this contradiction. “From a purely military standpoint the assault upon Fort Wagner was a failure, but it furnished the severest test of Negro valor and soldiership.” African American soldiers passed this test at a critical moment. The United States government had introduced the unpopular draft that had led to large-scale rioting in New York City in July 1863, which only ended when troops from Gettysburg arrived in New York and fired on the rioters. The success of what many considered an experiment, arming African American soldiers, represented as critical a turning point in the summer of 1863 as victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg.¹²

To some Northerners, the real test may not have been what freemen did but how former slaves performed in battle. No free black men participated in the Battle at Milliken’s Bend—a small engagement in the larger Vicksburg campaign. In June of 1863, Union officers stationed a small force of black and white soldiers at this bend in the Mississippi; Confederate soldiers attacked this small outpost. It was not, by Civil War standards, a large battle, it incurred about 800 casualties, its importance rests on composition of black units involved in the fight—untrained, former-slaves only recently recruited into the Union Army. Initially, this lack of training and surprise gave the Confederate forces an advantage and both black and white Federal soldiers retreated. Eventually, with the assistance of gunboat fire, Union forces rallied. A white soldier who commanded a company in newly-formed black regiment described the results of this battle to his aunt. “We had about 50 men killed in the regiment and 80 wounded, so you can judge of what part of the fight my company sustained. I never felt more grieved and sick at heart than when I saw how my brave soldiers had been slaughtered, one with six wounds, all the rest with two or three, none less than two wounds.” He cited the particular heroism of his non-commissioned officers, “Two of my colored sergeants were killed, both brave, noble men; always prompt, vigilant, and ready for the fray,” and the courage of his least experienced soldiers. “A boy I had cooking for me came and begged a gun when the rebels were advancing, and took his place with the company, and when we retook the breast-works I found him badly wounded with one gunshot and two bayonet wounds. A new recruit I had issued a gun to the day before the fight was found dead, with a firm grasp on his gun, the bayonet of which was broken in three pieces.” As a result of this battle he explained, “I never more wish to hear the expression, “The niggers won’t fight.” Some readers may question his sincerity since he used a racist

of the Fifty-fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865 (1894, Reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1995 Press, 1995); Peter Burchard, *One Gallant Rush: Robert Gould Shaw and his Brave Black Regiment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); Martin H. Blatt, Thomas J. Brown, and Donald Yacovone, eds. *Hope and Glory: Essays on the Legacy of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); and Russell Duncan, *Where Death and Glory Meet: Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Infantry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

¹² George Washington Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion 1861-1865*, Introduction by John David Smith, (1887, Reprint, New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 140; and Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

term; however, given the overall laudatory tone of his letter, he is likely echoing and refuting the words of those white men who questioned the fight mettle of black soldiers.

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This soldier knew that some doubted the wisdom of arming former slaves; the classical education of 19th century Americans explains some of these views. Herodotus, the Roman historian, tells of the Scythians' homecoming after a long campaign. In their absence, women at home had married slaves who attacked their returning masters. The Scythians brandished whips at the slaves and they surrendered, cowed by this reminder of their subordinate status. While few Northerners read the classics, racist attitudes led them to doubt African Americans' fighting spirit. Black soldiers had to overcome these views and convince white Northerners that they could and would fight for their freedom. These views may explain why the Battle at Milliken's Bend received more attention than one would expect in national newspapers and magazines. *Harper's Weekly* readers were informed of the grim nature of the battle. "It was a genuine bayonet charge, a hand-to-hand fight that has never occurred to any extent during this prolonged conflict. Upon both sides men were killed with the butts of muskets. White and black men were lying side by side, pierced by bayonets, and in some instances transfixed to the earth. In one instance, two men—one white and the other black—were found dead, side by side, each having the other's bayonet through his body." While the idea that black soldiers fought hard was critical, this description of a post battle scene might have been equally important to Northern whites. "One brave man took his former master prisoner, and brought him into camp with great gusto. A rebel prisoner made a particular request that his own [N]egroes should not be placed over him as a guard. Dame Fortune is capricious! His request was not granted." It is difficult to imagine white Northern soldiers and civilians supporting a war to end slavery if they believed that African Americans would be cowed by their old masters. The evolution of the war to one that did more than preserve the Union made black troops' first battles, small and large, on the Mississippi River or the Atlantic Coast, victories or defeats, a critical turning point in the Civil War.¹⁴

While there may be some disagreement on turning points in 1863, no one disputes that even after these critical engagements the United States fought almost two long years until final victory. During that period, African American soldiers participated in a number of battles across the various theaters of war; as far west as Oklahoma and as far east as the coast of North Carolina. The day before the defeat at Fort Wagner, African American soldiers emerged victorious at Honey Springs, Indian Territory, which is now part of Oklahoma. In this particular engagement, black soldiers fought alongside and against Native American soldiers making it the only battle in the Civil War in which most

¹³ Linda Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory* (Louisiana State University Press, 2013); and United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series III, volume 3, p. 452-3 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*).

¹⁴Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, with an introduction and notes by A.R. Burn (New York: Penguin, 1972), 271-272; and Theodore R. Davis "The Fight at Milliken's Bend," *Harper's Weekly*, 4 July 1863, Vol. 7, no. 340: 427.

soldiers were not white Americans. In the official report on the battle, the battle field commander singled out a black regiment for recognition. According to the commander of this fight, “The First Kansas (colored) (Later the 79th USCT) particularly distinguished itself; they fought like veterans, and preserved their line unbroken throughout the engagement. Their coolness and bravery I have never seen surpassed.” Two years later, in early 1865, black troops helped capture Fort Fisher, North Carolina; a battle featured in the recent movie, *Lincoln*. The capture of this installation led to the surrender of Wilmington, the last major Confederate port, and represents one of the last major victories of the war.¹⁵

While the war ended in 1865, the most critical year was 1864. Grant had ascended to command of the Union Army and launched simultaneous attacks on Confederate forces in the spring. Accompanying the main eastern Army, he directed a campaign focused on the destruction of Lee’s Army. The Overland Campaign, so named because it attacked Richmond via a land route, was the bloodiest six weeks of the war. Ultimately, this campaign ended when Union forces besieged Petersburg, thirty-miles south of Richmond. In the wake of these horrific casualties, Union morale plummeted. After tens of thousands of men dead and wounded, the Union Army was actually farther from Richmond in June of 1864 than it had been in June of 1862. Similarly, the western Union Armies had advanced as far as Atlanta, but Sherman’s Army had failed to take the city in a direct assault and, like Grant, besieged a Southern city. It is not surprising given this bloody stalemate that the election of 1864 became a referendum on the war. On one end of the political spectrum, Lincoln faced a challenge from the elements in his own party who believed that he was not radical enough; on the other, the 1864 Democratic convention approved a peace platform that demanded a negotiated settlement of the war. Northerners knew that a vote for Lincoln was a vote to continuing fighting until the end of the war, the restoration of the Union, and emancipation of the slaves. By the end of 1864, Northern fortunes had changed. Sherman occupied Atlanta and left it burning to march to the sea; the men who accompanied him and their eastern counterparts voted overwhelmingly for Lincoln who won a second term.¹⁶

In early 1864, Union soldiers would have found it difficult to imagine how the year would end; only months of hard fighting by black and white soldiers gave Lincoln the military victories he needed to win reelection. As early as February 1864, even before the Overland campaign began, black troops fought a critical battle in Olustee, Florida. The Union commander occupying Jacksonville decided to advance into Florida

¹⁵Trudeau, *Like Men*, 106-108; *O.R.*, I, 22, pt. 1, 449; *Lincoln*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (Glendale, CA: Dreamworks, 2012); and Rod Gragg, *Confederate Goliath: The Battle of Fort Fisher* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On; The Virginia Campaign, May-June 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Wilson Green, *The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign, Breaking the Backbone of Rebellion* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008); Albert E. Castel, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992) and; John David Smith, *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univeristy Press, 2013).

by heading west into the countryside. Union forces, including the 54th Massachusetts, the 8th USCT, and the 35th USCT, ran into a Confederate force that had been mobilized to stop this offensive. Because the Union commander attacked in piecemeal against entrenched troops, Confederate forces won. As always, whites American scrutinized black soldiers' performance; some units did better than others, reflecting their relative level of military experience. The inexperienced 8th USCT retreated in disorder as did several white units. In contrast, the 54th Massachusetts executed a controlled retreat under heavy fire that allowed the rest of the Northern forces to escape.¹⁷

A white officer of the 8th USCT, Lieutenant Oliver W. Norton, described the battle in letters sent to his family. "I shall give you more particularly my own ideas of the performance of our own men. I want to be true and I cannot endorse all that has been said of them. First, I think no battle was ever more wretchedly fought. I was going to say planned, but there was no plan." Despite this failure, the officer argues that "no new regiment ever went into their first fight in more unfavorable circumstances . . . no braver men ever faced an enemy" Norton explained that his unit was not allowed to get rid of their gear and load their weapons. Instead, the regiment marched at twice the usual pace "for half a mile, came under fire by the flank, [from their side, and] formed line with empty pieces under fire and, [and] before the men had loaded, many of them were shot down." In his view, "[The regiment] behaved as anyone acquainted with them would have expected. They were stunned, bewildered, and, as the balls came hissing past or crashing through heads, arms and legs, they curled to the ground like frightened sheep in a hailstorm." Eventually, the soldiers recovered and returned fire; however, Norton explains, "They did not know how to shoot with effect. Our regiment had been drilled too much for dress parade and too little for the field. They can march well, but they cannot shoot rapidly or with effect. Some of them can, but the greater part cannot. [The regiment's commander] had applied time and again for permission to practice his regiment in target firing, and been always refused." After the 8th USCT commander was killed, resistance collapsed and regiment retreated. The commander was not the only casualty; a number of black soldiers were left behind—wounded or captured. Norton describes his concern for these soldiers. "A flag of truce from the enemy brought the news that prisoners, black and white, were treated alike. I hope it is so, for I have sworn never to take a prisoner if my men left there were murdered." The officer's designation of black soldiers as "my men" demonstrated that shared military experiences changed some white soldiers' views of black soldiers. While a tactical defeat, Olustee was a strategic victory that advanced emancipation as a war aim. Lincoln specifically cited Olustee when defending his continued commitment to emancipation just before the 1864 election. "There have been men base enough to propose to me to return to slavery the black warriors of Port Hudson and Olustee [;] . . . Should I do so, I should deserved to be damned in time and eternity." While both of these battles were tactical defeats, they were

¹⁷ William Nulty, *Confederate Florida: The Road to Olustee* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990); Reed, 79-89; and Trudeau, *Like Men*, 137-151.

still strategic victories because they convinced Lincoln and other white Northerners that these “black warriors” were willing and able to fight for their freedom.¹⁸

Olustee was only the beginning of a decisive year for Union forces. The 8th USCT would fight other battles; it was just one of the many black regiments involved in the final campaigns around Petersburg and Richmond. These campaigns may not be as well-known today as the earlier battles in the East, such as those at Antietam and Gettysburg. Neglect of these later campaigns may be due to their grim character. Much of the time, soldiers lived in trenches with only a few pitched battles to break the stalemate, similar to the battles in World War I with none of the “romance” of the war’s earlier battles. Unfortunately, when historians and others slight these campaigns, they reinforce the historical amnesia that wrote black soldiers out of the all-white brothers’ war. This seems to be a modern phenomenon, black and white veterans in the decades after the war, understood the importance of these battles and the role black soldiers played in this critical campaign. One well-known study of regimental losses published in 1889 maintained that an attack by African American soldiers on Petersburg in June 1864 was “a brilliant success, [which resulted in the capture of] the line of works in its front and seven pieces of artillery.” The author maintained that “had the [rest of the Army] arrived in time to follow up the success of the colored troops, Petersburg would have been taken then.” The majority of African Americans who received the newly-created Medal of Honor received this recognition for their actions in the Petersburg campaign. Fourteen African American soldiers received the Medal of Honor at the Battle on New Market Heights, also known as Chaffin’s Farm.¹⁹

Despite black soldiers’ heroic actions, attempts to take Petersburg failed and instead, Union soldiers surrounded and besieged the city. To break this stalemate, Union soldiers exploded a mine underneath the Confederate line and created a large “Crater.” While this might have worked if executed properly, once again black soldiers suffered because of poor leadership. Originally, African Americans had been tasked with leading the assault; black units practiced going around the hole made by the explosion. Instead of black soldiers in the vanguard, senior officers ordered white soldiers to attack the gap in the line; untrained, these white units went into the hole and were trapped. Black soldiers sent into action to reinforce the first wave of Union troops ended up in the same desperate position. Eventually, the attack failed; but only after black and white units sustained large numbers of casualties. The murder of black soldiers was, once again, documented by Confederate witnesses. After the failure at the Crater, the Union Army settled in for a long siege that ended when Confederate forces could no longer hold onto the city. African Americans played an important role in the last battles;

¹⁸ Oliver W. Norton, *Army Letters, 1861-1865* (Chicago, Deming, 1903), 201-203; and “News of the Week,” *The Spectator*, No. 1891, September 24, 1864, 1087.

¹⁹ William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War* (1889, Reprint, Gulf Breeze, FL: eBooksDisk.com, 2002), 55; James S. Price, *The Battle of New Market Heights: Freedom Will be Theirs by the Sword* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011); and Melvin Claxton and Mark Puls, *Uncommon Valor: A Story of Race, Patriotism, and Glory in the Final Battles of the Civil War* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2006).

black units helped trapped Lee's army near Appomattox where his army surrendered. Similarly, Black soldiers participated in one of the last major actions out west playing a critical role in the destruction of John Bell Hood's Confederate Army of Tennessee at Nashville.²⁰

Despite their important part in the final war's final act, neither the black soldiers who trapped Lee's army, nor the African American regiments that destroyed Hood's army marched in the Grand Review of the Army in Washington D. C. celebrating Union victory at the end of the war. While this has been seen as race-based exclusion, it is also true that black troops had been given an important mission. Government Officials ordered an entire corps of black soldiers to the Texas border in response to France's interference in Mexican affairs. While the United States was distracted by the Civil War, Napoleon III installed a monarchy in Mexico, which led to a revolt by Mexican citizens who wanted a republican form of government. Eventually, the French withdrew and their puppet Emperor Maximilian was executed. Army officials demonstrated their faith in black soldiers by deploying them to this critical region. After occupation duty in Texas and other Southern states, African American soldiers went home. The question is to what; how were they treated, did their service matter?²¹

Some black veterans became very successful in post war America, Robert Pinn won the Medal of Honor at New Market Heights and later he became a lawyer, as did James Wolff, a black navy veteran. Like George Washington Williams, Joseph Wilson an African American Navy and Army veteran wrote very popular books about black Civil War soldiers. Others veterans stayed in the military. Four African American regiments served in the regular Army after the Civil War, two infantry regiments, the 24th and the 25th Infantry, and their better known cavalry counterparts, the 9th and 10th Cavalry. Other black veterans became ministers, while others worked as barbers, or skilled craftsmen. Limited educational opportunities and literacy meant that many worked as laborers. Many black veterans farmed their own land or shares owned by others. Some of these men, like their white comrades, were unable to work because of wartime diseases and injuries; these men received the same pensions as white veterans.²²

²⁰ Kevin M. Levin, *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012); William Marvel, *Lee's Last Retreat: The Flight to Appomattox* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Wiley Sword, *The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: Springfield, Franklin, and Nashville* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993). For a harrowing account of the Crater, see Freeman S. Bowley, *Honor in Command: Lt. Freeman S. Bowley's Civil War Service in the 30th United States Colored Infantry*, Edited by Keith P. Wilson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

²¹ For a discussion of the Grand Review and black soldiers, see Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 8-12; For more on the Mexican Civil War, see Mark E. Neely, *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²² Wilson, *The Black Phalanx*; Williams, *A history of the Negro Troops*; Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and Donald Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggle of Black Civil War Veterans* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). For more on African American in the post war army, see William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips, *The Black Regulars, 1866-1898* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); John H. Nankivell, *Buffalo Soldier Regiment: History of the Twenty-fifth Infantry*

Those who were able joined their white colleagues in veterans' organizations, including the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union Army's largest veterans' group. Some African American veterans belonged to all-black local organizations or posts—these grassroots organizations were similar to the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign War Posts today. Some of these men belonged to integrated local-posts alongside their white comrades. One reason for their acceptance, white soldiers remembered Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, Olustee, and Petersburg. Some of them had fought in these same battles. Sadly, the deeds of black soldiers are not as well known today as they were immediately after the war. Reminding Americans about black soldiers' Civil War service should be one of the most important priorities of the sesquicentennial.²³

Regiment 1869-1926 (1927, Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison, 2001) Garna L. Christian, *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas 1899-1917* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1995); William Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); and Marvin Fletcher's, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army, 1891-1917* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974).

²³ Gannon, *Won Cause*.