

Did Black Confederates Serve in Combat?

by Vernon R. Padgett, Ph.D. - Adjutant, California Division, SCV

Black Southern men served in the Confederate Army, and they served as soldiers. But did they fight in combat? Yes they did. The evidence is varied, and comes from many sources.

First, eyewitness testimony from Federal physician Louis Steiner, second, a report from Frederick Douglass; third, monuments reflecting black Confederate contributions, especially the unique work of Moses Ezekiel in Washington, D.C. Third, we see a sampling of combat reports of individual black Confederates, from a variety of sources, including the Official Records, and General Forrest's U.S. Congressional testimony regarding his 45 black slaves. Finally we review the Confederate Governmental recruitment and enlistment of black Southerners in the Confederate Army in March 1865-- and a few examples of their limited combat experience.

1. Eyewitness Testimony of Union Physician Louis Steiner

Dr. Lewis Steiner, Chief Inspector of the United States Sanitary Commission, observed General Stonewall Jackson's occupation of Frederick, Maryland, in 1862. He wrote:

Over 3,000 Negroes must be included in this number [of Confederate troops]. These were clad in all kinds of uniforms, not only in cast-off or captured United States uniforms, but in coats with Southern buttons, State buttons, etc. Most of the Negroes had arms, rifles, muskets, sabers, bowie knives, dirks, etc. ... and were manifestly an integral portion of the Southern Confederate Army (in Barrow, et al., 2001).

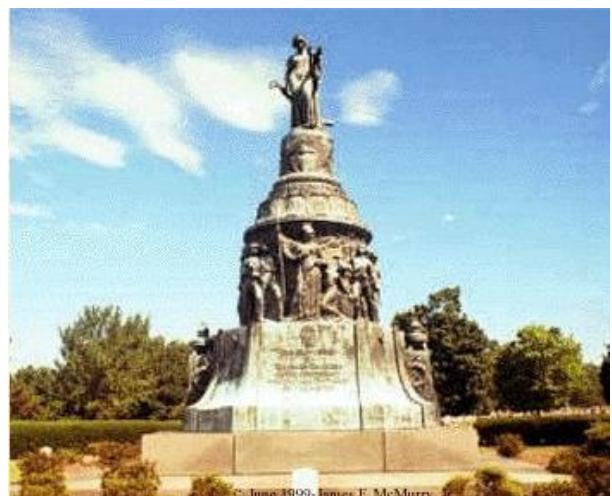
This description of men wearing shell jackets or coats and carrying weapons suggests soldiers. It does not appear indicative of cooks or musicians or body servants. Of course, we cannot know by the description, but it suggests 3,000 armed black Confederate soldiers.

2. Report of Frederick Douglass

"There are at the present moment many Colored men in the Confederate Army doing duty not only as cooks, servants and laborers, but real soldiers, having musket on their shoulders, and bullets in their pockets, ready to shoot down any loyal troops and do all that soldiers may do to destroy the Federal government and build up that of the rebels" (In Williams "On Black Confederates").

Douglass's report is clear: Black Southerners were fighting "as real soldiers."

3. Monuments to Black Confederates



The Confederate Monument, Arlington National Cemetery



Confederate Monument Encircled by Confederate Graves
Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, D.C.

The first military monument in the U.S. Capitol honoring an African-American soldier is the Confederate monument at Arlington National Cemetery. The monument was designed in 1914 by Moses Ezekiel, a Jewish Confederate. He wanted to correctly portray the “racial makeup” in the Confederate Army.

The Confederate Monument at Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, D.C.



**Frieze on the Confederate Monument, Arlington National Cemetery.
Note black soldier marching in ranks.**

Moses Jacob Ezekiel was the first Jewish cadet at the Virginia Military Institute. He was wounded in May 1864 at the Battle of New Market. As the first Jewish cadet at VMI, sculptor Ezekiel knew firsthand the nature of ethnic prejudice, and was for that reason a unique observer, and recorder, of the ethnic composition of the Confederate Army, observations which he recorded in the first military monument to honor a black American soldier in Washington, D.C. He is now buried at the base of the famous monument he created.

Enlargement of frieze of Confederate Monument, Arlington National Cemetery. Note black soldier in center and black woman at right. In 1900, a Confederate Section was authorized in Arlington National Cemetery. Confederate casualties from around the cemetery were gathered and re-interred in that Section. A circular frieze of 32 life-sized figures shows Southern soldiers going off to war.



**Black Confederate as depicted on the Frieze
of the Confederate Monument in Arlington**

Black Confederate soldier depicted marching in rank with white Confederate soldiers.

This is taken from the Confederate monument at Arlington National Cemetery. Designed by Moses Ezekiel, a Jewish Confederate, and erected in 1914. Ezekiel depicted the Confederate Army as he himself witnessed. As such, it is perhaps the first monument honoring a black American soldier. (Photo by Bob Crowell)

Confederate Monument at Arlington National Cemetery depicting a Confederate soldier entrusting his children to a slave.

While Confederate soldiers were away from their homes, Union soldiers frequently would victimize southern blacks in much the same ways as southern whites. Sometimes blacks experienced even worse treatment than whites, as Union officers often protected white women, but turned a blind eye when slave women were "ravaged" or abused. Photo by Bob Crowell.

In his statue, a black Confederate soldier is shown marching in step with white Confederate soldiers. Engraved in the stone, you can also see a white soldier giving his child to a black woman for protection.

4. Individual Accounts of Black Confederate Soldiers in Combat



Confederate soldier trusting his baby to his black slave before going off to war - as depicted on the Frieze of the Confederate Monument, Arlington National Cemetery

When we think of black Southerners who served in the armies of the Confederacy, we often think of them in the roles of teamsters, cooks, surgeon's assistants, nurses, shoemakers, blacksmiths, laborers, fortifications builders, and valets (most of these positions are now part of the modern military). But many blacks served in combat. Black Confederate Nim Wilkes said: "I was in every battle General Forrest fought after leaving Columbia ... I was mustered out at Gainesville (May 1865)" (Rollins, 1994).

One federal cavalry officer related how he was held under guard by a shotgun-wielding black who kept the weapon trained on the Yankee's head with unwavering concentration. "Here I had come South and was fighting to free this man," the disgusted major wrote in his diary. "If I had made one false move on my horse, he would have shot my head off" (Barrow et al., 2001, p. 43).

Private Louis Napoleon Nelson served the Confederate States of America at Shiloh, Lookout Mountain, Brice's Crossroads and Vicksburg as soldier and chaplain in the 7th Tennessee Cavalry, under Lt. General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Nelson was sent by his master to take care of his (master's) son. When the young Confederate was wounded, Nelson picked up his rifle and continued fighting against Northern aggression throughout the war. After the war, Nelson and his former master were best friends; their farms bordered each other (Winbush, 1996).

Col. Parkhurst's (Northern) Account of Forrest's Black Confederates: "The forces attacking my camp were the First Regiment Texas Rangers, a battalion of the First Georgia Rangers ... and quite a number of Negroes attached to the Texas and Georgia troops, who were armed and equipped, and took part in the several engagements with my forces during the day" (Lieutenant Colonel Parkhurst's Report (Ninth Michigan Infantry) on General Forrest's attack at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, July 13, 1862, in Official Records, Series I, Vol XVI, Part I, page 805).

The efforts of Jack, servant of an officer of the Thirteenth Arkansas Regiment, stands out as an act of heroism. Jack fought beside his master during the heat of battle. He fell seriously wounded but refused to be evacuated and continued to fire at the enemy. He later died in a hospital of his wounds sustained in the ranks of the Confederate army" (Memphis Avalanche, quoted in Charlotte Western Democrat, December 31, 1861).

At Brandy Station, Tom and Overton, two servants in the 12th Virginia Cavalry, picked up rifles discarded by Northerners and joined the 12th in a charge. They captured the black servant of a Union officer and marched him back to camp at gunpoint, where they held him prisoner. For two months, the Yankee servant waited upon the Southerners (Austerman, 1987, 47).

Levin Graham, a free colored man, was employed as a fifer, and attendant to Captain J. Welby Armstrong (2nd Tennessee). He refused to stay in camp when the regiment moved, and obtaining a musket and cartridges, went across the river with us. He fought manfully, and it is known that he killed four of the Yankees, from one of whom he took a Colt's revolver. He fought through the whole battle, and not a single man in our whole army fought better" (New Orleans Daily Crescent, 6 December 1861, cited in Rollins, 1994).

Black Confederate Levi Miller, born in Rockbridge County Virginia, was one of thousands of slaves who accompanied their owners to the war as a body servant. After nursing his master back to health from a near-fatal wounding in the Wilderness campaign, Miller was voted by the regiment to be a full-fledged soldier (Jordan, 1995).

Miller served the remainder of the war, exhibiting bravery in battles in Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. His former commander spoke highly of Miller's combat record, giving a riveting account of his performance at Spotsylvania Courthouse. "About 4 p.m., the enemy made a rushing charge," wrote Captain J. E. Anderson. "Levi Miller stood by my side-- and man never fought harder and better than he did-- and when the enemy tried to cross our little breastworks and we clubbed and bayoneted them off, no one used his bayonet with more skill, and effect, than Levi Miller. Captain Anderson wrote: "During the fight, the shout of my men was 'Give 'em hell, Lee!'" (Jordan, 1995).

In his letter of recommendation, Anderson dispelled any doubts as to whether Miller had fought for the South of his own free will. "He was in the Pennsylvania campaign, and at New Castle and Chambersburg he met several Negroes whom he knew, and who had run away from Virginia," wrote Anderson. "They tried to get Levi to desert-- but he would not" (Jordan, 1995).

After the war, Miller received a full pension from Virginia as a Confederate veteran. According to the Winchester Evening Star, "The pension was granted without trouble, and he had the distinction of drawing one of the largest amounts of any person in the state." Upon his death in 1921, the Evening Star published a front-page obituary under the headline "Levi Miller, Colored War Veteran." It was the sort of stirring tribute fit for a

local hero (Jordan, 1995).

Researcher Ervin Jordan (1995) cites another case of a valiant black Confederate, citing a diary that tells of an Afro-Confederate [who] became a local hero after being thrown into jail with nothing but bread and water for three days because of his support of the South and his refusal to work for the Union side ... The old man was made to chop wood with iron ball and chains attached to his arms and legs, but the curses of his jailers were unavailing: He stubbornly vowed to support the South until death.

The most telling account is from the most remarkable general officer of the War, Nathan B. Forrest.

General Forrest's Account of his 45 Black Confederates: "Better Confederates Did Not Live"

Both slaves and Free Men of Color served with Forrest's Escort, his Headquarters, and many other units under his command (Rollins, 1994). General Forrest took 45 slaves to war in 1861. He told a Congressional committee after the war:

I said to 45 colored fellows on my plantation that I was going into the army; and if they would go with me, if we got whipped they would be free anyhow, and that if we succeeded and slavery was perpetrated, if they would act faithfully with me to the end of the war, I would set them free. Eighteen months before the war closed I was satisfied that we were going to be defeated, and I gave those 45, or 44 of them, their free papers for fear I might be called.

In late August 1868, General Nathan Bedford Forrest gave an interview to a reporter. Forrest said of the black men who served with him: "... these boys stayed with me ... and better Confederates did not live" (Rollins, 1994).

5. The Confederate Government Enlists Black Soldiers, March 1865

In March 1865, the Confederate government began actively recruiting and enlisting black soldiers. One witness recorded that the streets of Richmond were filled with 10,000 Negroes who had been gathered at Camp Lee on the outskirts of Richmond ... (Rollins, 1994, p. 26). Richmond's vast hospitals were a prime source of recruits. One writer observed "the battalion from Camps Winder and Jackson, under the command of Dr. Chambliss, will parade on the square on Wednesday evening at 4 ½ o'clock. This is the first company of Negro Troops raised in Virginia," he noted. Thus a few black Southerners finally saw combat in authorized Confederate units in 1865. Not only did Chambliss' regiment fight against Sheridan, but other units were noted at various points in the retreat to Appomattox.

On April 4, 1865 (Amelia County, VA), a Confederate supply train was exclusively manned and guarded by black Infantry. When attacked by Federal Cavalry, they stood their ground and fought off the charge, but on the second charge they were overwhelmed and captured (Confederate Veteran, 1915, 404; 411).

A courier reported that on April 4th he saw black Confederates ... "all wore good gray uniforms and I was informed that they belonged to the only company of colored troops in the Confederate service, having been enlisted by Major Turner in Richmond. Their muskets were stacked ..." (Rollins, 1994, p. 27).

In an action on 7th April the 108th New York Infantry captured an armed black Confederate by the name of Tom Brophy; he was made a servant by the New Yorkers, and later lived in New York until his death in 1888 (Rollins, 1994, p. 28).

A book-length treatment of the topic of official black service in the Confederate Army is the excellent Gray and the Black: Confederate Debate on Emancipation by Robert F. Durden, (1972).

References

- Austermann, Wayne R. (1987). Virginia's Black Confederates. *Civil War Quarterly*, 8, 47.
- Barrow, C. K., & Segars, J. H., & R.B. Rosenburg, R.B. (Eds.) (2001). *Black Confederates*. Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company.
- Brewer, J. H. (1969). *The Confederate Negro: Virginia's craftsmen and military laborers, 1861-1865*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Confederate Veteran, 1915, 404; 411).
- Durden, R. F. (1972). *The Gray and the Black: The Confederate Debate on Emancipation*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Helsley, Alexia J. (1999). *South Carolina's African American Confederate Pensioners 1923-1925*. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 140 pages.
- Jordan, Jr., Ervin. (1995). *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*. University Press of Virginia, 447 pages.
- Oblatala, J.K. (1979). *The Unlikely Story of Negroes Who Were Loyal to Dixie*. Smithsonian, 9, page 94.
- Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, Series I, Vol. 17, Part II, p. 424.
- Quarles, Benjamin (1955). *The Negro in the Civil War*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Rollins, Richard, Ed. (1994). *Black Southerners in Gray: Essays on Afro-Americans in Confederate Armies*. Rank and File Publications, Redondo Beach, California, 172 pages.
- Segars, J. H. & Barrow, C. K., Eds. (2001). *Black Southerners in Confederate Armies*. Southern Lion Books, Atlanta, Georgia.
- Tennessee Colored Man's Pensions. Nashville Tennessee State Library and Archives.
- Thomas, Emory (1971). "Black Confederates: Slavery and Wartime" in *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, pp. 119-132.
- Wesley, C. H. (1919). The Employment of Negroes as Soldiers in the Confederate Army. *Journal of Negro History*, 4, 242.
- Wesley, C. H. (1927). *Negro Labor in the United States 1850 to 1925: A Study in American Economic History*. New York: Russell & Russell. Chapter 4: The Negro and the Civil War
- Wesley, C. H. (1937). *The Collapse of the Confederacy*. New York: Russell & Russell.
- Williams, Scott "On Black Confederates"
http://www.texasls.org/articles/reading_room/on_black_confederates_by_scott_w.htm

Winbush, Nelson (1996). Black Southern Heritage (video). Presentation delivered at Hollywood Performing Arts Center, 10 February 1996. Available for \$22 from Nelson Winbush, 1428 Grandview Blvd., Kissimmee, Florida 34744.

Posted by Gary at 9:51 AM 0 comments

[Email This](#)[Blog This!](#)[Share to Twitter](#)[Share to Facebook](#)

Labels: Black Confederates, Historical Controversy, Moses Ezekiel