



Did Blacks Serve in the Confederate Army as Soldiers?

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Blacks served by the thousands in the Confederate States Army. Many dismiss their service as that of servants—attached to the Army, but not soldiers in the Army. But black Southerners served as soldiers in the Confederate Army, not simply with that Army.

Evidence of the service of black Southerners as regular soldiers includes proclamations by Southern State governors, and authorizations by Southern State legislatures, calling specifically for black soldiers. Near the close of the War the Confederate Government enlisted thousands of slaves as regular Confederate soldiers.

Non-combat Job Classifications are Part of Today's Army

Black Southerners served as teamsters, cooks, musicians, nurses, hospital attendants, blacksmiths, hostlers, foragers, wheelwrights, and in other roles in the Army of the Confederate States of America. In the modern military, these same categories, or their modern equivalents, still exist. By today's standards these black Confederates were soldiers.

To the Confederate States Army, not the United States Army, goes the distinction of having the first black to minister to white troops. A Tennessee regiment had sought diligently for a chaplain, but had been unsuccessful until "Uncle Lewis," who accompanied the regiment, was asked to conduct a religious service. Soldiers were so pleased that they asked Lewis to serve as their chaplain, which he did from the time of Pittsburgh Landing to war's end. "He is heard with respectful attention and for earnestness, zeal, and sincerity, can be surpassed by none"-- Religious Herald, 10 Sept 1863. To the men of the regiment as well as to the editors of the Richmond newspaper, the service of the black chaplain was a matter of great pride (Barrow, 2001).

Black Southerners served as laborers on fortifications. The National Park Service, after a recent discovery, recognized that blacks were asked to help defend the city of Petersburg, Virginia, and were offered their freedom if they did so. Regardless of their official classification, black Americans performed support functions that in today's army would be classified as official military service. The successes of white Confederate troops

in battle was achieved only with the support of these loyal black Southerners (Williams, "On Black Confederates" website).

General Joe Johnston wrote in early 1864 to Senator Wigfall: "I propose to substitute slaves for all soldiers ... as cooks, engineer laborers, pioneers, or on any kind of work. Such details for this little army amount to more than 10,000 men. Negroes would serve for such purposes better than soldiers" (Vandiver, 1970, p. 264). Again, in today's army, these job classifications are filled by soldiers.

Applying today's standards to the past, blacks served as soldiers in the Confederate Army. But no historian applies modern standards to history. Let us turn to the question "did blacks serve as soldiers by the standards of 1861?"

Equal Treatment of Black and White Army: "Employees" Ordered by General Johnston

General Order Number 38, issued by Confederate General Braxton Bragg at Tullahoma, Tennessee, in January 1863, stated, "All employees of this army, black as well as white, shall receive the same rations, quarters, and medical treatment." The Confederate Army was providing equal treatment at a time when the U.S. Army discriminated against black men in the matter of pay (Barrow, et al. 2001). The Confederate government authorized equal pay for musicians, many of whom were black, in contrast to the Federal Army, in which musicians received lower pay. The Confederate Congress passed legislation requiring that black and white military bandmen receive the same pay. Free black musicians, cooks, soldiers and teamsters earned the same pay as white Confederate privates. This was not the case in the army of the United States (Barrow, et al., 2001).

Confederate Government Impressment

"The War Department was authorized to impress up to 20,000 blacks." State governors also drew on "private property" so that whites could fight more and dig less. ... The military also rented or impressed black men, slave and free, to cook and drive wagons and ambulances ... in several large hospitals more than one-half of the male nurses were black. Government and private manufacturers hired or rented black labor for skilled and unskilled work. In 1865, for example, 310 of 400 workers in the naval ordnance works at Selma, Alabama were black.

As the war wore on, the trend toward black labor became more pronounced. "Every black man employed meant one more available white soldier" (Thomas, 1971, pp. 119-132). Black Southerners served in roles now considered part of the modern army, as teamsters, etc.

Evidence of military service of blacks in the Confederacy appears in Southern states records:

The Tennessee Legislature Authorizes Male Persons of Color for Military Service

In June 1861, the Tennessee legislature authorized the governor to accept for military service all male persons of color between the ages of 15 and 50. By that time one Negro company from Nashville already had joined a white regiment in marching east to fight in Virginia (Wesley, 1927, p. 107; Barrow, 2001).

The 1st Louisiana Native Guards

In May 1861, Governor Thomas O. Moore of Louisiana issued a proclamation providing for the enrollment of free blacks in an all-black regiment with some black officers. By early 1862, nearly 3000 men had joined this regiment and other nearby units around New Orleans. Their officers were skilled tradesmen, craftsmen, and even a few slave owners. There were several sets of fathers and sons and sets of brothers in this regiment, and "all the males in the large Duphart family were members" (Rollins, 1994, pages 22-23). Black officers included:

Captain Noel Bachus, 40, a carpenter and landowner;

Captain Michael Duphart, a 62-year old wealthy shoemaker, and

Lt. Andre Cailloux, a cigar maker and boxer.

The 1st Louisiana Native Guards was a 1307 man regiment with some black officers. It included many of the leading individuals in the New Orleans black community. Like most Southern militia regiments early in the war, they provided their own arms, and uniforms. They spent the greater part of their Confederate service as Provost Guards, although there is some indication that part of the regiment saw action at Fort Jackson during the New Orleans campaign (Official Records, I, 6, 858).

Black Louisianans played a significant part in Louisiana's military history ever since the beginning of settlement. They fought for, and against, the French, the Spanish, the English, as well as with Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. By late 1861, about 3000 black Louisianans were enrolled in state troops and militia organizations, in the state, in service to the Confederate cause (Rollins, 1994, 22; 167-168).

Five Units of Confederate Blacks in Mobile, Alabama

Black Southerners in Mobile, Alabama took part in the defense of that city. In early 1862, a citizen wrote to the Government that he could organize a regiment of Creoles – a term for people of mixed blood— writing that “they are as true to the South as the pure white race. I can raise [a regiment] in a few days.” Black confederates were already organized and working on the city's defenses by early 1862, and in November 1862, the state legislature of Alabama passed an act authorizing the raising of troops of “mixed blood ... commonly known as Creoles” for the defense of the city. Major General Dabney Maury had written to the Adjutant General of the Confederacy, asking to enlist Creoles in Confederate service as artillerymen in the defense of Mobile. In August of 1864, the Confederate commander of Mobile formed a unit of cavalry with some blacks in it, and in October he ordered the city to enlist Creoles and free blacks; five different units of black troops were active in Mobile (Rollins, 1994, pp. 25-26).

Confederate Government Enlists Black Soldiers, March 1865

In March 1865, the Confederate government began actively recruiting and enlisting black soldiers. In early 1865 Robert E. Lee publicly advocated the enlistment of black troops, and in March the Confederate Congress authorized raising 300,000 new troops “irrespective of color.” General Ordinance No. 14 stated “no slave will be accepted unless with his own consent and with the approbation of his master by a written instrument conferring the rights of freedmen ...” (Official Record, IV, 3, 1161). Shortly after, 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. Negroes were armed and placed in trenches near Richmond” (Rollins, 1994, p. 26).

A book length treatment of this topic is the excellent *The Gray and the Black: Confederate Debate on Emancipation* by Robert F. Durden.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: Black Southerners served in the Confederate Army as soldiers.

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