

African Americans in the Civil War

About 178,000 African American soldiers served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Before 1862, those who sought to serve openly were turned away. However, some African Americans definitely served as members of their local units. Only as white volunteers became scarce were African Americans welcomed to enlist... The 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments were the first African American regiments mustered in the North, and they accepted recruits from other Northern states as well as escaped slaves.

About a quarter of all African Americans who enlisted were from the North; the rest were mostly former slaves from the South. As with all other African American units during the war, they were segregated and commanded by white officers. About 19,000 African Americans served in the U.S. Navy, which had always had black sailors. All in all, at the end of the war, 9% of about 2 million soldiers and sailors who were mustered out of the service were African Americans.

At first, African American soldiers were given noncombatant duty, building camps and roads, repairing rail lines, and driving wagons as white officers feared they would not do well in combat. One African American soldier wrote to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton that "we expected to be treated as men but we have been treated more like dogs." African Americans were originally paid \$10 per month regardless of rank. They mainly served as corporals and sergeants, although 111 were commissioned officers by the end of the war. They had \$3 per month deducted from their pay where white privates, in contrast, earned \$10 a month in addition to a \$3 clothing allowance, and higher ranks earned more money. The 54th Massachusetts regiments refused to accept any pay at all rather than an inferior wage, even when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts offered to make up the difference.



By the end of the war, African American soldiers had proven themselves, most spectacularly in the heroic but disastrous assault on Fort Wagner near Charleston, South Carolina, where two-thirds of the officers and half the men of the 54th Massachusetts lost their lives. Large numbers of African Americans were used in combat by Gen. Ulysses Grant in the war's final campaign against Richmond, and by Gen. George Thomas in the final battles of Franklin and Nashville against John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee. Over a fifth of the African American troops—36,000—died, 80% from disease, as opposed to 60% of the disease-related deaths of white soldiers, because of inferior camps, as well as due to the fact that more African Americans were in poorer health than their white comrades when they had enlisted. However, despite poor treatment, only about 5% of black soldiers as opposed to 15% of whites, deserted.

The war provided African Americans with some of the skills needed for civilian occupations. Sixteen percent became noncommissioned officers, and thus became leaders. Although there was no general policy, Northern abolitionists and white officers established schools to teach the mostly illiterate African American soldiers to read and write. The corporals and sergeants were taught and they, in turn, taught the privates. Their protests for equal pay and combat duty, along with the pride of marching and fighting alongside large numbers of other African Americans, instilled pride and a willingness to use their rights as citizens.

Most African Americans had enlisted in 1863 or later, and their three-year enlistments had not expired when the war ended. Thus, the Union regarded them as ideal occupation troops for the defeated South. Most African Americans resented this; they wanted to return to their families, correctly fearing that Southern whites not policed by Union troops would retaliate against African Americans. Those sent to Texas for garrison duty along the Mexican border mutinied as the United States was pressuring the French to leave that republic. African American troops in Jacksonville, Florida, mutinied and several were executed. The African American troops who remained on garrison duty in the South proved targets for the governments reconstituted by ex-Confederates that President Andrew Johnson allowed to take power.

After the war, African American veterans suffered more from poverty and unemployment than white veterans. Over four times as many black as white veterans were jobless in the immediate postwar era. The Freedmen's Bureau had to feed and clothe thousands of homeless African American veterans discharged in Washington, D.C. Largely because African American southerners did not obtain land at the end of the Civil War, most remained poor. Nevertheless, the 1890 census shows that there was a significant degree of geographic and economic mobility for African American veterans. Although most remained in their region of birth, there was a pronounced movement from the South to the North, and from the country to cities—in short, to places where opportunity and freedom would be greatest.

A smaller percentage of African American veterans received government pensions. This was even more true of widows because many African Americans did not legitimate their unions with official marriage ceremonies. Until 1890, veterans had to prove disability, and this required assembling witnesses and paperwork, notarizing documents, and traveling to pension offices. With average yearly incomes of

about \$250, many African Americans could not assemble the funds even to hire pension agents to take their cases. Others who did receive pensions often were obliged to take out loans at high rates, anticipating future checks.



Some African Americans used their war service to achieve distinguished careers. Most notable was Lewis Latimer, who served on USS *Massasoit* in the Union Navy and returned to his home city of Boston, where he learned mechanical drawing and later worked for Thomas A. Edison. Other well-regarded African Americans received patronage posts in the Republican Party. Sergeant William H. Carney of the 54th Massachusetts (pictured to the left) was one of 16 African Americans to win the Congressional Medal of Honor during the war...

Some African American veterans used their education to instruct their countrymen. John H. Murphy founded the *Baltimore Afro-American*, which at the time of his death in 1922 had the highest circulation of any African American newspaper on the East Coast. Alexander Augusta and Charles B. Purvis were African American medical professors at Howard University and founded the National Medical Society of the District of Columbia when white doctors would not admit them into the American Medical Association.

Other veterans saw migration as their solution to prejudice. Entitled to 160-acre homesteads, African American veterans were among the leaders of the "Exoduster" movement of Southern blacks to Kansas in 1879. Alfred Fairfax of Louisiana was the first African American member of the Kansas legislature. Henry McNeal Turner, chaplain of the First United States Colored Infantry, served in the Georgia state legislature and as postmaster of Macon before deciding African Americans could not live peaceably with dignity in the United States. A bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Turner never obtained many followers for his back-to-Africa movement because of lack of funds and reports of high death rates among those who emigrated...

Pencak, William. "African Americans in the Civil War: Need To Know." *American History*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 14 Oct. 2012.