

African Americans in Union-Occupied Eastern North Carolina during the Civil War ^[1]



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By Raelana Poteat; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023

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By mid-1862, less than a year after North Carolina left the Union, portions of the state were again under Federal control. The Union army first regained a toehold in the state by capturing Hatteras Island in August 1861 and Roanoke Island in February 1862. It then launched a campaign to gain control of areas on the mainland. On March 14, 1862, the army captured the city of New Bern. By the end of the spring of 1862, Union troops occupied much of eastern North Carolina north of the Cape Fear River.

North Carolina was thus a state divided between the control of two armies. Partial Union occupation affected all the citizens of the state in one way or another, but it was particularly important to enslaved African Americans who lived near the areas of occupation. As news of the Union army's advance spread, enslaved people in nearby Confederate-held territory began running away to cross army lines.

The enslaved people came into Union-occupied areas to gain their freedom. They also wanted to search for family members whom they had been separated from during slavery, and to find ways to support themselves and build new lives, free of slavery. They came for educational opportunities and religious freedom. Many schools that taught both children and adults sprang up behind Union lines. And African Americans quickly founded several new churches in occupied territory. Before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, enslaved people who crossed Union lines were technically not free. Federal officers, however, followed a policy of treating African American refugees as "contraband of war." This meant that enslaved people who came into army camps or Union-occupied territory became known as "contrabands" and could live under the army's protection without fear of being returned to their enslavers.

In the early spring of 1862, a Union official estimated that there were about 10,000 contrabands in occupied North Carolina. Of these, 7,500 were near New Bern; 1,000 were on Roanoke Island; and 1,500 were in the areas of Washington, Hatteras, and Beaufort. Most of these refugees came to the army with few possessions, needing food and shelter. As the number of formerly enslaved people seeking refuge with the army continued to grow, Horace James, the superintendent of Negro affairs in Federal-occupied North Carolina, began establishing contraband camps where people who had left their homes could be temporarily housed. The largest camp was the Trent River settlement, across the Trent River from New Bern. There were also camps at Roanoke Island, Washington, and Beaufort.

The Union army employed many of the refugees in various occupations. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the army also recruited contrabands, or freedmen, as they came to be known, from occupied areas of the state. These men served in the North Carolina African American Union regiments—the Thirty-fifth United States Colored Infantry, the Thirty-sixth United States Colored Infantry, the Thirty-seventh United States Colored Infantry, and the Fourteenth United States Colored Heavy Artillery. Freedmen who enlisted knew that they might be killed or wounded in battle like other soldiers. But they also knew that if they were captured, they could be returned to slavery or executed by Confederate forces.

Many male freedmen who did not join the Union army served the Federal forces in other ways. A select few were army scouts who risked their lives by traveling into Confederate territory to spy on troop movements and positions. Union official Vincent Colyer wrote of them, "Upwards of fifty volunteers of the best and most courageous, were kept constantly employed on the perilous but important duty of spies, scouts, and guides. In this work they were invaluable and almost indispensable. They frequently went from thirty to three hundred miles within the enemy lines; visiting his principal camps and most important posts, and bringing us back important and reliable information. They visited within the rebel lines Kingston [now Kinston], Goldsboro, Trenton, Onslow, Swansboro, Tarboro, and points on the Roanoke River: often on these errands barely escaping with their lives. They were pursued on several occasions by blood-hounds, two or three of them were taken prisoners; one of these was known to have been shot, and the fate of the others was not ascertained."

Many other freedmen worked for the army by building fortifications and bridges. Others chopped wood, drove wagons, or loaded and unloaded cargo. Colyer reported that while he was in charge of the freedmen, they built "three first-class earth-work forts" in New Bern, in Washington, and on Roanoke Island. Freedmen also constructed a large railroad bridge across the Trent River at New Bern, as well as several smaller bridges across creeks in the area. Many women who came into occupied areas supported the army by working as cooks and laundresses.

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