

African American Soldiers ^[1]

In 1862, President Lincoln's [Emancipation](#) ^[2] Proclamation opened the door for African Americans to [enlist](#) ^[3] in the Union Army. Although many had wanted to join the war effort earlier, they were prohibited from enlisting by a federal law dating back to 1792. President Lincoln had also feared that if he authorized their recruitment, border states would [secede](#) ^[4] from the Union. By the end of the war, approximately 180,000 African-American soldiers had joined the fight.

In addition to the problems of war faced by all soldiers, African-American soldiers faced additional difficulties created by racial prejudice. Although many served in the [infantry](#) ^[5] and [artillery](#) ^[6], discriminatory practices resulted in large numbers of African-American soldiers being assigned to perform non-combat, support duties as cooks, laborers, and teamsters. African-American soldiers were paid \$10 per month, from which \$3 was deducted for clothing. White soldiers were paid \$13 per month, from which no clothing allowance was deducted. If captured by the Confederate Army, African-American soldiers confronted a much greater threat than did their white counterparts.

In spite of their many hardships, African-American soldiers served the Union Army well and distinguished themselves in many battles. Of their service to the nation Frederick Douglass said, "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States." African-American soldiers comprised about 10 percent of the Union Army. It is estimated that one-third of all African Americans who enlisted lost their lives.

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For Teachers:

[Black Soldiers in the U.S. Military During the Civil War](#) ^[19] at the National Archives

[Grade 8: African American Troops in the Civil War at Carolina K-12](#) ^[20]

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[1st U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery](#) ^[25], article and audio courtesy of North Carolina Civil War Trails and the North Carolina Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

Primary Sources:

[War Department General Order 143: Creation of the U.S. Colored Troops \(1863\)](#) ^[26]

from the National Archives

TO COLORED MEN!

FREEDOM, Protection, Pay, and a Call to Military Duty!

On the 1st day of January, 1863, the President of the United States proclaimed FREEDOM to over THREE MILLIONS OF SLAVES. This decree is to be enforced by all the power of the Nation. On the 21st of July last he issued the following order:

PROTECTION OF COLORED TROOPS.

"WAR DEPARTMENT, ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,
WASHINGTON, July 21."

"General Order, No. 233.

"The following order of the President is published for the information and government of all concerned:—

EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON, July 30.

"It is the duty of every Government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color, or condition, and especially to those who are duly organized as soldiers in the public service. The law of nations, and the usages and customs of war, as carried on by civilized powers, permit no distinction as to color in the treatment of prisoners of war as public enemies. To sell or enslave any captured person on account of his color, is a relapse into barbarism, and a crime against the civilization of the age.

"The Government of the United States will give the same protection to all its soldiers, and if the enemy shall sell or enslave any one because of his color, the offense shall be punished by retaliation upon the enemy's prisoners in our possession. It is, therefore, ordered, for every soldier of the United States, killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy, or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works, and continued at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to prisoners of war.

"ABRAHAM LINCOLN."

"By order of the Secretary of War.

"E. D. TOWNSEND, Assistant Adjutant General."

That the President is in earnest the rebels soon began to find out, as witness the following order from his Secretary of War:

"WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON CITY, August 8, 1863.

"Sir: Your letter of the 24 inst., calling the attention of this Department to the cases of Orin H. Brown, William H. Johnston, and Wm. Wilson, three colored men captured on the gunboat Isaac Smith, has received consideration. This Department has directed that three rebel prisoners of South Carolina, if there be any such in our possession, and if not, three others, be confined in close custody and held as hostages for Brown, Johnston and Wilson, and that the fact be communicated to the rebel authorities at Richmond.

"Very respectfully your obedient servant,

"EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War.

"The Hon. GIDEON WELLES, Secretary of the Navy."

And retaliation will be our practice now—man for man—to the bitter end.

LETTER OF CHARLES SUMNER,

Written with reference to the Convention held at Poughkeepsie, July 15th and 16th, 1863, to promote Colored Enlistments.

BOSTON, July 13th, 1863.

"I doubt if, in times past, our country could have expected from colored men any patriotic service. Such service is the return for protection. But now that protection has begun, the service should begin also. Nor should relative rights and duties be weighed with nicety. It is enough that our country, aroused at last to a sense of justice, seeks to enrol colored men among its defenders.

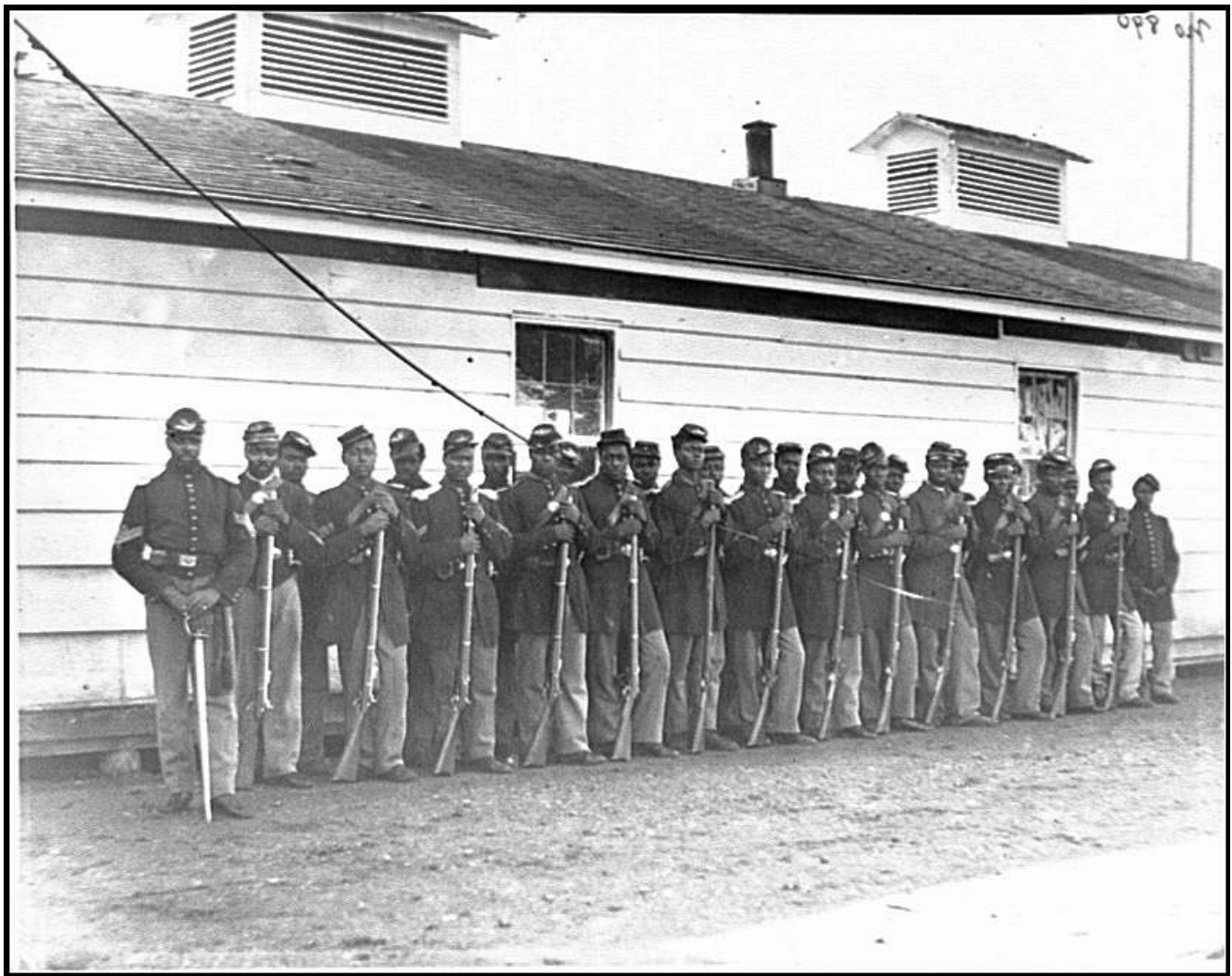
"If my counsels should reach such persons, I would say: enlist at once. Now is the day and now is the hour. Help to overcome your cruel enemies now battling against your country, and in this way you will surely overcome those other enemies hardly less cruel, here at home, who will still seek to degrade you. This is not the time to hesitate or to hingle. Do your duty to our country, and you will set an example of generous self-sacrifice which will conquer prejudice and open all hearts.

"Very faithfully yours,

"CHARLES SUMNER."

[27]

Broadside encouraging men of color to join the Union Army in 1863. Includes excerpts of relevant legislation and quotations from officials. Courtesy of the National Archives.



[28]

The soldiers of Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry. After the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in Union-occupied territory, African Americans in both North and South joined the Union army. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.

3 January 2018

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