

The Effects of Military Service on Black Civil War Veterans During Reconstruction

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The Civil War is undoubtedly one of the most well studied topics in American history, but for almost a century after Appomattox, historians virtually ignored the African-American soldiers who fought for the Union cause. By the end of the war nearly 180,000 black men wore the Union blue—about ten percent of the total force. During the decades of the civil rights era, interest in their battlefield exploits dramatically increased, and since then historians have answered many of the questions related to how they lived and died during the war.¹ However, historians have only recently begun to examine what happened to these men after the war, and one important question that remains to be fully answered is whether service in the Union army was generally an advantage or not, as these black Union veterans confronted the challenges of Reconstruction.

By studying African American veterans of the Civil War, we can gain valuable insight into the challenges all black southerners faced during Reconstruction. Of all the

¹ For more on black soldiers in the Civil War, see: Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1953); Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1987); James McPherson, *Marching Toward Freedom: The Negro in the Civil War, 1861-1865* (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967); Ira Berlin, et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867. Series II: The Black Military Experience* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Hondon B. Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1988); Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1990); Noah Andre Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (New York, N.Y.: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); John David Smith, ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Freedmen, ex-soldiers—often armed, well organized, disciplined, and possessing some money—had arguably the greatest potential among their peers to prosper, but this was often not the case. At the end of the Civil War, thousands of these men returned to a cultural landscape that was in turmoil, especially those who stayed in the South.² Although many black veterans dreamed of pursuing full citizenship and prosperity in a chastened ex-Confederacy, they and their families faced grinding poverty, difficulties locating relatives, and a resurgent white population willing to use violence to regain power. This essay briefly traces the path of the earlier scholarship, then delves into the current research—increasingly detailed and sophisticated—on the question of whether being a Yankee soldier helped or harmed southern black veterans, and finally suggests avenues for further research.

The Civil War was America’s great national cataclysm. Almost as many combatants died in that one war as all other American wars combined. Although much is known about the war’s famous battles, such as Gettysburg, and prominent generals, such as Grant and Lee, the story of the approximately 180,000 black soldiers who fought for the Union was virtually absent from the historical record till the middle of the twentieth century. Racism, of course, played a part in this, as well as the desire in the late 1800s for national reconciliation. As part of the bargain between white Americans to reunite North and South, historians downplayed, if not ignored, the role of slavery in causing the Civil War, and particularly ex-slaves-turned-soldiers in fighting the war against their former

² This essay will not trace the several thousand black soldiers that went westward and served as “Buffalo soldiers.” For a collection of essays and an extensive bibliography on this topic, see Bruce Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, eds., *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology*. College Station, Texas. Texas A&M University Press, 2007.

masters. As one price for reunion, black soldiers had to disappear from the historical record.

This field is understudied for some admittedly valid reasons. Civil War black soldiers are more difficult to research than white soldiers, because a significant majority of the blacks were illiterate, former slaves. Thus, they wrote very few letters, journals, or postwar memoirs. Simply identifying former slaves correctly is a significant hurdle. Slave owners often did not or would not tell them their birth date. The slaves often did not know their surname when they enlisted, so they might have used their master's name, a famous name like Washington, or simply adopted some other name they liked. Furthermore, some of the best records that do exist, pension files stored only in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., are tedious and time-consuming to access and digest. Many of these records are not yet on microfilm and must be photocopied by hand. All of this makes researching black veterans more tentative and difficult, but their stories can be teased out of sources more indirect than first person accounts like diaries. Despite problems of accessibility, pension applications and other military records are the key to this kind of research, as well as census data and other local, primary sources like newspapers and street address directories.

For decades after the Civil War historians did not even attempt an examination of black veterans. As the United States became more aware of racial injustice during the civil rights era of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, scholars became increasingly interested in reviving all aspects of forgotten African-American history, including the role of blacks as soldiers. Unsurprisingly, early studies had the task of simply reminding us of the existence of these troops, what battles they fought in, and how well they fought. In 1953 Benjamin Quarles,

a pioneer of twentieth century African-American history, was one of the first to tackle the subject in *The Negro in the Civil War*.

In the next several decades, although historians produced a flurry of excellent studies of black soldiers, few of them considered in any depth the fate of the soldiers after the war. One monumental collection of primary documents related to the experiences of black soldiers, called *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation...The Black Military Experience*, was published in 1982.³ In a chapter called “Home from the War: Discharged Black Soldiers,” Ira Berlin, et al., discuss some preliminary indications of the treatment black veterans experienced after discharge. Their evidence, although anecdotal, provides glimpses of not only the violence that often awaited black veterans from embittered, unreconstructed whites, but also the enhanced confidence, education, and leadership skills the black soldiers often returned with from the war. This book is an extremely compelling collection of primary documents, but because it is not a systematic study nor does it concentrate on one particular region or group of veterans, one must be hesitant to make claims about its universal applicability.

Other historians who do mention the postwar period often emphasize the advantages that military service sometimes conferred upon black veterans. Joseph Glatthaar, who examines the relationship between black soldiers and their white officers, notes simply that military service was sometimes “a springboard into politics” for black soldiers.⁴ One of the preeminent historians of the postwar period, Eric Foner, only briefly

³ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867. Series II: The Black Military Experience* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1990), 248.

touches on the fate of black veterans in his highly regarded tome, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*.⁵ Foner rightly points out that ex-soldiers could take deserved pride in fighting for and achieving freedom, and he cites the postwar success some black veterans had in politics, noting “the army flung open a door to advancement and respectability.”⁶ Foner, unfortunately, mentions little else about black veterans.

In the 1990s several histories of individual black regiments included small sections that traced certain aspects of the soldiers’ postwar careers. Versalle F. Washington, an officer in the U.S. army, wrapped up his study of an Ohio regiment of black soldiers with a few pages on their fate after the war.⁷ Washington notes that the war “did not bring many of them money or social status, but it brought them the opportunity to fight for their race’s freedom throughout the country, and it led to their right to vote.”⁸ Another history of a black regiment mentions postwar clashes of Louisiana black veterans with white rioters and difficulties collecting their pensions.⁹ In his book about white and black Civil War soldiers, historian Larry M. Logue devotes a few pages to the violence black veterans often encountered in the Reconstruction South and their difficulty finding jobs even in the victorious North.¹⁰

⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper's & Row, 1988).

⁶ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 9.

⁷ Versalle F. Washington, *Eagles on Their Buttons: A Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

⁸ Washington, 79.

⁹ James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), pp. 106 & 113.

¹⁰ Larry M. Logue, *To Appomattox and Beyond: The Civil War Soldier in Peace and War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), pp. 84 & 87.

My limited primary source research into this field has yielded tantalizing, if mostly anecdotal, evidence that, at least in one small town in the Mississippi River Valley, black soldiers cooperated and benefited from each others' support after the war.¹¹ Examining a regiment of black Union soldiers from Natchez, Mississippi, I was able to glean from both military and civilian records clues to the postwar condition of these ex-soldiers. Most of the men in the 6th United States Colored Troops, Heavy Artillery, were born into slavery and enlisted in the Union army when the Yankees captured Natchez in 1863. These ex-slaves-turned-soldiers served out their term of service in and around the city of Natchez mostly as garrison troops or mounted infantry.

After the war, fragmentary evidence contained in military and local, primary sources shows that these veterans carried the friendships and pride formed in the service into the Reconstruction era. Veterans of one Natchez regiment pooled their military bonuses and tried to buy a large plot of land for cooperative farming. Many of the 6th Heavy Artillery soldiers married into each others' families and some bought homes next to each other. Perhaps in the most dramatic example of the hold that the memory of their military service had on these men right up until their deaths was the large number of them who requested a military burial with their comrades in the National [Union] Cemetery at Natchez.¹² Designated exclusively for the burial of veterans, these cemeteries gave black soldiers a final opportunity to demonstrate their dedication to their comrades-in-arms by joining their ranks in death as they had in battle.

¹¹ Daniel William O'Sullivan, "The Lost History of the 6th U.S.C.T., Heavy Artillery" (master's thesis, C.S.U. Northridge, 2004).

¹² O'Sullivan, 56, 62, & 75.

Not until 2004 did a Civil War historian produce a full-length examination of the postwar plight of the black Union soldier.¹³ In *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* Donald Shaffer attempts a far-reaching answer to the question of how black veterans fared in the postwar period. Instead of concentrating on one or more black regiments from a specific locale, Shaffer takes a wider view by intensively studying a very large sampling of black veterans. The first part of his sample is African-American soldiers drawn from about 1,000 randomly selected military pension files, which ostensibly offers a “from the ground up” look at black veterans. The second sample consists of about 200 black veterans who went on to some prominence in politics after the war. By studying such a large cross section of both ordinary and extraordinary veterans, Shaffer has produced the most comprehensive study on this topic so far.

Rather than writing a typical chronological history, Shaffer uses his chapters to explore themes important to black veterans, such as politics, family and marriage, government aid, comradeship between the men, and how they remembered the war. Throughout the book, he emphasizes what he describes as these soldiers’ quest for “manhood,” typically the sense of self worth that came from achieving some measure of power over their environment—power that was denied them under slavery. While acknowledging the significant impediments of continuing racism by white Americans, Shaffer notes the tangible progress black veterans made toward suffrage and citizenship in terms of “manhood rights under the U.S. Constitution.”¹⁴

¹³ Donald R. Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004). Shaffer completed his doctoral dissertation, *Marching On: African-American Civil War Veterans in Postbellum America, 1865-1951* in 1996.

¹⁴ Shaffer, 3.

Shaffer convincingly argues that on balance military service in the Union army helped more than harmed African-American men in the Civil War era. Several real benefits accrued to these veterans, including the financial advantage of access to federal aid. One of Shaffer's most effective chapters looks at the federal assistance that veterans received, usually in the form of military claims, pensions, and federally supported veterans' homes. Shaffer argues, particularly in the case of pension payments, that this government largess was not an inconsiderable amount of money in hard times and gave black veterans a small advantage over their nonveteran fellow Freedmen.

Another benefit was the physical protection offered by fellow comrades-in-arms. After the war, black veterans sometimes settled near each other for mutual protection and economic support. In the 1880s a black veteran of the Union navy, Isaiah T. Montgomery, founded an all-African-American town in Mississippi called Mound Bayou. Although the settlement was short-lived for a variety of reasons, for a time it afforded its residents a measure of freedom from interference by the state's white population.¹⁵

According to Shaffer, less tangible, but equally important benefits also accrued to these black veterans. Serving in the military increased their politicization, better equipping them to fight the citizenship and enfranchisement battles of the postwar period. Many black veterans themselves went on to political careers in the Reconstruction era. Black Civil War veterans occupied some of the most powerful political offices achieved by any African Americans nationwide during this period.¹⁶

¹⁵ Shaffer, 86.

¹⁶ Shaffer, 74. For more on black officeholders, see Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

Shaffer notes that many of the veterans' gains were modest and temporary, and he qualifies his discussion of tangible gains by noting that, first, most gains quickly evaporated in the tumult of resurgent white power in the South, and, second, that service in the U.S. army often made ex-soldiers the special targets of postwar racial violence. In one dramatic example in the spring of 1866, white policemen fired upon black veterans recently discharged from a Union fort in Memphis, Tennessee. The black veterans, still possessing weapons, fired back, killing one white police officer. In the ensuing riot by white vigilantes, forty-six local African Americans were killed, seventy to eighty were injured, several black women were raped, and many black churches, schools, and houses were burned.¹⁷

Shaffer, although acknowledging that few black veterans ever achieved opportunities even approaching those routinely enjoyed by white Americans, nevertheless concludes his book on a hopeful note:

Hence, although these men did not win the battle for memory that they fought during their lifetimes, their efforts to articulate their experience ensured that it would be rediscovered and eventually become an important part of the mainstream history of the Civil War and a tool in the ongoing battle over the conflict's memory in present-day culture wars. These developments represent the ultimate triumph of the black veterans, much better than the victory, ambiguous at best, they enjoyed during their lifetimes.

A number of historians have commented on Donald Shaffer's contribution to this field, and the reviews are almost universally admiring of his work. Although Stuart McConnell describes the book as "the definitive study of African American Civil War veterans for some time," he regards the manliness theme as the main weakness of the book. He notes that the words "manly" and "unmanly" appear forty times in the first forty-three

¹⁷ Shaffer, 36-37.

pages, but that this concept is “entirely an author’s label—no black veteran is ever quoted using either term.”¹⁸ This criticism itself seems somewhat weak in that the pursuit of increased manliness would not require the black soldiers to ever use exactly those words to describe it. Gregory Mixon comments that the “work’s strengths are in the black visions and voices, utilization of pension records, and the problems of historical memory,” but that the sections on informal marriage practices and black naming patterns leave us with more questions than answers. “Did black men view black women as an impediment? Was not this too part of the ongoing conflict between blacks and whites over the world-view that each brought with them after the War for Black Liberation?” Despite these criticisms, I believe Shaffer’s book has advanced the debate over black veterans significantly and has suggested numerous avenues for further research.

One recent study of violence against blacks during Reconstruction is particularly ineffective. Kwando M. Kinshasa’s 2006 book, *Black Resistance to the Ku Klux Klan in the Wake of the Civil War*, fails to deliver in a number of ways on its promising title.¹⁹ Frustratingly, Kinshasa devotes very few pages to examining organized black militias in the postwar South. In a brief discussion on this topic, he fails to examine the composition or leadership of these militia units. It seems probable that many of the black paramilitary organizations of the type he mentions were at least trained, if not actually lead, by black veterans from the Union army. Kinshasa’s often opaque prose and syntax errors only

¹⁸ Stuart McConnell, “After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans,” *Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 1 (Feb. 2006): pp 197-198.

¹⁹ Kwando Mbiassi Kinshasa, *Black Resistance to the Ku Klux Klan in the Wake of the Civil War* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006).

heighten the frustration at finding so few references to black veterans in a book ostensibly about armed black resistance to resurgent white power during Reconstruction.

The most recent historian to effectively contribute to the debate concerning black soldiers after the Civil War is Richard M. Reid. Although he has long studied this topic,²⁰ this most recent book is his most ambitious effort yet concerning black veterans.²¹ Unlike Donald Shaffer's more geographically broad approach, in *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* Reid intensively studies just four black regiments from one state for insights into the larger questions. Reid justifies his smaller sample of black soldiers noting, "the activities, abilities, and utilization of these four regiments were sufficiently varied to encompass the experiences of most black soldiers."²²

Reid's analysis differs from Shaffer's in at least one important way. Although Shaffer concedes that black veterans eventually lost most of the significant early gains achieved from having served in the Union army, he maintains that on the whole most of them benefited at least initially from that service. Reid's research supports the position that not only did African-American soldiers realize "at least as many liabilities as benefits from their service," but that several of these regiments never accrued any advantage at all from serving as Yankee soldiers.²³ Indeed, military service seems to have been a distinct handicap for most of Reid's sample from the time they were discharged onward.

²⁰ See Richard M. Reid, "Black Experience in the Union Army: The Other Civil War," *Canadian Review of American Studies* [Canada] 21, no.2 (Fall 1990): 145-155, and "USCT Veterans in Post-Civil War North Carolina," in Smith, pp. 391-421.

²¹ Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

²² Reid, *Freedom for Themselves*, xiv.

²³ Reid, *Freedom for Themselves*, xvii.

Reid uses most of his book—seven of eight chapters—to investigate the recruitment, military conduct, family life, and postwar service for four black North Carolina Union regiments. He is careful to note at the beginning that, although conditions were often horrendous for these troops, the army offered at least the promise, if not the delivery, of an environment that was much more egalitarian than the bondage most of them had just left.²⁴ Unfortunately, unequal training and equipage between the four regiments—the first received adequate training and supplies, the second regiment received less of those things, the third and fourth even less—dramatically affected their wartime performance and, thus, the value of this service to the veterans after the war.

Reid's Chapter Eight examines the postwar experience of this group of North Carolina troops. He notes that many black soldiers learned to read and write during the war, and some went on to political careers. Large numbers of black veterans joined their local Grand Army of the Republic post and received the comradeship and modest benefits of this membership.²⁵ Many more, however, had difficulty competing for jobs, when they got out of the service. Not only were they mustered out years after the war ended, thus losing valuable opportunities to compete with those who did not fight, but injuries and illnesses they suffered during their service often hampered their usefulness as laborers. While it is true that the presence of often-armed black veterans prevented some white-on-black violence, black veterans were also the targets of white vigilantism.

Reid convincingly argues that for the four disparate regiments in his case study, postwar outcomes depended heavily upon wartime experiences, noting “[i]t would seem reasonable that the broader the men's wartime experience, the broader the range of

²⁴ Reid, *Freedom for Themselves*, 15.

²⁵ Reid, *Freedom for Themselves*, 308.

possibilities they would envision for their future.”²⁶ One representative example of this proposition is the number of the North Carolina veterans who went into politics after the war. Black, North Carolina troops were underrepresented in the political hierarchy, Reid asserts, because “the early black leadership was lighter-skinned, wealthier, more literate, and more inclined to have been free and to have resided in urban centers than the bulk of the black population... and “[m]ost of North Carolina’s USCT veterans were rural, black, and poor.”²⁷

Reid concludes by noting that in the end the diversity of experience of black soldiers, particularly this sample of North Carolina troops, “allowed white Americans to remember and interpret events in ways that reinforced and confirmed their preexisting biases.”²⁸ This group of four regiments had served honorably, but the gains they made from this service were most often more of personal pride in the memory of that service than financial or status improvements.

Donald Shaffer and Richard Reid have most successfully answered the question of the fate of black Civil War veterans using different research approaches, and both approaches have advantages. Shaffer’s broader, more comprehensive look at black soldiers is definitely needed, if historians are to draw meaningful conclusions about the vast numbers of black veterans as a whole. Intensive local studies, such as Reid’s, may be more useful in the short term as this field matures. Shaffer will soon release another book in collaboration with historian Elizabeth Regosin, which looks at the experiences of African Americans in slavery, during the war, and during Reconstruction by using the

²⁶ Reid, *Freedom for Themselves*, 300.

²⁷ Reid, *Freedom for Themselves*, 314.

²⁸ Reid, *Freedom for Themselves*, 325.

military pension files even more extensively.²⁹ The book will be released at the end of May 2008, and will no doubt make another important contribution to this literature.

Despite the admirable start that Shaffer, Reid, and others have made on this topic, many questions remain. For instance, how did military service affect a soldier's family? If the role of black men in the Civil War and Reconstruction is understudied, the role of black women is even more so.³⁰ Preliminary evidence suggests that the women associated with the 6th U.S.C.T. from Natchez not only struggled to overthrow their enslavement, but also had to keep their families safe and together at the same time.³¹ Tens of thousands of self-emancipated men, for instance, in the Mississippi River Valley chose to enlist in the Union army, but the slave owners often punished the family they left behind. If the soldiers brought their family with them when they enlisted, they risked re-capture, illness, or injury to their loved-ones. If the soldier died, wives and children sometimes had difficulty collecting their military benefits, because many of the same identification problems existed for the family as well.

Another question that remains unanswered is how the Lost Cause mythology of the Civil War contributed to the "loss" of this history. As resurgent white southerners crafted their intricate justification for losing the war—eventually with the complicity of northern whites—was the history of black men in blue uniforms intentionally purged from the

²⁹ Elizabeth Regosin, and Donald Shaffer, *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

³⁰ Two excellent studies are Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), and Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Families & Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

³¹ O'Sullivan, 33.

narrative? If so, it was accomplished in the face of considerable ongoing enthusiasm by black veterans for honoring and remembering their own service. Many black soldiers lived well into the twentieth century, and actively participated in their local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, a relatively desegregated Union veteran organization. Even in 2008, though, monuments to black soldiers are rare. Only recently did the National Park at Vicksburg, Mississippi, erect a statue honoring their service. What cultural mechanisms did the unreconstructed whites in places like Natchez, Mississippi, use to mute the living proof—black veterans—of this uniquely American narrative? The field of memory and the Civil War is ripe with possibility regarding African-American veterans.

The remarkable scholarship of Shaffer and Reid is, of course, not the end of research into the plight of post-Civil War black soldiers, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning. Much work remains to be done by historians interested in African-American soldiers of the Civil War. Despite the numerous volumes already written about their wartime experience, their postwar history still needs to be expanded upon. Civil War pension records at the National Archives contain an underused treasure of first-person accounts of the struggles black soldiers grappled with during Reconstruction in the South. Local records, such as those in small towns like Natchez, lie in wait of some intrepid student of history to mine their riches. The forgotten history of black Civil War soldiers has yet to be fully remembered by Americans.

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