

Educator Resource

Civil War to Civil Rights: Military

Dates & Eras Civil War

Themes

Military,
African
Americans,
Soldiers,
Confederate
Army,
Union Army,
Civil War to
Civil Rights

Grades

5–7

Standards

VS.7 c,
USI.9

History Overview

During the American Civil War, African-Americans, both enslaved and free, contributed to both the United States and Confederate States Armies.

Even before the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, many enslaved African-Americans sought freedom by following the U.S. Army or seeking refuge in U.S. controlled fortifications. There many found work. Some women and men provided labor but it wouldn't be until after 1862 that the U.S. Army began organizing African-American Regiments for military service known as the United States Colored Troops (USCTs). Both free and formerly enslaved people enlisted in the U.S. Army and Navy. African-American Regiments were composed of African-American enlisted men and non-commissioned officers serving under White commissioned officers. In these early Regiments, African-American men were often used for garrison duty for fortifications and captured Southern towns, as prison guards, teamsters. Later, USCT Regiments served as combat troops. Some, like the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, gained fame throughout the country.

African-Americans also performed a multitude of tasks for Confederate soldiers, though they did not serve in a direct combat role. White Confederate soldiers of means brought along enslaved people who cooked, cleaned, and performed other duties for the mess (a mess is a group of about 5-10 soldiers). These enslaved people often were tasked with returning home to take mail and retrieve packages. In the Confederate Army, enslaved African-Americans labored as ship workers, laborers, cooks, and camp workers. The Confederate government used both enslaved and free African-Americans to build fortifications around cities such as Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia, and Wilmington, North Carolina. The Confederate relied on enslaved African Americans to raise crops and provide labor for the army.

****A Note on Language:** In some of the provided sources, students might come across words that are offensive to many people today. It's important to acknowledge the words (since the students will notice) with a reminder that language evolves over time--the term "African-American" was not in common usage 150 years ago. These words can be used to hurt people today, so we remind students to leave them in the historical source.**

Resources

[US 54th Massachusetts Litograph](#)

[E.W. Smith Letter and
Transcription](#)

Additional Links

[LOC Image 1](#)

[LOC Image 2](#)

Suggested Questions

- 1.** Describe the letter from EW Smith. What does he say about his experiences in the war? How does he describe the United States Colored Troops.
- 2.** Explain the types of jobs African Americans did for the Confederate Army. What can the pictures tell us about their experiences.
- 3.** Compare and contrast the experiences of African Americans serving in the Confederate Army versus the United States Army.

Suggested Activities

- 1.** Write an essay from the African American Army cook's point of view. The students should use the background of the picture to reflect on life at the camp for this individual. Students could develop this project further researching other primary sources about what it was like to be a civilian traveling with the army.
- 2.** Have the students watch this video about the Massachusetts 54th regiment. Allow the students to work in groups for about 20-30 minutes in order to compare and contrast the experience of African Americans in the Union Army and the Confederate Army. After completing this activity, the students could also compare and contrast the experience of white soldiers in the army versus black soldiers in the army during the Civil War.

Lithograph of US 54th Massachusetts Regiment



E.W. Smith Letter and transcription

ago he was your's mother I think I
 and visit the Army of the Potomac this
 summer if I can get away - George
 and Margaret are getting along well I had
 a letter from them a short time ago - what
 would you think of your brother's system of
 Commission in a Colonel Regt. how all the
 folks at home a general thing like Colonel before
 a part with you could see a Regt of them
 and if they had their skills would be improved
 but know that what they were when - subtraction
 my will - they are very ignorant - they was at
 the time about 100 colored troops has paid out
 of that it doesn't appear there were ten men
 that could read or write - most of the colored
 men lives and they are all caused for by the
 South their masters must hire them and
 of course the darker will not work for their
 then are not a great many here now at home
 exhibited and so on you will see a great
 report of them when they must be able
 you should hear them all about their trials
 while in bondage - it is sorrowful and will
 convince any one of the baseness of the institution
 but there has a bright day dawned for them and
 we are in our land all out is united with great
 strength will digger their white has done
 at all time I would like to see you and have
 a good time my mother is well now and there and
 to a my change of health - but we hope
 to meet some day and then have a nice time
 Remember me kindly to Maggie Garrison and
 all my friends - I read out say how much I could
 have enjoyed your party - it must have been grand
 coming by friends are here and they ought - highest
 do thank & love and affection of those they are to
 open it but that I don't and we don't know
 but we will - you are things - think a very little
 share for yourself but not so - with some few more
 E. W. Smith

Talks of home and
 without home

Drummond Wood Vol
 March 7th 1864

Dear Brother Willie

I received your
 very kind letter some time ago but had
 been so busy that I did not have
 any time for writing till now
 as at the close of the month we
 make out all reports we could in
 a place like this it requires a
 great many - but we are through
 now and will have some rest - however
 we will likely not remain here
 a great while our Regt. has been
 released and is now at Fort Mifflin
 but as the Q. M. has charge of all
 the Q. M. stores in this place cannot
 go until some one takes his place
 that may be soon and may not be for
 some time - we have been having a
 fine time here and if we could



remain for six months I don't think
we would be easily taken away. This
is certainly a delightful place. The
country is level and the soil well adapted
for raising Potatoes Corn &c. and some
Cotton and I would venture to say if
I had a Factory here could make cotton
in a short time but the inhabitants have
waited so long in their Slaves for shipping
and now they are gone and the owners
don't know how it works some of them
offer very good chances to rent and if
I was a married man don't know
but that I would accept I have been
thinking seriously about it. It is a
lot to do a general thing on my side
a great many of them are doctors and
even among themselves seem jealous of
each other. a great deal of the property
is owned by such as the Sons of
Bellingham &c. who govern are the
T. S. Co. although they seem distant when
you visit them they are extremely hospitable

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and by the way I have formed the
acquaintance of the sons of the fair
daughters of the South and must say
there are some of them perfect ladies
and one of them told me last evening
that she was not afraid of a Yankee
but she was at one time she thought
there are some fine fellows among
them. never mind we will make them
Girls out of them you had better let
Mr. Alder look out for the C. W.
give him warning to keep his heart
locked up against the fair ones of the South
if he knew I was writing this he would
give me justice. Well I am
very sorry I cannot do anything for
the ladies of your country but by all means
give them my address you know it has
to get letters and I may get some post
out of it I do I will let you know when
you see any of the Brothers give them
my best wishes and kind regards
I had a letter from Charles a few days

Drummondtown Va

March 7th, 1864

I received your very kind letter some time ago but have been so busy that I did not have any time for writing letters. You see at the close of the month we make out all reports & in a place like this it requires a great many. But we are through now and will have some rest. However we will be likely not remain here a great while our Regt. has been releaved and is not at Fort Monroe but as the [Quartermaster] has charge of all the Q.M. stores on this shore cannot go until someone takes his place that may soon and may not be for some time. We have been having a fine time here and if we would remain for six months I don't think we would be [easily] taken away. This is certainly a delightful place the country is level and the soil well adapted for raising Potatoes Corn Oats—and even Cotton and I would venture to say if I had a farm here could make a fortune in a short time. But in the inhabitants have trusted to long in their slaves for a living and now they are gone and the owners dont know how to work some of them offer very good chances to rent and if I was a married man dont know but that I would accept I have been thinking serious about it. The inhabitants [as] a general thing are very selfish a great many of them aristocrats and even among themselves seem jealous of each other. A great deal of the property is owned by such as the Wises Winders Nottinghams &c, who you know are the FFVs [First Families of Virginia] although they seem distant when you meet them they are extremely hospitable.

Any by the way I have formed the acquaintance of some of the fair Daughters of the South and must say there are some of them perfect Ladies and one of them told me last evening that she was not afraid of a Yankee but she was at one time she thinks there are some fine fellows among them. Never mind we will make Union Girls out of them. You had better tell Mrs Elder to look out for the Q.M. give him warning to keep his heart locked up against the fair ones of the South if he know I was writing this he would give me a jossen [“joshin”]. Well [Nannie?] I am very sorry I cannot do something for the Ladies of your country but by all means give them my address you know I love to get letters and I may get some good ones if I do I will let you know. When you see any of the Brookvilles, give them my best wishes and kind regards. I had a letter from Charles a few days ago he was quite well. I think I will visit the Army of the Potomac this summer if I can get away. George and Margaret are getting along well I had a letter from them a short time ago. What would you think of your Brother getting a commission in a Colored Regt. How do they folks at home a general thing like Colored Troops I just wish you could see a Regt. of them drill if they had their backs turned you would not know but what they were white. I like them very well. They are very ignorant. There was at one time about 800 Colored Troops here and out of that [number] I don't suppose they were ten men that could read or write. Most of the soldiers have wives and they are call cared for by the Govt. their masters will not hire them and of course the darkies will not work for them. There are not a great many here now all have enlisted and I'm sure you will hear a good report of them when they meet the Rebels. You should hear them talk about their trials while in Bondage it is sorrowful and will convinve anyone of the sinfulness of the institution but there has a brighter day dawned for them ere long our land will not be cursed with foul slavery. Well Maggie Charlie + [Eddie?] how do you all do how I would like to see you all and have a good time my mouth is well and there wood not be any danger of hurting me. But we hope to meet some day and there have a nice time.

Remember me kindly to Maggie [Garner?] and all my friends. I had not say how much I would have enjoyed your party. It must have been grand. Among my friends are Alex and May [Moffat?]. Miss and Dr. Barber and Lady miss Rubison if that's the way to spell it. Mr & Mrs Elders and almost innumerable [number] of others. You will think there is a very little share for yourselves but not so. Write soon. Your Loving Brother.

E.W. Smith