

Educator Resource

The United States Colored Troops

**Dates &
Eras** 1863
1864

Themes Battles,
Generals,
African
Americans,
Soldiers

Grades 5–7

Standards VS.7
USI.9
VUS.7;
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.
RH.6-8.4,5,6

History Overview

When the American Civil War began, African-American men wanted to join the fight; however, neither the United States nor the Confederate States would accept them as soldiers. Although African-American men were not allowed in the military, they were a critical behind-the-scenes workforce. In the South, enslaved people were forced to dig trenches, built fortifications, work in hospitals and factories, and serve as teamsters (wagon drivers). As the United States Army occupied areas of the South, they began to employ the formerly enslaved to do similar types of work.

In July of 1862, Congress granted the first official authorization of African-Americans in the military with the Second Confiscation and Militia Act. Five Regiments were formed. One of these was the 1st South Carolina Volunteers. After the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, the United States Colored Troops (USCTs) were formed, and the 1st South Carolina Volunteers became the 33rd USCTs.

Susie King Taylor, a young woman who had formerly been enslaved, enrolled as a laundress for the 33rd. After the war, she became the only Black woman to write about her time with the Army.

Acceptance did not come easily for African-American soldiers. Subject to constant discrimination, they were segregated from White soldiers, paid less, and were given the most menial and laborious tasks such as constructing fortifications, building roads, and collecting firewood. Commanded by White officers, these soldiers were treated like laborers and suffered the prejudice of Northern White soldiers. Blamed by some soldiers as being the cause of the war, African-American troops weathered dangers from friend and foe. As the USCTs were given the chance to fight and gained more combat experience, White troops began to respect their bravery and valor.

In all, approximately 180,000 African-American men served in the United States Colored Troops. They fought in 39 major engagements and 410 lesser actions. Sixteen men who served in the USCTs received the Medal of Honor for courage and bravery under fire.

Featured here are two artifacts (a letter as well as an image of a Confederate flag) that can be used to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of African-American soldiers during the war. Both are from the Battle of the Crater, which was fought in Petersburg, Virginia, on July 30, 1864. (Note: In the letter, Anthony Sydnor Barksdale writes of the slaughter of USCTs and uses the word “negrows” several times. The Battle of the Crater is an extremely controversial event. Atrocities were committed as defenseless Black and White soldiers were slaughtered at various times. Be prepared to deal with these issues as well as the language in the letter.)



Resources

[Letter from Anthony Sydnor Barksdale to his sister](#)

[Barksdale Letter Transcription](#)

[Flag of the 49th North Carolina Infantry](#)

Additional Links

[Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers by Susie King Taylor](#)

[Massachusetts Historical Society](#)

[Encyclopedia Virginia](#)

[Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History](#)

[Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division](#)

[The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](#)

Suggested Questions

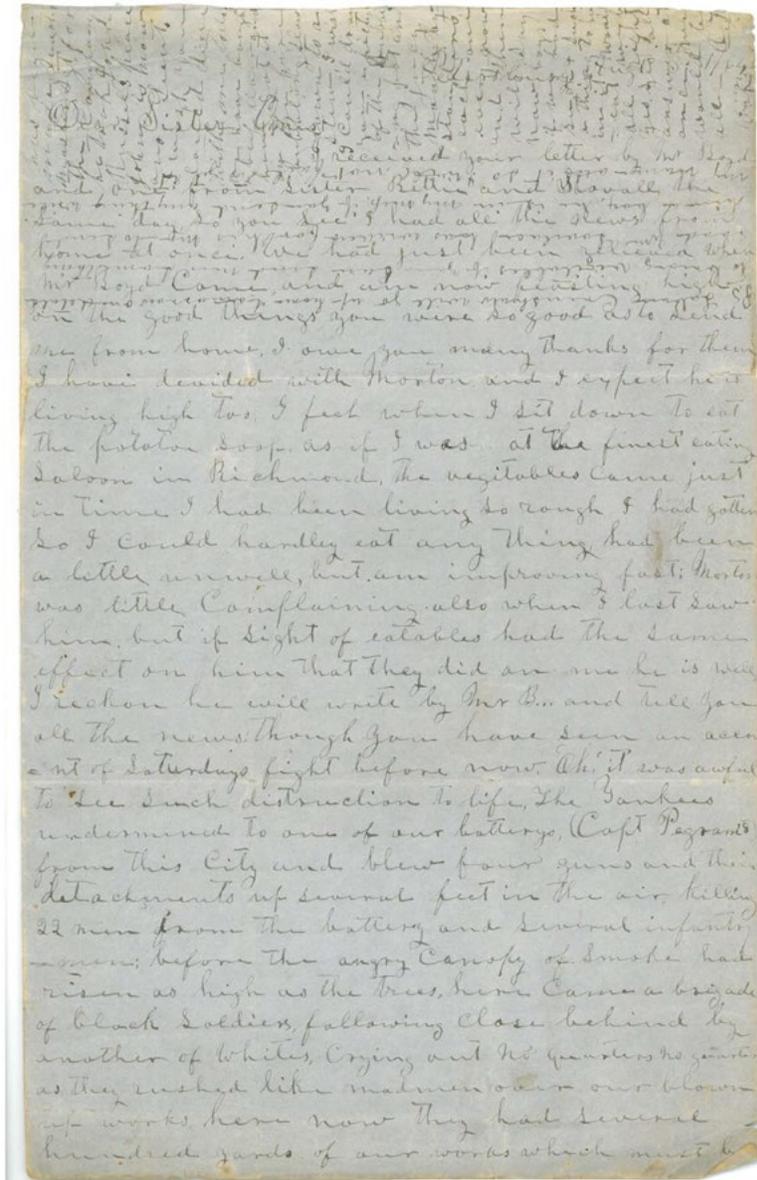
- 1.** Read the letter from Anthony Sydnor Barksdale to his sister. How does Barksdale describe the battle? In what way do you think the sentiments expressed by Barksdale were typical?
- 2.** Describe the captured Confederate flag. What does it tell you about its use in battle? How do you think members of the 43rd United States Colored Troops felt upon seeing their captain capture this flag?
- 3.** After watching this short clip about the 54th Massachusetts, name two things that you found most interesting. Why were these men able to change the minds of some who were opposed to the use of black troops?

Suggested Activities

- 1.** Have the students read the letter and also watch a short video on the Battle of the Crater by the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. After doing so, have the students compare and contrast the similarities and differences between the letter and the video. Students can work in small groups or with a partner.
- 2.** Have students write a letter from the perspective of a soldier involved in the Battle of the Crater.
- 3.** Using this photo, have the students write a paragraph describing this black company. Students should include the expressions on their faces and their overall demeanor. Students should take 15-20 minutes to complete this task.



Letter from Anthony Sydnor Barksdale to his sister



Eleanor Brockenrough Library
American Civil War Museum



Transcription of Barksdale Letter

Dear Sister Omis,

Petersburg August 1/64

I received your letter by Mr. Boyd and one from Sister Bettie and Stovall the same day, so you see I had all the news from home at once. We had just been relieved when Mr Boyd Came and am now feasting high on the food things you were so good as to send me from home, I owe you many thanks for them. I have divided with Morton and I expect he is living high too. I feel when I sit down to eat the potatoe soup as if I was at the finest eating saloon in Richmond. The vegetables came just in time. I had been living so rough I had gotten so I could hardly eat any thing had been a little unwell, but am improving fast; Morton was Complaining also when I last saw him, but if sight of eatables had the same effect on him that they did on me he is well. I reckon he will write Mr. B... and tell you all the news though you have seen an account of Saturday's fight before now. Oh; it was awful to See Such distruction to life, The Yankees undermined to one of our batterys, (Capt. Pegram's) from this City and blew four guns and their detachments up several feet in the air killing 22 men from the battery and several infantry men; before the angry Canopy of smoke had risen as high as the trees, here came a brigade of black Soldiers, following close behind by another of whites, crying out no quarters no quarters as they rushed like madmen over our blown up works, hence now they had several hundred yards of our works which must be retaken or Petersburg fall. Soon the frosty locks of an aged man was seen to come in sight and who should it be but the Noble Old Veteran (Genl Lee) who rode quietly on Smiling as he went. Mahone's Division was then ordered to the front and Brigadier Mahone with his and Rights [sic:Wright's] brigade was ordered to charge this they did as bold as lions. The Negraw brigade was forming to make another charge but we charged first. They broke ranks, rushed in to the trenches on the whites, and got into Such a confusion the white brigade killed very few of our men as they charged up. We were on them before they know it. Now came our time to show no quarters and I tell you we did not allow many to hunt them when there two brigades got in bayanet range things generally were desperate and the longer they continued this bloody work the more disperately our boys fought until Brigadier Mahone thought it too bad to see men sloutered in that stile and at once Sprang from his Saddle rushed to his men and cryed out to them men for God's sake observe humanity and don't be so distructive to life. The clamor of bayonets was too great for them to hear this Command, thus the horid work went on until between 1000 and 1200 lay dead on the field; finally the Command was heard, but it was then too late to save a great many of them. They were laying so thick here that it was impossible to step without treading on the dead boddys. The slouter of Negrows were awful. Captured 800 hundred prisoners, 750 of which were Negrows. It gows mighty against our boys to take Negrows prisoners. They would not do it if General Lee had not ordered it to be done. Mr. Boyd has gone over to Richmond to see John. I will hear wen he returns how Nelson is John Boyd wrote to his Bro James a few days ago, and he sayed N- was well and would be with the Company soon he may come over this evening with Mr. B. I hope he will if able. We lost another man the other day (Corpl Sherman) Pa knew him Poor man he was just going to be relieved that evening and had made a bargan with Lieut Boyd to go bathing but before the



3rd hour had arrived he was mortally wounded by a mortar shell, it fell between his feet and exploded setting his clothes on fire and [shiniring?] one thigh which was amputated as soon as reaction took place, but before the next day's setting Sun he was called to go and now he sleeps never to wake no more til the Sound of Gaberial's horn awake him from the grave. Oh: it is too awful to think of to day a man may be in perfect health and maby before to morrow this time al that is seen of him is his name Cut on a piece of plank stuck up at the head of his grave to show this friends were he was last layed; this you see is the soldier's fate if so unfortunate to fall. I would give most any thing in reason if I knew it would bring about peace but at at the mean while let it be free from Yankess if not we cant call it peace. I say give us a final Seperation from Yankeedom. I can't think we will have peace soon. Suppose the North tell us if we come back into the Union every state should have its rights would you be willing to any such proposition this would be a great temptation and I am afraid we would go back but if my vote could keep us out, I would forever give it No I say never go back into the Union let them make whatever propositions they may, they see now they cant conquer us and by managing to bring us back into the Union they would again Commence their deep schemes to get us bound both hand and foot and all at once would rais up another curel war in our midst. We can never again it is bown to be fought out and I say no better time than now We have seceded and I say will never be happy until free and independant from Yankeedom So now boys of the South take fresh courage and lets fight to the last for Dixie. [?] [?] my uniform also Nelson's he will want it to fly around the lines now as he has happened to the good luck of getting a months furlough. I send them in Wm Lovelace's carpet bag and William also sends several garments. his name is written on them You will therefore please send his things and Sachel over home by first posting. The pants sent by Uncle Elisha is a very nice fit I have not tryed on the draws & shirt but I am afraid they are too large for me. don't listen to every thing you hear about my being so fat and ruin all my clothes. I am now thinner than when I was (writing continues along the tops of the pages) at home (because of damage to the paper much of the writing is difficult to transcribe; it is also difficult to discern the order of the material)

(Along top of 2nd then 1st page) Tell sister Bettie my friend Flippen is well and say he thanks her for her kind wishes in regard to his further happiness. Flippen says he has an uncle who was taken with the night blindness and he has become an under Quartermaster Sgt. For the Company he took John Russels place John is now a Co. Lieut. I wish you could dine with me today we have bought a beef liver and have got it in the fire bubbling slow down to a stew, I wish I could draw you a picture of the bubbling pot and the jucy mouth bystanding each and every now and then will say now boys if we had such & such a thing to put in it wouldent [?] [?] all right Yes, sirs all answer at once we would be all-A.S.

(Cross writing on 1st page) P.S. Laban Crenshaw will go up home on detail to bring vegetables if you can send me something good Wm Lovelace has written for his Ma to send him a box, he is in my mess; if you send anything write my name on it so I will not fail to get it

(Dark writing on 3rd page) I have concluded to find my shoes. I am afraid I cant carry so much if I have to march. I can get them when in need. I send you also a string of buttons which you will find in my pocket.

(along top of 3rd page) finally got so bad the could not see in the day he was discharged sent home and the Dr. put a [seton?] in back of his neck which proved to be compleat I am sorry to hear little Susan's health is so bad You must write soon and often Uncle Elisha came down but he gave me the slip again or I would have written by him. Good bye. I remain as ever your attached Bro Syd

Flag of the 49th North Carolina Infantry



Captured at the Battle of Petersburg, Virginia, July 30, 1864 by Capt. Albert D. Wright of the 43rd US Colored Troops (USCT). Identification based on modern research.

American Civil War Museum