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### African American Service in the United States Civil War: The Forgotten Ten Percent

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*African American Service in the United States Civil War:*

*The Forgotten Ten Percent*

*Jacob Roberts*

*Research Seminar*

*May 5, 2020*

## Introduction

Throughout the early years of the development of the United States, the outright discrimination and prejudice directed against African American men, women, and children unfortunately became widely accepted, specifically in the southern regions of the country. Even in today's society, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, instances of racism and hatred towards people of color are still prevalent. Despite over 200 years of growth and progress, many individuals in the United States still hold true to the beliefs that were consistent with racists and bigots of the pre-Civil War era. African Americans continue to experience the same trials and judgement that many other people of color suffered through in the years of slavery and oppression of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the latter portion of the 1800s saw a change in attitudes and an acceptance of African Americans that had been unprecedented. The Civil War was a turning point in American history which allowed African Americans to serve in the Union Army while slavery would come to be abolished in 1863. The tens of thousands of African Americans who served the Union in the Army and Navy played an immensely significant role in the success of the Union throughout the duration of the war. Often times, people of color and the support that they offered for their country go unnoticed due to the fact that racism and oppression overshadowed their recognition.

The idea of this paper is to shine a light onto the successes and accomplishments of the African American soldiers who served for the Union in the Civil War and how the lack of this support could have altered the outcome of the war entirely. Many high school, or even undergraduate, history courses tend to ignore the influence of these people of color throughout the Civil War. Their representation in the Union goes overlooked, and many

students are unaware that they made up a significant percentage of the soldiers who enlisted. Many educators will focus on the main events while ignoring the fact that roughly ten percent of the Union Army consisted of African Americans. Any Civil War historians or connoisseurs should absolutely emphasize the effect of this ten percent, and not doing so would be a dishonor to those that served their country during these trying times.

While the Civil War is a widely discussed and researched topic across the country, the role of African Americans in the Union Army is somewhat disregarded in that the research and inquiry is not nearly as extensive as many other aspects of the war. While battles, leaders, causes, and effects tend to lead the conversation surrounding the war, many of those who served are often omitted, specifically people of color. Journal entries, diaries, letters written to loved ones, manuscripts, military records, and other primary sources will be used to enhance the understanding of the lives and daily encounters African American soldiers faced in a time where the country was at war with itself over the rights of these people. These personal accounts will give a deeper insight into what it was like to serve in the Union Army and Navy as a person of color. Whether they were recently freed slaves from the south or northerners choosing to fight for the Union, these sources will allow readers to gain certain knowledge beyond simply the names or occupations of these soldiers. Understanding the daily struggles and efforts of African Americans in the army through primary sources will only enhance the overall narrative of the Civil War while emphasizing a subject that many have little to no comprehension of the importance of people of color that served in the Union army.

This paper will serve as a continuation of the existing narratives and experiences while hoping to provide a more thorough level of knowledge and insight into the lives of these

soldiers. Many resources provide adequate information and facts about the soldiers who served in this war; however, more research should be done regarding the accomplishments and impact of African Americans during this time period. During a time where white volunteers began to dwindle, and numbers of those enlisting slowly decreased, tens of thousands of African Americans stepped up and offered their lives for a country that had long disrespected people of color and deprived them of basic human rights. They put aside personal interests and beliefs and fought for the greater good of the country. This paper looks to show the struggles of these soldiers and their role in the war. Expanding this perspective will allow readers and other historians to gain a new knowledge of the achievements of these soldiers, why they decided to serve a divided country, and how the lack of their support could have possibly been detrimental not only to the Union Army, but to the future of the United States and the values on which this country reflects today.

## **Methodology**

There are many archives and museums that do offer a great deal of new perspective. Particularly, the African American Civil War Museum in Washington, D.C., provides a great deal of insight into the service and responsibilities of these soldiers. Despite numerous attempts to contact the museum via e-mail and telephone calls to obtain specific resources and assist in advancing the research of this topic, no assistance was provided. However, this museum also offers an online database containing the names, positions, and years many soldiers served

throughout the Civil War. Also, the museum presents an oral history project containing interviews, poems, and insight from descendants of the soldiers. Many Civil War historians have comprised a collection of facts and primary sources relating to the roles of these soldiers; however, a more profound investigation into the lives and overall impact of the service of people of color is needed to better understand the significance of these people laying their lives down for a war based on hate and prejudice.

I took time to dive into some of the more prominent African American soldiers in the Civil War. I researched numerous soldiers, most of which served only as low-ranking infantrymen. However, after a more intense look into specific leaders of regiments and units, I was able to find several individuals worthy of the acknowledgement they have not received for decades. Numerous books of military records and battle reports were found to assist in compiling adequate information to share the stories of these honored individuals.

While it is nearly impossible to obtain primary sources from many Civil War or African American museums or libraries across the country, online databases and local history records will allow for sufficient research on this topic in order to provide the readers with adequate information for deeper comprehension. The National Archives online database, the Library of Congress, along with many journal articles and resources from other historians have proved to be extremely helpful in gaining personal accounts from these soldiers. Letters written from soldiers to friends or loved ones at home, military records discussing achievements by people of color, and diary or journal entries from these soldiers were used to discuss not only the impact of the participation of African Americans in the Union Army, but also gain insight into the personal lives of these soldiers and the experiences they faced on a daily basis. These primary

sources have been extremely helpful in attempting to complete the Civil War narrative as they provide a level of knowledge that many historians, or the general population for that matter, have not yet attained.

More information relating to this topic should be easily accessible in order to further highlight the importance and relevance of the 180,000 African American men who faithfully served the Union.

### **Historiography.**

This topic falls under the category of historiographies, as it is not a typically popular area of study. Much of the research related to African American participation in the Union Army has gone somewhat unnoticed and under-appreciated. There is, however, an adequate amount of information available to further the public knowledge of this topic and expand upon the existing narrative surrounding this particular content area. Letters from Union officers, newspaper articles, and monographs during this time provide sufficient evidence to broaden the study of these soldiers.

Many books, biographies, articles, and other sources recalling parts of the Civil War disregard an immensely significant component of the war: African Americans as soldiers. Typically, books will highlight specific battles, important leaders, and the conditions of the war. Biographies have detailed the lives of Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, and those alike while ignoring the infantrymen who truly paid the price for their respective sides. Articles have been used to explain the strategies of generals, political and social outcomes, or the causes and

effects of the war as a whole. However, very few scholars and historians focus their studies and attention to the ten percent of the Union Army that have flown under the radar for decades. Those that have contributed to furthering the knowledge of these soldiers have done a tremendous job of historicizing records and written works regarding these men.

The Library of Congress provides several collections describing African American efforts in the Union Army. These collections consist of manuscripts, speeches, photographs and letters that illustrate the roles of African American soldiers and the degree of diligence in which they executed the tasks given to them. However, this database simply provides evidence and sources rather than expanding upon the significance of these documents. Historians looking to begin their studies on this topic would find the Library of Congress digital database immensely helpful in finding primary sources to support their point of view.

The National Archives also provides an extensive amount of information regarding the lives of African American soldiers and their service throughout the duration of the Civil War. The National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) consists of a compilation of over 185,000 military service records of those who served with the United States Colored Troops (USCT) including accounts of those who were not African Americans. While the archive is little used and largely undiscovered, it is a remarkable source of reliable and functional documentation allowing for historians to gain a better understanding of the views of African American soldiers and the encounters they would experience as they fought for the freedom of all enslaved African Americans. Also, the Civil War Conservation Corps (CWCC), created by the NARA have worked to arrange a chronological compilation of service records of each soldier who volunteered for the USCT. The CWCC yields numerous records that reveal remarkable



details and stories of those that served the Union Army in the USCT. Letters from soldiers to their families, photographs of wounded African American soldiers, and notes written to soldiers from wives, mothers, and other family members create a diverse collection allowing for enhanced comprehension regarding the experiences of these soldiers. While most of these documents are only available at the National Archives building in Washington, D.C., it remains a great collection to aid the research of this topic.

The African American Civil War Soldiers project, provided by the *Journal of American History*, attempts to digitize the Compiled Military Service Records (CMSR) of African American troops in the Civil War and make them available via the internet. These records provide physical descriptions, such as height and complexion, occupations, dates of enlistment, and even remarks regarding battles fought and accomplishments of thousands of African American soldiers. This collection allows not only for historians to diverge in a vast amount of personal records regarding these soldiers, but also for family members of these soldiers to possibly discover new information relating to their ancestors. The project is ongoing; however, it comprises a great deal of documentation describing who these soldiers were and what they were able to accomplish as individuals in the Civil War.

While this topic is not particularly a popular one amongst historians, an immense amount of documents and sources have been preserved to allow for further expansion on the significance of these Union soldiers. Compared to other wars in which African American participation was significant, such as World War II, this era seems to receive a considerably less amount of recognition. This could be due to the reality during this time period. African Americans were enslaved, oppressed, and seen as greatly inferior. Recognizing African

American soldiers for their efforts may have been deemed to be unacceptable or taboo, even in parts of the Union itself. Although, authors and historians of today have written about these brave men to identify and recognize their accomplishments while also signifying the relevance and impact these soldiers had on the overall narrative of the a Civil War. The collection of available sources allows for any historian to explore the cultural and historical significance of the participation of African American soldiers in the Union Army with great detail.

Interestingly enough, a prominent perspective seen in many of these documents is that of white, Union officers describing the bravery and dedication of African American troops in their regiment. This is a great perspective to study due to the fact that during this time period, white praise for African Americans, in any aspect of society, was considered few and far between. Letters and speeches to representatives and state officials by Union Army generals and officers have discussed the great sense of pride and commitment held by soldiers of color who served under them. These perspectives have consistently emerged as many white officials were fluent writers and able to create many records that some African American soldiers, who may have not had any experience in writing, were not able to create. There is no greater source to acknowledge African American participation in the Civil War than from the officers that lead these men into battle and fought for their lives alongside one another.

Ways of filling the gaps in the literature are continuing to be developed to complete a consistent and factual narrative regarding the influence of these soldiers. More and more information is being made available through online databases and digital libraries where historians will have the ability to access documents and sources that have typically only been accessible through the National Archives, the Library of Congress, or the African American Civil

War Museum. Service records, letters to loved ones, and perspectives from white officers and leaders have been greatly detailed throughout these archives; however, this information could receive a more considerable amount of exposure to increase public knowledge regarding the subject. Soldiers throughout history have received an ample amount of recognition for their call to duty. The African American soldiers of the Civil War deserve nothing less and this gap in exposure of the literature should be eliminated, or at the very least, significantly reduced.

### **Research: Perspectives from Union officers**

One thing that was extremely surprising through this research was the perspectives of the white, Union officers that led African American regiments. Although the South was much more known for its bigotry and racism, the North was not exempt from these values. Many soldiers and officers alike shared this hatred at one time or another; however, many officers fully supported these African American soldiers and trusted them with their lives on the battlefield.

Colonel Norwood P. Hallowell gave a speech to the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts on January 5, 1892, describing the service and casualties of African American soldiers in several significant battles throughout the duration of the Civil War. For instance, Colonel Hallowell recalls the day the Union fought for victory over the city of Nashville on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1864. Hallowell claims this battle as, “the heaviest loss in any regiment occurred in the 13th U.S. Colored Infantry,--55 killed and 106 wounded: total 221.”<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that roughly 3,000 Union soldiers were either killed or wounded during this battle,

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<sup>1</sup> Norwood P. Hallowell to Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, January 5, 1892.

roughly five percent of the total amount of Union soldiers fighting in this battle. According to Colonel John A. Hottenstein, one of the field officers leading the fight for Nashville, the 13th U.S. Colored Infantry went into action with 556 soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Two hundred and twenty-one of these brave men, or roughly forty percent, were wounded, killed in action, or died from diseases. These men fought on the second line of defense and pushed forward as the first line slowly diminished. Their bravery and courage did not go completely unnoticed, however. Hallowell also claims, “General George H. Thomas, the hero of that battle, a Virginian and at one time a slaveholder, when riding over the field, saw the dead colored troops commingled with the bodies of the white soldiers, and said, ‘This proves the manhood of the negro.’”<sup>1</sup>

Also, Colonel C.R. Thompson, leader of the 2<sup>nd</sup> colored brigade under which the 13<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry served, stated in a report to his superiors that, “These troops were here, for the first time, under such fire as veterans dread, and yet, side by side with the veterans of Stone’s River, Missionary Ridge and Atlanta, they assaulted probably the strongest works on the entire line, and though not successful, they vied with the old warriors in bravery, tenacity, and deeds of noble daring.”<sup>3</sup> These accounts from Colonel Hallowell and Colonel Thompson not only exemplify the service of these African American soldiers, but communicate how high-ranking officials viewed the dedication and valor of these men. Rather than seeing these soldiers as people of color, they saw them as they should have; as soldiers fighting for the greater good of the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> 13th U. S. Colored Infantry Regiment.” Tennessee the Civil War, November 27, 2016.  
<https://tngenweb.org/civilwar/13th-u-s-colored-infantry-regiment/>.

<sup>3</sup> Hondon Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War*, 119.

Furthermore, in 1862, General David Hunter brought up and led a group of African American soldiers in South Carolina for the Union Army. Representative Charles A. Wickliffe called for the Secretary of War to account for Hunter's decision. Hunter proceeds by penning a letter to Representative Wickliffe describing the honor and value of these soldiers of color. Hunter first responds to the acquisition that he had organized a group of "fugitive slaves" by stating, "I reply that no regiment of 'fugitive slaves' has been or is organized in this department. There is, however, a fine regiment of persons whose late masters are 'fugitive rebels', men who everywhere fly before the appearance of the national flag, leaving their servants behind them to shift as best they can for themselves."<sup>4</sup> General Hunter stands for his men, emphasizing their own agency and desire to establish an identity of their own while also portraying their past masters as "fugitive rebels" who chose against the values of the Union.

General Hunter goes on to respond to Wickliffe's question of his authority to organize a regiment such as this one. Hunter proclaims that his instructions from the late Secretary of War:

do distinctly authorize me to employ all loyal persons offering their services in defense of the Union and for the suppression of this rebellion in any manner I might see fit, or that the circumstances might call for. There is no restriction as to the character or color of the persons who might be employed, or the nature of the employment; whether civil or military, in which their services should be used.<sup>4</sup>

Hunter further explains his decision by claiming that even if his regiment did consist of "fugitive slaves", he would have full authority to enlist these men with the instructions given to him by his superiors. General Hunter did not see the color of his soldier's skin. He saw loyal, willing men ready to go to war against a rebellion attempting to tear the country apart.

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<sup>4</sup> David Hunter to Edwin Stanton, June 23, 1862.

Hunter responds to Wickliffe's final question of whether Hunter had been furnished supplies by the War Department for the regiment. Hunter states that, "it is my painful duty to reply, that I never have received any specific authority for issues of clothing, uniforms, arms, equipments, etc., to the troops in question."<sup>4</sup> Hunter had also not been supplied shovels, pickaxes, boats, or oars to employ his soldiers as laborers or lightermen. Hunter goes on to explain his belief that the authority to enlist these soldiers in his regiment implied the authority to provide adequate supplies to help these men serve diligently. He ends this response by stating, "...acting under this faith I have clothed, equipped and armed the only loyal regiment yet raised in South Carolina." The general concludes his letter by reinforcing the value of these African American men:

The experiment of arming the blacks, so far as I have made it, has been a complete and even marvelous success. They are sober, docile, attentive, and enthusiastic, displaying great natural capacities for acquiring the duties of a soldier. They are eager beyond all things to take the field and be led into action; and it is the unanimous opinion of the officers who have had charge of them, that in the peculiarities of this climate and country, they will prove invaluable auxiliaries.<sup>5</sup>

Hunter has faith in his men to become distinguished soldiers whose character and loyalty stand above all else. He envisioned the enlistment of these men to be an immaculate aid against the confederate rebellion, as did a number of white officials serving the Union. Hunter trusted these men, saw them as a valuable asset, and fought for their service before they had a chance to step foot on a battlefield. This act of leadership and loyalty reflects the opinions of many white officers in the Union Army as soldiers of color slowly became an integral part of the fight against the South.

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<sup>5</sup> David Hunter to Edwin Stanton, June 23, 1862.

## Research: Personal Accounts of African American Soldiers

Another insight that is significant in crafting a well-rounded narrative regarding these soldiers is analyzing their own perspectives and outlooks on their participation in the war. In 1994, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) worked in conjunction with the National Park Service's Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System (CWSS) to create computerized database identifying numerous soldiers from the Union and Confederate armies. These records include the name of the soldier, the regiment in which he served, and any other documents that belong to the soldier. Included in this database is a letter from Samuel Cabbie, a private in Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Infantry of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The twenty-one year old former slave writes to his wife:

Dear Wife i have enlisted in the army i am now in the state of Massachusetts but before this letter reaches you i will be in North Carlinia and though great is the present national dificulties yet i look forward to a brighter day When i shall have the opertunity of seeing you in the full enjoyment of fredom i would like to no if you are still in slavery if you are it will not be long before we shall have crushed the system that now opreses you for in the course of three months you shall have your liberty. great is the outpouring of the colered peopl that is now rallying with the hearts of lions against that very curse that has seperated you an me yet we shall meet again and oh what a happy time that will be when this ungodly rebellion shall be put down and the curses of our land is trampled under our feet i am a soldier now and i shall use my utmost endeavor to strike at the rebellion and the heart of this system that so long has kept us in chains . . . remain your own afectionate husband until death-Samuel Cabbie.<sup>6</sup>

While the spelling and grammar may be far from satisfactory, the passion and determination of Cabbie is obvious. He craves the chance to one day be reunited with his wife in freedom and with no fears of continued oppression. Cabbie details the outpouring support of African Americans as the number of enlisted African Americans continued to rise throughout the last

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Cabbie to his wife.

year of the Civil War. The private illustrates his intensity throughout the letter, showing his enthusiasm to not simply help put an end to the war, but to free all others who experienced the same injustice he endured before enlisting, including his own wife. Cable's stance on the war is reflected by several African American soldiers throughout the duration of the war.

Another example of this shared attitude comes from an African-American soldier of the 73rd Regiment Infantry USCT under the command of Colonel Spencer Stafford. Written to a newspaper now known as the Hartford Daily Courant, the soldier emphasizes the willingness of African Americans to fight for the country in which they were born. The soldier writes, "but we are still anxious, as we have ever been, to show to the world that the latent courage of the African is aroused, and that, while fighting under the American flag, we can and will be a wall of fire and death to the enemies of this country, our birth place." This soldier was most likely a free man as his literacy skills and dictation throughout the letter is exceptional. Nonetheless, the soldier's eagerness and desire to secure a life of freedom for others while laying his life on the line for his country exemplifies the bravery that many of these soldiers encompassed during this time.<sup>7</sup>

The soldier goes on to discuss how he and fellow African-American soldiers were greeted upon their arrival to New Orleans in 1862. Recognized as "plebeians and cowards", the soldier further iterates, "I am proud to say that if any cowardice has been exhibited since we left Camp Strong, at the Louisiana Race Course, it has been exhibited by the rebels." After the Union's victory over the city of New Orleans, confederate forces retreated and found

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<sup>7</sup> "Letter From One of Butler's Negro Soldiers," Hartford Daily Courant, November 26, 1862.



themselves unprepared for the fierceness of the regiment. African American troops proved to be an integral part of Union warfare for the final years of the Civil War. Finally, the soldier expresses the soldiers' camaraderie and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the greater good of the country by stating, "...but I venture the assertion that there is not a regiment in the service more willing to share the hardships of marching and bivouacking, and more desirous of meeting the enemy than this regiment, led by Colonel S. H. Stafford."<sup>8</sup> These men knew nothing other than bravery, courage, and perseverance as they stood shoulder to shoulder against an enemy attempting to keep people of color under a system of oppression that had reigned for far too long.

### **Research: Confederate Perspectives on African American Service**

For Confederate soldiers, officers, and political leaders, the idea of African Americans having the opportunity to serve in the army was absurd. Discrimination and hatred against people of color was more notable than ever. Extreme tensions rose astronomically in the early 1860s as one side fought for freedom while the other fought for oppression. Confederate soldiers saw African Americans as the lowest of lows and would have them carry their gear when going into combat. After the Emancipation Proclamation came into affect in 1863, African Americans from all over pledged to serve the Union Army and fight against the very system that had been holding them down for their entire lives. On the other side, the Confederate Congress prohibited people of color from participating in the war until March 13, 1865, three weeks

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<sup>8</sup> "Letter From One of Butler's Negro Soldiers," Hartford Daily Courant, November 26, 1862.

before the end of the Civil War. Before this time, enslaved African Americans were strictly forbidden from enlisting in the Confederate Army. In a June 1865 edition of the *Augusta Chronicle*, Robert Toombs, the Confederacy's first Secretary of State and a general in Robert E. Lee's army, claimed:

in my opinion, the worst calamity that could be for us would be to gain our independence by the valor of our slaves instead of our own. If we are conquered by the fortunes of war, we may save our honor and leave the cause to our descendants, Who may be wiser and braver than we are and may avail themselves of the accidents of human affairs, and yet win what we are ignominiously throwing away. The days that the army of Virginia allows a Negro regiment to enter their lines as soldiers they will be degraded, ruined, and disgraced.<sup>9</sup>

As a strong political figure in the confederacy, Toombs' viewpoint on having African-Americans in the Confederate army would surely be reflected in nearly all regiments across the South. Toombs views people of color as a "cancer" to the confederate army and insist that their participation would cause significant issues and would ultimately lead to the downfall of the army as a whole. Although, many African Americans drive in the union army, Toombs remained firm in his belief that they had no place in the South other than on a plantation.

Despite the beliefs of one of his generals, Robert E. Lee himself saw the possible advantages of arming African Americans and allowing them to fight alongside the rest of the Confederate Army. In a letter penned to Mississippi congressman Ethelbert Barksdale on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1865, months before the decision by the Confederate Congress to permit the enlistment of African American soldiers, Robert E. Lee wrote, "with reference to the employment of negroes as soldiers, I think the measure not only expedient, but necessary."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Toombs, Robert, "Negroes in the Army," *Augusta Chronicle*.

<sup>10</sup> Robert E. Lee to Ethelbert Barksdale, February 18, 1865.

These words carried a great weight coming from Lee. As a well-respected and accomplished military leader in the south, his decision to support the use of slaves as soldiers could not have been an easy conclusion to come across. Lee expressed concerns of the Union Army using African Americans to supplement their already numerically superior army. He insisted that rather than waiting until the arrival of Union forces to employ slaves, it would be wise to use them immediately and halt their progress. Lee continues by stating, "I can only say that, in my opinion, the negro, under proper circumstances, will make an efficient soldier...Under good officers and good instructions, I do not see why they should not become soldiers." Lee continued to lobby for the use of slaves as soldiers, noting their habits of obedience would make for a good foundation for discipline. He saw the potential benefits of having the extra soldiers and suggested they be enlisted as soon as possible.

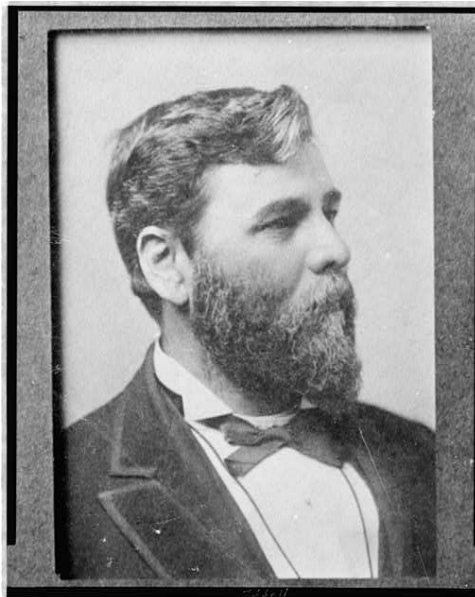
The Confederate leader even went as far as suggesting that all slaves pledging their allegiance to the Confederacy during this time should be given their freedom. Lee asserted that it "would be neither just nor wise to require them to serve as slaves."<sup>11</sup>At this point, the Confederacy began to shift their focus from the preservation of the institution of slavery to the protection of state's rights. General Lee insisted that the decision be left in the hands of the people and the states, but believed growing public opinion regarding the potential benefits would eventually eliminate any obstacles. For many southern states, the idea of arming slaves who would then gain their freedom was senseless, but it very well could have been the ultimate savior of the Confederate agenda.

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<sup>11</sup> Robert E. Lee to Ethelbert Barksdale, February 18, 1865.

## Research: Achievements and Accomplishments of Prominent African American Soldiers

While almost all commanders throughout the union army consisted of white soldiers, many African-American men were able to rise in ranking and accrue several awards for their outstanding service. For instance, sergeant Major Milton M. Holland was one of the first African Americans to receive the medal of honor in United States history.<sup>12</sup> In 1863, Holland in listed as a private in the Fifth Regiment United States Colored Troops under the command of General Benjamin F. Butler. On September 29, 1864, Holland, as Sergeant Major of company “C”, lead his unit into a daring battle at Chaffin’s Farm in Virginia. His white commanding officers were killed and he himself had been severely wounded; however, his valiant efforts and extreme bravery led to a significant Union victory. Holland was awarded the medal of honor for this act of valor and became “immortalized” after his death in 1910 when he was laid to rest in the Arlington National Cemetery as a hero. Holland’s refusal to accept defeat in this situation



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<sup>12</sup> “Milton M. Holland, Sergeant Major, United States Army”. <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/mholland.htm>.

continues to exemplify the outstanding determination of the African American soldiers to achieve true freedom for all people of color across the nation. When the odds were stacked against him, and surely no one expected Holland to take point and lead the unit to victory, he rose to the occasion and solidified himself as one of the most prominent African-American soldiers in American military history.

Twenty-five African American men went on to receive the Medal of Honor for their service in the Civil War. Fourteen of these recipients earned the award just as Holland did, for their service in the Battle at Chaffin's Farm in Virginia. Another distinguished African American soldier was Sergeant Major Christian Fleetwood who cemented himself as one of these twenty-five award recipients for his efforts at Chaffin's Farm in 1864.<sup>13</sup> Fleetwood enlisted in the Fourth Regiment United States Colored Troops in August of 1863. Upon his investment, he was given the promotion to sergeant major due to his high level of education. During the battle of Chaffin's Farm, Fleetwood lead his unit on Confederate fortifications from the left flank. One of his color bearers, a man tasked with holding the flag during battle, was shot and severely wounded. However, Fleetwood rushed to the injured soldier and gained control of the flag before it even touched the ground. Fleetwood would continue to attack the confederate forces he faced, but eventually retreat or death were the only options for his unit. Carrying the flags back to the reserve line, Fleetwood attempted to rally his troops and continue the fight against the rebels. Six months later, Fleetwood would secure the Medal of Honor for his courageousness during this turning point of the war. The citation regarding his awards claims,

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Scott et al., *The War of Rebellion*.

“He seized the colors, after 2 color bearers had been shot down, and bore them nobly through the fight.” Fleetwood viewed the flag as a symbol for his sacrifice. With bullets flying and blood splattering, Fleetwood held steady, secured the flags, and fought valiantly against the oppressive enemy.

Lastly, although he did not serve as an infantryman in the Civil War, Alexander Thomas Augusta was commissioned in the Union Army in October of 1862 by President Lincoln. Born to free parents, Augusta faced many instances of institutionalized racism in his pursuit of achieving a medical degree. After earning his degree from the University of Toronto, he went on to become the head surgeon of the Seventh United States Colored Infantry. With his service,



Augusta rose to the rank of Major, making him the highest ranking African American in the Union Army.<sup>14</sup> Augusta continue to face many instances of hatred and discrimination as he was Attacked by mobs in Baltimore and Washington D.C. Also, two white, assistant surgeons complained to President Lincoln about having to answer to a black surgeon. Despite these

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<sup>14</sup> Jimmy Fenison, “Alexander T. Augusta (1825-1890),” June 8, 2019. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/augusta-alexander-t-1825-1890/>.

challenges, Augusta continued in his attempt to save lives through his immaculate work while also fighting for equality for African Americans in all areas of life. While he may not have ever picked up a gun and pulled the trigger, Augusta tirelessly served the Union Army while achieving something that was unheard of for people of color during this time.

### **Directions for Future Research**

After a great deal of research and hours of searching for primary sources, more work is still needed to be done. One place this could start is in classrooms across America. Educators throughout the country lack a specific level of knowledge needed to articulately unravel the narrative of The service of African Americans in the Civil War. Curriculums in many states do not acknowledge this extremely significant factor of the Civil War, depriving students of a great deal of information that could be used to gain a better understanding of the beliefs and values in place during this time. As databases grow more accessible, students, educators, and history professionals will have the opportunity to research this topic more in depth. Service records and personal accounts should continue to be analyzed in order to further understand the different roles of African-American soldiers and how they viewed the war itself. Military historians, specifically Civil War historians, could form their own research from these records and accounts to reach further conclusions regarding the overall narrative of these soldiers. Some gaps may always exist in this area of study, but future research should persist in obtaining different perspectives from several groups to understand contrasting views on these African American soldiers. Letters, diaries, notes, and other sources are great tools to use when attempting to uncover perspectives from different groups. Having these personal, first-hand

accounts give a deeper insight into what feelings and viewpoints were experienced during a time of constant conflict in almost all corners of the country.

There are several other branches that stem from this topic that could be followed and researched in great detail. This would aid in gaining a better understanding of causes and effects of the Civil War and how some of these issues could possibly still be reflected in today's society in different cases. As with any topic, a deeper analysis must be completed, but these soldiers deserve for more research to be done and for their stories to be told.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, roughly 180,000 African Americans sacrificed their lives for others that may not have done the same for them. These men fought tirelessly and whole heartedly in pursuit of liberties that they had been denied since birth. Slavery, discrimination, and racism dominated the majority of beliefs regarding African Americans throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the constant pushback and oppressive behaviors these men and women experienced, they fought back even harder for equality, unity, and acceptance of others for reasons deeper than a skin color. When the Union made the decision to allow African Americans to enlist in the army, not many were sure of what the outcome might be. Officers and leaders quickly learned of the bravery and perseverance of these soldiers. These men were selfless, determined, and willing to give whatever it might take to secure a victory that symbolized a change in the culture of the country; a change that has been in progress for over one hundred and fifty years.

Many steps must be taken when concerning oneself with any level of research much like this project. My goal for this was not to simply highlight big names or name every white person



in the 1860s a racist. My goal was to discover the truth and the facts. My goal was to honor and commemorate those African American men who served a country in which many people hated them. They did not see the determination, persistence, and pure will to secure something that seemed so unattainable before: freedom. But, I saw. I noticed the bravery and the fight and the belief that nothing could stop them. That is what makes these soldiers great and why they deserve every second of research that is put into their names.

Ten percent may not typically seem like a significant amount of anything, but this ten percent served a larger purpose than simply fighting an enemy. These soldiers fought for their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers who remained in slavery while they went into a battle caused by the same very reason. They proved to other white Americans that it is possible to live in solidarity and alongside one another rather than against. This ten percent proved to America that unity is possible with understanding and sacrifice. For decades, the efforts of these 180,000 African American men have flown under the radar. It is time that they be acknowledged, celebrated, and recognized for their efforts that exceeded beyond the battlefield. While their names may be forgotten and their possessions disintegrated, their story will live on for generations to come.

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