

Before the United States would accept many of us as soldiers, it had already accepted laws that could treat us as property. Some of us lived under slavery. Others were free but faced restrictions on voting, employment, movement, and citizenship. Our circumstances differed, yet the coming war placed a question before all of us: what would this country become, and would we have a place in deciding? When Confederate guns fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, the conflict began as a struggle over whether the United States would remain together. Behind secession—the withdrawal of Southern states from the Union—stood the determination to protect slavery. Confederate leaders stated that purpose openly. Their declarations described enslaved labor as essential to their society and condemned threats to its survival. For a man whose wife or children could be sold, those arguments concerned the control of an actual family. The secession declarations preserve those stated reasons.

The Union government did not begin the war with a settled commitment to abolish slavery everywhere. President Abraham Lincoln's immediate objective was to preserve the nation, and slaveholding states including Kentucky and Maryland remained within it. He feared driving them toward the Confederacy. Many white Northerners also opposed Black military service, while abolitionists—people working to end slavery—pressed for it. Black communities organized, petitioned, and offered men willing to enlist. Enslaved people crossed into Union-held territory and forced commanders to decide whether they would return human beings to those claiming ownership. Every escape could deprive the Confederacy of labor while bringing the Union information, skills, and potential recruits. Our participation began before widespread enlistment. People seeking freedom were already changing the conditions under which the government had to conduct the war. The National Archives explains this movement toward Black military service.

For those of us who entered the Army, the regiment became our immediate military community. A regiment was usually divided into companies, smaller groups that trained, marched, and fought together. Infantry soldiers primarily fought on foot; cavalry operated with horses, and artillery crews handled cannon. Most Black regiments had white commissioned officers, men formally authorized to command, while Black sergeants and corporals helped maintain discipline, direct soldiers, and carry out orders. A few early organizations included Black commissioned officers as well. Our daily work involved learning formations, handling weapons, maintaining equipment, standing guard, and responding together under pressure. A soldier's effectiveness depended on the men around him and on supplies, transport, medical care, and leadership. Joining the Army placed us inside a vast cooperative effort, even while racial discrimination limited how that army treated us.

We of the First Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry entered that effort while federal policy was still taking shape. Organized in Kansas in 1862, our ranks included men who had escaped slavery in Missouri and Arkansas. The border region had already experienced years of violence over slavery, and the outbreak of national war did not make it safer. Black recruiter William Mathews helped bring men into the regiment, working alongside

white supporters of Black enlistment. In October, soldiers from our formation fought pro-Confederate forces at Island Mound, Missouri, before the regiment had been formally accepted into federal service. It was a small engagement in a large war, but its meaning traveled beyond the battlefield. Black men were organizing, carrying weapons, and resisting armed opponents while others continued debating whether we should be permitted to do so. [The National Park Service's First Kansas history](#) records those beginnings.

At Island Mound, our immediate responsibility was to survive and hold together. Men fought in dangerous, close encounters against mounted opponents, and members of our force were killed and wounded. Later accounts celebrated the action as evidence that Black soldiers could fight. That recognition mattered politically, but it did not create our courage. The men who had escaped slavery had already taken risks that might never appear in a military report. A report could count those present, describe an attack, and record casualties; it could not fully contain the decisions that brought each man there. The engagement helped weaken racist arguments against enlistment and supplied an early example of Black military effectiveness. It also belonged to the practical struggle for control of a violent border region. [Missouri State Parks preserves the history and site of Island Mound.](#)

As 1862 ended, the war's purpose was changing. After the Battle of Antietam halted Lee's invasion of Maryland, Lincoln issued a preliminary emancipation announcement. The final Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863, declaring freedom for enslaved people in designated areas still in rebellion and authorizing their reception into the armed services. Its limits were substantial: it did not immediately abolish slavery in loyal slaveholding states, and specified occupied areas were excluded. Enforcement depended on the reach of Union power and on people escaping slavery themselves. Nevertheless, emancipation had become an official war measure, tying Union military success to the destruction of slavery across much of the Confederacy. For Black recruits, carrying a rifle could now help extend the policy that recognized other people's freedom. [The National Archives explains the proclamation's reach and limitations.](#)

Along the South Carolina coast, that connection became especially direct. We were the Second South Carolina Volunteers, later renamed the Thirty-fourth United States Colored Infantry. Many of our men came from the enslaved population of the coastal South. Union control of the Sea Islands had created places where freedom seekers could gather, where Black regiments could organize, and where military operations could reach plantations farther inland. Under Colonel James Montgomery, we participated in the Combahee River raid in June 1863. Harriet Tubman helped develop intelligence and guide the operation through her knowledge and relationships with people in the region. Intelligence meant information useful for military action: routes, obstacles, enemy activity, and the circumstances of communities along the river. Tubman's contribution joined that of soldiers, boat crews, scouts, and people ready to escape. [The National Park Service's Combahee history describes their cooperation.](#)

On June 2, boats carried the force upriver while soldiers struck plantations and destroyed resources supporting the Confederate economy. Enslaved people moved toward the vessels, bringing themselves and their families within reach of Union protection. More than seven hundred people gained freedom through the operation, with accounts commonly placing the number above 750. This was a military success whose results could be counted in people no longer under their enslavers' immediate control. The families were participants in that success: they had to recognize the opportunity, move toward it, and accept the risks of leaving. Some of the men liberated during the raid subsequently joined our regiment. Their departure weakened the plantation labor system, while their enlistment strengthened the force fighting against it. The same operation could therefore free people, remove resources from the Confederacy, and bring new soldiers into the Union Army. The Combahee record follows the raid through its aftermath.

Our service continued through operations around Charleston, including the prolonged campaign against its defenses. A campaign is a connected series of military operations directed toward a larger objective. An operation might succeed without ending the campaign, and a campaign could include defeats alongside gains. After becoming the Thirty-fourth in February 1864, we served in Florida and South Carolina, participating in expeditions, maintaining military control, and fighting at Honey Hill that November. The Union attack there failed to achieve its objective of reaching the Charleston and Savannah Railroad. That failure belongs in our history because soldiers' contributions must be measured honestly. Our regiment continued carrying out assignments and remained in service until February 1866. Combahee was an extraordinary achievement within years of military work, rather than the beginning and end of our contribution. The Thirty-fourth's service record documents those continuing duties.

Farther west, the Mississippi River gave our service another purpose. We were the First Louisiana Native Guard in Union service, organized in New Orleans after federal forces captured the city in 1862. Our ranks included formerly enslaved men and free men of color, the historical term for Black and mixed-race people who were legally free before general emancipation. New Orleans possessed established Black communities, businesses, and traditions of militia service. Our Union formation should be distinguished from an earlier Confederate-era local militia with a similar name, although some individuals served in both. By the spring of 1863, our military objective brought us toward Port Hudson, a fortified Confederate position above the Mississippi. Control of the river meant movement of supplies and troops, commercial access, and communication between large sections of the country. Capturing its defended positions was central to Union strategy. The Native Guard's history and the Port Hudson campaign record explain that setting.

On May 27, we attacked Port Hudson's defenses alongside other Union troops, including the Third Louisiana Native Guard. Earthworks—defensive walls and positions made from soil—protected the enemy while the attackers moved through exposed and difficult ground. Captain André Cailloux, a Black officer commanding Company E of our regiment,

was killed. His name became a public symbol of Black military courage, and his funeral drew a major gathering in New Orleans. The assault itself failed. It is possible to recognize extraordinary conduct without changing the outcome, and the men who fell deserve an account accurate enough to distinguish their determination from the decisions made above them. They advanced into an organized defense that the Union attack did not overcome. The army then continued the siege, applying sustained pressure to a position it could not immediately take by assault. The National Park Service records the battle and the community significance of Cailloux's funeral.

Port Hudson surrendered on July 9, 1863, following the fall of Vicksburg to Grant's forces on July 4. Together, those victories opened the Mississippi to Union control and severely disrupted the Confederacy's connections across it. Our contribution belonged within the combined effort of armies, naval crews, engineers, transport workers, and the people supplying them. At nearly the same time, Union soldiers at Gettysburg had defeated Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania. We had not fought at Gettysburg, and their victory remained their hard-earned achievement. The importance of that summer lay partly in the relationship between these successes: Confederate ambitions were checked in the East while its position along the Mississippi collapsed. No one regiment could accomplish that continental result. Our place was within it, helping sustain the operations that brought Port Hudson down. The National Park Service's Civil War timeline connects these events.

On the Atlantic coast, we of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry were preparing to enter a different part of that struggle. Massachusetts organized our regiment in 1863, but our men came from across the North and beyond it. The state's name identified the organization through which we served, not the birthplace of everyone in the ranks. Governor John Andrew supported recruitment, and Frederick Douglass helped encourage enlistment; his sons Lewis and Charles joined the regiment. Colonel Robert Gould Shaw commanded us, with training conducted at Camp Meigs near Boston. The men brought different histories, occupations, levels of education, and reasons for serving. Their common task was to become an effective military organization. When we marched through Boston toward transport south, public attention accompanied us, but attention was not the same as acceptance. We would still face discrimination inside the institution whose uniform we wore. The National Park Service's history of the Fifty-fourth describes recruitment and training.

Our service in South Carolina brought combat on James Island and then the assault on Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863. Wagner guarded an important approach to Charleston, and the ground leading toward it restricted the attacking force. The Fifty-fourth led the assault, advancing along an exposed approach against troops protected by the fort. Cannon and rifle fire struck the formation, and men continued toward the defenses as others fell. Shaw was killed, and our losses were severe. Other Union regiments followed and suffered heavily as well. The assault failed to capture Wagner. Its military outcome was a Confederate victory, even though our conduct had powerful consequences for Black recruitment and public opinion. The Union eventually occupied the position after a

sustained siege forced its evacuation in September. The July charge and the later capture were different events, both necessary to the story. The National Park Service's battle account distinguishes them.

Among the men at Wagner was Sergeant William H. Carney, who took responsibility for the United States flag after its bearer fell. A regimental flag served as a visible point of identification and direction amid noise, smoke, and confusion. Carrying it exposed a soldier to danger because he had to remain visible. Wounded during the action, Carney kept the flag from capture and brought it back. His conduct later earned the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military decoration for valor, although the award did not arrive until 1900. His action is often described as the earliest performed by a Black American to receive that recognition; other Black recipients received their medals before he did. That distinction matters because dates of courage and dates of official acknowledgment were not always the same. Carney's achievement belonged to a regiment whose survival depended on many men performing their responsibilities under fire. The National Park Service's Carney history recounts his actions and recognition.

Our demand for recognition also appeared at the pay table. Black soldiers were generally offered ten dollars a month with three deducted for clothing, while white privates received thirteen dollars with a separate clothing allowance. Men of the Fifty-fourth refused the unequal pay, even when Massachusetts offered to make up the difference. The dispute concerned federal recognition as soldiers, and the refusal imposed hardship on men and families who needed the money. Corporal James Henry Gooding put the issue directly to President Lincoln in an actual letter: "Are we Soldiers or are we Labourers?" Gooding also wrote newspaper letters describing regimental life, leaving a Black soldier's own account of the war. Congress acted on equal pay in 1864, although retroactive eligibility and payment involved further complications. Gooding did not survive to enjoy the future he argued for; captured after Olustee, he died at Andersonville prison in July 1864. The National Park Service's biography preserves his words and service.

At Olustee, Florida, in February 1864, the Fifty-fourth helped cover a Union retreat after a costly defeat. A rear guard protects withdrawing troops, resisting pursuit while others move toward safety. That assignment can demand the same steadiness as an advance, with the additional knowledge that the larger operation has gone wrong. The regiment later fought at Honey Hill and continued serving into the war's final spring. Its history therefore extends far beyond Wagner. Men survived one battlefield only to face another, while others recovered from wounds, became prisoners, or never returned to duty. Describing the Fifty-fourth only through its most famous charge hides that continued service. It also narrows our understanding of courage, which includes preserving an army during withdrawal as well as carrying an attack forward. The National Park Service's account of soldiers in the Fifty-fourth follows them through Olustee.

Back in the First Kansas, our war continued through supply operations and fighting in Indian Territory, now largely Oklahoma. At Cabin Creek in July 1863, we served alongside

Native soldiers of the Third Indian Home Guard and white units protecting a Union wagon train. Success depended on artillery, infantry, and cavalry working together to force a contested crossing. At Honey Springs later that month, our regiment contributed to another important Union victory. These operations mattered because an army unable to obtain provisions could lose its position without suffering a dramatic battlefield defeat. Food, ammunition, clothing, and transport animals were part of combat power. The men securing their movement helped determine whether other troops could remain in the field. Our work connected the courage of soldiers to the practical requirements of maintaining Union strength in the region. [The Oklahoma Historical Society explains the combined force at Cabin Creek and Black service at Honey Springs.](#)

At Poison Spring, Arkansas, on April 18, 1864, our supply escort was defeated, and Confederate forces killed Black soldiers who were wounded or attempting to surrender. This was a racial atrocity within the larger military defeat. A Black soldier could not assume that capture would bring the treatment afforded a white prisoner, even though white prisoners also suffered terribly in the war. Some Black captives were imprisoned, some were threatened with or subjected to enslavement, and others were murdered. Recognizing those dangers helps explain the additional burden carried into battle. It does not require describing every Confederate encounter as identical. Surviving men of the First Kansas continued their service, and the regiment later received the designation Seventy-ninth United States Colored Infantry. The new number preserved the organization's continuing history, including its victories, losses, and endurance after Poison Spring. [The National Park Service's battle record documents the defeat and killings.](#)

By 1864, we of the Twenty-second United States Colored Infantry had entered the war from Pennsylvania. Our regiment organized in January and moved into Virginia, serving in the Army of the James. There we participated in operations involving Richmond, the Confederate capital, and Petersburg, a vital transportation center supporting it. Our assignments included protecting supply transports, constructing defensive works, and participating in the fighting before Petersburg in June. The struggle settled into extended operations involving trenches, attacks, and efforts to cut transportation routes. A trench was more than a ditch: it offered protection, defined part of the defensive line, and became a place where soldiers spent long periods under threat. Work with a shovel helped keep men alive and made positions harder to take. [The Twenty-second's service record identifies these early assignments.](#)

The larger Petersburg campaign aimed to weaken Lee's army by restricting the supplies and communications sustaining it. Richmond's position depended partly on those same connections. Soldiers in the trenches belonged to a struggle measured through railroad access, defensive extensions, repeated offensives, and the capacity to replace losses. An offensive is an organized effort to seize the initiative and force an enemy to react. For an individual soldier, the campaign meant carrying out a specific assignment without controlling the whole plan. A regiment could perform effectively while the army failed to gain its larger objective that day. The prolonged campaign eventually helped make

Confederate positions untenable, meaning they could no longer be maintained. Understanding that process gives the months between famous battles their proper importance. [Petersburg National Battlefield explains the campaign's strategic purpose.](#)

In September, our regiment participated in the operations at New Market Heights and Chaffin's Farm north of the James River. Black regiments attacked Confederate defenses while other Union troops struck positions including Fort Harrison. The larger operation gained ground and forced the Confederates to respond to a threat near Richmond. Across the Black formations involved, soldiers continued advancing through severe fire and difficult obstacles, with men taking over responsibilities when officers and comrades fell. Their actions earned numerous Medals of Honor. The Twenty-second's contribution belonged within that collective assault; achievements by soldiers in neighboring regiments should remain attached to the men and units that performed them. The result demonstrated both the fighting strength of Black troops and the importance of coordinated pressure across the Confederate line. [The University of Virginia's account of Chaffin's Farm explains the combined operation.](#)

While we fought in Virginia, other Union armies were reshaping the war elsewhere. Sherman's forces captured Atlanta in September 1864, striking an important transportation and industrial center. That success strengthened Northern morale and helped Lincoln win reelection in November, preserving the government's commitment to continue the war. Sherman then marched toward Savannah and later through the Carolinas, damaging resources and transportation supporting Confederate resistance. These operations involved tremendous effort by soldiers who were not in our regiments. Our service gained meaning within the same expanding pressure. The Confederacy had to defend multiple regions while losing resources, transportation links, and men. Union victory developed through that combination of military operations, political endurance, productive capacity, and the efforts of people undermining slavery from within. [The National Archives explains Atlanta's military and political importance.](#)

The rivers and sea lanes were part of the same struggle. Black sailors served aboard Union vessels, often in racially mixed crews, performing work that supported blockades, transportation, and naval combat. A blockade attempts to restrict an enemy's maritime trade and access by controlling approaches to its ports. River vessels could protect transports, bring troops to an operation, or use their guns against Confederate positions. Soldiers stepping onto a riverbank depended on crews who had carried them there and might have to bring them out. Black naval service followed different organizational practices from segregated Army regiments, but its contribution belongs in the same victory. The Army's story cannot account for the Combahee raid, Mississippi operations, or coastal campaigns without the vessels and people making those movements possible. [The National Archives' history of Black sailors describes that service.](#)

In April 1865, the pressure finally broke the Confederate positions around Petersburg and Richmond. We of the Twenty-second entered Richmond on April 3 as part of the Union occupation. Black soldiers were now helping establish federal control in the city that had

served as the capital of a government founded to protect slavery. On April 9, Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Grant at Appomattox. That was a decisive surrender, but other Confederate forces remained in the field. The war ended through a sequence of collapses and surrenders rather than a single moment experienced everywhere at once. For soldiers, the meaning of victory depended partly on where their unit stood and what orders followed. The Twenty-second would soon be sent to Washington to participate in Lincoln's funeral observances after his assassination. Military triumph and national mourning arrived within the same month. The regimental record traces Richmond and the funeral assignment, while the national timeline follows the successive surrenders.

For those of us whose service began in the First Louisiana Native Guard, the Army's records now named us the Seventy-third United States Colored Infantry. On April 9, the same day Lee surrendered in Virginia, our regiment participated in the assault and capture of Fort Blakely, Alabama. We subsequently joined the occupation of Mobile. Our history had carried us from the unsuccessful assault at Port Hudson to another major fortified position near the war's end. The Fifty-fourth Massachusetts also continued fighting after Appomattox, including at Boykin's Mill in South Carolina on April 18 during operations against Confederate transportation infrastructure. Those dates prevent a familiar misunderstanding: news of one army's surrender did not instantly remove every armed opponent or end every regiment's duty. Men could still be killed while much of the country was already celebrating. The Seventy-third's service record and the Fifty-fourth's later campaign history preserve those final operations.

Even after Confederate armies surrendered, some of us remained far from home. The Twenty-second moved to Texas and served along the Rio Grande before discharge in October 1865. The Second South Carolina's successor, the Thirty-fourth, continued serving in Florida into 1866. Occupation duty meant maintaining federal military authority during an uncertain transition. The destruction of Confederate military power had made emancipation enforceable across a far greater area, but it did not settle how formerly enslaved people would obtain land, wages, education, family security, or political rights. Nor did it erase the white resistance they faced. These were people beginning new lives while many of the institutions around them remained unequal. A soldier's discharge could end his Army obligation without completing the struggle that had helped bring him into service.

The Thirteenth Amendment supplied a national constitutional abolition of slavery. Ratified in December 1865, it prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime after conviction. An amendment changes the Constitution itself, giving abolition a different foundation from a wartime presidential order. It did not by itself guarantee voting rights, equal protection, or economic independence. Those questions would shape Reconstruction, the period in which the country attempted to restore the former Confederate states and define freedom and citizenship after slavery. The amendment's passage involved political leadership, congressional votes, state ratification, decades of abolitionist work, and a war that destroyed the Confederacy's

ability to preserve slavery by force. Black soldiers helped create the military conditions in which that constitutional transformation became possible. [The National Archives explains the amendment and its text.](#)

By the war's end, approximately 179,000 Black men had served in the Union Army, with another 19,000 in the Navy. Nearly 40,000 Black soldiers died, most from disease. Behind those totals stood households that lost sons, fathers, husbands, brothers, and the wages they might have earned. The survivors carried service records that documented something the nation could no longer honestly deny: Black Americans had helped defeat the Confederacy and preserve the United States. They had done so through combat, occupation, transportation, construction, intelligence, and the repeated tasks that kept military forces functioning. Their contribution strengthened a victory shared with millions of other people, while helping give that victory its emancipating consequence. [The National Archives documents the scale of their service and losses.](#)

Remember us with our unit names attached to the work. Remember the First Kansas at a contested crossing and after the catastrophe of Poison Spring; the Second South Carolina helping open a river route to freedom; the First Louisiana Native Guard before Port Hudson and its successor at Fort Blakely; the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts advancing at Wagner, protecting a retreat, and demanding equal pay; the Twenty-second serving before Richmond and entering it under the United States flag. Remember the neighboring regiments, the sailors, and the civilians whose contributions made each operation possible. Our records contain defeats as well as victories, discrimination as well as opportunity, and ordinary duty alongside extraordinary courage. We did not need history to make us flawless. We needed it to preserve the fact that, when the country's future was being decided by force, we helped decide it.