
February – Black History Month

USCT – US Colored Troops

Quick highlights:

- August of 1861: First Confiscation Act
- July of 1862: Second Confiscation Act & Militia Act
- January 1, 1863: Emancipation Proclamation
- May 22, 1863: General Order No. 143 created the Bureau of Colored Troops
- June 1863: The first regiment was officially mustered into the Bureau of United States Colored Troops.

Who were the US Colored Troops (USCT)?

The War Department issued General Order No. 143 in May 1863. This Order established a procedure for receiving African Americans into the armed forces and designated African American regiments as United States Colored Troops, or USCT. Maj. Charles W. Foster was appointed the bureau chief, with the title assistant adjutant general.

African-descent regiments organized before the new bureau was established were not the first regiments mustered into the Bureau of United States Colored Troops. Most would retain their state designation until 1864, when they would be designated **United States Colored Troops**.

In June 1863, the first regiment was officially mustered into the Bureau of United States Colored Troops. Organized in Washington, D.C., the regiment was designated the 1st United States Colored Infantry.

That same month, the secretary of war published the department policy on the pay of “colored troops.” In accordance with section 15 of the Militia Act of 1862, the secretary ordered that the regular pay for colored troops be reduced to \$10 per month regardless of rank, with \$3 deducted for their uniforms.

Until the Bureau of United States Colored Troops was established, Lincoln’s War Department had not enforced this congressional mandate.

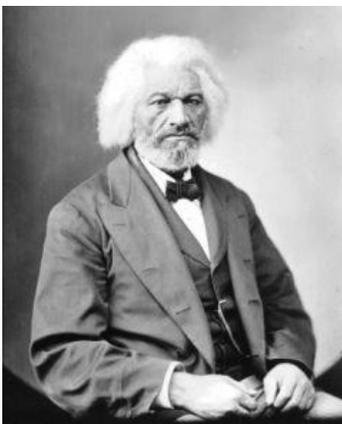
USCT regiments were led by white officers, and African American troops encountered little opportunity to advance within the ranks. The Bureau set out to create an ordered structure for training, drilling, and equipping large numbers of African Americans, who they feared would seek revenge on their former masters.



This recruiting poster was published by the Philadelphia Supervisory Committee. The Committee organized and trained 11 infantry regiments at Camp William Penn, west of Philadelphia.

-African American Civil War Museum

Leading abolitionist Frederick Douglass famously wrote,



*Frederick Douglas
(Library of Congress)*

“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny he has earned the right to citizenship.” -

Frederick Douglas – April 6, 1863

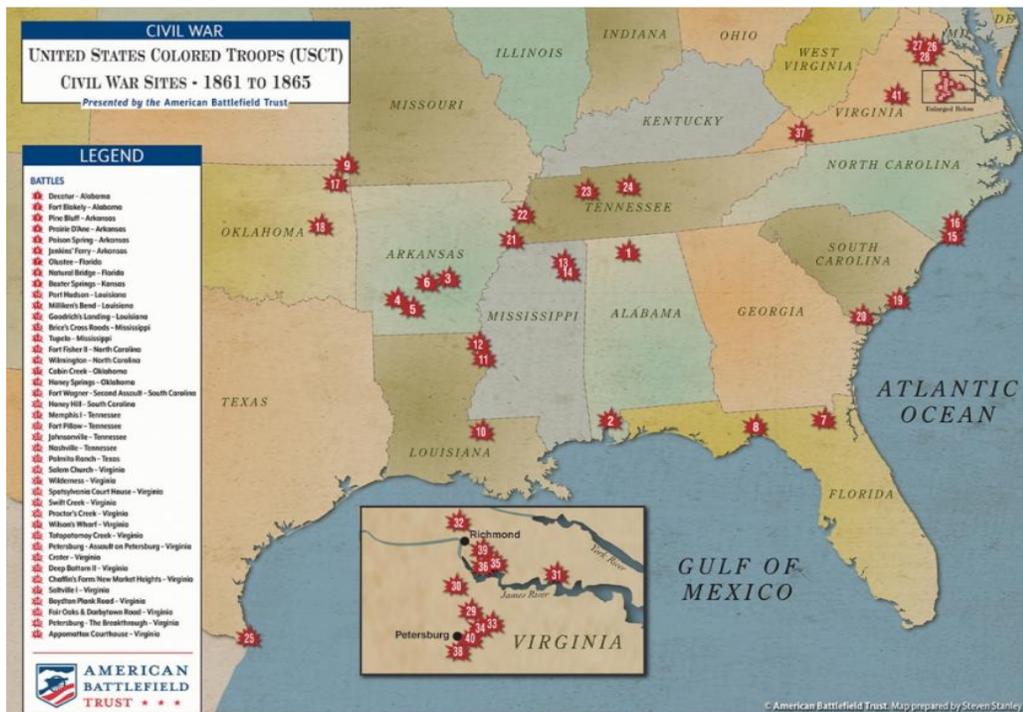
USCT soldiers at an abandoned farmhouse in Dutch Gap, Virginia, 1864



Map of United States Colored Troops (USCT) Civil War Sites - 1861 to 1865 - American Battlefield Trust

African American soldiers continued to prove their mettle throughout the conflict, even while waging two wars at the same time: physical combat and racial bigotry. Members of the United States Colored Troops were paid less than white soldiers and were restricted from serving as officers, even in their own units.

179,000 men – many who were former slaves – volunteered to fight in the Union army; nearly 37,000 gave their lives for the cause. With every engagement in which they fought, the USCT's time and again proved their mettle.



At Port Hudson in Louisiana, Fort Wagner in South Carolina, Spotsylvania, New Market Heights, and Wilson's Wharf in Virginia, and elsewhere, USCT units displayed courage under fire and won glory on the field of battle.

By the end of the war, African-Americans made up 10 percent of the Union army.

This map depicts major battles where USCTs fought or were in a supporting role as well as encampments such as the Wilderness, Salem Church, and Totopotomoy Creek.

<https://www.nps.gov/rich/learn/historyculture/usct.htm>

Volunteer regiments

Before the USCT was formed, several volunteer regiments were raised from [free black](#) men, including [freedmen](#) in the South. In 1863 a former slave, William Henry Singleton, helped recruit 1,000 former slaves in New Bern, North Carolina for the First North Carolina Colored Volunteers. He became a sergeant in the 35th USCT. Freedmen from the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, established in 1863 on the island, also formed part of the Free North Carolina Colored Volunteers (FNCCV) and subsequently the 35th.^[13] Nearly all of the volunteer regiments were converted into USCT units.

The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Organized in early 1863 under the leadership of [Colonel Robert Gould Shaw](#), the 54th Massachusetts was the first “officially” recruited regiment of African American soldiers. Freemen and former slaves living in the North, even as far as Canada, flocked to fill its muster roles. The 54th’s ranks were filled so quickly that another regiment, the 55th Massachusetts, was organized shortly after.

On July 18, 1863, the 54th Massachusetts achieved immortality in their forlorn assault of [Battery Wagner](#) near Charleston, South Carolina. The eyes of the Union and Confederacy alike were on this singular regiment, which destroyed the persistent perception that African Americans couldn’t perform heroically in battle.

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT WILLIAM H. CARNEY



In the futile assault on Confederate positions, the 54th lost more than half of its men. ***One of the 54th’s soldiers, Sergeant William Harvey Carney, was the “first” African American to be awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of ort Wagner in July 1863.***

<https://homeofheroes.com/heroes-stories/civil-war/william-carney/>

Sergeant Carney's Beginnings

The Civil War was almost two years old when President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. With that historic step, for the first time, black American's were encouraged to enlist in the Union Army. Among the enlistees was a young man named William Carney.

Born on February 29, 1840, at Norfolk, Virginia, William Carney's mother was a slave to Major Carney. Prior to the Civil War, there was no program for educating young black men in the South, but Carney was fortunate enough at the age of 14 to attend a secret school where he learned to read and write. Emancipated when Major Carney died, young William Carney had moved to Bedford, Massachusetts, and began preparing for a future as a minister.

Joining the Infantry

When volunteers were requested to man the Union Army in 1862, and following President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, William Carney temporarily set aside his plans to enter the ministry. He later stated, "I felt I could best serve my God by serving my Country and my oppressed brothers." He became a member of and trained with, the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry's Company. Most of the soldiers in the unit were conscientious and focused on

the task at hand. Union General Ullman later said of the men in the all-black units, "They are far more earnest than we...They know the deep stake they have in the issue."

During the advance, Carney was wounded but still went on. When the color-bearer was shot, Carney grabbed the flagstaff and planted it in the parapet, while the rest of his regiment stormed the fortification. When his regiment was forced to retreat, he was wounded two more times while he carried the colors back to Union lines. He did not relinquish it until he handed it to another soldier of the 54th. When he returned to the decimated battle line, Carney reportedly claimed, "Boys! The old flag never touched the ground." **Carney** was promoted to the rank of sergeant for his actions

It was not unusual for acts of valor accomplished during the Civil War to go unrecognized for many years. More than half of the 1520 Medals of Honor awarded for heroism during that period were not awarded until 20 or more years after the war. His valor at Fort Wagner was honored on May 23, 1900, Sergeant William Harvey Carney was awarded his Nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor. Though by that time several other black Americans had already received the award for heroism during the Civil War and the Indian Campaigns, Sergeant Carney's action at Fort Wagner on July 18, 1863, was the first to merit the award.

The 54th paved the way for subsequent black regiments who continued to prove their worth at places like Big Cabin and Honey Springs, Port Hudson, Petersburg, and **New Market Heights**, where ***14 members of the United States Colored Troops were awarded Medals of Honor.***

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/covered-glory>

Covered With Glory: The African American Heroes of The Battle of New Market Heights on September 29, 1864

By Peter A. Sicher • March 22, 2018 • Updated September 29, 2020



***Richmond National Battlefield Park Staff
&
Battlefield Trust***

The Battle of New Market Heights, Henrico County, Virginia, fought on September 29, 1864, remains among the lesser-known engagements of the Civil War. Its significance, however, in American military history and African-American history deserves recognition.

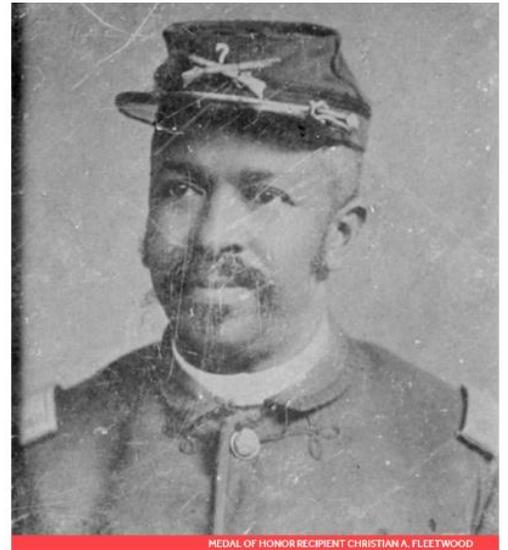
Fourteen African-American soldiers of the **4th USCT**, were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions at the Battle of New Market Heights, part of the **Battle of Chaffin's Farm** in September 1864,

during the campaign to take Petersburg.

At the end of what had been a long and difficult day, Sgt. Maj. Christian A. Fleetwood of the 4th United States Colored Infantry recorded in his diary that he “Charged with the 6th at daylight and got used up...saved colors.” Terse though it may be, Fleetwood’s entry opens a window onto a tale of heroism that is extraordinary, even by the standards of the American Civil War.

In September 1864, in an attempt to tie down Confederate reinforcements, Gen. [Ulysses S. Grant](#) ordered a diversionary attack against the Confederate fortifications around Richmond. Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant approved a plan sending Butler's Army of the James against the Confederate defenses protecting Richmond.

Gen. Butler had recommended that his division lead the Union attacks; he believed blacks would fight as well as whites, and New Market Heights offered a perfect



opportunity for the USCTs to prove their ability. If Butler's men broke through, the capture of the Confederate capital became possible. The campaign involved more than 20,000 Union troops including 3,000 blacks serving in units designated United States Colored Troops, or USCTs.



On Sept. 29, 1864, during the [Battle of New Market Heights](#) near Richmond, several regiments of [United States Colored Troops](#) launched an assault on a well-fortified Southern position at the gates of the Confederate capital.

They fought in hellish conditions. New Market Heights was defended by one of the most storied units in Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, the Texas Brigade led by John Gregg. Joining the Texans was a brigade of dismounted cavalry including Hampton’s Legion, another legendary unit. Artillery batteries anchored each end of the Confederate line, exposing the Federal flanks to deadly enfilading fire.

The defenders were protected by the trenches from which they fought, plus formidable natural and artificial obstacles, including two lines of abatis, and a swamp through which the Union attackers had to wade while under enemy fire. The troops fought their way through a treacherous terrain while barraged with infantry and artillery fire. The troops remained stuck in a field of trees and debris for 30 minutes before charging through Confederate fortifications and assuming control of New Market Heights.

As the black troops stood among their fallen comrades, the answer to the question, "will the negro fight?" had been answered forever. 14 black soldiers were later awarded the medal of honor. The courage and determination shown by those making the attacks could not be denied. Paine's division suffered some 800 casualties in just over an hour. For their valor, **14 African Americans received the Medal of Honor**. This was an especially significant event in

American military history given that only 16 Army Medals of Honor were awarded to black troops during the entire Civil War.

The Battle of Chaffin's Farm was the North's most successful effort to break General Robert E. Lee's defensive lines north of the James. The attack at New Market Heights forever established the fighting spirit of the African-American soldier. For the next six months the two armies held fast to their opposite positions just eight miles from Richmond. On April 2, 1865, the Confederate government evacuated its capital city.

The following day the Army of the James, including hundreds of USCTs, proudly entered Richmond.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the USCTs that fought at the Battle of New Market Heights was paid by John Townsend Trowbridge, a Northern Journalist who visited the battlefield shortly after the war. He wrote; "...Butler's colored regiments formed unflinchingly under fire and made their gallant charge, wiping out with their own blood, the insults that had been heaped upon them by white troops."

***Listing of USCT Medal of Honor
Recipients at New Market Heights.***

** indicates photograph online*

Army

**Barnes, William H.-VA-Co. C, 38 US Col.
Inf.**

Beaty, Powhatan *-OH-Co. G, 5 US Col Inf.

**Bronson, James H.-OH-Co. D, 5 US Col.
Inf.**

**Fleetwood, Christian A. *-MD-4th US Col
Inf**

**Gardiner, James *-VA-Co. I, 36th US Col.
Inf.**

**Harris, James H. *-MD-Co. B, 38th US Col.
Inf.**

Hawkins, Thomas R. *-PA- 6 US Col. Inf.

Hilton, Alfred B.-MD-Co. H, 4th US Col. Inf.

Holland, Milton M. *OH- 5th US Col. Inf.

James, Miles-VA –Co. B, 36th US Col. Inf.

**Kelly, Alexander * - PA – Co. F, 6th US Col.
Inf.**

**Pinn, Robert A. * -OH – Co. I, 5th US Col.
Inf.**

**Ratcliff, Edward-VA – Co. C, 38th US Col.
Inf.**

Veal, Charles –MD – Co. D, 4th US Col. Inf.