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COMPILED MILITARY SERVICE RECORDS OF VOLUNTEER UNION SOLDIERS WHO SERVED
WITH THE UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS:
55th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored)

Introduction

On the 16 rolls of this microfilm publication, M1801, are reproduced the compiled military service records of volunteer Union soldiers belonging to the 55th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored). This unit was part of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) but retained its state designation. The USCT included 7 numbered cavalry regiments; 14 numbered artillery regiments; 144 numbered infantry regiments; plus Brigade Bands Nos. 1 & 2 (Corps d'Afrique and US Colored Troops); Powell's Regiment Colored Infantry; Southard's Company Colored Infantry; Quartermaster Detachment; Pioneer Corps, 1st Division, 16th Army Corps; Unassigned Company A Colored Infantry; and Unassigned USCT. There are also miscellaneous service cards arranged alphabetically by surname at the end of the unit records. The records reproduced are part of the records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917, Record Group (RG) 94.

Background

United States Colored Troops

Since the time of the American Revolution, African Americans have volunteered to serve their country in time of war. The Civil War was no exception. Official sanction was the difficulty. In the fall of 1862 there were four Union regiments of African Americans raised in New Orleans, LA: the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Louisiana Native Guard, and the 1st Louisiana Heavy Artillery (African Descent). The 1st South Carolina Infantry (African Descent) was not officially organized until January 1863; however, three companies of the regiment were on coastal expeditions as early as November 1862. Similarly, the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry was not mustered into Federal service until January 1863, even though the regiment had already participated in the action at Island Mound, MO, on October 27, 1862. These early unofficial regiments received little Federal support, but they showed the strength of the African-American soldier's desire to fight for freedom.

The first official authorization to employ African Americans in Federal service was the Second Confiscation and Militia Act of July 17, 1862. This act allowed President Abraham Lincoln to receive into the military or naval service persons of African descent and gave permission to use them for any purpose "he may judge best for the public welfare." However, the President did not authorize use of African Americans in combat until issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

In late January 1863, Gov. John Andrew of Massachusetts received permission to raise a regiment of African-American soldiers. The pace of organizing additional regiments was very slow. In March Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton sent Gen. Lorenzo Thomas to the lower Mississippi Valley to recruit free and contraband African Americans. Thomas was given broad authority. He was to explain the

administration's policy regarding African-American soldiers and recruit volunteers to raise and command them. Stanton wanted all officers of such units to be white, but that policy was softened to allow African-American surgeons and chaplains. By the end of the war, in addition to the chaplains and surgeons, there were some 87 African-American officers. Thomas' endeavor was very successful, and on May 22, 1863, the Bureau of Colored Troops was established to coordinate and organize regiments from all parts of the country. Created under War Department General Order No. 143, the bureau was responsible for handling "all matters relating to the organization of Colored Troops." The bureau was directly under the Adjutant General's Office and its procedures and rules were specific and strict. All African-American regiments were now to be designated United States Colored Troops (USCT). At this time there were some African-American regiments with state names and a few regiments in the Department of the Gulf designated as Corps d'Afrique. All these were ultimately assimilated into the USCT, even though some of the regiments retained their state designations.

To facilitate recruiting in the states of Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and eventually Kentucky, the War Department issued General Order No. 329 on October 3, 1863. Section 6 of the order stated that if any citizen should offer his or her slave for enlistment into the military service, that person would, "if such slave be accepted, receive from the recruiting officer a certificate thereof, and become entitled to compensation for the service or labor of said slave, not exceeding the sum of three hundred dollars, upon filing a valid deed of manumission and of release, and making satisfactory proof of title." For this reason, some records of manumission are contained in the compiled service records reproduced in this publication.

The USCT fought in 39 major engagements and over 400 lesser ones. Sixteen African-American soldiers received Medals of Honor. As it was in other units, the death toll from disease was very high in the USCT. Deaths from disease and battle totaled 37,000. The last regiment of the USCT was mustered out of Federal service in December 1867.

Important sources for information about African-American units in the Civil War are the War Department's *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: 1880-1901; reprinted Harrisburg, 1971 and 1985) and the Navy Department's *The War of the Rebellion; A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies* (Washington, DC: 1874-1922; reprinted Harrisburg, 1971 and 1985.) These multivolume works contain reports of operations and other official correspondence.

55th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored)

The 55th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored) was mustered into service on June 22, 1863, at Readville, Massachusetts. Comprised of the overflow from the famous 54th Massachusetts, the regiment contained recruits from many northern states and one volunteer from eastern Sudan, Nicholas Said, who was of high birth and spoke five western languages fluently. There were both free men and former slaves in the regiment. Chaplain John R. Bowles of the 55th was, like his counterpart in the 54th, an African American from Massachusetts.

On July 21, 1863, the 55th left Readville and traveled to Newbern, NC. Because of the heavy losses incurred by the 54th at the assault on Fort Wagner during the siege of Charleston, the 55th immediately proceeded to Folly Island, SC, where they were attached to the 10th Army Corps, Department of the South. From September 17 to October 28 the regiment was assigned to Forts Wagner and Gregg on Morris Island where it participated in operations against nearby Fort Sumter and the city of Charleston. From late October until February 1864, the regiment was in camp on Folly Island. During that time Company "F" of the 55th participated in the expedition to John's Island, SC. On February 13, the

regiment moved to Jacksonville, FL, and had provost duty there until March 11. Company "F" was again detached, this time from February to April for garrison duty at Jacksonville's Fort Fribley. Companies "B" and "I" were ordered to Yellow Bluff in February. The remaining men were ordered to Palatka on March 11.

The 55th returned to Folly Island April 17, 1864, and remained there until November 27. During this tour on Folly Island, the unit took part in operations at James Island on May 21-22 and June 30-July 10. On November 27, the regiment moved to Hilton Head where Company "G" was assigned to duty at the battery on Long Island and Company "H" to Fort Delafield at Stono Inlet. On November 29-30 remaining elements of the regiment participated in Hatch's expedition up the Broad River to Boyd's Neck and on the 30th became, along with the 54th, part of the expedition to destroy the Charleston and Savannah Railroad. At the battle at Honey Hill, which occurred during this effort, the 55th suffered the loss of one-half of its officers and one-third of its enlisted men. From December 6-9, the regiment participated in demonstrations against the railroad near Deveaux's Neck. It then proceeded to Boyd's Landing, remaining there until January 11, 1865, when it returned to Hilton Head. Then it moved to Fort Thunderbolt near Savannah, GA, and later to Forts Jackson, Bartow, and Battery Lee. From February 1-6, the unit proceeded to Beaufort, SC, and up the South Edisto River to Stono Inlet. It took part in the expeditions to James Island, February 9-10, and to Bull's Bay, February 11-15. During this period, Companies G and H rejoined the command and the entire regiment moved to Mount Pleasant on February 19.

From February 21 through March 10, the unit took part in an expedition to the Santee River, and from April 6-12 participated in another to Eutaw Springs. It had duty at or near Charleston until May 7 when it moved to Sumpterville and then on to Orangeburg on May 19. Attached to the District of Charleston, Department of South Carolina, the regiment served on provost duty at Orangeburg until August 1865. It was mustered out August 29, 1865, and discharged at Boston, MA, on September 23, 1865.

During its service the 55th Massachusetts lost 130 personnel to disease and 67 killed. Besides Chaplain Bowles three African Americans would become officers in the 55th, John F. Shorter, James M. Trotter, and William H. Dupree.

Records Description

Compiled service records consist of a jacket-envelope for each soldier, labeled with his name, rank, unit, and card numbers. The compilation of service records of Union soldiers began in 1890 under the direction of Col. Fred C. Ainsworth, head of the Record and Pension Office of the Adjutant General's Office, Department of War. Information from muster rolls, regimental returns, descriptive books, and other records was copied verbatim onto cards. A separate card was prepared each time an individual name appeared on a document. These cards were numbered on the back, and these numbers were entered onto the outside jacket containing the cards. The carded information was verified by a separated operation of comparison; great care was taken to ensure that the cards were accurate.

A typical jacket contains card abstracts of entries found in original records relating to the soldier and original documents relating solely to that soldier. Examples of the latter include enlistment papers, substitute certificates, casualty sheets, death reports, prisoner-of-war memorandums, and correspondence. Unique to the records of the USCT are deeds of manumission, oaths of allegiance, proof of ownership, certificates of monetary award, and bills of sale. These items appear most frequently in units recruited in the border states of Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland. These states remained in the Union but were slave states. Jackets and cards include a section labeled "bookmark" which was reserved for cross-references to other records relating to the individual or his unit. The service records are arranged by arm

of service, thereunder numerically by regiment or independent battalion or company, and thereunder alphabetically by name of the soldier. Records for officers are interfiled alphabetically by name with the records of enlisted men. If an individual served in more than one unit, which was typical for USCT officers, there will be separate service records for each unit in which he served.

The unjacketed miscellaneous cards were accumulated by the War Department with the expectation that they would be incorporated in individual compiled service records. However, this expectation was never fulfilled, because either insufficient or contradictory information made it impossible to associate the cards or papers with a particular soldier's service record.

Related Records

Among the records of the Adjutant General's Office in the National Archives are many of the original records that were abstracted or "carded" by the Record and Pension Office. These include the individual unit's muster rolls, returns, and descriptive books. Other series in RG 94 that contain information relating to volunteer Union soldiers who served with the USCT include carded records relating to Union staff officers, carded medical records of volunteer Union soldiers, unbound and bound regimental records and "record of event" cards. The regimental records of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored) have been reproduced as Microfilm Publication M1659, *Records of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment (Colored), 1863-1865*

The "record of events" cards include information copied from the unit's muster rolls and returns. They show the station of the field and staff and those of the various companies of the regiment at the time the muster roll or return was prepared and sometimes mention battles, skirmishes, or other activities in which the regiment participated. The cards have been reproduced as Microfilm Publication M594, *Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations*.

Record Group 94 also includes a card index for the USCT, reproduced as Microfilm Publication M589, *Index to Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with U.S. Colored Troops*, which may be used to locate the regiment of USCT personnel. An index card gives the name of the soldier and his rank, as well as the unit in which he served; sometimes there is a cross-reference to his service in other units or organizations. This index does not cover the miscellaneous card abstracts and personal papers included in this microfilm publication. The National Archives is continually producing microfilm publications of volunteer Union compiled military service records. A complete listing of finished publications can be found in the National Archives' *Microfilm Resources for Research: A Comprehensive Catalog* which is available on-line at <http://www.nara.gov>.

The Records of the Colored Troops Division, within RG 94, include division correspondence; records relating to recruiting, the appointment of officers, and the slave or free status of individuals; and a compilation of historical extracts and official papers concerning the military service of African Americans from the colonial period through the Civil War entitled *The Negro in the Military Service of the United States 1639-1886*. This compilation is reproduced as Microfilm Publication M858. The records of the Bounty and Claims Division, also in RG 94, include correspondence of the division and records relating to bounties and claims paid to loyal owners of slaves by the Slave Claims Commissions of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee and West Virginia.

If an application for a pension was made, the pension application case file may be among the Records of the Veterans Administration (RG 15). Indexes to the pension applications have been reproduced as Microfilm Publication T288, *General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934*, and T289, *Organizational Index to Pension Files of Veterans Who Served Between 1861 and 1900*.

If a soldier or officer was tried before a general court-martial or if an individual or his unit was the subject of a court of inquiry or military commission, transcripts of the proceedings may be among the Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) (RG 153). The registers to the proceedings have been reproduced as Microfilm Publication M1105, *Registers of the Records of the Proceedings of the U.S. Army General Courts-Martial, 1809-1890*.

Other record groups having information pertaining to the USCT include Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (RG 105); Records of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau (Civil War) (RG 110); Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury (RG 217); and Records of U. S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920 (RG 393).

Holdings of the National Archives relating to the Civil War are outlined in Kenneth W. Munden and Henry Putney Beers' *Guide to Federal Archives Relating to the Civil War* (Washington, DC, 1962) and Henry Putney Beers' *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the Confederate States of America* (Washington, DC, 1968), reprinted respectively as *The Union* (Washington, 1986) and *The Confederacy* (Washington, 1986).

CONTENTS

<u>Roll</u>	<u>Description</u>
1	Compiled Military Service Records
	Abbott, John - Bowlin, Edward
2	Bowlin, James - Carter, Joseph
3	Carter, Nelson - Davis, Lee
4	Davis, Robert - Ford, Lewis
5	Forrest, Harry M. - Griffin, Harrison
6	Griffin, Jackson - Highwarden, John Wesley
7	Hill, Andy - Jones, Armstead M.
8	Jones, Dennis H. - Macofee, Francis
9	Maddox, Isaac D. - Morgan, Alexander
10	Morgan, Charles H. - Pernel, George E.
11	Perry, Alfred - Roberts, William H.
12	Robertson, James - Slaughter, Simon
13	Smith, Andrew - Thompson, James
14	Thompson, John H. - White, Israel
15	White, Lemuel - Young, Washington
16	Miscellaneous Compiled Military Service Cards
	Abbott, Wiley - Young, Henry

