

# The Civil War Experience of St. Mary's County's African American Soldiers

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Half way through the Civil War, on January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. With the issuance of this decree, President Lincoln officially committed to end slavery in the states that seceded from the Union. With the declaration of slaves in the Confederacy as forever free, the United States was presented with the possibility to transform itself into a slave-less society. Prior to the Proclamation, colored regiments had been unofficially organized, although they met with little success and were usually disbanded. Yet, President Lincoln's decree established the ground work for the official recognition of colored regiments in the Union Army. In fact, no later than mid-July of that year, African Americans from all over Maryland were showing up at recruitment centers in Baltimore. However, the process of bringing black soldiers into a formerly all-white army proved turbulent. The Civil War experiences of Maryland's black soldiers in general and, in particular, those from St. Mary's County were plagued by discrimination and hardship. But, by the time the last bullets were fired and all the dust had settled, the exertions and accomplishments of these tired and proven men represented a critical step towards the greater goal of social equality for which they struggled and fought.

Even from the onset of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the issue of black enlistment in the Union Army was controversial. Opponents to enlistment relied heavily upon the racist attitudes of the times to argue against African Americans from joining the military. The prevailing attitudes questioned African Americans' abilities to become disciplined soldiers and to fight effectively as soldiers. In an 1862 edition of the *National Intelligencer* dated May 30th, the *Intelligencer* commented on blacks' inabilities to become proper soldiers by doubting the ability of the "rude negro of Southern plantations [to learn to handle a musket] though that very implement may with entire safety be placed in his hands if he is to be kept out of battle".<sup>1</sup> Opposition to black enlistment is not just evidenced in the popular literature of the times; it could also be seen within the military itself.

General Banks, commander of the 4th regiment of the United States Colored Troops, openly expressed his disapproval of the use of African American officers. He said, "The three regiments first named have ten companies each...but they have negro company officers, whom I am replacing...[with] white ones, being entirely satisfied that the appointment of colored officers is detrimental to the service". Gen. Banks went on to describe the use of black officers as "a source of constant embarrassment and annoyance".<sup>2</sup> Banks' unease over African American officers extended from the mentality that questioned the general usefulness of black soldiers altogether—whether they fought as infantry or commanded as officers. However, voices of opposition, whether issued from politicized newspapers or from military leaders, fell on deaf ears as the Union Army had a desperate need for manpower and the only way to supply this need was through the enrollment of African American soldiers.

It must be noted that in their recruitment and enrollment, black soldiers from St. Mary's County did not just enlist in local regiments. Muster rolls indicate soldiers from the county enlisted in several regiments outside the state of Maryland. African American soldiers from St. Mary's County enlisted in the 1st, 2nd and 23rd United States Colored Infantry regiments in Washington, D.C. Also, soldiers can be found as far as the 28th and 29th regiments of the USCI, which were regiments from Indiana and Illinois, respectively. Accordingly, with the enlistment of black soldiers from the county in a variety of regiments, the experience of the typical black soldier from St. Mary's was liable to vary. So, in order for us to understand the Civil War experience of African

American soldiers from St. Mary's County, it is necessary and appropriate to examine all the regiments in which they fought, whether they were from Maryland or not.

It can be plausibly assumed that St. Mary's black soldiers experienced the same discriminations as other African American soldiers throughout the Union Army. Two of the biggest problems experienced by almost all black soldiers concerned unequal pay and combat opportunities. Hiram Peterson, an African American Sergeant in the 2nd USCI, voiced his displeasure over unequal pay. Peterson, like most other black soldiers, was under the impression black soldiers were to receive the same pay as white soldiers. However, African American soldiers received only a miniscule pay of seven dollars a month while their white counterparts earned almost double. In a letter to his father dated October 29th, 1863, Peterson admits he is content with everything in his company except his pay; saying this about his wages, "I am first duty sergeant and my pay should be 17 dollars a month and I think it is hard to be obliged to put up with seven dollars ...I am willing to be a soldier and serve my time faithful like a man but I think it is hard to be put off in such a doggish manner".<sup>3,4</sup> This issue of unequal pay highlights the federal government's indecision about what rights black soldiers possessed in their newly founded emancipation.<sup>5</sup>

African American soldiers were not only discriminated against in their monthly wages but also in the types of duties they performed while in the service. As mentioned, racist attitudes of the time questioned the capabilities of black soldiers. These mentalities disputed the abilities of African American soldiers to become disciplined, effective fighters. From the beginning of black recruitment, the military's policy intended for African Americans to be employed in menial labor "or in relief of white troops holding stationary positions far from the line of battle".<sup>6</sup> Some of the typical duties performed by black soldiers were constructing fortifications and campgrounds, digging trenches, loading and unloading wagons and ships and cleaning latrines.<sup>7</sup> William McGoslin, a First Sergeant with the 29th USCI from Illinois, expressed his disdain for these tedious tasks and voiced his growing eagerness for battle. In a letter, McGoslin writes that his company came into contact with Confederate forces near Charles City Point on the James River. And, after days of anticipating combat, McGoslin and the rest of the 29th still had not engaged the enemy. McGoslin writes, "We are expecting every day; to be sent to the front; but it is ordered otherwise...Our regiment has built two forts and about three miles of breastworks, which shows that we are not idle and that we are learning to make fortifications, whether we learn to fight or not". If the amount of construction was not enough, McGoslin goes on to describe the exhaustive and endless manner with which they accomplished their work, saying, "Working day and night, four hours on and four hours off. We have worked in that way for eight or ten days, without stopping".<sup>8</sup> However, there was some degree of variability to these experiences.

Not every colored regiment experienced the same degree of discrimination as others. An African American soldier by the name of "Rufus" from the 7th USCI provides evidence that shows in some cases there was more of a general equality than perceived. Writing in response to criticisms made by a soldier of the 8th USCI, Rufus asserts, "[T]here is no duty imposed upon colored soldiers here that is not shared by their white brothers in arms...our camp equipage and other necessities are just the same as those furnished to white troops, and in better condition than theirs". Rufus goes on to say:

With regard to rations, I most flatly contradict the soldier's assertion: after an experience of eight months in this regiment and extensive observation in others, I have come to the conclusion that these troops are the best fed men in the service; and if there is any fault, it should fall upon the regimental Q[uartermaster's] department, and not upon the General Government.<sup>9</sup>

As testified by Rufus, there was a degree of variability between what black soldiers experienced. Although conditions such as the ones experienced by the 7th were certainly rare, Rufus' account nonetheless attests to the alternate reality that only a small handful of African American soldiers experienced. Lastly, Rufus is correct in placing blame on the departments of regimental Quartermasters for racial transgressions. Even though the discrepancies in labor assignments and combat opportunities may say more about Quartermasters than the actual military, the sheer commonality of these discriminations cannot be dismissed as relative per regiment, especially since the majority of colored troops did experience many of the same discriminations.

So, despite the need to recruit African American soldiers into the Union Army, it appears the enrollment of black soldiers was not quite out of the "military necessity" on which President Lincoln based his decision. Regiments composed of St. Mary's colored soldiers experienced a similar reality as that experienced by other colored regiments. The Union's military policy largely relegated black soldiers to the more wearisome and strenuous duties, all for lesser pay, while white soldiers typically saw more combat. Although there certainly were exceptions to this policy, the reality faced by most black soldiers throughout the Union Army was shaded by discrimination and inequality. However, the policy of using African American soldiers primarily for secondary tasks had latent affects that constructed and perpetuated the racist idea that blacks made for poor soldiers.

Major Quincy McNeil of the 39th USCI recognized his regiment's lacking preparedness for battle and their lagging discipline, so he sent a letter of request to the General-in-Chief of the Union Army, asking that the 39th be placed at the rear of the company to "offer an opportunity for discipline and drill".<sup>10</sup> In the request, Maj. McNeil declared the 39th as well as the 19th and 30th, two other USCI regiments with soldiers from St. Mary's County, as being unfit and ill-prepared. The letter of request is important because it reveals some of the reasons why African American soldiers were perceived as poor soldiers as well as how the military's policy perpetuated the poor military skills of those black soldiers. Maj. McNeil blames the 39th's lacking readiness for battle on their constant movement and endless labor tasks. He says, "From the 5th of May owing to the continual marchings and fatigue [duties] which we have necessarily been required to perform no opportunity has been allowed to drill or discipline". Furthermore, Maj. McNeil adds:

Target practice, except for the five days at Manassas Junction has been out of the question, and this for men who have never been allowed the handling, much less the use of fire arms, has proven to be too short to enable many to determine as to whether the explosive part of the cartridge is the powder or the ball.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, Maj. McNeil calls attention to two glaring problems that inhibited black soldiers from developing proper military skills.

One of the problems Maj. McNeil calls attention to concerns the military's policy towards the level of involvement of African American soldiers. As discussed, the policy stipulated colored troops were to be used primarily for non-combative duties; and, as Maj. McNeil reveals it was these fatigue duties, menial tasks and "continual marchings" that prevented black troops from receiving the proper training they needed. Without proper training, it is questionable how any individual could have been expected to become a proficient soldier. Furthermore, the case could be made that African American soldiers needed more drilling than typically required. Many black soldiers throughout the Union Army were formerly enslaved, where they would never have had the opportunity to handle firearms or learn other skills useful to the military. Even African American soldiers' recognition of rank was skewed by their former lives as slaves. As Maj. McNeil says in his same request, "As to discipline I know not where to begin to describe defects. To them every one is Captain or Boss and no amount of correction has so far rectified their knowledge of rank".<sup>12</sup> At one time, all African Americans had to address every white male as a superior, so it can be surmised how difficult it was for them to assimilate into an all-white military. As made evident by Maj. McNeil's account of the 39th, black soldiers, including but not limited to those from St. Mary's County, were at a disadvantage in their military skills because of their history and former lives as slaves. Yet, many of these soldiers were able to triumph over these disadvantages and racist attitudes to prove they deserved their position in the army and their status as free men.

African American soldiers throughout the Union felt they had much more to prove in the Civil War than their white counterparts. Black soldiers were out to prove their worth as human beings who deserved respect and equal rights. African American troops from St. Mary's were no different. Eager to prove themselves, these men were often hungry for battle. For some St. Mary's soldiers, the chance to prove oneself in combat never came; but, for the ones who did see combat, they often fought meritoriously and with unshakeable courage.

Two of the better known instances of combat for African American soldiers from St. Mary's County were the Battles of Petersburg and the Battle of Chaffin's Farm, which is also referred to as the Battle of New Market Heights. Occurring on June 15, 1864, the Battles of Petersburg were a series of heavy skirmishes fought over a three day period. Petersburg witnessed a large concentration of fighting done by black soldiers. The 1st, 4th and 22nd infantry regiments of the USCT, all containing soldiers from St. Mary's, were present. Although the primary objective of capturing the Confederate stronghold of Petersburg was not realized at this time, the black soldiers were reported to have fought courageously and captured many of the enemy's fortifications and defenses surrounding the stronghold. General William F. Smith of the Eighteenth Army Corps said this about the fighting of his African American soldiers: "Some heavy profile works in the rear of the line [were] still keeping up a galling of artillery fire, I ordered the colored troops to carry them by assault. This was gallantly done".<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, General Edward Hincks of the Third Division of the Eighteenth Corps was moved to say, "[W]e have sufficient proof that colored men, when properly officered, instructed, and drilled, will make most excellent infantry of the line, and may be used as such soldiers to great advantage".<sup>14</sup> Much of the acclaim African American soldiers received because of their expert fighting at Petersburg was echoed at the Battle of Chaffin's Farm.

When it took place, the Battle of Chaffin's Farm involved more black soldiers than any other prior battle. Chaffin's Farm in addition to witnessing one of the largest concentrations of black fighting in the Civil War also witnessed some of the bravest and most heroic fighting done by African

American soldiers. The Union's objectives were to capture three strong Confederate fortifications that "constituted an important segment of the final defenses of Richmond".<sup>15</sup> As the first bullets of the battle were fired at daybreak on September 29, 1864, General Halbert Paine led his Third Division with almost three thousand black troops into battle. The Confederate's fortifications were well-defended and the initial approach of Gen. Paine's forces was decimated with casualties. The aggregate for killed, wounded and missing or captured soldiers for the Third Division amounted to 1,026, representing almost one-third of total Union losses for the battle. The amount of sacrifice exacted by the Union's forces at this battle prompted the War Department to issue fourteen Medals of Honor to black Third Division soldiers for their heroic services.<sup>16</sup> Two of these medals were awarded to Sgt. James H. Harris of the 38th regiment and to Private William H. Barnes of the same regiment. Both of these men were born in St. Mary's County and both were two of the first African Americans to receive Medals of Honor for heroic deeds. Sgt. Harris was cited the award for "Gallantry in the assault"; and, Pvt. Barnes received his award for being "[A]mong the first to enter the enemy's works; although wounded".<sup>17</sup>

A point of clarification must be made about the battles of Petersburg and Chaffin's Farm. Both were atypical combat scenarios involving African American soldiers from St. Mary's County. Because of their scale and the extent to which black soldiers were used, these two battles were not what the average black soldier from St. Mary's would have experienced. Nevertheless, these battles showcased the abilities of African American men to fight capably as soldiers; and, these men proved they were equally capable at soldiering as white men if not better. The bravery, courage and skill demonstrated by black soldiers at these battles attested to African Americans' determination to prove themselves not just as soldiers but as individuals and as a race. When the liberated received the chance to become the liberators, they fought hard with many soldiers losing their lives to uphold the virtues of freedom and equality. Yet, African Americans' ability to fight as equals in the war did not necessarily translate into society's equal treatment of them.

Even though the Civil War changed the course of America's future and the lives of African Americans, society was slow to reflect this change. When many black soldiers returned home, they were met with the same racist attitudes and discriminations they experienced as slaves. Their status as slaves changed to freed men and women but many whites, especially returned Confederate soldiers, still possessed racist mentalities. Occurring around February 1866, Isaac Barbour, a black soldier from St. Mary's County, was brutally attacked by a crowd of Confederate sympathizers. In a letter to Edward O'Brien, the superintendent of a Freedmen's Bureau Farm in St. Mary's County, Barbour recounted the attack. Barbour describes how he was assaulted by a company of men and identified one of his assailants as Repley Tibbit<sup>18</sup>, "a returned rebel soldier... [who] makes it his business to injure colored people, more especially colored soldiers...at all times and place".<sup>19</sup> Barbour concludes his letter with a request, "I have defended the country in the field and most respectfully request that I be protected at home".<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, it can be surmised how hostile society was for black men and women as they attempted to assimilate into local communities as freed persons.

Black soldiers from St. Mary's County, like many of their fellow brothers at arms, possessed a unique position in the Union Army during the Civil War. Their newly founded statuses as freed men complicated the federal government and military authorities' ideas on how to properly utilize them. Racist attitudes typically subjected these soldiers to flagrant discriminations, particularly

that of unequal pay; and, these same attitudes questioned the general usefulness of African Americans as soldiers. However, when given the chance to prove themselves in the line of fire, black soldiers from St. Mary's County often did so meritoriously and gallantly. In the end, these men were not just fighting a war to restore the United States, but they were fighting to restore to their race the rights and equal treatment African Americans deserved. Although it could be argued that these rights for black men and women were not realized until almost one hundred years later with the culmination of the Civil Rights movement, the efforts and exertions of these African American soldiers during the Civil War were the critical first steps that put in motion this fight for social equality.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army 1861-1865* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966), 42-43.
- <sup>2</sup> Hondon B. Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988), 86.
- <sup>3</sup> Ira Berlin, ed., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1851-1867, Series II, The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, reprinted 1983), 374.
- <sup>4</sup> Please note all spelling and grammar has been corrected.
- <sup>5</sup> Edwin S. Redkey, *A Grand Army of Black Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 230-231.
- <sup>6</sup> Berlin, *Freedom*, 483.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 485.
- <sup>8</sup> Redkey, *A Grand Army*, 109-110.
- <sup>9</sup> Redkey, *A Grand Army*, 56.
- <sup>10</sup> Berlin, *Freedom*, 601.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 602.
- <sup>12</sup> Berlin, *Freedom*, 602.
- <sup>13</sup> Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers*, 182.
- <sup>14</sup> John David Smith, ed. *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 175.
- <sup>15</sup> Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers*, 187.
- <sup>16</sup> Smith, *Black Soldiers in Blue*, 192.
- <sup>17</sup> Footnote.com, [http://www.footnote.com/page/823\\_us\\_colored\\_troops\\_and\\_sailor\\_awarded/](http://www.footnote.com/page/823_us_colored_troops_and_sailor_awarded/). Accessed December 06, 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> Spelling not corrected.
- <sup>19</sup> Berlin, *Freedom*, 804.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

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