The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886

On the five rolls of this microfilm publication are reproduced the seven volumes (eight bound parts) of records compiled for publication by the Colored Troops Division of the Adjutant General's Office (AGO). This compilation, "The Negro in the Military Service of the United States: A Compilation of Official Records, State Papers, Historical Extracts, etc., Relating to his Military Status and Service, from the date of his introduction into the British North American Colonies," consists primarily of documents copied from published and unpublished primary sources. In addition there are a few original documents and extracts of material from secondary sources that are used to cover periods of history for which primary sources were not readily available. The volumes are part of the Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917, Record Group 94.

The Colored Troops Division was established as a division of the AGO under War Department General Order 143, May 22, 1863. This Division, whose functions included all matters pertaining to the recruitment, organization, and service of black troops and their officers, existed until January 31, 1888, when most of its functions were transferred to the Volunteer Service Division. It was under Elon A. Woodward, Chief of the Colored Troops Division, along with several clerks, that the compilation was made between 1885 and 1888.

Their object, according to a letter from Adj. Gen. Richard C. Drum to Secretary of War William C. Endicott, dated April 21, 1888, was to select "the more important documents bearing upon this subject." Drum added that the documents selected were historically significant and had been selected "from time to time, as it could be done by those most familiar with the records, without interrupting the current work of the office." He also requested that the Secretary of War obtain congressional approval to publish the collected material, which the Government Printing Office had estimated would cost about $7,200 for 2,000 sets of three printed volumes. Endicott submitted this proposal to Congress with the printing estimates, Drum's letter, examples of the records, and his request that the compilation be published. The Speaker of the House of Representatives introduced the letter of the Secretary of War to Congress; it was referred to the Committee on Printing, but no action was taken. In the 51st and 52d Congresses, Government publication of the documents was again sought. Resolutions were introduced by Congressman Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts (H.J. Res. 181) in the 51st and by Congressman Henry P. Cheatham of North Carolina (H.J. Res. 149) in the 52d. These resolutions were referred to the Committee on Printing. Nothing further was heard, nor is there any indication that the committee ever considered publication of the history.

A registry volume, used by the clerks of the Colored Troops Division to record the work performed by each clerk, indicates that at least 7 1/2 man-years were expended on the project. Woodward
worked on the project from 1885 to 1888, while the number of clerks at any one time varied from
one to three. In 1887 approval was given for Woodward to travel to Boston to examine colonial and
Revolutionary records, and in the fall of 1888 permission was granted to Woodward to examine the
records in the War Records Office of the War Department that were to be used in the publication
*The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate

Between 1888, when the Colored Troops Division was abolished, and 1894, the copied documents
and a few original documents were bound into seven volumes, and in 1894 these seven volumes
were transferred from the War Department library to the Records and Pension Office. Woodward
moved to the Office as a clerk and later to other clerical positions until his retirement in 1920, but
his name continued to be associated with the history. It was referred to as "Woodward's history of
the Negro" when it was transferred to the Records and Pension Office in 1894 and the Publication
Branch of the AGO in 1913.

No formal order or authorization for either the Colored Troops Division or Woodward to make this
compilation has been found; therefore the intended scope of the compilation is not known. There
are, however, many gaps in the work: minimal inclusion of records for the Revolutionary War, no
records for the Mexican War, and the inclusion of only a few records for the post-Civil War period.
The "The Negro in the Military Service of the United States," therefore, is not the exhaustive work
that its title might imply.

**Sources**

At the end of most documents there is a note stating the source, either published or unpublished,
from which the document or extract came. Because the citations to the published sources are often
unclear or incomplete, a bibliography has been prepared that lists correctly the published sources
that could prove troublesome. Since citations to such sources as *The Congressional Globe* and
publications of State laws and proceedings are quite adequate, they have not been listed.

Most of the documents came from either United States or Confederate States records, most of
which are now in the custody of the National Archives and Records Service (NARS). Many of
these documents were published in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records
of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901, available as NARS Microfilm
Publication M262). This work is cited as "Reb. Rec." or "Rebellion Records" in the black history
compilation. Many more documents were published in the "Rebellion Records" than are cited
simply because both compilations were underway simultaneously in the War Department.

The documents copied from Government records now in NARS came primarily from records
among Records of the Adjutant General General's Office, 1780's-1917, Record Group 94; Records
of the Office of the Secretary of War, Record Group 107; Records of the Headquarters of the Army,
Record Group 108; and Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920,
Record Group 393. There are a few that came from Records of the Provost Marshal General's
Bureau (Civil War), Record Group 110, and Records of the Office of the Inspector General, Record Group 159.

The types of documents compiled came from many series of letters sent and received, telegrams sent and received, endorsement books, and general and special orders. In Record Group 94, the records of two AGO divisions, the Colored Troops Division and the Volunteer Service Division, were used extensively.

The Confederate documents were copied primarily from the records now in the War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Record Group 109, and are similar in type to those compiled from Federal sources.

This seven-volume compilation (8 bound parts) is divided into nine chapters corresponding roughly to 9 time periods. The chapters are further subdivided into three or four sections. Those sections concerned with military employment and civil status are further divided between Confederate States and United States. Under each section the documents are arranged chronologically. Some editing of the documents, varying in amount from volume to volume, was done, indicating that the work was being prepared for the press and that mistakes had been made by the copyists. (Pages were numbered consecutively for the entire series. When title pages were inserted later, they were given the preceding page number plus a letter.) On the last page of the compilation, under the title "Statistical Tables," is a note stating that the tables were too bulky to be placed with the copies of the records that were to be bound. Although much effort has been expended in an attempt to locate these statistical tables, their whereabouts is not known. Below is a Description of Contents that gives in more detail the contents of each of the volumes and chapters of this publication.

Related Records and Records Guides

Several record groups, in addition to those already mention are related to the records comprising this publication: Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29; Records of the United States House of Representatives, Record Group 233; Records of the United States Senate, Record Group 46; Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Record Group 92; and Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105.


**CONTENTS**

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I Colonial Period (p. 1-50B)
This chapter contains six extracts from secondary works stating when and where blacks were introduced into the American colonies; several military laws and orders in council permitting the arming and use of slaves in the militia during war; three casualty reports for the years 1689, 1725, and 1780; and one page listing slave population statistics for 1715.

II The War of the Revolution, 1774-83 (p. 50C-295)
This chapter contains extracts from published sources (largely acts of colonial governments and proceedings of State assembies), a few published letters, and a few documents from the Massachusetts State Archives. These extracts and documents contain general statements regarding events and acts of Royal officers and slave population statistics. They relate to the use of free blacks and slaves as soldiers, the treatment of blacks who sided with the English or who were taken as prisoners of war, the desirability of enlisting all-black units, and the enlistment of blacks in general. There are several references to Connecticut and Rhode Island black units.

The period from 1783 to 1812 is covered in about 20 pages of excerpts from published sources, primarily acts of States’ General Courts or State Assemblies. The 32 pages of documents covering the War of 1812 are, except for a few Secretary of War letters, primarily published correspondence of military officers. Almost half the pages in this chapter cover the period 1820-57. Except for some State Department letters, they are generally published decisions of courts and assemblies of various States, Attorney General decisions, House documents, War Department orders, and Florida War correspondence during 1838. Among the opinions of the Attorney General is a lengthy one about the restoration of blacks to the Seminoles in 1848.

IV War of the Rebellion from the date of President Lincoln’s first inaugural address to the close of 1862, preceded by an extract from the report of the Census of 1860 (p. 392A-1061)
Census Report (p. 393-397)
This extract from the census of 1860 lists numbers of free blacks and slaves by State and thereunder by sex.
Fugitive Slaves, Contraband of War, Laborers, etc. (p. 397-800)
This section is divided between Federal (p. 397-706) and Confederate (p. 707-800) correspondence, orders, legislation, and so forth. The Federal part is composed almost exclusively of copies of War Department correspondence and orders. The correspondence is primarily between the Secretary of War or the Adjutant General (and in a few instances President
Lincoln) and territorial department commanders, and between the department commanders and their subordinate officers. The proclamations and issuances are those of the War Department and of the many territorial commands. Before the President's proclamation of September 1862 freeing slaves in the rebel States, the correspondence was mainly concerned with the problems involved in, and the lack of specific instructions for, determining which blacks were slaves and which were free, their use as forced laborers or as paid laborers, which were slaves of rebellious masters and which of loyal masters, how to prevent collisions between the civil and military authorities, the discipline of the military in an emotional and social problem, and the necessity of giving assurance that the war was one of restoration and not of abolition or destruction. The problems relating to loyal masters are well summarized in a letter of Edward Stanley, Military Governor of North Carolina, to the Secretary of War, dated June 12, 1862 (p. 517).

After the Emancipation Proclamation, the correspondence relates mainly to the inability of the Army to adequately feed and house black refugees or contrabands and to justification for Army actions in loyal slave States (e.g., Kentucky) in not freeing the slaves. Included is a lengthy opinion of the Attorney General, November 29, 1862, that freemen of color, if born in the United States, are citizens of the United States. Of special interest (p. 632) is a memorandum of an arrangement entered into between planters, new loyal citizens of the United States in Louisiana, and the civil and military authorities of the United States where the blacks were to be paid and fed for their labor, and the sick to be cared for.

The Confederate part contains acts and resolutions of State assemblies authorizing the employment for pay for both free persons of color and slaves as laborers on fortifications and defenses. It also contains correspondence between the Confederate Secretary of War or Adjutant General and Confederate Army officers relating to the need for impressing blacks as laborers on fortifications and as hospital attendants to replace enlisted nurses, to the inadequacy of black laborers, and to the competition among officers to secure a sufficient number of black laborers.

Military employment (p. 801-1045)
This section is also divided between Federal (p. 801-1010) and Confederate (p.1010A-1045) documents. Since at the beginning of the Civil War only free whites could be enlisted into the U.S. Army, the Federal part contains petitions submitted to the State and Federal Governments, resolutions of State governments, and correspondence relating to the possibility of enlisting blacks. The correspondence consists primarily of letters written by civilians and Volunteer Army officers to the Secretary of War and other War Department officials offering their services in the recruitment of black
regiments, offering their own services in battle, and setting forth the advantages in or the necessity for such a recruitment program. There is correspondence relating to the authorization of Gen. T. W. Sherman, in October 1861, to use the services of any volunteer, including a fugitive from labor, in any way that he is fitted. This was authorized as an emergency measure and not as the regular enrollment for military purposes. There is also correspondence relating to the authorization of Gen. David Hunter, Commander of the Department of the South, to form blacks into "squads, companies, or otherwise," but this, too, was not considered to be authorization to organize and muster into the Army of the United States fugitive or captive slaves. Also included are congressional debates and resolutions on the use of blacks in the military and the act of July 17, 1862, permitting the President to employ, organize, and use blacks to suppress rebellion. After the Union defeats at Richmond in August 1862, the requests for using blacks as soldiers greatly increased, but by the end of 1862 the President had authorized black troops only in the Departments of the South and the Gulf. The correspondence indicates, nevertheless, that a number of black units were organized without proper authorization.

The Confederate section, consisting of only 35 pages, contains acts of the general assemblies of the States relating to the use of blacks in the Confederate Army for menial work, letters from civilians to the Secretary of War suggesting the use of blacks and the advantages thereof, and suggestions that a number of blacks be attached to each white unit to serve as cooks, launderers, guards, police, and musicians.

Events, Battle Reports (p. 1045A-1061)
These reports, of both the Union and the Confederacy, were selected because somewhere in each report blacks were involved in shooting incidents. The black unit that appears to have shown greatest distinction was the 1st South Carolina Volunteers (Colored).

3 V  War of the Rebellion, 1863 (p. 1061A-2297)
Pt. I  Military employment (p. 1061A-1894)
This section contains mainly correspondence of the Secretary of War, War Department bureaus, geographical departments and Army commanders, and State Governors, and issuances promulgated by them. The correspondence concerns the raising of black troops, Army sentiment for and against arming blacks, the use of blacks as officers, difficulties encountered in recruiting and mustering, changes in methods of mustering, training and drill of black troops, methods of organizing, numbers enrolled, and excerpts from letters relating to complaints, rumors, and threats. There are reports on the pros and cons of black camps in certain locations, on contrabands and the education and employment problems of free blacks, reports from Adj. Gen. Lorenzo
Thomas in the Mississippi Valley on his experiences in explaining the contraband policy of the Federal Government to Army officers and on their reactions, reports of behavior of black troops under fire, and reports of recruiting results. There are also letters recommending men to be come officers of black troops, letters relating to the dismissal of officers tendering their resignations because of Government policy, and letters exhorting the War Department to use blacks against the enemy and to treat them with out prejudice. Also included are accounts of congressional bills and debates on the raising of black troops and a “Preliminary Report of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission” of June 30, 1863, relating to blacks as refugees, military laborers, and soldiers. There are also the report of the Bureau of Colored Troops, October 1863; extracts from department returns on numbers of black troops; a few notes and memoirs postdating 1863 (as late as 1891); some manuscript records from the State of Massachusetts; and some correspondence of the Departments of the Interior (relating to number of blacks of armsbearing age) and State (relating to the use of blacks by the French Army in Mexico).

In the few pages of Confederate documents there are four letters received by President Davis-relating to the use of blacks in the Army, three letters of the Secretary of War relating to the use of blacks and Creoles, and excerpts from legislation introduced into the South Carolina General Assembly and the Confederate House of Representatives.

Pt. II

Correspondence Relative to Civil Status, Labor, etc. (p. 1895-2080)
The Federal correspondence is largely between Headquarters of the Army or the Secretary of War and department commanders, or between department commanders and subordinate commanders. It relates to the use and treatment of blacks coming into Army lines, loyalty of blacks, treatment of abandoned slaves or the former slaves of rebels, the issuance of rations, escorting blacks out of some States, and the selling of slaves freed under the Emancipation Proclamation. There are also instructions to State Governors relating to these same problems, orders issued by various geographical Army commands relating to the employment of blacks and in what capacity, and reports of labor and duties actually performed by blacks. The Confederate records consist primarily of acts of State legislatures about using slaves for the public defense, President Davis' message relating to the Emancipation Proclamation, and the reaction of other Confederate officials to the Proclamation. The correspondence relates to the need of and requests for black laborers, suspected black uprisings, and rumors.

Events, Battle Reports, etc. (p. 2080A-2297)
The Confederate and Union documents are not separated from each other and consist of complete reports, extracts from monthly returns, and extracts from
letters and reports. The documents are about blacks involved in warfare, but
do not necessarily describe fighting or the conduct of blacks under fire.
Complete reports have been included about expeditions and battles in which
the Federal 1st and 2d South Carolina Volunteers (Colored) and the
Confederate 1st South Carolina (Negro) regiments were involved, as well as
other black units in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, the Cherokee Nation, and
the Indian Territory. Many of the extracts are simply statements or
announcements that a unit is to report, has sailed, has departed, has suffered
so many killed and wounded, or was involved.

4 VI War of the Rebellion, 1864 (p. 2297A-3513)
Military Employment (p. 2297-2918)
As in part I of chapter V, this section has been divided between Federal (p.
2297-2862) and Confederate (p. 2862A-2918), and the correspondence and
issuances stem from the same offices and commands. Similarly, the
documents mainly concern the same subjects. Of more consequence in the
1864 Federal documents, however, was the subject of equal pay for white
and black soldiers and the opportunity for deeper comparisons between white
and black soldiers. In the latter connection, one of the most interesting
documents consists of extracts from "Testimony accompanying Final Reports
of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission," dated May 15, 1864,
which consists of questions to and answers of officers of United States
Colored Troops (USCT) units (p. 2547-2588) relating to their reactions to the
black soldiers. In addition to War Department correspondence with the
Philadelphia Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments,
there is a prospectus of the Free Military School established by the
committee and correspondence relating to the school. In addition to
 correspondence related to the forming of USCT units, there is the "Report of
Operations" of the AGO Bureau for Colored Troops for the year ending
October 1864. In the short Confederate section, the correspondence between
Richmond and the State Governments and the military relates primarily to
the pros and cons of freeing the slaves and arming them as allies and equals.
In addition to acts and resolutions introduced into State assemblies on the
subject of calling free men of color into the service, there is included
Jefferson Davis' message of November 7, 1864, against any "general levy
and arming of the slaves for the duty of soldiers" (p. 2891).

5 VI Correspondence Relative to Civil Status, Labor, etc. (p.2918A-3004)
As in the first section of part II, chapter V, this section for 1864 is divided
into Federal 5 (p. 2918A-2930) and Confederate (p. 2930A-3004)
subsections. This is a short section, especially for the Federal documents,
inasmuch as the newly organized U.S. Colored Troops used blacks as
soldiers and not as laborers. The few items of Federal correspondence relate
largely to using as laborers at contraband camps the old men, women, and
children who were incapable of bearing arms. The Confederate part comprises acts and resolutions of the Confederate Congress and the State assemblies relating to the use of slaves and free blacks in such capacities as teamsters, workers on fortifications, laborers in producing and preparing materials of war, and attendants in military hospitals. After the passage of a Confederate act of February 17, 1864, which provided for the enrollment of all male free blacks and slaves of certain ages for use as laborers, the Bureau of Conscription was to enroll such persons east of the Mississippi River and the commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department was to enroll them west of the Mississippi. Consequently, most of the correspondence, which is between Richmond offices and field commanders, relates to such enrollment, numbers, exceptions, and methods, and the necessity of impressment of free blacks before slaves.

Events, Battle Reports, etc. (p. 3004A-3512)
The greater portion of this volume is devoted to events and reports, arranged chronologically, with Federal and a very few Confederate documents mixed. The Confederate reports and extracts from reports are mainly concerned with blacks in the Federal lines, and, like many Federal reports, they point out the bad treatment of black soldiers by the enemy. Like the corresponding part for 1863, this part for 1864 contains reports, extracts of reports, and monthly returns. Again they show the number of killed and wounded and the units involved, as well as giving detailed accounts by the many USCT commanders of the expeditions and battles in which USCT units were involved. Examples of these for which there are substantial numbers of reports are: the Yazoo Expedition in February 1864; the Ft. Pillow battle of April 12; the battle at Jenkins Ferry, Ark., April 30; defense of Williams Wharf, James River, Va., May 25; expedition from Tennessee into Mississippi in July; explosion of the mine and assault of Petersburg, July 30; operations before Richmond, Va., engagement at Fair Oaks, Oct. 1864; battle of Honey Hill, S.C., November 30, 1864; and the campaign in Tennessee, December 1864.

War of the Rebellion and the Reconstruction Period, 1865-67, with some documents of later dates (p. 3512A-4147)

Military employment (p. 3513-3970)
As in previous chapters, this section is divided between Federal and Confederate documents. Much of the early 1865 Federal correspondence relates to the recruiting of blacks and conflicts between various commands in their recruitment programs. It includes reports of superintendents of recruiting, special inspectors of black regiments, and of the organization of USCT units. After volunteer recruitment stopped in April, the nature of the correspondence changed to the mustering out of U.S. Colored Troops, the discontinuance of various units and commands, the removal or withdrawal of
U.S. Colored Troops from certain areas, and payment of bounties. Of primary interest are reports of the Provost Marshal General and various provost marshals about the enrollment of black troops, Adjutant General Thomas' report describing his assignment in the west organizing black troops, annual reports of the Bureau of Colored Troops (which include many statistics), historical sketches of various USCT regiments, and extracts from the "Final Report" of the Provost Marshal General in March 1866, which is concerned with casualties in USCT units and the substitution of blacks for whites in the draft. Most records are for the years 1865 and 1866, but there are documents extending to 1887. The Confederate documents are only for the period from January to April 1865 and consist primarily of correspondence relating to the wisdom of converting portions of the black population into soldiers, resolutions introduced into and speeches made in the Confederate Legislature upon the subject, and a few requests in April for permission to organize black units.

Correspondence Relative to Civil Status, Labor, etc. (p. 3970A-3995)
This section contains a few Federal documents, mainly General Orders relating to the subject, and letters reviewing the history of blacks as laborers.

The Confederate records are primarily acts submitted to State legislatures and a few general orders relating to the Bureau for Negro Labor.

Events, Battle Reports, etc. (p. 3995-4147)
Written primarily by division, brigade, and USCT commanders, these 1865 reports cover black efforts in such battles or campaigns as Ft. Fisher, N.C., in January; Wilmington, N.C., in February; the abandonment of Richmond in March and April; the assault and capture of Blakely, Ala., in April; the expeditions from Georgetown to Sumterville, S.C., in April; and the engagements at Dingle's Mill and Boykin's Mill in April.

Treatment and Exchange of Prisoners of War (p. 4147A-4670)
As in previous sections, this one is also divided between Federal and Confederate correspondence. Because the nature of the subject was such that correspondence was carried on between the two governments, the Federal section contains much Confederate as well as Federal correspondence relating to the treatment and exchange of prisoners of war. There is correspondence between the Agents for Exchange of Prisoners of both sides, between Federal and Confederate agents relating to arrangements for the exchange, and between Federal agents and other Federal officers. More specifically the correspondence relates to such problems as arrangements for and attempts for exchanges, Federal complaints about the treatment of blacks and officers of black units, complaints about Confederate failure to obey the cartel agreed to on July 22, 1862, threats of retaliation, and reports of
eyewitnesses to instances of maltreatment, such as the hanging of black prisoners by the Confederates. Included are two summaries of the Federal position on the question of prisoner exchange: an article covering the period September 1862 to December 1863 by Maj. Gen. Ethan A. Hitchcock, Commissioner of Exchange, which appeared in the New York Times, December 2, 1863, and a second report by Hitchcock on November 22, 1865, to the Secretary of War, for the period 1862 to 1865.

The Confederate section contains many bills introduced into the Confederate Legislature relating to the punishment of blacks who were in the Federal Army and retaliation for the prosecution of the "unholy war" being waged by the U.S. against the Confederate States. In addition to correspondence between Confederate agents and officers, there is also correspondence between Confederate and Federal agents primarily concerned with the U.S. insistence that recaptured slaves and officers of black units be treated as prisoners of war, to which the Confederacy did not agree. According to the Presidential proclamation of December 22, 1862, all officers of black regiments were to be tried as felons who had incited slaves to riot. Captured black soldiers were to be turned over to State authorities.

IX  Regular Army, 1866-86 (p. 4670-4730)
Included in this chapter are extracts of congressional bills relating to the employment of blacks in the Regular Army; the general order promulgating the act of July 28, 1866, that reorganized the Army; extracts from inspection reports relating to discipline in black units; correspondence relating to recruitment for black units in the Regular Army; correspondence concerning the attitudes of whites toward black units; reports from officers relating to the effectiveness of black soldiers and the best places to station black units; and extracts from annual reports, including those of Headquarters of the Army and the Commander of the Department of West Point that relate to black cadets.

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