

**CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS: LESSON 4: HANDOUT 1****BLACK UNION SOLDIERS: THE UNITED STATES COLORED INFANTRY**

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During the first two years of the Civil War, Black abolitionists tried to persuade the North and Abraham Lincoln to allow them to fight for the Union. They believed that they could achieve full citizenship and equality if they could serve the country. Frederick Douglass supported these efforts. He believed that Black people could not be denied citizenship if they fought for the Union. He said, "Let the black man get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder ... and there is no power on earth or under heaven which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States."<sup>1</sup>

Some Black Northerners organized community meetings and created volunteer **regiments** that would offer their services to the Union. They knew that the primary goal of Lincoln and the Union was to keep the country together, not to rid the nation of slavery. However, they also believed that if they could fight alongside White soldiers, they would be able to shift the war's goals toward freedom for enslaved people. Not all Black northerners felt that the Union deserved their services since they had not been granted equal rights.<sup>2</sup>

Those who wanted to volunteer were rejected by each state. Many White men in the North did not view Black men as citizens and believed that they should not participate in the country's war. In 1862, when Confederate soldiers invaded Cincinnati, Ohio, the city called for volunteers to defend it. When Black men showed up to fight, they were turned away.<sup>3</sup>

Douglass and other **reformers** had to think of a way to change the minds of White Northerners. They began writing in newspapers and making speeches. They told the North that allowing Black people to enlist in the army was in its own best interest. In the South, enslaved Black people worked the plantations, which allowed all the available White men to fight for the Confederacy. The Confederacy had even bragged that their enslaved populations would fight on their side if needed. If the Union fought to end slavery and allowed free Black men to fight, then they would have the advantage.<sup>4</sup>

The North began to accept that Black military service was necessary. Some believed that Black men deserved justice while others were more interested in preserving their own White men's lives. They could do this if they allowed more Black men to fight. After Union defeat at Bull Run in 1861, Congress passed the **First Confiscation Act**, which allowed Union officers

<sup>1</sup> See Frank Cirillo, "'Let the Black Man Get an Eagle on His Button, and a Musket on His Shoulder': The Long Road to African American Military Service, Part I," John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History, University of Virginia College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (December 19, 2020). Retrieved from <https://naucenter.as.virginia.edu/blog-page/1126>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See Frank Cirillo, "'The Iron Arm of the Black Man': The Long Road to African American Military Service, Part II," John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History, University of Virginia College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (January 27, 2020). Retrieved from <https://naucenter.as.virginia.edu/blog-page/1166>

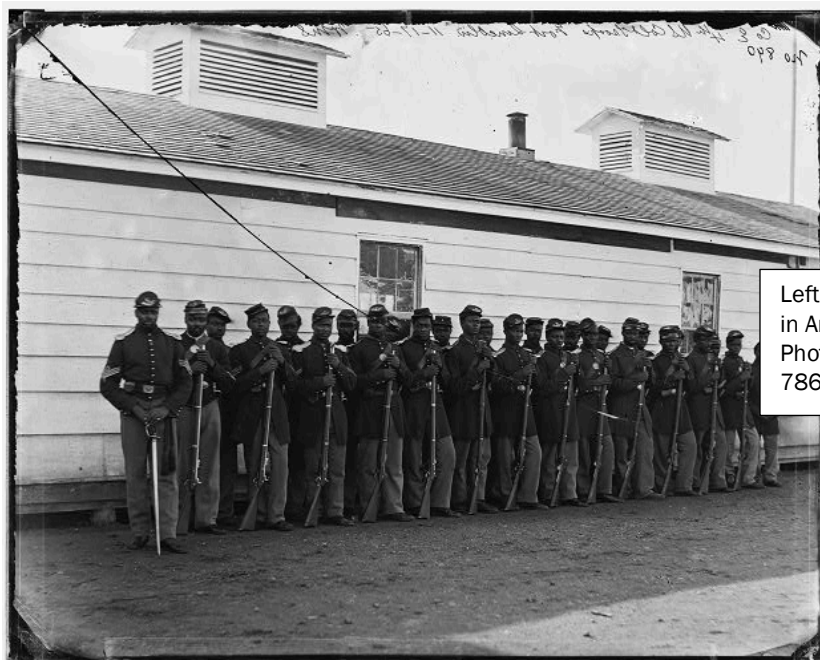
to take enslaved people who had escaped into Union territory. This act did not grant enslaved people freedom or the *right* to fight for the Union. Instead, it allowed the Union to use them as they needed as employed workers in the camp. In 1862, after another Union defeat, Congress passed a second act that allowed Black people to enlist in the military but did not recognize their rights.<sup>5</sup>

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Union generals began recruiting Black soldiers. In South Carolina, formerly enslaved people became part of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Volunteer Infantry Regiment. It was under this regiment that Harriet Tubman became a cook, nurse, and spy. Republican Senator James Lane of Kansas also recruited formerly enslaved people to form the 1<sup>st</sup> Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry Regiment. These actions did not have the full public support of President Lincoln.<sup>6</sup>

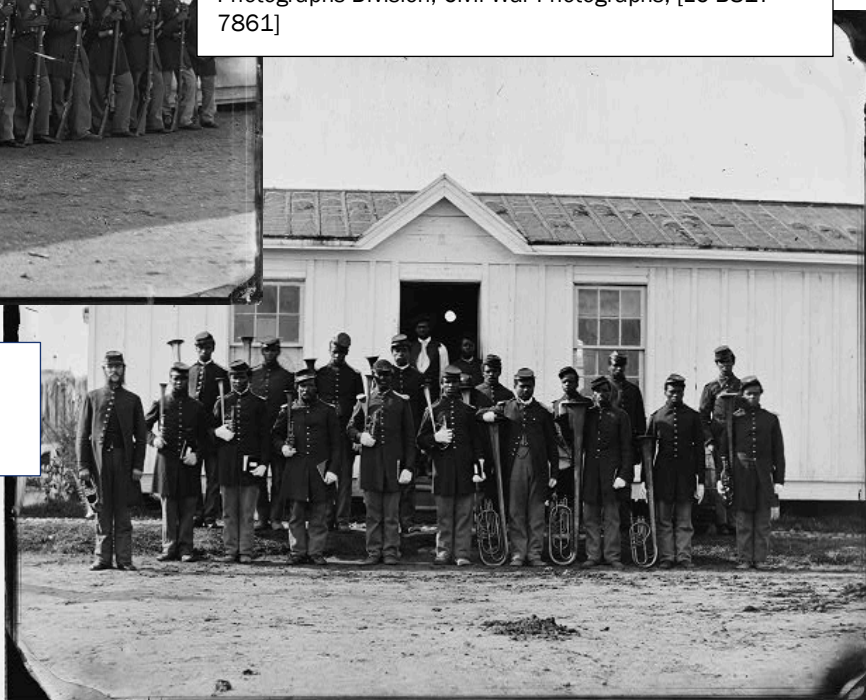
Finally, in 1863, President Lincoln delivered the **Emancipation Proclamation** that declared all enslaved people in Confederate states freed and allowed Black men to enlist in the military. The federal government created the United States Colored Troops (USCT).<sup>7</sup> But the opportunity to fight for their country did not lead to equal rights for Black soldiers. They

faced discrimination such as unequal pay and the inability to advance up the ranks. Usually, White officers were in charge of Black regiments. Douglass and other abolitionists were frustrated



Left: Band of 107<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry at Fort Corcoran in Arlington, VA. Source: Library of Congress. Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, [LC-B817-7861]

Right: Company E, 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry at Fort Lincoln. Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, [LC-B817-7861]



<sup>5</sup> Cirillo, "The Iron Arm of the Black Man."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

with these unequal policies. Douglass met with Lincoln to secure equal protection for Black soldiers. But it was not until 1864 that Black troops were granted equal pay as White soldiers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Frank Cirillo, “The Enlistment Map: The Long Road to African American Military Service, Part III,” John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History, University of Virginia College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (May 20, 2020). Retrieved from <https://naucenter.as.virginia.edu/blog-page/1191>.