

BLACK CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS?

by Carole E. Scott

Nobody questions that the Confederate Army utilized blacks as cooks, teamsters, laborers, and body servants. There are photographs of Confederate-uniformed black musicians. However, claims made in recent years by amateur historians, some of whom are members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, that blacks served as soldiers in the Confederate army have frequently been questioned.

Those who claim there were black Confederate soldiers have been accused of making what seems to some to be an extremely improbable claim in order to imply that slavery was not the cause of the Civil War. It is not difficult to find evidence that the states right that white southerners were willing to fight for was the right to enslave blacks. Much more difficult--but far from being impossible--is finding evidence that, despite this, there were black Confederate soldiers.

In September, 1861, Frederick Douglass, a famous black abolitionist and former slave, wrote in his newspaper, the *Douglass Monthly*, "that It is now pretty well established that there are at the present moment many colored men in the Confederate army doing duty not only as cooks, servants and laborers, but as real soldiers, having muskets on their shoulders, and bullets in their pockets, ready to shoot down loyal troops, and do all that soldiers may to destroy the Federal Government and build up that of the traitors and rebels. There were such soldiers at Manassas, and they are probably there still." At that time Douglass was trying to persuade the U.S. government to enlist blacks in the army. Later, when they were enlisted, they were paid less than whites and were led by white officers.

in July 1862, Richard Yates, Governor of Illinois, sent a letter to President Abraham Lincoln in which he said that "They [meaning the Confederacy] arm negroes and merciless savages [perhaps Cherokee Indians living in what would become Oklahoma] in their behalf." New York newspaperman Horace Greely wrote in his book, *The American Conflict*, Volume II, that "For more than two years, Negroes had been extensively employed in belligerent operations by the Confederacy. They had been embodied and drilled as rebel soldiers and had paraded with white troops at a time when this would not have been tolerated in the armies of the Union."

In *Frederick Douglass, American Hero and International Icon of the Nineteenth Century*, its author, Connie A. Miller, cites several examples of blacks late in the war fighting for the Confederacy, including a battle between some of Union General William T. Sherman's men and old men and boy Confederate soldiers at Griswoldville, Georgia. Revolvers based on a Colt model were manufactured at this small factory town near Macon. Miller says that black and white militiamen rendered heavy fire on Union troops at Griswoldville, where the Confederates were badly beaten. Reportedly, many elderly black men and boys died for the Confederacy in this battle.

Miller claims that free black cooks, musicians, soldiers, and teamsters earned the same pay as white Confederate privates. Also claimed in his biography of Douglass is that on April 4, 1865 in Amelia County, Virginia black Confederate soldiers guarding a Confederate supply train initially drove off Union attackers.

In *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*, its author, Larry Koger, provides a possible reason for free blacks who owned slaves to fight for the Confederacy. In 1835, he says, "...the editor of the *Charleston Courier* defended the right of a free black to own slaves on the grounds that this right to hold slaves gives him a stake in the institution of slavery and makes it his interest as well as his duty to uphold it. It identifies his interests and his feelings in this particular with those of the white population..."

In 1860, the states with the largest number of free blacks were Virginia (58,042), North Carolina (30,463), and Louisiana (18,647). As abolitionist agitation increased, the slave states made it more difficult or impossible for their owners to free slaves because it was thought that free blacks were more likely than slaves to lead a slave rebellion. Possibly discouraging freeing slaves was it being illegal for freed blacks to be settled in some free states.

On March 2, 1861, the *Shreveport Daily News* reported that some prominent free blacks in New Orleans had volunteered for military service. These men formed the Louisiana Native Guards. Evidence that before the Confederate Native Guards were converted to a Union unit these free blacks fought for the Confederacy is lacking. They might not have been allowed to fight because this would prove that they were not inferior to whites. That blacks were inferior was used to justify enslaving them.

Union General Benjamin Butler was told by the leaders of the Native Guards that the reason why these "free men of color" had formed a Confederate home guard unit was in order to improve their standing with whites and avoid being impressed as military laborers. The fact that in his first inaugural address Abraham Lincoln said that he lacked both the intention and power to abolish slavery and that shortly before he was inaugurated Congress had passed the Corwin amendment, a proposed amendment to the Constitution that guaranteed the continued existence of slavery where it then existed makes understandable the behavior of the black Louisiana guardsmen.

A letter sent by a free Charleston mulatto who moved to New York to his brothers in Charleston in 1857 provides some insight in the thinking of blacks about life as free blacks in the North. He wrote that he did not think he could ever obtain "political equality" in New York, and that the general conclusion there of his people was that "this is not our abiding home". In his eyes, Jamaica was the "promised land".

Having no or little education, skills, and property limited many free blacks to being what are today called blue collar workers. Free blacks were responsible for providing themselves with food, clothing, shelter, and care in their old age--all things slave owners were responsible for providing their slaves with. In 1861, laws in

Midwestern states, including Lincoln's Illinois, and Oregon still made it illegal for blacks to live in them. In those days anti-slavery sentiment, which was concentrated in Great Britain, was not widespread. Slavery existed in Africa, and enslaved blacks there had been sold to white slavers who brought them to America.

In his book, *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*, Ervin I. Jordan, a black historian, says that in June 1861 Tennessee became the first Confederate State to authorize the use of black soldiers. These soldiers were to be paid \$18 a month and be provided with the same rations and clothing as white soldiers. Two regiments, he says, of blacks had appeared by September. Very late in the war the Confederate Congress passed a bill signed by the Confederacy's president authorizing the enlistment of blacks in the nation's army.

Jordan contributed to *Black Southerners in Gray* edited by Richard Rollins which, like a 2007 book, *Black Southerners in Confederate Armies* edited by J. H. Segars and Charles Kelly Barrow, contain numerous reports of individual black Confederate soldiers. Among the sources relied upon by contributors to this book were Confederate pension records, newspapers, county histories, and personal correspondence.

An account of a group of black Confederate soldiers was recorded in his diary by Dr. Lewis Steiner, Chief Inspector with the United States Sanitary Commission. He was present when Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's troops occupied Frederick, Maryland in 1862.

Wednesday, September 10--At four o'clock this morning the rebel army began to move from our town, Jackson's force taking the advance. The movement continued until eight o'clock P.M., occupying sixteen hours. The most liberal calculations could not give them more than 64,000 men. Over 3,000 negroes must be included in this number. These were clad in all kinds of uniforms, not only in cast-off or captured United States uniforms, but in coats with Southern buttons, State buttons, etc. These were shabby, but not shabbier or seedier than those worn by white men in rebel ranks. Most of the negroes had arms, rifles, muskets, sabres [sic], bowie-knives, dirks, etc. They were supplied, in many instances, with knapsacks, haversacks, canteens, etc., and were manifestly an integral portion of the Southern Confederacy Army. They were seen riding on horses and mules, driving wagons, riding on caissons, in ambulances, with the staff of Generals, and promiscuously mixed up with all the rebel horde. The fact was patent, and rather, interesting when considered in connection with the horror of rebels express at the suggestion of black soldiers being employed for the National defense.

Another account of black Confederate soldiers was provided by Christian A. Fleetwood, a former Sergeant-Major in the U.S. Colored Troops, at the Negro Congress at the Cotton States International Exposition held in Atlanta, Georgia from November 11 to November 23, 1895. In a speech he made at the Exposition, he said:

It seems a little singular that in the tremendous struggle between the States in 1861-1865, the south should have been the first to take steps toward the enlistment of Negroes. Yet such is the fact. Two weeks after the fall of Fort Sumter, the *Charleston Mercury* records the passing through Augusta [Georgia] of several companies of the 3rd and 4th Georgia Regt. and of sixteen well-drilled companies and one Negro company from Nashville, Tenn.

A telegram from New Orleans dated November 23, 1861, notes the review by Gov. Moore of over 28,000 troops, and that one regiment comprised "1,400 colored men." The *New Orleans Picayune*, referring to a review held February 9, 1862, says: "We must also pay a deserved compliment to the companies of free colored men, all very well drilled and comfortably equipped."

The *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* contains several accounts of armed, black Confederates.

There were also quite a number of negroes attached to the Texas and Georgia troops, who were armed and equipped, and took part in several engagements with my forces during the day.

Pickets were thrown out that night, and Captain Hennessy, Company E, of the Ninth Connecticut, having been sent out with his company, captured a colored rebel scout, well mounted, who had been sent out to watch our movements.

It is also difficult to state the force of the enemy, but it could not have been less than from 600 to 800 here were six companies of mounted riflemen, besides infantry, among which were a considerable number of colored men.

[Our] skirmishers on the bank, who were ordered to keep so vigorous a fire that the enemy should not dare to lift their heads above their rifle pits; but the enemy, and especially their armed negroes, did dare to rise and fire, and did serious execution upon our men.

In his chapter in *New Perspectives on the Civil War: Myths and Realities of the National Conflict*, Erwin L. Jordan, Jr. says that "Two fully armed Afro-Confederate soldiers were seen on picket duty at the Confederate camps at Fredericksburg in 1862; a sketch of them appeared in *Harpers Weekly*". On March 11, 1865, two days before the Confederate Congress approved the bill allowing the enlistment of blacks, Jordan says the "Jackson (Hospital) Battalion, comprising three companies of white convalescent soldiers and two companies of blacks, arrived at the Petersburg front. The unit entered combat just seven days after its organization..." Another example of a black Confederate soldiers he cites is a report in the *New York Herald* that among the rebel prisoners after the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg were seven fully armed blacks in Confederate uniforms.

The subject of black Confederate soldiers was addressed in a 1919 article in *The Journal of Negro History*. In it, its author, Charles H. Wesley, provided an explanation for men of his race serving the Confederacy. Early in the war slaves captured by Union forces were returned to their masters. The result was:

To the majority of the Negroes, as to all the South, the invading armies of the Union seemed to be ruthlessly attacking independent states, invading the beloved homeland and trampling upon all that these men held dear....The Negroes were not only loyal in remaining at home and doing their duty but also in offering themselves for actual service in the Confederate army. Believing their land invaded by hostile forces, they were more than willing under the guidance of misguided Southerners to offer themselves for the service of actual warfare....Under the guidance of the local authorities, thousands of Negroes were enlisted in the State Militias and in the Confederate Army. They served with satisfaction, but there is no evidence that they took part in any important battles.

One of many examples of how the invasion of the South by Union troops sometimes negatively impacted blacks was a letter written by Georgian David Clopton to a friend shortly after some of Sherman's men first showed up at his home in Polk County. "They robbed my house, took a part of my meat and corn, and broke up things generally. They found the box containing your bedclothes, etc. and took most of your things, scattered your books all over the yard, robbed Edy of her money and the most of her fine clothes, and took many things from the rest of the negroes. Your box was under Edy's bed. She thought, and was told, that Yankees would not rob negroes."

Free blacks' slaves were not limited to family members. However, that free blacks owing slaves simply in order to make money would fight for the Confederacy is one thing. That slaves would fight for the Confederacy is quite another.

Possibly the most convincing example of a slave who fought for the Confederacy is Holt Collier, who in 1970 the Mississippi Department of Archives and History authenticated as a Confederate soldier. In his book, *Holt Collier: His Life, His Roosevelt Hunts, and the Origin of the Teddy Bear*, Minor Ferris Buchanan says there is no doubt that Holt Collier was a Confederate soldier.

Holt Collier was Theodore Roosevelt's guide on a 1902 bear hunt. During this hunt, Buchanan says, Collier told the story of his life, including how in civilian life he had killed white men without being punished and had engaged in hand-to-hand conflict with Union soldiers during the war. "His background and experience held the President's imagination as he told stories of his years as a slave, his service as a Confederate scout, and his many years hunting bears."

It is easy to find accounts of extremely abusive treatment of slaves. However, southern plantation records examined by economic historians Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman reveal that slaves worked less, were better fed, and whipped less than had previously been widely believed. Concluded by Fogel and Engerman was that

the material conditions experienced by slaves in the 19th century was "better than what was typically available to free urban laborers at the time". This makes it easier to understand both blacks being Confederate soldiers and the absence of slave rebellions during the war.

Some slave owners tried to engender fondness for themselves in their slaves. Early in the war, Georgia slave owner Edgeworth Bird wrote his wife from Virginia where he was serving in the Confederate Army that she should "take pains to gain the affection of the negroes. You can attach them to you and govern them through their hearts better than any overseer can through fear."

The population of Hancock County where the Birds lived was two-thirds black. Edgeworth's wife and their children spent the war years there. In 1860, 44 percent of Georgia's people were slaves. In Mississippi and South Carolina this figure was higher, 55 percent and 57 percent, respectively.

In an August 19, 1864 letter Bird sent his daughter from Camp Walker in Virginia, he wrote, "Tell Allen I think of him often, and how anxious he was to come with me. Sam sends a heap of love to them and is in good health." Sam, who accompanied Bird to Virginia, was his body servant. Allen was another of his slaves. Edgeworth called all his slaves servants. In a September 3, 1864 letter he sent his wife from Four Mile Church, Richmond, Virginia, he wrote, "Ten or fifteen of the negro soldiers in our front have come in the past few days. Two came over this morning. A negro who knows what is for his good will never let the Yanks get him".

William "Bill" Yopp, a slave, appears to have been fond of Thomas Yopp, a white man he had grown up with and served as a body servant while Thomas was a Confederate soldier. Twice he rescued Thomas, a captain, when he was wounded. Decades after the war, at Christmas time Bill Yopp began giving money he raised to Confederate veterans living in the Confederate Soldiers Home in Atlanta where Thomas Yopp resided.

There is no evidence that Bill Yopp, who is the only black buried at the Confederate Cemetery in Marietta, Georgia, was more than a body servant and drummer for the 14th Georgia Infantry, whose roster he is listed on. Some critics of the claim that slaves served as soldiers say that at the most the role of slaves associated with the Confederate army were like that of Bill Yopp. It is also claimed that sculptures of Confederate-uniform-clad blacks by Moses Ezekiel, a Confederate veteran, are explainable as being of body servants like Yopp. Blacks in photographs taken at Confederate reunions are likewise explained.