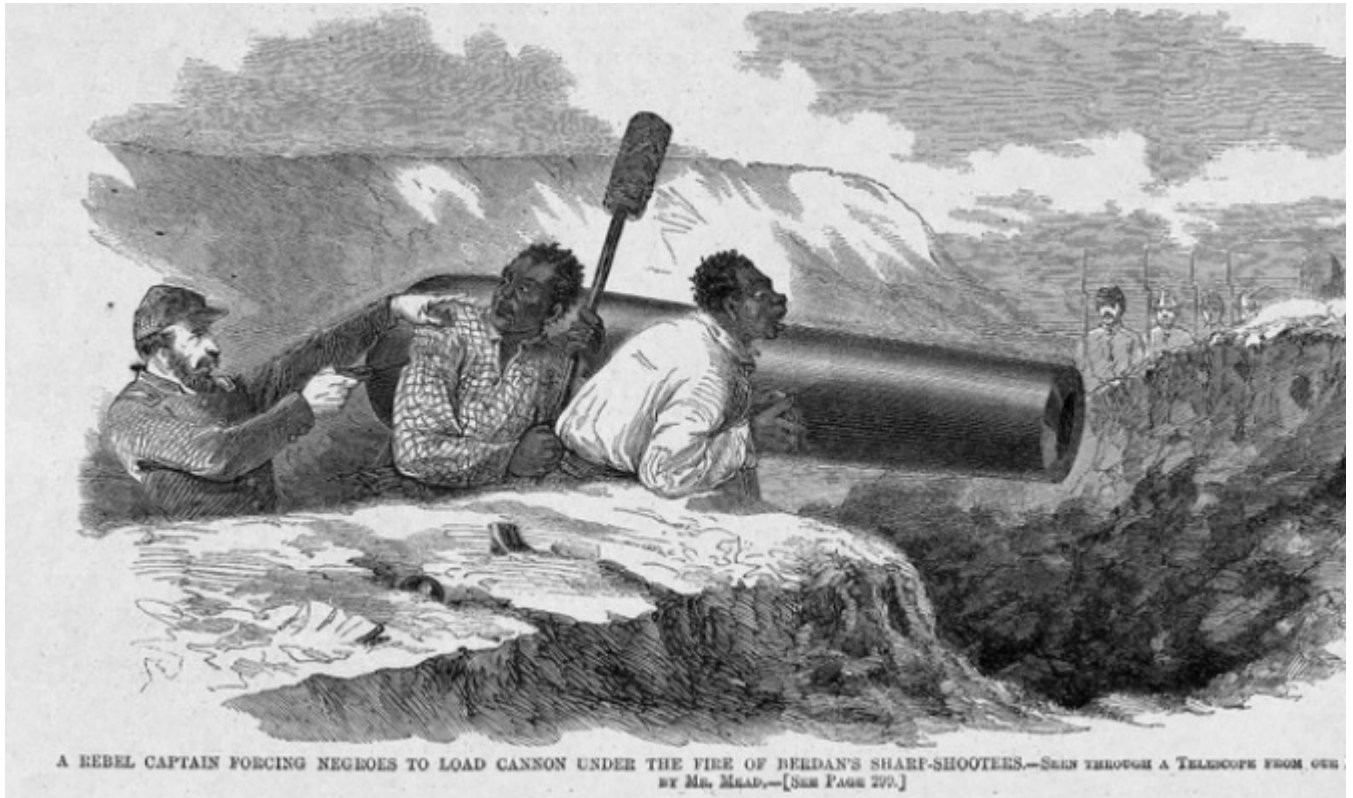


Yes, There Were Black Confederates. Here's Why

Evidence points to who they were and what their motivations were for fighting.

By: John Stauffer

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Caption: “A rebel captain forcing negroes to load cannon under the fire of Berdan’s sharpshooters—seen through a telescope from our lines, and sketched by Mr. Mead.” Cover of Harper’s Weekly May 10, 1862

The myth of black Confederates is arguably the most controversial subject of the Civil War. Over the past four years, the debate over whether or not blacks fought for the Confederacy has been the most discussed topic on Civil War Memory, a popular website attracting teachers and scholars from around the world, and the Atlantic Monthly and The Root have devoted several articles to it.

Almost every Civil War historian today repudiates the idea of thousands of blacks fighting for the South. Brooks Simpson and Fergus Bordewich are representative in their dismissals. The notion of “black Confederates,” Simpson says, betrays a “pattern of distortion, deception, and deceit” in the use of evidence. Bordewich declares the very term “meaningless,” “a fiction,” “a myth,” utter “nonsense.”

They are reacting to a growing chorus of “neo-Confederates,” who assert that tens of thousands of blacks loyally fought as soldiers for the Confederacy and that hundreds of thousands more

supported it. Neo-Confederates acknowledge that the Confederacy legally prohibited slaves from fighting as soldiers until the last month of the war. But they argue that 10 percent of the Confederate states' 250,000 free blacks enlisted as soldiers, and that thousands of loyal slaves fought alongside their masters even though the Confederacy prohibited it. They do this, as the Civil War scholar James McPherson noted, "as a way of purging their cause of its association with slavery."

The debate over black Confederates has reached a kind of impasse: Neither side is listening to the other. As the historian William Freehling quietly acknowledged in a footnote: "This important subject is now needlessly embroiled in controversy, with politically correct historians of one sort refusing to see the importance (indeed existence) of the minority of slaves who were black Confederates, and politically correct historians of the opposite sort refusing to see the importance of black Confederates' limited numbers."

Freehling is right. A few thousand blacks did indeed fight for the Confederacy. Significantly, African-American scholars from Ervin Jordan and Joseph Reidy to Juliet Walker and Henry Louis Gates Jr., editor-in-chief of *The Root*, have stood outside this impasse, acknowledging that a few blacks, slave and free, supported the Confederacy.

How many supported it? No one knows precisely. But by drawing on these scholars and focusing on sources written or published during the war, I estimate that between 3,000 and 6,000 served as Confederate soldiers. Another 100,000 or so blacks, mostly slaves, supported the Confederacy as laborers, servants and teamsters. They built roads, batteries and fortifications; manned munitions factories—essentially did the Confederacy's dirty work.

We know that blacks made up more than half the toilers at Richmond's Tredegar Iron Works and more than 75 percent of the workforce at Selma, Ala.'s naval ordnance plant. And slaves grew the crops that fed the Confederacy. As Frederick Douglass noted, blacks were "the stomach of the rebellion."

The total number of black Confederate soldiers is statistically insignificant: They made up less than 1 percent of the 800,000 black men of military age (17-50) living in the Confederate states, based on 1860 U.S. census figures, and less than 1 percent of at least 750,000 Confederate soldiers.

But they carry immense symbolic weight, for they explode the myth that a slave wouldn't fight on behalf of masters. Scholars recognize that throughout history, slave societies have armed slaves, at times with the promise of freedom. They also acknowledge that a small number of African Americans were slave owners (about 3,700, according to Loren Schweninger). In a similar vein, some blacks voted against Obama (4 percent in 2008, 6 percent in 2012), and a few Jews supported the Nazis. Now that the sesquicentennial of the Civil War is almost over, it is time to admit that there were also a few black Confederates.

Did Black Confederates Lead to Black Union Soldiers?

African Americans were the first to publicize the presence of black Confederates. Frederick Douglass bemoaned the Confederate victory of First Manassas in July 1861 by noting in the August 1861 issue of his newspaper, *Douglass' Monthly*, that “among rebels were black troops, no doubt pressed into service by their tyrant masters.” He used this evidence to pressure the administration of Abraham Lincoln to abolish slavery and arm blacks as a military strategy. It was “the speediest method of terminating the war,” he said.

Douglass repeatedly drew attention to black Confederates in order to press his cause. “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,” he wrote in July 1861. Slaveholders “accept the aid of the black man,” he said. “Why should a good cause be less wisely conducted?” (Douglass and most other observers ignored blacks’ service in both the Union and Confederate navies from the beginning of the war.) In refusing to use blacks as soldiers and laborers, the Lincoln administration was “fighting the rebels with only one hand”—its white hand—and ignoring a potent source of black power.

What were Douglass’ sources in identifying black Confederates? One came from a Virginia fugitive who escaped to Boston shortly before the Battle of First Manassas in Virginia that summer. He saw “one regiment of 700 black men from Georgia, 1000 [men] from South Carolina, and about 1000 [men with him from] Virginia, destined for Manassas when he ran away.”

For historians these are shocking figures. But another eyewitness also observed three regiments of blacks fighting for the Confederacy at Manassas. William Henry Johnson, a free black from Connecticut, ignored the Lincoln administration’s refusal to enlist black troops and fought as an independent soldier with the 8th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. He also wrote for the *Pine and Palm*, a black paper, and blamed the Union loss at Manassas partly on black Confederates: “We were defeated, routed and driven from the field. . . . It was not alone the white man’s victory, for it was won by slaves. Yes, the Confederates had three regiments of blacks in the field, and they maneuvered like veterans, and beat the Union men back. This is not guessing, but it is a fact.”

Meet John Parker, Black Confederate

Douglass corroborated Johnson’s story. He published in the March 1862 issue of *Douglass' Monthly* a brief autobiography of John Parker, one of the black Confederates at Manassas. A Virginia slave, Parker was sent to Richmond to build batteries and breastworks. After completing this job, he and his fellow slaves were ordered to Manassas “to fight,” as he said. He was put in an artillery unit with three other black men. On Sunday, July 21, “we opened fire about 10:00 in the morning; couldn’t see the Yankees at all and only fired at random.”

During the battle, Parker said, he worried about dying, hoped for a Union victory and thought of

fleeing to the Union side. “We wished to our hearts that the Yankees would whip us. ... We would have run over to the other side but our officers would have shot us if we had made the attempt.” He and his fellow slaves had been promised their freedom “and money besides” if they fought. “None of us believed them; we only fought because we had to.”

Parker remained on the battlefield for two weeks, burying the dead, bayoneting the wounded to put them out of their misery, and stripping the Yankees of clothes and valuables. His burial duty was, like his impressment as a laborer and gunner, under orders and the threat of being shot.

Parker’s ticket to freedom was the first Confiscation Act, passed on Aug. 6, 1861, which authorized the Union Army to confiscate slaves aiding the Confederate war effort. Although the act did not mention freedom, it was in effect the first emancipation act, as the historian James Oakes has noted, because it prohibited officers from returning “contrabands” into slavery.

Parker fled for Union lines and in early 1862 reached Gen. Nathaniel Banks’ division near Frederick, Md. Union soldiers “welcomed” him. They gave him a suit of clothes and plenty to eat and asked him to return to Virginia as a Union scout. Parker refused, saying that he “was bound for the North,” but told them everything he knew about rebel positions. They gave him provisions, a contraband pass and a letter of introduction to a minister in New York City who could help him. He arrived safely in New York and began lecturing on “The War and Its Causes” for 10 cents a ticket, according to an advertisement for his lecture.

Why Did They Fight for the Confederacy?

Parker’s ordeal sheds light on black Confederate soldiers at Manassas. First impressed into Confederate service as a laborer, he was then ordered to man a battery and to fire on Union troops. After the battle, he resumed his status as laborer, working burial duty. Prompted by the first Confiscation Act, he found freedom behind Union lines and in New York City.

His case was representative. Confederates impressed slaves as laborers and at times forced them to fight. In effect, they put guns to their heads, forcing them to fire on Yankees.

Harper’s Weekly, one of the most widely distributed Northern papers, featured a similar scene on the cover of its May 10, 1862, issue. An engraving based on a drawing by Harper’s sketch artist Larkin Mead depicts “a rebel captain forcing negroes to load cannon” while under fire from Union sharpshooters (shown as the lead photo for this article). Mead obtained details of the scene from Union officers, who “witnessed it through” a telescope. According to Harper’s, the blacks were shot by the sharpshooters, “one after the other.”

Most black soldiers, at First Manassas and elsewhere, were free blacks. They were either conscripts who built breastworks and then, like Parker, were ordered to fight or were volunteers.

Free blacks in the Confederacy had few rights. Nevertheless, they were “the black pseudo-

aristocracy” of the South, according to the Civil War historian Ervin Jordan. Their expressions of loyalty to the Confederacy stemmed from hopes of better treatment and from fears of being enslaved. In several communities they formed rebel companies or offered other forms of support to the Confederacy. Their displays of loyalty protected them and provide a context for understanding such newspaper reports as that of the Charleston Mercury, which stated in early 1861: “We learn that one hundred and fifty able-bodied free colored men of Charleston yesterday offered their services gratuitously to the Governor to hasten forward the important work of throwing up redoubts wherever needed along our coast.”

Free Black Confederates Step Into the Fray

The most prominent example of free black Confederate troops is the Louisiana Native Guards, based in New Orleans. Some 1,500 men enlisted, and early in the war they announced their determination to “take arms at a moment’s notice and fight shoulder to shoulder with other citizens” in defense of the city. Part of the state militia, they marched in review through the streets with white soldiers. But they were never ordered into combat, and when Union forces captured New Orleans in the spring of 1862, they switched sides and declared their loyalty to the Union.

Gen. Benjamin Butler, commander of the Union forces in New Orleans, interviewed some Native Guards and asked them why they had served a government created to perpetuate slavery. They “dared not refuse,” they told Butler, according to the book *General Butler in New Orleans*, published in 1864 by the biographer James Parton. “By serving the Confederates,” they hoped “to advance a little nearer to equality with whites.”

Many, if not most, free blacks in and around New Orleans aligned themselves with the planter class in hopes of greater rights. In this sense the region more closely resembled the Caribbean than the cotton South, with a comparatively large population of elite free blacks, most of them light-skinned. Some were slave owners—and among the wealthiest free blacks in the country, as the economic historian Juliet Walker has documented.

A similar culture of free blacks identifying with the planter class existed in Charleston, S.C., and Natchez, Miss. In fact, most of the 3,700 “black masters” in the decade before the Civil War lived in or around Charleston, Natchez and New Orleans. In addition to owning slaves, they established churches, schools and benevolent associations in their efforts to identify with whites.

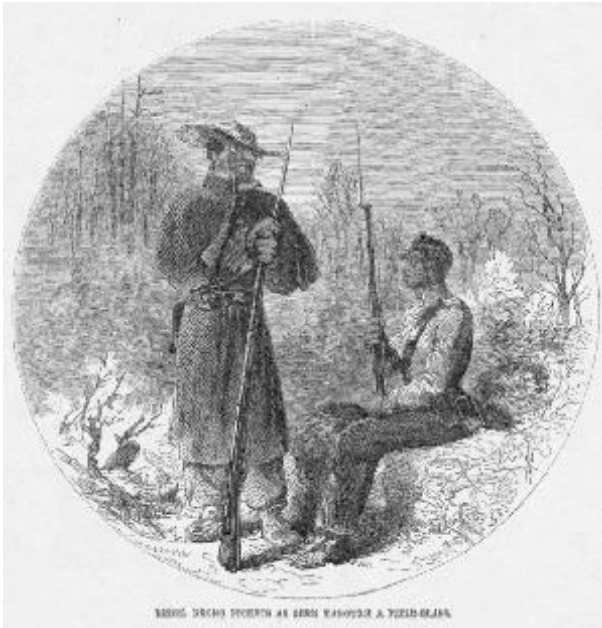
With the onset of war, their patriotic displays were especially strident. In early 1861 a group of wealthy, light-skinned, free blacks in Charleston expressed common cause with the planter class: “In our veins flows the blood of the white race, in some half, in others much more than half white blood. ... Our attachments are with you, our hopes and safety and protection from you. ... Our allegiance is due to South Carolina and in her defense, we will offer up our lives, and all that is dear to us.” In their show of support for the Confederacy, they were “race traitors.”

How Long Were There Black Confederates?

The vast majority of eyewitness reports of black Confederate soldiers occurred during the first year of the war, especially the first six months. Why? Because after the first Confiscation Act, slave laborers began deserting to Union lines en masse, and free blacks' expressions of loyalty toward the Confederacy waned. The second Confiscation Act, of July 1862, which declared all slaves of rebel masters in Union lines "forever free," accelerated desertions. So did Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. In some counties beginning in 1863, as many as 70 percent of impressed slaves deserted. The Union's emancipation policy checked any impulse blacks may have had to fight for the Confederacy.

As desertions rose, masters increasingly refused to allow slaves to be impressed by the Confederacy. Their claims on their slaves trumped that of the state, as the historian Stephanie McCurry has noted. Masters could force slaves to fight as soldiers despite the Confederacy's prohibition, and they could refuse to have them impressed.

Beginning in 1863, reliable eyewitness reports of blacks fighting as Confederate soldiers virtually disappear. The last known newspaper account of black Confederate soldiers occurred in January 1863, when Harper's Weekly featured an engraving of two armed black rebel pickets "as seen through a field-glass," based on an engraving by its artist, Theodore Davis. Harper's used the image to silence Northern dissent against arming blacks in the North, as the Emancipation Proclamation authorized: "It has long been known to military men that the insurgents affect no scruples about the employment of their slaves in any capacity in which they may be found useful. Yet there are people here at the North who affect to be horrified at the enrollment of negroes into regiments. Let us hope that the President will not be deterred by any [such] squeamish scruples."



Black Negro Pickets as seen through a field glass

The Union's emancipation policy ultimately forced the Confederacy to offer freedom to slaves who would fight as soldiers in the last month of the war. But before slaves were accepted as recruits, their masters first had to free them, and freedom did not extend to family members. Only a hundred or so slaves accepted the offer.

Ironically, the majority of blacks who became Confederate soldiers did so not at the end of the war, when the Confederacy offered freedom to slaves who fought, but at the beginning of the war, before the U.S. Congress established emancipation as a war aim.

The Union's emancipation policy prompted blacks, slave and free, to recalculate the risks of fleeing to Union lines versus supporting the Confederacy. Frederick Douglass was right: Emancipation was a potent source of black power.

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