

African-American History at War of 1812 Sites

Pick up a history book. More precisely, open a school text book on American history and turn to the War of 1812 section. Should you be fortunate to find such a section, recounted will be brief accounts of battles at Fort McHenry, New Orleans, and Lake Erie. Conveniently forgotten in American texts is the fact that the United States lost most of the battles and did not clearly win the war. This lack of knowledge makes the War of 1812 not only one of the least known, but also one of the least understood conflicts in American history. Paralleling this lack of knowledge is the little known role of African Americans in the War of 1812.

African-American men freely volunteered during the war, but their services were not readily accepted. Prior to the war, the United States maintained a standing army of fewer than 7,000 men. Such being the case, the country was dependent upon the various state militias to cope with military emergencies. The Federal Militia Act of 7 May 1792 stipulated that every “free able-bodied white male citizen...who is or shall be of the age of eighteen years, and under the age of forty-five years...shall be enrolled in the Militia...”¹ Service by black Americans was not specified, so each state adapted its own interpretation. Many black volunteers served in state militias before the war, but their role was largely relegated to that of servants or laborers. However, the lack of military success in 1812 and 1813 soon changed perspectives. By 1814, northern states like Pennsylvania and New York were recruiting entire regiments of black troops, and even some southern states like Louisiana and North Carolina were mustering black soldiers.

Black enlistment in the U.S. Army was banned by law prior to and during the first year of the war, and the U.S. Navy likewise issued directives against enrolling black sailors. Despite the ban, many naval recruiters ignored the prohibition. The social fabric of life at sea evolved differently from that on land. Seafaring was “a partly separate subculture with its own mores and traditions” which “could offer minority men opportunities not available in the mainstream.”² Obtaining crewmen was ultimately the commanding officer’s responsibility, and the availability of skilled sea-



men was more important than skin color. Black sailors served in the Quasi-War with France and the Tripolitan Wars against the Barbary pirates, and throughout the War of 1812, black seamen comprised between 15 and 20% of all enlisted men on all ships and all stations in the United States Navy.³

Both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army were integrated during the War of 1812. On 3 March 1813 Congress passed an act officially opening the naval ranks to “...citizens of the United States or persons of color, natives of the U. States...”⁴ The U.S. Army followed suit shortly thereafter. By no means can it be stipulated that equality or lack of prejudice existed since both slavery and racism were endemic in the U.S. Nevertheless, by 1814 black soldiers and sailors fought and died side by side in line of battle and on warship gundecks. Moreover, in official records and documentation, black soldiers and sailors were treated exactly the same as their white counterparts.

And therein lies the interpretive challenge. Attempting to identify those brave black soldiers and sailors, or ascertaining the roles they played in specific engagements, has proven extremely difficult. Unlike the American Civil War period, for which official and unofficial documentation abounds, few such resources are available for the War of 1812. The problem is no less formidable north of the U.S. border. Large numbers of black sailors and soldiers fought with the British Navy, the British Army, and the Canadian Militia. Embroiled in a cataclysmic struggle against the Napoleonic Europe and desperately short of sailors, British ship captains appeared to harbor no concern for skin color. The British Army, akin to the U.S. Army, was greatly affected by 19th-century racial attitudes; many black Canadians served with British regiments, and while some black regulars were assimilated into infantry companies, for the most part they served as pioneers, musicians, and servants. Canadian Militia regiments also enlisted black soldiers. Still, the racial climate in the Canadian Militia was no different from that in the British Army. Unique among Canadian militia organizations was an outfit designated in unit

returns as the Colored Corps, sometimes referred to as Captain Runchey's Company of Colored Men.

While in-depth research is lacking on both sides of the border, Canadian War of 1812 parks appear to be pursuing black history interpretation with slightly greater vigor than U.S. sites. Fort York in Toronto, managed by the Toronto Historical Board, is making considerable interpretive progress.

In 1993, the board approached the Ontario Black History Society in an effort to incorporate African-Canadian history into the Fort York interpretive story. Developed as a result of this partnership was an exhibit entitled "African Canadians in the Defence of Canada." The exhibit and accompanying slide presentation have been widely displayed. Similarly, the experiences of black soldiers have been detailed in several workshops conducted by Fort York. Historian Wayne Kelly disclosed that Fort York interpretation generally focuses upon the settlement of black Loyalists in Canada, the limitation of slavery in 1793, the contributions of African Canadians to the defense of the province, and the impact of the war upon the black population.

The Niagara River Region of Ontario encompasses several sites, plus historical plaques and markers, which interpret the role of black Canadians in the War of 1812. Fort George, a Parks Canada site situated at the northern end of the Niagara River, formulated a plan to actively present a more equitable history of the war. As explained by Superintendent Ron Dale, the interpretive emphasis at Fort George has tended to be Eurocentric, a story about "dead white guys." Personal presentations at Fort George have recently offered a more balanced story, and some interpretation about Runchey's Colored Corps has been incorporated into A/V productions, exhibits, and historical plaques. Fort George has also established an alliance with local black history groups in order to develop relative themes throughout the Niagara Region.

Fort Erie, located at the southern end of the Niagara River, is managed by the Niagara Parks Commission. By the late summer of 1814, when the seven-week siege of Fort Erie occurred, black soldiers dotted the ranks of both armies, a fact that has become a regular feature of Fort Erie's interpretive programs. Site supervisor Jim Hill related that Fort Erie will be expanding its exhibits, and currently under development is an exhibit relating to the black Canadian experience. Fort Erie has also become the site of a popular annual re-enactment. Like the armies themselves in 1814, the ranks of Canadian and American re-

enactment units are becoming sprinkled with black soldiers.

In addition to established sites, a number of historical plaques pepper the Niagara region. By the Isaac Brock monument, site of the battle of Queenston Heights near Queenston, Ontario, a Provincial plaque extols the formation of Runchey's Colored Company and heralds its accomplishments. The Colored Corps was the vision of Samuel Pierpoint, a Canadian veteran of the American Revolution. A plaque denoting Pierpoint's contribution is located in St. Catherine's, Ontario. Robert Runchey was the first commander of the Colored Corps, and the remains of Runchey's Tavern in Jordan, Ontario are also marked by a Provincial plaque.

As with some Canadian parks, several sites south of the border are also making progress. Recent research at Fort McHenry in Baltimore has revealed considerable participation by black soldiers, sailors, and civilians, free men and slaves, in the various Chesapeake campaigns. Personal programs increasingly communicate the story of African Americans to Fort McHenry visitors, and both general and specific handouts are available. Additionally, Fort McHenry historian Scott Sheads has published a number of articles and papers pertaining to African-American involvement in the Chesapeake theater of operations.

The USS *Constitution* Museum in Boston, while lacking details about individuals, is well aware that 15 to 20% of all U.S. sailors in the War of 1812 were African Americans, thus they have initiated special programs to convey their black history theme. Berthed in Erie, Pennsylvania is the U.S. Brig *Niagara*. The *Niagara* is administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which on September 10, 1996, dedicated a historical marker in Erie commemorating the African-American seamen who served with the Lake Erie squadron.

Perry's Victory & International Peace Memorial, on South Bass Island, Ohio, embraces the same themes as the U.S. Brig *Niagara*. A handout pertaining to black sailors is available, and the role of black seamen is discussed in personal programs at every opportunity. Park staff have also presented papers recounting the role of African Americans in the War of 1812 at three history symposiums, and specific off-site programs are in the offing. Most significant is the 1996 publication of *Amongst My Best Men: African Americans and the War of 1812*. Published by the Friends of Perry's Victory & IPM, this 200-page book is the first comprehensive work to chronicle the subject.

Without doubt the best documented episodes of African-American involvement in the

war are found during the New Orleans campaign. On the British side both the 1st and 5th West India Regiments were engaged, while American forces included two battalions of Free Men of Color, three independent companies, and numerous individuals intermingled with other Louisiana Militia units. African-American sailors fought for both sides in the naval engagement on Lake Borgne, and black soldiers and sailors battled in each of the other five distinct engagements of the campaign.

Slaves and free men alike helped construct fortifications around New Orleans—as they did at cities all along the east coast. Chalmette National Historical Park interprets their black history theme in a variety of ways. A handout is also currently being produced, and an exhibit illustrating the different fighting units depicts three black soldiers: two British and one American. Without doubt, Chalmette’s best asset is the five active volunteers who portray Free Men of Color soldiers in living history demonstrations.

Overall, great strides are being made at War of 1812 sites toward interpreting the role of African Americans in the war. Yet each and every individual surveyed agreed that much has yet to be accomplished; most pressing is the need for more research. It is incumbent upon those sites to enlighten the public about this forgotten war, and

in the process, present a balanced story of the soldiers, sailors, and civilians whose lives were affected.

Notes

- ¹ Quoted in Jesse J. Johnson (ed.), *The Black Soldier Documented (1619-1815), Missing Pages In United States History* (Hampton, Virginia: Jesse J. Johnson, 1970), 64.
- ² W. Jeffrey Bolster, “‘To Feel Like a Man’: Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800-1860,” in the *Journal of American History*, Volume 76, Number 4, March 1990, 1174.
- ³ Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession, The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 219.
- ⁴ *Baltimore Federal Gazette & Commercial Daily Advertiser*, 15 March 1813.

Gerard T. Altoff is currently the National Park Service Chief Ranger and historian at Perry’s Victory & International Peace Memorial. He frequently presents programs on the Battle of Lake and The War of 1812 to clubs, organizations, and schools. His most recent published work is *Amongst My Best Men: African Americans and the War of 1812, Ohio: The Perry Group*, 1996.

Joseph P. Reidy

The African-American Sailors’ Project The Hidden History of the Civil War

Anonymous sailor on the USSS North Carolina. Photo courtesy US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA.

The Civil War shows no signs of relinquishing its place as the most dynamic topic in United States history. Historians keep finding new topics to investigate, even as the general public displays broad interest in all facets of the conflict. To be sure, genealogy has played a large part in the war’s popularity. More than 3 million European Americans fought on both sides of the contest, and some 200,000 African Americans served in the Union’s armed forces. Incalculable numbers of present-day American citizens descend from Civil War veterans.

Four years ago, Howard University, the Department of the Navy, and the National Park Service formed a partnership to investigate the experience of American sailors in the Civil War Navy. The Department of Defense Legacy Cultural Resources Program has served as the primary source of financial support. Despite the vast

knowledge of Civil War armies, comparatively little is known about the navies, and next to nothing about the

lives of ordinary sailors. Few know that black men may have constituted as much as 25% of the Navy’s enlisted force and that on some ships they represented 75% or more of the crewmen. Fewer still appreciate that a number of black women were enlisted—mostly as nurses—and that eight black sailors won medals of honor for their heroism. The natural starting point of the research involved identifying by name every African-American sailor who served in the Civil War. Such an enumeration would help resolve the mystery surrounding the number of African-American sailors who served (low-range estimates hover around 10,000 men while high-end estimates

