

were rated and paid according to their skill and experience.

Over the course of the war, the numbers of African-American sailors increased, and so, correspondingly, did their percentage on board naval vessels. Whereas in 1861 they may have constituted at best 5% of any given vessel's crew, by the closing months of the war the average figure was closer to 25%, and on some ships it was more than 50%. Ironically, informal segregation helps account for the large proportions of African-American crewmen on certain vessels. Black men accounted for disproportionately large numbers of the crewmen on board storeships and supply ships. These men tended to occupy the low-paid, low-prestige enlisted ratings. This pattern of informal segregation also extended to sailing craft generally, but often with unforeseen results. On 1 April 1865, for instance, the complement of the mortar schooner *Adolph Hugel* numbered 48 men, 46 were rated as landsmen (or raw recruits), there were 3 seamen, 3 cooks and 1 steward.

Most significantly, black men held four prestigious petty-officer ratings: boatswain's mate, captain of the hold, master at arms, and quartermaster. As this case suggests, vessels where de facto segregation prevailed also offered opportunities for advancement.

Unlike their counterparts in the army, black sailors stood no chance of gaining commissioned office during the Civil War. The Navy did not commission African-American officers until World War II. Moreover, not a single warrant officer of the Civil War era appears to have been African American, despite the fact that any number of men had the requisite skills and experience. Most African-American sailors occupied the lowest enlisted ratings, and of those who were rated petty officers, most were cooks and stewards.

In seeking to move beyond a mere demographic understanding of the black naval experience, the research team has begun exploring the pension records to the veterans and their eligible survivors. Only three diaries of black sailors are known to have survived, and, though illuminating, these documents provide but a small glimpse into the bigger picture. As researchers have been delighted to discover, the depositions, letters, medical reports, and other documents in the pension files offer a panoramic perspective on the men's and their families' lives before, during and after the war.

In 1862, Congress authorized pensions for men who suffered debilitating wounds while in service. In 1890, eligibility was expanded to include any affliction that interfered with a man's ability to support himself and his family by manual labor.

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Lifesavers' Courage and Duty Went Hand-in-Hand

On the night of October 11, 1896, nine people aboard the schooner *E.S. Newman* learned first-hand about courage and dedication to duty. With their ship forced into the raging breakers by a fierce storm, they clung to life on its battered remnants with little hope of rescue. Yet they lived to tell about one of the great stories in the annals of local lifesaving.

Fate brought the *E.S. Newman* ashore just two miles south of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station. Though recognized as the only all-black crew in the U.S. Lifesaving Service, the lifesavers at Pea Island also had a well-deserved reputation for excellence under their veteran Keeper, Richard Etheridge. Their response upon sighting the distress signal from the *E.S. Newman* was immediate.

Keeper Etheridge later noted in his log that "the voice of gladden[ed] hearts greeted the arrival of the station crew" at the site of the wreck. He quickly realized, however, that he would have to improvise the rescue. Though the ship lay just 30 yards offshore, the flooded condition of the beach prevented the use of standard lifesaving procedures. He decided to forego the familiar equipment and practiced methods, relying instead on his crew's bravery and endurance. Securing a heavy line to two of his men, he instructed them to head out to the wreck and return with someone if they could. Plunging into the thundering surf, they fought their way out toward what was left of the schooner. Though holding tightly to the line, the men on the beach could do little else but wait. Then, emerging from the storm-tossed night, came the two lifesavers...bearing with them a crewman from the *E.S. Newman*! Places were quickly exchanged, and two more men went out into the huge waves. They, too, returned successful. Ultimately, all nine people were saved from the wrath of the storm, including the captain's wife and three-year-old son. The men of the U.S. Lifesaving Service had merely done their duty once again.

Wayside exhibits now mark the site of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station and this famous rescue. You may view them in the Pea Island Wildlife Refuge Headquarters parking area.

—Chris Eckard
Ranger Historian