

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 USS 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



assume 30,000 of the estimated 118,000 enlistees were black men). It would also provide a point of entry into naval records for the Civil War Soldiers' and Sailors' that will eventually include information about every person who fought in the Civil War.

This process of identification has proven remarkably challenging. Unlike the Union Army, which created a Bureau of Colored Troops to administer affairs concerning the approximately 179,000 soldiers who served in the racially segregated black regiments, the Navy neither segregated African-American sailors nor created a separate administrative bureau. Personnel records indicating such physical characteristics as color of hair, eyes, and skin offer a point of entry. Although such terms as "Negro," "Colored," and "Mulatto" seem straightforward, other descriptions are far more ambiguous. Men who were professional mariners frequently were described as "black" complected regardless of their ethnicity or nativity. By the same token, light-skinned African Americans at times appear in the records as "dark."

However subjective, these physical descriptions are the necessary starting point for investigating the African-American naval experience in the Civil War.

In an attempt to overcome the biases in the sources, the research team (consisting of advance students in the graduate history program at Howard University led by the author) undertook to enter into a computerized database the name and

all descriptive information of every man whose physical description connoted African ancestry. Researchers examined surviving enlistment records—the weekly returns of enlistments at recruitment depots—as well as the surviving quarterly muster rolls of the 600-plus vessels in the Union fleet. At present, the database contains some 100,000 individual records representing approximately 19,000 men.

The database, like the personnel records from which it was constructed, holds great interest to historians of the Civil War and of the U.S. Navy as well as to genealogists and descendants. Preliminary analysis of the data reveals a number of fascinating trends, as the demographic profile of the men illustrates. Most enlistees were young men, particularly in their twenties. A majority was born in the southern United States, and of that group perhaps four-fifths escaped from slavery prior to enlisting. African-American enlistees from the free states of the North came from far and wide, although the majority hailed from the seaboard states of the north-Atlantic coast. A good number had had prior seafaring experience—for perhaps 10% this included a stint in the U.S. Navy prior to the war. Men of African ancestry from offshore points also served in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War. Although most of these men came from the West Indies, others came from Africa and Europe and from the islands of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans. Once enlisted, the men

African-American History in the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors (CWSS) Partnership

On September 10, NPS Director Roger Kennedy held a press conference to announce that NPS had completed the first phase of the CWSS Names Index project by putting over 235,000 African-American Civil War soldiers' names on the Internet. The Internet site <<http://www.nps.itd.gov/cwss>> includes regimental histories of 180 African-American Union regiments, with hyperlinks between soldiers' names, regiments they served in, and the battles the regiments fought in.



On September 12, at an event with General Colin Powell as the featured speaker, former NPS Field Area Director Robert Stanton presented a computer file of these name records to D.C. Councilmember Frank Smith for use on the African-American Civil War Memorial, which, when completed, will be in the National Park System as part of the National Capital Field Area.

For more information, contact the NPS Project Manager, John Peterson, at 202-343-4415 or NPS cc:Mail or John Peterson@nps.gov

—John Peterson

Photo © Milton Williams.

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

preservation efforts. Civil rights sites acquired their significance during modern times. Furthermore, many of these resources are vernacular buildings constructed after the Second World War. The quintessential nontraditional site in Orangeburg is All Star Bowling Lanes, part of a 1960s strip shopping center. Such resources are worthy of preservation not for their architecture or aesthetics, but for their association with important modern events.

A second preservation problem for Civil Rights sites is their association with controversial events of modern history. For example, the Orangeburg Massacre occurred only 28 years ago and remains among the most controversial events in the state's history. The local community may feel uncomfortable dealing with the Orangeburg Massacre, in part because some of the participants are still living. Another potentially controversial issue involves targeting for preservation sites associated with white resistance. Opponents of recognizing these sites may argue that such actions would honor the individuals who tried to maintain a society based on white supremacy and racial segregation. However, select white resistance sites should be preserved in order to tell the entire story of the civil rights movement. White resistance was a formidable barrier to the goals of the civil rights movement, especially in majority-black counties like Orangeburg. The movement can not be fully understood without some knowledge concerning white resistance.

Despite potential problems, preservation steps are available for the nation's civil rights sites. The first priority should be to educate the public about the significance of civil rights resources. The National Register is a useful tool in recognizing such sites. This past August, Orangeburg's All Star Bowling Lanes was listed on the National Register at the national level of significance as part of the author's multiple property submission. In addition, communities like Selma, Alabama, have marketed civil rights resources for heritage tourism. The developing South Carolina Heritage Corridor could include Orangeburg County's civil rights sites. Such efforts are necessary in order to provide future generations with a complete material record of the African-American experience.

*Steven A. Davis is a recent graduate of the Applied History Program at the University of South Carolina. This article is a summary of one of three case studies in his thesis, *Historic Preservation and the Social History of the New South*.*

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African-American Sailors' Project

Applicants had to authenticate their service, demonstrate their debility did not result from vicious habits, and undergo examination by a board of surgeons who would attest to the degree of disability. Given that a surviving dependent became eligible for the veteran's pension upon his death, the files of widows and minor children contain even more detailed accounts of marriages, births, and deaths, and of family and community relationships generally, than the files of the veterans do.

The pension files of black sailors (together with the much more voluminous record of their counterparts who served in the U.S. Colored Troops) provide a rich and largely untapped source of first person testimony into late-19th-century African-American history. The picture is a mixed one that included cases of duplicity and greed as well as generosity and self-sacrifice.

Among the myriad details that emerge from the files is a clear sense that the sacrifices of the veterans and their families merited the thanks of the nation and that the modest pension payments were the least form that the thanks might take.

Certainly at the dawn of the 20th century in the cities and the neighborhoods where naval veterans lived, knowledge of the African-American contribution to the naval history of the Civil War lived too. But as the veterans died and their children themselves had children, that understanding grew less and less distinct. What persists in the considerable numbers of families where photographs, papers, or artifacts survive is the knowledge that great-grandfather served in the Civil War Navy. But the broader pattern of service that he and his comrades configured has largely been lost.

The prospects for restoring the balance have never looked brighter that they do at present. As the recent events marking the dedication of the African-American Civil War Memorial make clear, descendants of the sailors are every bit as proud of their ancestors as are the descendants of soldiers.

Although the public at large may not fully appreciate the Civil War at sea, the descendants have no doubt that the navy contributed as mightily as the army to saving the Union and destroying slavery. As scholars, the researchers of the African-American Sailors' Project operate with a clear sense of shared purpose to understand the experience of African-American sailors in all its diversity and complexity. For despite all that is known about the Civil War, there is still much to learn.

Joseph P. Reidy is a Professor of History at Howard University and Director of the African-American Sailors' Project.