



A Grand Army of Black Men

Edited by
EDWIN S. REDKEY

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Letters from African-American Soldiers
in the Union Army, 1861–1865

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For Nancy

Preface

WHEN, in 1978, the late Bell Irvin Wiley wrote a new introduction to his book *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*, he sadly noted “a dearth of letters written by the 200,000 blacks who donned the blue. A careful search has turned up less than a score of these sources.”¹ Wiley’s book gives an excellent picture of the daily lives, routines, thoughts, and concerns of Yankee soldiers, and part of a chapter is on the black troops. But without the breadth and depth of documents written by the black soldiers themselves, neither Wiley nor any other historian has been able fully to document the roles played by African Americans in the Civil War.

Private letters of black soldiers may have vanished, but others have now reappeared. A massive quantity of official correspon-

1. Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*, second edition (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1978) 16.

dence by and about black soldiers has been found in the National Archives. And many soldiers wrote "letters to the editors" of black and abolitionist newspapers, to tell their friends at home about their experiences, their fears, and their hopes. This book is a selection of such letters by black soldiers published in newspapers during the war years.

THE NEWSPAPERS

During the Civil War, two nationally read newspapers were published by black Americans: the *Christian Recorder*, of Philadelphia, and the *Weekly Anglo-African*, of New York City. The *Recorder* was the official organ of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The Church had been established in 1816 by several congregations of black Methodists who had withdrawn from white-dominated churches because of racial discrimination. By 1860 the Church had spread across the Northern states and into portions of the South where free black communities existed. It established the *Christian Recorder* in 1853 to help unite the denomination and to provide a forum where black writers could discuss their views. Most of the content of the paper focused on church affairs; but in 1863, with the enlistment of many Northern blacks into the army, the editor, the Reverend Elisha Weaver, began to include letters and articles about current affairs. From 1863 through 1865 the *Christian Recorder* each week published several letters from black soldiers. Many of those issues have survived, and most of the letters in this collection come from those pages.

The second major black newspaper of the Civil War years was the *Weekly Anglo-African*. Founded in 1859 by editors Thomas and Robert Hamilton, the "*Anglo*" reported the affairs of the black community throughout the Northeast. It printed religious news from all denominations, but it was not a church newspaper as such, and from the beginning it carried letters and articles of broader concern. It vigorously opposed slavery, and it sponsored an educa-

tional group called the "African Civilization Society." Early in the war years it also gave limited endorsement to the idea of emigration to Haiti as a solution to the race issue in the United States. But after the Emancipation Proclamation it urged black men to enlist in the army to fight for the Union, and when they began writing letters from the training camps and battlefields, the *Anglo* published many of them. Robert Hamilton died in 1865, and his newspaper also died at the end of that year. Relatively few issues of the *Weekly Anglo-African* have survived, especially from 1863 through the end of the war. But the rich content of those surviving issues suggests that the *Anglo* was the main voice of the black soldiers of the North.

For four months, from May to August of 1862, the *Weekly Anglo-African* stopped publication and yielded the ground to another weekly, the *Pine and Palm*, published in Boston. This paper was the official organ of the "Haytien Emigration Bureau," headed by a white man, James Redpath, and was sponsored by the government of Haiti. During those early months of the war, the *Pine and Palm* also became the official paper of the African Civilization Society. Before it stopped publishing, after the Emancipation Proclamation, it carried a series of letters from a black man who had joined a white regiment from Connecticut and fought in some of the early battles of the war.

Most of the letters in this volume are drawn from these three newspapers. *Frederick Douglass's Monthly* stopped publishing just when blacks began enlisting, and Douglass himself became an active recruiter. Occasionally letters from black soldiers appeared in other newspapers, including white-edited abolitionist papers such as *The Liberator*. From time to time the general press would publish a letter from a black soldier, and undoubtedly more letters lie undiscovered in the pages of small-town newspapers across the North. This was true of the letters of Corporal James H. Gooding of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, who wrote weekly reports to the New Bedford (Massachusetts) Mercury. But the *Christian Recorder*, the *Weekly Anglo-African*, and the *Pine and Palm* pro-

vided a sympathetic audience and assured publication, so most black soldiers of the Civil War wrote to them, leaving a rich vein of firsthand accounts to be mined by future historians.

PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION AND EDITING

This collection of letters from black soldiers contains 129 items selected and edited to give the reader a broad sample of the experiences and concerns of those men. In over a dozen years of searching, the editor has found almost four hundred such letters. Those in this book have been chosen because they are articulate statements on significant issues or experiences.

Every effort has been made to identify the author of each letter. Many writers signed their letters with their full name, rank, and unit, along with the date and place of writing. Others signed with just initials or a *nom de guerre*; this was especially likely when a letter contained strong criticism of whites, or officers, or of the government. (Sergeant Joseph H. Barquet of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was court-martialed and reprimanded for writing a letter to the *Weekly Anglo-African* complaining about the quantity and quality of army food.) In every case, the editor tried to make positive identification of the writer by searching of service records, by comparison with other letters, and by use of other internal evidence.

The texts of these letters stand essentially as they were originally published in the newspapers. It is clear that the newspaper editors made changes in the letters before publication; grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were standardized, and letters may have been shortened to fit available space. Occasionally, in reading the handwritten letters, the newspaper editor or typesetter made errors that are obvious, such as misspelling of names or incorrect identification of military units; but we must assume that what actually appeared in print was reasonably close to what the original

author scratched by hand under conditions of war. In this collection, minor changes have been made where the original newspaper spelling, capitalization, or punctuation might confuse or distract the modern reader from the content of the letters. Where the print in the newspaper was mutilated, the editor has so indicated and, where possible, made a reasonable guess about the missing words; those guesses are placed in brackets. Also in brackets are the missing ranks and portions of names of people mentioned in the letters, whenever they can be positively identified. Some letters contain references to terms, people, or events that need further identification or explanation; the editor has added footnotes to provide such background information.

Few newspaper letters from black soldiers have been reprinted since the Civil War. Herbert Aptheker, in the first volume of his *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York, Citadel, 1951), included three such letters. James M. McPherson, in *The Negro's Civil War* (New York, Vintage, 1965), quoted parts of eight letters. Virginia M. Adams discovered the uniquely valuable series of forty-eight weekly letters from Corporal James Henry Gooding of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry written to the *New Bedford Mercury*. She edited and published them in *On the Altar of Freedom* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

Ira Berlin and his colleagues assembled a monumental collection of official letters by and about black soldiers. These documents, published in *The Black Military Experience*, Series II, Volume I of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), were found in the National Archives. They include letters from the soldiers and their officers, and the editors provide extensive scholarly apparatus for each document. Although that volume does not include the "letters to the editors" that compose this book, a number of the letter writers appear in both collections. Many black soldiers who wrote to army officials, politicians, and government offices also wrote to newspapers.

ORGANIZATION

The letters collected here are arranged in chapters that focus on broad topics. Most of the letters, of course, discuss more than one subject; but usually each soldier had one major reason for writing. In all of the letters there is a clear consciousness that the writer is an African American. This means that the soldiers considered themselves representatives of their race and pioneers in the struggle for equal rights. They were acutely conscious of the discrimination they faced, both nationally and in the army. This perspective appears throughout these letters, no matter what people, events, or ideas the writer focuses on. Therefore, any subdivision of the letters will reflect this social perspective.

The letters fall into two main categories: those that focus on the events of army life and those that focus on issues. The letters in most chapters of the first half of the book are arranged by locale and tell about combat and daily life. Within each chapter, letters are largely arranged chronologically. The first chapter contains letters from black soldiers who served with white units before Lincoln decided to recruit black regiments. The official status of some of these men is not clear; some were not legally soldiers, but they participated fully in combat with their white colleagues. Chapters 2 through 4 deal with the war in different parts of the South. Black troops served in most theaters of the war, but most of those who wrote letters served in the eastern part of the country and along the Gulf Coast. Many were concentrated on the coastline from Charleston to Jacksonville, what the army called the "Department of the South." Others fought in the many battles around Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia. A smaller number served along the Gulf Coast, from Pensacola to Louisiana. Two-thirds of the black soldiers in the Union Army were newly emancipated slaves, generally men who could not read or write, and who may not have known that black newspapers existed. As a result, almost all of these collected letters were written by men from the North,

who had been free before the war. Consequently, war zones such as Tennessee and the Mississippi Valley, where many black soldiers served, are not represented in this book.

Chapter 5 has letters from troops on occupation duty. Starting early in 1865, black troops began occupying towns and rural areas that had just been liberated by Union armies. Occupation duty for the black soldiers extended through most of the year, and it included Texas, where a large contingent went as soon as the fighting ended in the East.

In the second part of the book, the letters focus on the issues that concerned the African-American troops. Foremost was their desire for civil rights. The letters in Chapter 6 show that these men clearly believed that the primary reason they had joined the army was to win citizenship and voting privileges for themselves and their people. Chapter 7 contains only a small portion of the many letters written about the issue of equal pay. Closely reasoned, articulate letters came from the men, many of whom refused to accept lower pay. Black soldiers wrote more letters about this particular grievance than any other. Chapter 8 contains letters focused on the other complaints about racism, including the restrictions on having black officers, atrocities against black prisoners by the Confederates, and harsh treatment by their own, supposedly sympathetic white officers.

Few of the thousands of black sailors in the Union Navy wrote letters to the newspapers, and of course they were not part of the "grand army of black men." Five letters from sailors have come to light, however, and they add significant detail to the story of African Americans in the Civil War, so Chapter 9 contains all five of those letters. The book ends with a chapter of letters from black veterans who had returned home. Their war experiences had changed them, and they boldly spoke out for their rights. By the end of 1865, the newspapers carried no more letters from black soldiers.

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Abbreviations

<i>CR</i>	<i>Christian Recorder</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Pine and Palm</i>
USCHA	United States Colored Heavy Artillery
USCI	United States Colored Infantry
USCT	United States Colored Troops
<i>WAA</i>	<i>Weekly Anglo-African</i>

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Introduction: For Freedom and Equality

FOR A CENTURY after the Civil War, most Americans thought that blacks had done little or nothing to win their freedom from slavery. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, renewed study of African-American history corrected that old ignorance and showed that almost 200,000 black soldiers (and thousands of black sailors) had served the Union. But most interested people thought that those soldiers were newly freed slaves, capable only of labor, afraid of battle, illiterate, and ignorant of the more complex issues of the war.

Forgotten were the thousands of free black men from the Northern states who had fought not only to free the slaves and preserve the Union but also to show the world that they, as much as any other men, deserved to be full partners in the United States. From Vermont and Maryland, from Massachusetts and Iowa, from every one of the Union states, they had put on blue uniforms to show their patriotism and manhood. From 1863 to 1865 they had