

Service to Country: The Fight for Freedom by Enslaved Soldiers from Maryland

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Introduction

The Maryland Agricultural College (MAC) was established in 1856 on land that had been worked by enslaved men, women, and children. Just five years after the founding of the MAC, General P.G.T. Beauregard opened fire on Ft. Sumter on April 1861, marking the beginning of the U.S. Civil War. Although it was a slaveholding state, Maryland did not secede, and it served as an important border state. President Abraham Lincoln instituted a draft in March of 1863 to replenish the Union Army. The Conscription Act of 1863 allowed able-bodied drafted men to hire substitutes to serve in their stead. So, often enslaved men were made to be substitutes for wealthy planters in Maryland during the Civil War. The U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) was established in 1863 and it was composed of free black men and freedmen, hundreds of whom were originally from Prince George's County going as far south as Florida and as far west as Texas. This research examines the impact of enlisted formerly-enslaved men from Maryland on the Civil War.

Central Questions

What did it mean to be an African American enlisted in the USCT during the Civil War? How did enlisted men resist or helped others resist bondage? After the USCT was disbanded in 1865 following the conclusion of the Civil War, what happened to the men of the USCT?

Figure I. Fourth Regiment USCT Company at Ft. Lincoln, Washington, D.C.



Figure I. Detail

Figure II. Fourth Regiment USCT Civil War Banner



Case Study: Edward Walker

Walker enlisted in the 30th Regiment Infantry of the USCT at the age of 24 in June 1864. Prior to his enlistment, he was enslaved by Catherine H. Barnard in Vansville, MD which was only a mile away from the MAC. Walker died on March 1865 in Ft. Monroe, VA (Fig. V). Known as "Freedom Fort", because hundreds of fugitive slaves found refuge on the peninsula, it is possible that Walker died defending this refugee community. After the unsuccessful Hampton Roads Peace Conference on February 1865, it is possible that residual skirmishes occurred.

Figure III. Evening Star Recruitment Advertisement March 1863

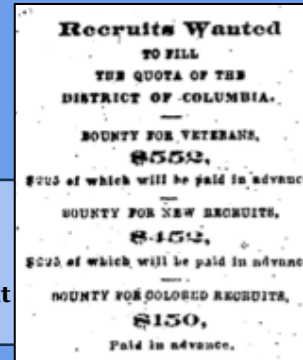


Figure VII. Petersburg National Battlefield Park USCT Memorial, VA



Figure VI. Unidentified USCT Soldier Poses with Family ca. 1863-5, Cecil County, MD



Figure IV. USCT Soldiers at L'Ouverture Hospital, VA
L-R: Pvts. Trout, Degraff, Johnson, Lisle, Brown, Bond, Deyo.



Figure V. Plan of Fort Monroe, VA

The Role of Enlisted African American Men

In 1863, black men were allowed to enlist in the Union armed forces, though they were paid less (Fig. III). Free black men and freedmen worked primarily as laborers in USCT at first but eventually served in combat. Approximately 20% of all African Americans enrolled in the USCT died. The Battle of the Crater in July 1864 saw severe casualties, especially for Gen. Edward Ferrero's division of the USCT (Fig. IV).

Postbellum America

Thousands of men of the USCT died; many of the deceased were not laid to rest in a place they called "home" (Fig. VII). Orphaned children of deceased soldiers were often sent to freedmen schools; others were placed in short and long-term forced apprenticeships.

Conclusions

Slavery was abolished in Maryland on November 1, 1864, almost two years after African American men from the state served the Union. Seven regiments of the USCT were established in Maryland. Freedmen from Maryland faced an enemy that believed they were subhuman; facing death or worse. Unfortunately, many African American men in the USCT were put in the line of danger, as in the case of the Battle of the Crater. As did Edward Walker, formerly enslaved soldiers fought for the freedom of others and died for a future in which slavery was eradicated.

Future Research

Further research should be done on enlisted men of all the Prince George's County Election Districts. Also, oral histories from the Ft. Monroe Descendant Community would allow for a better understanding of enslaved fugitivity in the Civil War.

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