

# **The Role of Black Soldiers in the Confederate Army**

By SSG Harry W. Tison, II

Many historians would have you believe that all minority groups such as Blacks, Indians, and Hispanics hated the Confederacy and what it stood for. This is completely untrue according to records that are recently been brought to the forefront of history. Groups such as the 37<sup>th</sup> Texas Calvary and the Sons of Confederate Veterans have for many years tried to make this information possible. For those who do not know, the 37<sup>th</sup> Texas Calvary is a Civil War reenactment group that prides itself on having minorities in their unit. The Sons of Confederate Veterans is a historical group only. There are men of color within this group and they are very proud of their heritage.

Why then have we not heard of these proud soldiers? The answer may lie in the fact that many of the history books that are in our schools were written by people who are either ignorant of the situation or by someone bent on covering up the true history of the past. I have found a lot of information about these soldiers on the Internet and have even met some of the blacks in the Sons of Confederate Veterans. This paper is to bring out the truth about them with the hopes that others will see exactly what the War of Northern Aggression was about.

First, the war was not 100% about slavery. Yes, there was a small portion of people in the South that owned slaves and thought that there was nothing wrong with it. But the majority of people believed that the North was oppressing them much the same way that the King of England was oppressing their parents and grandparents were in the Revolutionary War. The North was trying to put heavy taxes on things such as cotton, tobacco and other such items that the South was producing. Although very difficult, the way of life in the South was a matter of pride and not to be messed around with.

Although blacks were repressed in the South, the same was true in the North. Blacks were probably discriminated against in New York City and Boston more than they were in Charleston or Atlanta. Yes, they were 'free' in the North, but were still considered second-class citizens to many in the North. They still did not have the right to vote nor were they allowed in the same establishments as whites. This is why the majority of blacks stayed in the South when the war started. They stayed to fight for their homeland against the 'Yankees'. There was between 50,000 to 100,000 blacks that served in the Confederate Army as cooks, blacksmiths, and yes, even soldiers. Hollywood would have us believe that the Union Army first started letting Blacks fight with the movie "Glory", the story of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. This is not the case. Here is the history of these brave souls.

There are many references to the trials that blacks had to endure during this era. Not many though, tell the story of blacks that served in the Confederacy. Although it is true that a good number of slaves fled to the North, there were those that chose to stay in the South to stay with their families or to fight what they saw as the tyranny of the Yankees. There is the story of a slave whose name were Silas Chandler and his master Andrew Chandler. ([www.37thtexas.org](http://www.37thtexas.org)) Andrew enlisted in the 44<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Volunteer

Regiment and took Silas along with him as many Southerners did. Andrew was 15 years old and Silas was nearly 17 and very close friends with Andrew. Silas traveled between the plantation in Mississippi and wherever Andrew was. Andrew wrote home on 31 Aug 1862, "If the Feds were to capture him, they might take him along with them." "I greatly fear another raid, don't let them catch Silas. Be sure to write when Silas gets home."

Andrew was severely wounded in the Battle of Chickamauga. Army doctors were prepared to amputate his leg but Silas refused to let the doctors perform the operation. Instead, he used a piece of gold to buy whiskey, which he used to buy a bottle of whiskey to bribe the surgeons for Andrews release. He carried his master on his back and loaded him on a boxcar in Atlanta and better medical care. Andrew survived as a cripple and the two remained friends for the rest of their lives and both received pensions for serving in the war.

On the far side of Arlington National Cemetery, in a little known place, is the cemetery's largest monument. It is the Confederate Memorial that stands over the graves of Confederate Soldiers. On this monument is a carving of a black soldier, not in chains, but in a Confederate uniform marching along side his fellow soldiers. The sculptor of this monument was Moses Ezekiel. A Confederate veteran who knew what the true history of the war was. Ezekiel himself was a minority in the Confederate Army being Jewish, so he knew some of the trials the blacks were facing in the country. He was a native Virginian who graduated from the Virginia Military Institute and fought in the Battle of New Market where several black Confederates saw action. ([www.37thtexas.org](http://www.37thtexas.org))

Although the Confederates did not officially enlist blacks until March 1865, some states allowed them to serve on a local level as early as 1861. Nobody really knows how many blacks actually served in the Confederacy; some estimates go as high as 50,000. A Union officer noted in his diary shortly before the Battle of Sharpsburg:

"Wednesday, September 10: At 4 o'clock this morning the Rebel army began to move from our town, (Fredrick, Md), Jackson's forces taking the advance. The movement continued until 8 o'clock pm, occupying 16 hours. The most liberal calculation could not give them more than 64,000 men. Over 3,000 Negroes must be included in this number. These were clad in all kinds of uniforms, not only in cast-off or captured United States uniforms, but in coats with Southern buttons, State buttons, etc. These were shabby, but not shabbier or seedier than those worn by white men in the rebel ranks. Most of the Negroes had arms, rifles, muskets, sabers, bowie-knives, dirks, etc. They were supplied with knapsacks, haversacks, canteens, etc and they were an integral portion of the Southern Confederate army. They were seen riding on horses and mules, driving wagons, riding on caissons, in ambulances, with the staff of generals and promiscuously mixing it up with all the Rebel horde." (Union Sanitation Commission Inspector Dr. Louis Steiner, Sept. 1862.)

Another Black Confederate is Levi Miller, a former slave who became a Confederate hero. He was one of thousands of slaves who went to war with their masters as a body servant. He was voted by his regiment to be a full-fledge soldier after nursing his master

back from a near fatal wound. He also exhibited bravery in battles in Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. During the fighting at Spotsylvania Courthouse, his former commander, Capt. J.E. Anderson, said of him, "Levi Miller stood by my side and no man fought harder and better than he did when the enemy tried to cross our little breastworks and we clubbed and bayoneted them off, no one used his bayonet with more skill and effect than Levi Miller. During several battles, Levi met several other Negroes that he knew either by friendship or as a relative. They attempted to get him to desert to the North, but would not.

Upon his death, it is ironic that his coffin was draped with the Stars and Bars at a hero's funeral service. He was laid to rest in a black cemetery. This is perhaps the biggest irony of all since the cemetery is near the spot where R.E. Lee is buried.

In a letter dated 27 March 1865, Lt. Col. Charles Marshall wrote a letter to Lt. Gen. Ewell stating that Gen. Lee regretted the "unwillingness of owners to permit their slaves to enter the service", and "His only objection to calling them colored troops was that the enemy had selected that designation for theirs". Also, "Harshness and contemptuous or offensive language or conduct to them must be forbidden and they should forget as soon as possible that they were regarded as menials".

The following is a list of 4 soldiers captured at Ft. Fisher when it fell to Union troops in January 1865:

Charles Dempsey, Private, Company F, 36<sup>th</sup> NC Regiment, Negro. Captured at Ft. Fisher and confined at Point Lookout, Md., until paroled and exchanged at Coxes Landing, Va. 14-15 Feb 1865. (Taken from North Carolina Troops, Volume I)

Henry Dempsey, Private, Company F, 36<sup>th</sup> NC Regiment, Negro. Captured at Ft. Fisher and confined at Point Lookout, Md., until paroled at Coxes Landing, Va. 14-15 Feb 1865. (Taken from North Carolina Troops, Volume I)

J. Doyle, Private, Company E, 40<sup>th</sup> NC Regiment, Negro, Captured at Ft. Fisher and confined at Point Lookout, Md., until paroled at Boulware's Wharf, Va. On 16 Mar 1865. (Taken from North Carolina Troops, Volume I)

Daniel Herring, Cook, Company F, 36<sup>th</sup> NC Regiment, Negro. Captured at Ft. Fisher, and confined at Point Lookout, Md. Until released after taking Oath of Allegiance June 19, 1865. (Taken from North Carolina Troops, Volume I)

Notice that all 4 soldiers were black and that one of them signed an Oath of Allegiance only after Lee's surrender.

If you look at the make up of Union troops, you can plainly see that blacks were segregated into separate units, while in the South, they were mixed in with the white troops. They were also given the same pay and rations as other Confederate troops as opposed to their counterparts in the North. In June 1861, Tennessee became the first

state in the South to allow the use of black soldiers. The governor authorized the enrollment of those between the ages of 15-50 and have the same rations and clothing as white soldiers. Blacks started appearing in Tennessee regiments by September of that same year.

At the Battle of Fair Oaks near Richmond, a black cook and minister with the Alabama regiment picked up a rifle and was heard yelling, “Der Lor’ hab mercy on us all, boys, here dey comes agin!” As the Alabamians returned fire and mounted a charge, he was heard shouting, “Pitch in white folks, Uncle Pomp’s behind yer. Send them Yankees to de ‘ternal flames!” (Battlefields of the South. Vol. 2, page 253)

There are many stories about Black Confederates. I have listed only a few to give you a glimpse at them. There are many resources to go to and read if you wish to learn more. History can no longer be covered up by the ‘do-gooders’ that wish to wash our minds of the truth. I know where the hatred for the Confederate Battle Flag comes from, and it is not from the Old Confederacy. It comes from those who chose to degrade the good names of Confederate Soldiers. What they don’t realize though is that what they are hiding behind in the name of racial purity was fought and died for by men of all races; including blacks.

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