

Appomattox Court House

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Appomattox Court House
National Historical Park



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Why Federal Soldiers Fought

The majority of Northern soldiers, like their Southern counterparts, were volunteers rather than draftees and fought for many different reasons. For most, the preservation of the Union against secession was of primary importance. Many Northerners, including recent immigrants, believed that the breakup of the United States would mean the end of American liberty, independence and prosperity. In addition, the firing on Fort Sumter by Southern “Rebels” filled many in the North with patriotic rage. Although emancipation of slaves was not an initial cause for most Federal soldiers, direct contact with the institution of slavery and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation eventually swayed many to the side of abolition. The cause of emancipation also induced more than 180,000 African-Americans to join the fight. Finally, a sense of duty to their country, their families and their comrades, as well as a wish to see the thing through, figured prominently in why many Federal soldiers volunteered and persevered through four years of war. Of the roughly two million who served, more than 360,000 did not survive.

The Union



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Unidentified New York Soldier

“If the Unionists let the South secede, the West might want to separate next Presidential election...others might want to follow and this country would be as bad as the German states...There would have to be another form of constitution wrote and after it was written who would obey it?” – *Private Titus Crenshaw (English immigrant), 3rd New Jersey Infantry.*

“My grandfather fought and risked his life to bequeath to his posterity...the glorious Institutions [now threatened by] this infernal rebellion...it is not for you and I, or us and our dear little ones, alone, that I was and am willing to risk the fortunes of the battle-field, but also for the sake of the country’s millions who are to come after us.” – *Corporal Josiah Chaney, 1st Minnesota Infantry.*



34-Star United States Flag (1861-1863)

“I am fighting for the cause of the constitution and the law...Admit the right of the seceding states to break up the Union at pleasure...and how long will it be before the new confederacies created by the first disruption shall be resolved into still smaller fragments and the continent become a vast theater of civil war, military license, anarchy, and despotism? Better settle it at whatever cost and settle it forever.” – *Private Samuel Evans, 70th Ohio Infantry.*

“This is my country as much as the man who was born on the soil. I have as much interest in the maintenance of the integrity of the nation as any other man...This is the first test of a modern free government in the act of sustaining itself against internal enemys...if it fail tyrants will succeed...the old cry will be sent forth from the aristocrats of europe that such is the common lot of all republics...Irishmen and their descendents have a stake in [this] nation...America is Irland’s refuge, Irland’s last hope...destroy this republic and her hopes are blasted.” – *Sergeant Peter Welsh (Irish immigrant), 28th Massachusetts Infantry.*

Emancipation



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United States Colored Troop (USCT) with family.

“I am no abolitionist, in fact I despise the word, [but] as long as slavery exists...there will be no permanent peace for America...Hence I am in favor of killing slavery.” – *Private Henry Henney, 55th Ohio Infantry.*

“I believe that slavery (the worst of all curses) was the sole cause of this Rebellion, and until this cause is removed and slavery abolished, the rebellion will continue to exist.” – *Private George W. Lowe, 5th Iowa Infantry.*

“Slavery has brought death into our own households already in its wicked rebellion...There is but one way [to win the war] and that is emancipation...I want to sing ‘John Brown’ in the streets of Charleston, and ram red-hot abolitionism down their unwilling throats at the point of the bayonet.” – *Captain John W. Ames, 22nd Massachusetts Infantry.*

“[I am now] sick and tired [of the war because] it really seems to me, that we are not fighting for our country, but for the freedom of the negroes.” – *1st Lieutenant John Babb, Jr., 5th Maryland Infantry.*

“We have been almost constantly on the move, marching and fighting for the good old cause – LIBERTY.” – *Private Edgar Dinsmore, 54th Massachusetts (Colored) Infantry.*

Honor and Duty



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Unidentified Federal Soldiers

“It ought to be a consolation to know that you have a husband that is man enough to fight for his country.” – *Private Samuel J. Alexander, 62nd Pennsylvania Infantry.*

“I have been talking all my life for the cause of liberty and now the time is nigh at hand when I shall have a chance to aid by deed this cause and I shrink not from doing my duty.” – *Private James H. Leonard, 5th Wisconsin Infantry.*

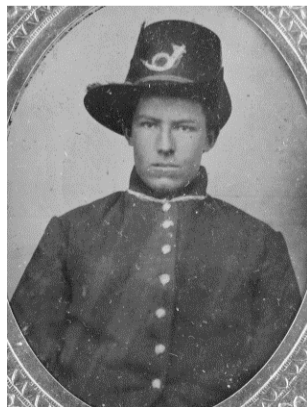
“My heart burns with indignation [against] armed rebels and traitors to their country and their country’s flag. [My hope] has always been for a peaceful, quiet home of my own, with you as a companion, [but] I have concluded to volunteer in the service of my country...This step will cause you pain and sorrow I know...I love you still and always shall [but] I can’t stay behind, no, no.” – *James Bell, Illinois infantryman to his fiancé.*

“I know no reason why I should not be as subject to duty as any man, as I have had the protection of government all my life...My absence from home is, of course, a source of grief to Lida and the children...but an all-absorbing, all-engrossing sense of duty, alike to country and family, impelled me.” – *Assistant Surgeon Benjamin F. Stevenson, 23rd Kentucky Infantry.*

The Draft

Like the Confederacy, the United States implemented conscription when the pool of volunteers began to dry up. The Enrollment Act, signed by President Lincoln on March 3, 1863, called for all able-bodied white men between the ages of twenty and forty-five to be enrolled. Quotas for new soldiers were established for each Congressional District. Individual states offered cash bounties between \$100 and \$500 to new volunteers to avoid implementing the draft. In addition, an enrolled man could pay a \$300 commutation fee or hire a substitute. This exemption based on wealth caused great resentment by the poor, leading to draft riots in several northern cities. Ultimately, due to bounties and substitutes, barely 2% of all Union soldiers were actually draftees.

“By God, I don’t know for what I should fight. For the rich man so he can make more money the poor man should risk his life and I should get slaughtered.” – *Private Valentine Belcher, 8th New Jersey Infantry.*



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Private Harrison Corbin, 5th Pennsylvania Reserves

“Nearly all that have been sent here are [bounty men] and substitutes and are miserable surly rough fellows and are without patriotism or honor. They seem to have no interest in the cause and you would be surprised to notice the difference between them and the old veterans who have endured the hardships and borne the brunt of the battles.” – *Colonel Nelson Miles, 61st New York Infantry.*