

United States Colored Troops

At Vicksburg

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Vicksburg National Military Park



By late 1863 black regiments had proven themselves in combat and were subsequently provided with better resources. The soldiers pictured above, equipped with modern rifled muskets, new footwear, and clean uniforms, stand in stark contrast to the early teamsters to the right.



From Servitude to Service

Although Congress sanctioned black enlistment in the later half of 1862, it was the Emancipation Proclamation that opened the floodgates of recruitment by encouraging the enlistment of runaway slaves and free men of color.

The first black regiments were formed in the spring of 1863 following the creation of the Bureau of Colored Troops. Soon after, African American volunteers were organized into infantry, artillery, and cavalry regiments that eventually became known as the United States Colored Troops (USCT).

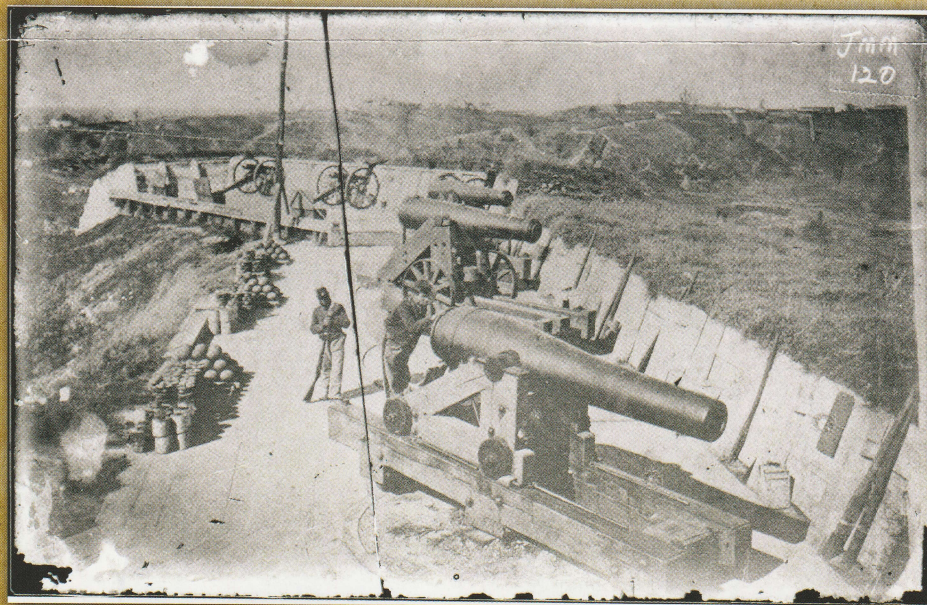
Nearly 175 regiments of over 178,000 free men and former slaves served during the last two years of the war. Thousands of additional blacks served in the United States Navy.



USCT recruitment poster

Occupation of Vicksburg

1863 - 1865



Pictured here is the *5th U.S. Heavy Artillery* in Vicksburg following the city's capture by Union forces in July of 1863. The 5th was one of several African American regiments that served in Vicksburg during the period of occupation until war's end.



Battle of Milliken's Bend - engraving

Will They Fight?

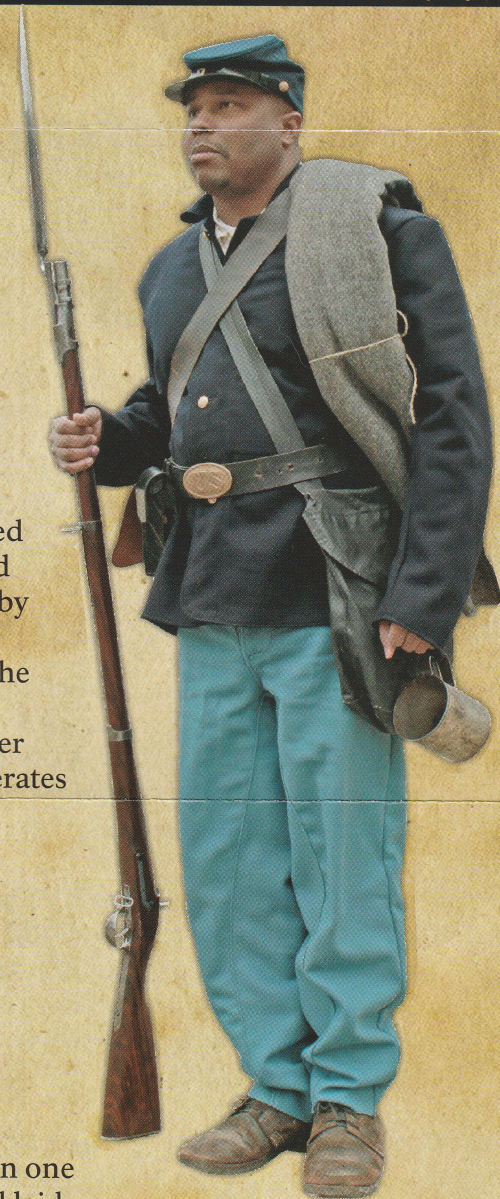
Following months of training and physical labor, black troops were finally allowed to prove themselves in a major battle. By the spring of 1863, Port Hudson, Louisiana, and Vicksburg, Mississippi, were the only remaining Confederate strongholds on the Mississippi River. On May 27, the 1st and 3d Louisiana Native Guards were ordered to take a section of the imposing Rebel earthworks at Port Hudson. They charged across six hundred yards of open ground, only to be cut-down by a maelstrom of canister and musketry. Despite their valiant attempts, the assault failed. Nearly 200 black troops were killed or wounded.

Eleven days after the bloody assault at Port Hudson, black troops again proved their bravery in battle. At Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, three recently organized regiments of black troops were tasked with guarding a supply depot and nearby military hospital. On June 7, approximately 1,500 Confederates attacked the isolated post with hopes of distracting Union forces besieging Vicksburg. As the Rebels attacked, the hastily trained and ill-equipped black troops resorted to fighting with bayonets and clubs in vicious hand-to-hand fighting. Finally, after the arrival of Union gunboats and reinforcements, the outnumbered Confederates retreated, leaving the depot and hospital in Union hands.

"I never more wish to hear the expression 'the negro won't fight.' Come with me 100 yards from where I sit and I can show you the wounds that cover the bodies of 16 brave, loyal, and patriotic soldiers as ever drew a bead on a rebel."

Capt. M. Miller
Co. I, 9th Louisiana
Regiment of African Descent

The carnage that day was extreme even by Civil War standards. The 9th suffered 45% killed or mortally wounded, the highest proportion of any unit in one fight during the entire war. The sacrifices at Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend laid to rest any doubts that black troops could or would fight.



The Art of Commemoration



The Mississippi African-American Monument is a 3,000 pound, 9-foot tall, bronze sculpture resting on a pedestal of African black granite, and depicts a black soldier in uniform and a civilian laborer in farm attire, both helping a wounded black soldier from the field of battle. The monument also honors the 3d Mississippi regiment of African Descent, which proved its valor at the Battle of Milliken's Bend.