

# African-Americans at Petersburg

## Petersburg National Battlefield



*Twenty-Second Negro Regiment, Duncan's Brigade, carrying the First Line of  
Confederate Works before Petersburg, June 15, 1864*

FROM SKETCHES BY EDWIN FORBES.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Virginia had a slave population of about 491,000 and a free black population of almost 58,000. About half of Petersburg's 18,266 residents were black, of which 3,164 were free. Petersburg was considered to have the largest number of free blacks of any Southern city at that time. Many of the freedmen prospered here as barbers, blacksmiths, boatmen, draymen, livery stable keepers, and caterers. There were also those who owned considerable property, particularly in the communities of Bluff and Beechmont.

## Serving the Confederacy

When Petersburg became a major supply center for the newly formed Confederacy and its nearby capital in Richmond, both freedmen and slaves were employed in various war functions. More than 850 slaves and free blacks worked for the numerous railroad companies that operated in and out of the city. In the latter part of 1862, when a ten-mile long defense line was begun around Petersburg, Captain Charles

H. Dimmock used both freedmen and slave labor to construct the trenches and batteries. In the many hospitals that sprang up in the city, blacks served as nurses and servants.

Once the Siege began in June 1864, African-Americans continued working for the Confederacy. In September 1864, General Lee asked for an additional 2,000 blacks to be added to his labor force. In March 1865, with the serious loss of white manpower in the army, the Southern army called for 40,000 slaves to

become an armed force in the Confederacy. A notice in the April 1, 1865, *Petersburg Daily Express*, called for black recruits with the statement, "To the slaves is offered freedom and undisturbed residence at their old homes in the Confederacy after the war. Not the freedom of sufferance, but honorable and self-won by the gallantry and devotion which grateful countrymen will never cease to remember and reward." It is not known how many responded to this challenge. The war ended before any major contribution could be made.

## Serving the Union: U.S. Colored Troops in the Siege of Petersburg

During the war, a total of 186,097 blacks served in the Union army, with the first regiments activated after September 1862. In front of Petersburg, two black divisions numbering about 7,800 men (nineteen regiments) saw action.

In the initial assault upon the city on June 15, 1864, a division of General Edward Hinks attacked the Confederate Dimmock Line. Comprising 3,500 men from the XVIII Corps of the Army of the James, which was commanded by General Benjamin F. Butler, Hinks' troops helped capture and secure a section of the Southern defenses from Batteries 7 through 11. In the initial stage of this action, located at Baylor's Farm on the City Point Road, the black troops also captured a

gun from Captain Edward Graham's Petersburg Artillery. On the 15th, Hinks' Division lost 378 killed and wounded. They acted in a supporting role on the June 18th assault, suffering a loss of 36 men.

The other division of United States Colored Troops to serve at Petersburg was the Fourth Division, IX Corps, under General Ambrose E. Burnside and the Army of the Potomac. Four thousand, three hundred strong, these men were

involved in one of the most well-known events of the Siege, the Battle of the Crater, fought on July 30, 1864.

For three weeks, as a Pennsylvania Regiment dug a tunnel under a Confederate fort to blow it up, the black troops were being trained to lead the assault once the battle commenced. The black troops were chosen because they were numerically superior, and having been mainly wagon guards up to this point, they had seen little action. With the white troops showing exhaustion after the severe fighting of the campaign from the Wilderness to Petersburg, it was believed the blacks would have a better chance at being successful.

Unfortunately for the black soldiers, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, General George G. Meade, would change Burnside's plan twenty-four hours before the battle. Instead of leading the assault, their division, led by General Edward Ferrero, would now be the last to go in.

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***If we put the colored troops in front . . . and it should prove a failure, it would then be said, and very properly, that we were showing those***



*Hinks's Division of Negro Infantry bringing in the guns captured from the Confederates at Baylor's Farm, near Petersburg, Virginia, June 15th, 1864.*

FROM A SKETCH BY E.F. MULLEN

nessee, while others said "no quarter" was shouted by the blacks. Many of the Confederates were enraged that black troops were being deployed against them, and the fighting became vicious. As a result, many blacks who surrendered were not taken prisoner; the division suffered 209 killed, 697

In December 1864, all the United States Colored Troops around Petersburg were incorporated into three divisions and became the XXV Corps of the Army of the James. Commanded by General Godfrey Weitzel, it was the largest black force assembled during the war and varied in numbers from 9,000 to

***people ahead to get killed because we did not care anything about them.*** Meade

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Once the explosion took place on the morning of July 30, the three white divisions tried to reach their objective, Cemetery Hill. Stiff Confederate resistance along with a lack of leadership on the Union side, bogged down the Union assault in the area of the Crater. When Ferrero's troops attempted their attack, they ran into a Confederate counter-attack led by General William Mahone. As the blacks were forced back into the Crater with Burnside's other troops, stiff hand-to-hand combat now began and the face of battle changed. Some claimed the black troops went into the battle yelling "Remember Fort Pillow," the site of an earlier massacre of black prisoners in Ten-

wounded, and 421 missing or captured, a total of 1,327 or 38% of the IX Corps loss.

Following the battle, Sergeant Decatur Dorsey of the 39th U.S.C.T. received the Medal of Honor for "rushing forward in advance of his regiment and placing his colors on the Confederate trenches." Three white officers who commanded black troops at the Crater also received medals.

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***General Burnside wanted to put his colored division in front, and I believe if he had done so it would have been a success.*** Grant

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The division captured approximately 300 prisoners and one battle flag during the engagement.

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## **African-Americans at City Point**

With General Grant's logistical supply base located at City Point (now Hopewell) on the James River, African-Americans served in varying capacities for the Union army.

The soldiers acted as sentries, guarding the numerous ships that were docked at the wharves. Some employees of the U.S. Military Railroad Construction Corps were Northern blacks and worked as laborers in building the needed facilities. An observer wrote

16,000 men.

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***The colored soldiers were smartly dressed and well drilled . . . they really looked [like] good soldiers.***

*A Citizen*

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When Petersburg fell to the Union army on April 3, 1865, some of the XXV Corps marched through the city on their way to Appomattox. A newspaper reporter wrote "A negro regiment passing seems to take special pride and pleasure in maintaining the dignity becoming soldiers, and are neither boisterous nor noisy." These men continued to march with Grant's army and were present at Lee's surrender on April 9, 1865.



"legions of negroes were discharging the ships, wheeling dirt, sawing the timber, and driving piles." Many also worked at the Depot Field Hospital, with the women serving as laundresses and in the diet kitchen, the men as cooks. About 160 blacks assisted there.