

African Americans on Lee's Retreat, April 1865



THE OCCUPATION OF PETERSBURG

Serving the Union: U.S. Colored Troops in the Retreat to Appomattox

The Union armies under Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant would sever Confederate General Robert E. Lee's supply line to Petersburg on April 2, 1865. Lee would be forced to evacuate the Confederate Capital of Richmond and the fortified supply center of Petersburg thus beginning his final campaign of the war. While most of the United States Colored Troops in the Federal army were involved with the occupation of Richmond on the morning of April 3rd, some did enter Petersburg (Tour Stop 1 - Refers to numbered stops on Lee's Retreat Driving Tour map) when it fell on the same day. Brigadier General William Birney's second division, XXV Corps,

On their way they passed through the settlements of Blacks & Whites (Blackstone), Nottoway Court House (Tour Stop 25), Burkeville Junction (Tour Stop 23), Rice's Station (Tour Stop 14) and Farmville (Tour Stop 16). From the latter point they stayed south of the Appomattox River and traveled via Walker's Church (present day Hixburg) to Appomattox. These regiments were of Colonel William W. Woodward's brigade, the 29th and 31st U.S.C.T., along with the 116th U.S.C.T., assigned to them from another brigade. Colonel Ulysses Doubleday's brigade, 8th, 41st, 45th, and 127th U.S.C.T., were also present. The

operating south of the Appomattox River, would be among the first units to come into the city from the west. It was noted that the 7th U.S.C.T. regiment, recruited in Maryland, and the 8th U.S.C.T., from Philadelphia, were on the skirmish line that morning and with those who marched into the evacuated railroad center. The 7th's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Oscar E. Pratt, wrote, "I entered the city of Petersburg at 6 a.m., amidst the joyous acclamations of its sable citizens."

We were among the first troops to enter Petersburg, and the orderly, well-behaved disposition of our command elicited the praise of our officers, and the universal commendations of the people, sobriety and decorum being the order of the day...Colored men, you know, can be, are, and will be gentlemen as well as soldiers.

*Soldier
29th U.S.C.T.*

Seven black units (about 2,000 men) made the journey all the way to Appomattox Court House with Major General E.O.C. Ord's Union Army of the James and arrived in time to be involved in the final fighting.

first brigade, under Colonel James Shaw, Jr., would not arrive until the day after the surrender, having marched ninety-six miles in four days. His brigade was detached from the others and sent back to Sutherland Station (Tour Stop 3) for a period of time, causing their delayed arrival.

On the morning of the 9th at Appomattox Court House, the black units were sent forward to support other Federal units in the closing phase of the battle. Consequently, only Woodward's brigade participated in the final advance on the Confederate line. Some of Doubleday's skirmishers did proceed forward, and the only casualty for the U.S.C.T. brigades was Captain John W. Falconer of Company A, 41st U.S.C.T., a white officer. He was mortally wounded and died on April 23d.

According to Surgeon-in-Chief Charles P. Heinrichhold, during the entire campaign, the U.S.C.T.'s lost 4 men killed, 1 officer (mortally) and 30 men wounded, a total of 35 casualties.

We, the colored soldiers, have fairly won our rights by loyalty and bravery — shall we obtain them? If they are refused now, we shall demand them.

*Sgt. Maj. William McCeslin
29th U.S.C.T.*

Serving the Confederacy

With General Robert E. Lee's manpower reserves quickly dwindling, on March 23, 1865, General Orders #14 was issued allowing the enlistment of Blacks into the Confederate service. Shortly thereafter, a notice was posted in Petersburg's **The Daily Express**, "The commanding General deems the prompt organization of as large a force of negroes as can be spared, a measure of the utmost importance, and the support and co-operation of the citizens of Petersburg and the surrounding counties is requested by him for the prosecution to success of a scheme which he believes promises so great benefit to our cause....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."

This recruitment effort did bear fruit in Richmond where Majors James W. Pegram and Thomas P. Turner put together a "Negro brigade" of Confederate States Colored Troops. **The Richmond Daily Examiner** noted of the unit "the knowledge of the military art they already exhibit was something remarkable. They moved



*One of Lee's wagon trains is caught and captured near Painesville, April 5.
Alfred Waud drawing.*

the dirt.... The [Blacks] thus employed all wore good gray uniforms and I was informed that they belonged to the only company of colored troops in the Confederate service, having been enlisted by Major Turner in Richmond. Their muskets were stacked, and it was evident that they regarded their present employment in no very favorable light."

On April 10th, as Confederate prisoners were being marched from Sailor's Creek and elsewhere to City Point (present day Hopewell) and eventually off to Northern prison camps, a Union chaplain observed the column.

The first installment [sic] of Rebel prisoners, numbering seventeen hundred and seventy, have just passed, under a strong guard....In the squad were many negroes recently armed by Jef. Davis.

Union Chaplain

with evident pride and satisfaction to themselves.”

As the Confederate army abandoned Richmond on April 3rd, apparently these Black Confederate soldiers went along with General Custis Lee’s wagon train on its journey. They would move unmolested until they reached the area of Painesville (near Tour Stop 7) on April 5. Here they were attacked by General Henry Davies’ cavalry troopers.

I saw a wagon train guarded by Confederate negro soldiers.... When within about one hundred yards of and in the rear of the wagon train, I observed some Union cavalry a short distance away on elevated ground forming to charge and the negro soldiers forming to meet the attack, which was met successfully.... The cavalry charged again, and the negro soldiers surrendered.

Southern Soldier

A Confederate officer, who rode upon this situation as it was transpiring, recalled: “Several engineer officers were superintending the construction of a line of rude breastworks.... Ten or twelve negroes were engaged in the task of pulling down a rail fence; as many more occupied in carrying the rails, one at a time, to the desired spot; and several were busily throwing up

This incident along the retreat to Painesville, seems to be the only documented episode of “official” Black troops serving the Confederacy in Virginia as a unit under fire.

African-Americans also accompanied the Confederate army on the retreat with the First Regiment Engineer Troops and provided yeoman service. One member of this unit remembered that they repaired roads and bridges, and cut new parallel roads to old ones when they became impassible. When this was not possible, an engineer officer would post a group near the trouble spot to extricate wagons and artillery pieces.

When Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox, thirty-six African-Americans were listed on the Confederate paroles. Most were either servants, free blacks, musicians, cooks, teamsters or blacksmiths.

A Black woman was to become the only civilian casualty in the final fighting at Appomattox. Hannah, a slave of local resident George Abbitt, stayed behind with her husband in the home of Doctor Coleman located on the battlefield and was mortally wounded by an artillery round. A Union chaplain remembered “she was sick with fever and unable to be moved. As she lay upon her bed, a solid shot had passed through one wall of the house at just the right height to strike her arm, and then passed out through the opposite wall.”

NOTE:

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