

Black Southerners in Confederate gray

As published in the Murfreesboro Post, December 21, 2007



Library of Congress • Not all of the African-Americans involved in the Civil Wars served as teamsters or manual laborers.

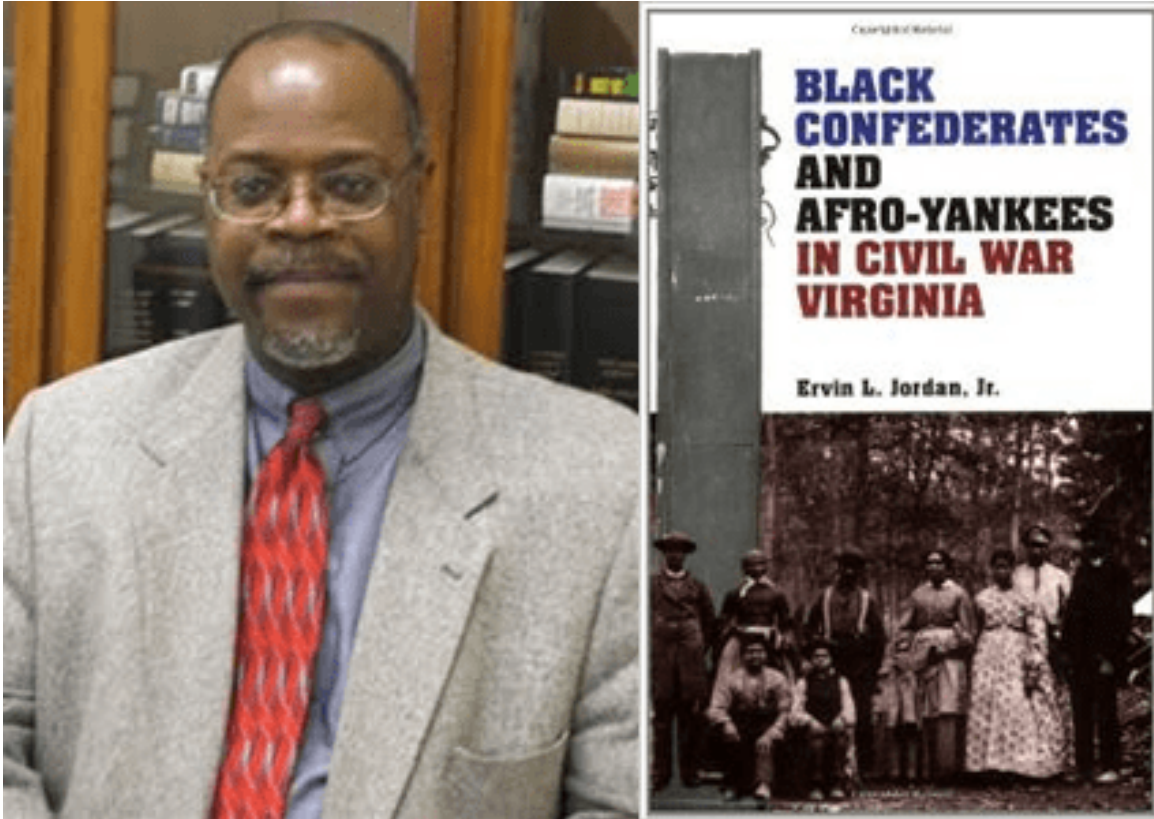
February marks the beginning of Black History Month – a remembrance of important people and events of African American origin that began in 1926.

There have been many major contributions to our nation and to our society by black Americans some that have changed history – and are continuing to do so today.

One area that has never received the recognition it deserved and has even been over-looked to a certain degree was that of black Southerners who fought for the Confederacy. One would have to ask, “Why haven’t we heard more about them?”

Ed Bearss, National Park Service Historian Emeritus, made the following statement: “I don’t want to call it a conspiracy to ignore the role of blacks, both above and below the Mason-Dixon line, but it was definitely a tendency that began around 1910.”

And, Historian Erwin L. Jordan, Jr., calls it a “cover-up” which started back in 1865.



Historian Ervin Jordan

He writes, “During my research on pension applications, I came across instances where black men stated they were soldiers, but you can plainly see where ‘soldier’ is crossed out and ‘body servant’ or ‘teamster’ inserted.”

Another black historian, Roland Young says that “he is not surprised that blacks fought ... some, if not most, would support their country, and that by doing so they were demonstrating that it was possible to hate the system of slavery and love one’s country.”

This same principle was exhibited by African-Americans who fought for the colonies during the American Revolution, despite the fact that the British offered them freedom if they would fight for them.

Peter Jennings, an early settler of Rutherford County, was one of more than 5,000 black soldiers who fought for the colonies in the war for Independence. In 1830, Jennings was listed as having built a house on the corner of Vine and Church streets, which was also his bakery shop. There is a marker in the old City Cemetery commemorating his services in the Revolutionary War, but the exact place of his burial is not known.

It has been estimated that more than 65,000 Southern blacks served in some form or fashion in the Confederate ranks, and more than 13,000 of these “saw the elephant,” a term used to describe meeting the enemy in combat.

These black Confederates included both slaves and free men.

The Confederate Congress did not approve blacks to be officially enlisted as soldiers, except as musicians, until late in the war. But in the ranks it was a different story. Many Confederate officers, ignoring the mandates of politicians, enlisted blacks with the simple criteria, "Will you fight?"

According to historian Ervin Jordan, "biracial units were frequently organized by both local and state militia commanders in response to immediate threats by Union troops."

As of February 1865, there were 1,150 black seamen who served in the Confederate Navy. One of these was among the last Confederates to surrender, aboard the CSS Shenandoah in England, six months after the war ended.

However, George Smith has done extensive research on this subject as well, and based upon both Union and Confederate documents included in the Official War Records, it is his opinion that "since it was illegal for blacks, either free or slave, to carry and bear arms, it is extraordinarily hard to believe there were 65,000 blacks serving in Confederate ranks, with over 13,000 seeing combat. Closer to 100,000 freemen and slaves were impressed under the numerous impressments acts. All the impressments acts clearly delineated slaves were to be used as teamsters, laborers, hospital orderlies, cooks, etc."

As the war was nearing its final days, the Confederacy took progressive measures to build back its ranks with the creation of the Confederate Colored Troops, copied after the segregated northern colored troops, but this idea came too late for any measure of success.

CSA Maj. Gen. Patrick Cleburne, at the height of his military career and recognizing the plight of the South's dwindling supply of able-bodied men, made a bold proposal in late 1863 to "drill and arm as many as 300,000 black slaves."

Included in this proposal was the idea to not only free the blacks who volunteered, but their wives and children as well. Cleburne was quite disappointed that his idea was not more readily embraced. However, in 1864, President Jefferson Davis, in an attempt to gain official recognition of the Confederacy by Britain and France, did approve a plan that proposed the emancipation of slaves.

But what actually passed on March 13, 1865, was General Orders No. 14 that stated: "SEC. 2, that the General-in-Chief be authorized to organize the said slaves into companies, battalions, regiments, and brigades, under such rules and regulations as the secretary of war may prescribe, and to be commanded by such officers as the president may appoint. ... that nothing in this act shall be construed to authorize a change in the relation which the said slaves shall bear toward their owners, except by consent of the owners and of the states in which they may reside, and in pursuance of the laws thereof."

This occurred just one month before the end of the war and by this point, there was no time, no munitions, no supplies, no uniforms, no nothing, for it to ever come to fruition. It is unclear whether the wages would go to the slaves or to the owners. Contrary to what a lot of people believe, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which went into effect in January 1863, stated that only those slaves held "within any state or designated part of a state the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States" would be freed and those slaves in states "not in rebellion" were not affected.

Free black men served the Confederacy as soldiers, teamsters, musicians, and cooks. They earned the same pay for their service as did white Confederate privates, which, in the Union Army, was not the case. They also earned the wrath of their fellow black men of the North.

Ex-slave Frederick Douglas commented, "There are at the present moment, many colored men in the Confederate Army doing duty not only as cooks, servants and laborers, but as real soldiers, having muskets on their shoulders and bullets in their pockets, ready to shoot down ... and do all that soldiers may do to destroy the Federal Government."

Horace Greeley, observing the differences between the two warring armies, commented, "For more than two years, Negroes have been extensively employed in belligerent operations by the Confederacy. They have been embodied and drilled as rebel soldiers and had paraded with white troops at a time when this would not have been tolerated in the armies of the Union."

Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was a slave trader before the war, had both slaves and free men serving in units under his command. After the war, Forrest said of the black men who served under him, "These boys stayed with me ... and better Confederates did not live."

And, in an address given by Col. William Sanford, at the Confederate Veterans Reunion of the 7th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment of Cavalry, Forrest's Corps, at Columbia on September 22, 1876, Sanford said, "And to you, our colored friends ... we say welcome. We can never forget your faithfulness in the darkest hours of our lives. We tender to you our hearty respect and love, for you never faltered in your duty nor betrayed your trust."

When Forrest made his raid on Murfreesboro on July 13, 1862, there is documentation regarding the participation of Black Confederates according to Col. Parkhurst's report (Ninth Michigan Infantry) included in the Federal Official Records.

He wrote: "The forces attacking my camp were the First Regiment Texas Rangers, Col. Wharton, and a battalion of the First Georgia Rangers, Colonel Morrison, and a large number of citizens of Rutherford County, many of whom had recently taken the oath of allegiance to the United States government. There were also quite a number of negroes attached to the Texas and Georgia troops, who were armed and equipped, and took part in the several engagements with my forces during the day."

Southern generals owned slaves but northern generals owned them as well. Gen. Ulysses Grant's slaves had to wait for the Thirteenth Amendment for freedom. When asked why he didn't free his slaves earlier, Grant replied, "Good help is so hard to come by these days."

In February 1865, Grant in fact ordered the capture of "all the Negro men ... before the enemy can put them in their ranks."

And Frederick Douglas warned Lincoln that unless slaves were guaranteed freedom (those in Union controlled areas were still slaves) and land bounties, "They would take up arms for the rebels."

With the South's surrender, men stacked arms and went home.

Many had no home to go to.

During the early 1900s, many members of the United Confederate Veterans advocated awarding former slaves rural acreage and a home. There was hope that justice could still be served to those slaves who were once falsely promised "forty acres and a mule."

In 1913, this plan was printed and promoted by the Confederate Veteran Magazine, as "the right thing to do." There was much gratitude toward former slaves, which stated, "thousands were loyal, to the last degree," now living with total poverty in the big cities. Regrettably, this proposal fell on deaf ears on Capitol Hill.

In 1891, Tennessee began granting pensions to Confederate veterans. The Board of Pension Examiners was established to determine if those applying for pensions were eligible. Eligibility requirements included an inability to support oneself, honorable separation from the service and residence in the state for one year prior to application. Widow's pensions were first issued in 1905. These applications show place of birth

for widow and soldier, and information about their children. Proof of marriage was required. The board maintained three separate rolls: soldiers' roll, widows' roll and African-American soldiers' roll.

The following notice appeared on the Colored Man's Application for Pension:

"The Negroes' pension law passed by the Tennessee Legislature, provides that Negroes Pensioned by this Act must have been bona fide residents of this State three years if they served with a Tennessee Command, and ten years if they served with a command from any other State. They must have remained with the army until the close of the war, unless legally relieved from service. They must be indigent. Unless you come clearly under the law, it is useless to file an application."

Of those black Southerners who wore Confederate Gray, only those surviving to pension age, or were fortunate enough to overcome postwar anti-Negro prejudice, even stood a chance of receiving a pension. The pension files were controlled by state authority and were often subject to a local county review board.

Of the 290 people represented on the Tennessee Colored Pension Application for CSA Service, apparently 267 pensions were granted.

The following 14 pension applications were from Rutherford County:

- Avant, Alfred Scott -born in Rutherford County, in 1852; application rejected
- Averitt, Albert – born in Rutherford County, in 1843, claimed service with the 18th Tennessee Infantry Co. C, application accepted
- Clayton, Sam – born in Rutherford County, about 1848, claimed service with the 23rd Inf., application disposition unknown
- Kirk, Sam – born in Rutherford County, claimed Hospital service, application accepted
- Ledbetter, Ralph – born in Rutherford County, application disposition unknown
- Maney, James – born Murfreesboro in 1843, claimed service with General Money's Headquarters, application accepted
- McCulloch, Ned – born. in Rutherford County, claimed service with the 17th Tennessee Inf., application accepted
- Miller, William – born in Rutherford County, in 1847, claimed service with the 11th Tennessee Cavalry, application rejected
- Nelson, Henry – born in Rutherford County, in 1842, claimed service with the 19th and 20th Tennessee Cavalry, application disposition unknown
- Ransom, Alexander – born in Rutherford County, in 1840, claimed service with the 24th Tennessee Infantry, Co. A, application accepted
- Ready, Albert – born in Rutherford County, in 1848, claimed service with the 23rd Tennessee Infantry, application accepted
- Rucker, William – born in Rutherford County, in 1842, claimed service with the 2nd Tennessee Infantry, application accepted
- Seay, Frank M., born in Rutherford County, on Jan. 25, 1843; claimed service with the 24th Tennessee Infantry, Co C., application accepted Windrow, Wyatt, born in Rutherford County, organization unknown, application accepted

Another pension granted, though not from Rutherford County, was that of Louis Napoleon Nelson, a member of the 7th Tennessee Cavalry, which was part of



Louis Napoleon Nelson, CSA

Forrest's command. Louis Nelson was born in Lauderdale County and originally went off to war as a bodyguard for E.R. and Sydney Oldham. E.R. Oldham became a general in the 7th Tennessee Cavalry, Co. M. According to his grandson, Nelson Winbush, a native of Ripley, Tennessee, and a retired high school assistant principal now living in Florida, his grandfather died when he was five years old at the age of 88.

"He was buried with great ceremony, dressed in full Confederate uniform with a Battle Flag draping his coffin. Sons of Confederate Veterans members came from three states to see him off on his last campaign. ... He had been to 39 SCV reunions before he died." Nelson Winbush, like his grandfather and himself a member of SCV, speaks proudly of having the flag, which draped his grandfather's coffin, in his possession. "My grandfather was there ... 1861 -1865 ... at Shiloh, Lookout Mountain, Brice's Crossroads, and Vicksburg. He was originally a cook and forager, ... but when they needed him, he fought just like anybody else."

So why did so many Southern black men choose to wear Confederate gray?

Blacks fought for the very same reason as whites – to defend their homes and their families. Historical data can sometimes be a matter of interpretation and the facts can sometimes contradict themselves. But, one must remember that day and time and judge it accordingly, for a man of the 19th century should not be compared to a man of today's world and evaluated by current standards.

Regardless of how black Southerners participated, whether voluntary or involuntary, one thing is certain: The thousands of slaves and free persons of color in the South are the most forgotten group of the Civil War. They, too, should be remembered for the suffering, sacrifices and contributions they made.

Note: The writer gratefully acknowledges Zack Malpass, Murfreesboro SCV Camp 33, for so generously sharing his extensive research, and George Smith, for providing both research and viewpoint.