

## United States Colored Troops in Tennessee

*Essential Question: What contributions did United States Colored Troops make to the Union victory in the Civil War?*

From the beginning of the Civil War, Abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass urged President Lincoln to end slavery and to allow African American men to fight. Congress passed a number of laws in 1861 and 1862 that allowed African Americans limited participation in the war, but that would change with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The Emancipation Proclamation not only freed enslaved people in areas held by the Confederacy, but also opened the Union army to African American soldiers.

Governor John Andrews of Massachusetts received permission to raise the first regiment of African American soldiers in January, 1863. This regiment, the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, would go on to achieve fame with their heroic actions at Fort Wagner, South Carolina on July 18, 1863. However, recruitment of additional units was slow until General Lorenzo Thomas was sent to the lower Tennessee River Valley to recruit men in March, 1863. Of the two hundred thousand recruits Lincoln called for in 1863, most of them were African American and a large percentage of them were from Tennessee. Only Louisiana and Kentucky had more African Americans serving in the Union army than Tennessee. Some men choose to enlist in other states in order to receive the cash bounties that were offered there. Ultimately, Lorenzo raised nearly twenty-four thousand troops which formed twenty-two infantry and eight artillery units.

Confederate officials responded to recruitment of African American soldiers by issuing an order that African American soldiers taken prisoner be returned to their former owners or if free men to be used as slave labor by the Confederate government. White officers in command of African American troops were to be considered as leaders of a slave rebellion, an offense punishable by death. The order had little effect on the men in the regiments or their officers who remained as determined as ever to fight.

In West Tennessee, many United States Colored Troops (USCT) saw action against Confederate General and former slave trader Nathan Bedford Forrest's forces. The best known is the Fort Pillow Massacre on April 11, 1864. Forrest's troops took the fort which was garrisoned by USCT troops and killed or wounded two hundred and thirty-eight out of two hundred and sixty-two men in the fort. Forrest was denounced as a war criminal by Union generals. He defended his reputation in a letter to Union general C.C. Washburn, commander at Memphis, by saying that he did not mistreat prisoners of war. This is disputed by the report of Captain Frank Battle that on July 13, 1863 Forrest shot the mulatto servant of a Union army officer five times because the man had shot at Forrest when he attacked the Union camp. Forrest's motivation for sending the letter was report from his spies that USCT soldiers in Memphis had taken a vow on bended knee to avenge Fort Pillow and show no quarter to Forrest's troops in future battles. General

Washington confirmed the vow had been made and went on to inform Forrest that “You have learned by this time that the attempt to intimidate the colored troops by indiscriminate slaughter had failed, and that instead of terror you had aroused a spirit of courage and desperation that will not down at your bidding.” USCT regiments continued to fight in West Tennessee until the end of the war most notably repulsing an attack by Forrest’s cavalry on Memphis in April, 1864.

In Middle Tennessee, USCT soldiers proved their valor in the Battle of Nashville on December 15, 1864. Union General Thomas ordered the USCT regiments to attack the Confederate right flank on the edge of the city. The attack was meant to distract John Bell Hood from Thomas main attack on the Confederate left. The USCT troops fought valiantly and managed to force the Confederates to retreat about two miles. On the second day of fighting USCT troops attacked the Confederates and pushed them back to Overton Hill. Though it took several bloody charges, the USCT troops eventually succeeded in forcing a full Confederate retreat into Alabama. Hood’s Army of Tennessee would never recover. Nine hundred and seventeen USCT troops were wounded or killed in the fighting. Colonel Morgan of the First Colored Brigade said that his troops climbed the “hill with a steady resolve which nothing but death itself could check.” The white troops cheered the USCT regiments when they returned to Nashville.

After the war some Tennesseans chose to remain in the USCT because it offered food, shelter and medical benefits. George Jordan, a former slave from Williamson County, enlisted in the USCT in 1866 and eventually became part of the frontier fighters known as Buffalo Soldiers. Jordan was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in stopping an Apache attack on Fort Tularosa in 1880. Other men returned to their families after the war. In Dickson County, USCT veterans John and Arch Nesbitt were part the group of settlers that formed the Promise Land community. Many of the early settlers had been enslaved workers at the Cumberland Furnace and worked there after the war. Promise Land became a thriving community with more than fifty homes, a number of stores, three churches and an elementary school.

Ultimately, over one hundred eighty thousand African American men served with honor and courage in the Union Army during the Civil War. More than forty thousand African American soldiers gave their lives defending freedom. Lincoln credited the service of African American troops as turning the tide of war in favor of the Union. Indeed, on April 9, 1865, more African American men were fighting for the Union than the total of all Confederate forces. In Tennessee, USCT soldiers were instrumental in the Union victory at Nashville and fought bravely in numerous other engagements. One former soldier said that when asked by whites why he wanted to help the Union he replied “I ain’t fighting you, I’m fighting to get free.”

#### Sources:

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Promise Land Heritage Association. <http://www.promiselandtn.org/>.

## Student Activity

Design a monument for Tennessee's USCT troops. Use the space below to draw your monument. In the box, write an inscription for the monument.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a student to draw a monument and write an inscription. The box is positioned at the bottom of the page, below the instructions.