

United States Colored Troops and Buffalo Soldiers

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Objectives

- Understand the general history of the Colored Troops
- Understand the general history of the Buffalo Soldiers
- Recognize the genealogical value of the records
- Find the records

The United States Colored Troops - History

The United States Colored Troops were regiments of the United States Union Army which were composed of African Americans, and other ethnic groups too. Over 170 army units were created, and many more volunteers served in the navy.

On January 1, 1863, as the Civil War approached the third year of conflict, President Abraham Lincoln officially issued the Emancipation Proclamation. In part, it read, “. . . all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.”

The states in rebellion were Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and some additional Union occupied counties in Virginia and in Louisiana. The border states were not included in the Emancipation Proclamation and their slaves were not freed at this time. Lincoln feared the slaveholding border states, Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware, all who were slave states but had not left the Union, if pushed too far would unite with the Confederacy. Tennessee was a Confederate state as it had voted to leave the Union, but by 1862 much of the state was under Union Army control and many Confederates had fled. Lincoln did not consider Tennessee in rebellion like the other Confederate states. This meant that all enslaved persons in Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, and Delaware were not freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet many enslaved in these states freed themselves and joined the Union war effort.

In May 1863 the United States War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops for the recruitment of the African Americans to fight for the Union Army. These are the units we know today as the United States Colored Troops. Frederick Douglass, who was a leading black abolitionist, encouraged free blacks and those newly freed to fight for their right to citizenship. He said,

“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters ‘U.S.,’ let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.”

Fourteen states raised volunteer units. Over 180,000 men were enlisted into the Union Army as servicemen in the U.S. Colored Troops. The units consisted of 144 infantry units, 13 Artillery units, 7 Cavalry units, 2 Brigade bands and other smaller units. The officers over these troops were white men. The units comprised 10% of the Union Army. Another 9,600 served in the U.S. Navy.

President Lincoln was quoted as saying, "Without the military help of the black freedmen, the war against the South could not have been won."

In the fall of 1865, which was several months after the Civil War ended, the United States Colored Troops were disbanded along with the vast majority of all the troops of the Union Army.

The Buffalo Soldiers – History

The term "Buffalo Soldier" is a nickname given to African American United States army soldiers. They were regiments of Black men who served with distinction on the western frontier. It is generally believed they were nick-named Buffalo Soldiers because their curly hair resembled that of the buffalo. But it is not clearly known where the term started.

On July 28, 1866 Congress passed the Reorganization Act. This legislation created six post-Civil War peacetime regiments of Black enlisted men. The units were the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st Infantry regiments. In 1869 the infantry regiments were consolidated into the 24th and 25th.

This was the first time Black men were included in the regular army and was the beginning of the units which came to be called the "Buffalo Soldiers. The regiments served from 1866 until the army was desegregated by President Harry Truman. He signed Executive Order 9981, to end segregation in the armed forces. The Executive Order also established the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. The order stated that "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed forces without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin."

Buffalo Soldiers served on the western frontier, the Spanish-American War, and the Philippine Insurrection. In peacetime they built roads, acted as park rangers for the new National Parks, protected the railroads, guarded stagecoach stations, constructed and repaired telegraph lines, escorted supply trains and mail coaches, served in scouting patrols and protected the border.

During World War I no regular army colored regiment saw action as part of the American Expeditionary Forces. Other Black regiments, such as the 92nd and 93rd Infantry Division were created from the draft, and were mostly used as support units. The nickname "Buffalo Soldiers" followed the 93rd, although it was not created from the original regular units of colored troops. In 1944, during World War II, the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry were disbanded. Segregation of the Armed Forces ended in 1951.

How do I know if my ancestor served in the military?

This is probably the most often asked question. Below are some ideas for discovering if your ancestor might have served in the Colored Troops or the Buffalo Soldiers.

- Family oral or written history
- Obituaries
- Headstones
- Photographs
- Historical lists
- Military record indexes

One of the best resources is the U.S. Federal Census schedules.

- 1890 federal census veteran's schedule: *Whether a soldier, sailor, or marine during the Civil War (United States or Confederate), or widow of such person.*
- 1910 federal census: *Whether a survivor of the Union of Confederate Army or Navy*
- 1930 federal census: *Whether the person is a veteran of the U.S. military or naval forces mobilized for any war or expedition? If yes, which war or expedition?*

- 1940 federal census: Long Form Question: *Is this person a veteran of the United States military forces; or the wife, widow, or under-18-year-old child of a veteran? If the person is a child of a veteran, is the veteran father dead? War or military service.*

What military records are there for U.S. Colored Troops and Buffalo Soldiers?

- Compiled Military Service Record - CMSR
- Pensions
- Widows' Pensions
- Regular Army Enlistment Records
- Regimental history books and compiled lists

What genealogical information is in the records?

- CMSR: name, unit, residence, age, birthplace, physical description, date mustered in/out, medical information and injuries, death date and cause, military rank.
- Pensions-soldier and widow: birth date and place, service record, narrative of events, marriage records, death records, family letters, bible pages, affidavits of witnesses, extended family relationships, enslaver name, other surnames used during the veteran's life.
- Army enlistments: enlistment date, military ranks, physical description, age, birth date and place, discharge, medical information and injuries, death date and cause.
- Regimental history books and lists: evidence of service, unit, enlistment dates, discharge dates, engagements, unit photographs.

Where can I find the records?

Compiled Military Service Records – CMSR

- FamilySearch: *United States Civil War Service Records of Union Colored Troops, 1863-1865*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1932431>
- FamilySearch: *United States Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union soldiers Who Served With the U.S. Colored Troops, 1861-1866*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3518724>
- FamilySearch: *United States Civil War Service Records of Union Soldiers, 1864-1866*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1932430>
- FamilySearch: *United States Index to Service Records, War with Spain, 1898*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919583>
- Ancestry: *U.S., Union Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2344/>
- Ancestry: *U.S., Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1863-1865*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1107/>
- Ancestry: *U.S., Spanish American War Volunteers Index to Compiled Military Service Records, 1898*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2400/>
- Fold3: Civil War Service Records, African American Collections
<https://www.fold3.com/search?keywords=civil+war+service+records&general.title.content.type=african-american:African+American+Collection>
- Fold3: World War I Collection
<https://www.fold3.com/collection/world-war-i-united-states>
- Fold3: World War II Collection
<https://www.fold3.com/collection/world-war-ii-united-states>

- National Archives article: *Compiled Military Service Records*
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/army/compiled-military-service-records>

Pensions

- FamilySearch: *United States Civil War and Later Pension Index, 1861-1917*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1471019>
- FamilySearch: *United States General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919699>
- Other Libraries: *General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934*
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/pension-genealogy/1861-1934.html#where>
- FamilySearch: *United States Civil War Widows and Other Dependents Pension Files, 1861-1934*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1922519>
- FamilySearch: *United States Veterans Administration Pension Payment Cards, 1907-1933*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1832324>
- FamilySearch: *United States Remarried Widows Index to Pension Applications, 1887-1942*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1979426>
- Ancestry: *Washington D.C., Pension Correspondence and Case Files of Formerly Enslaved People, 1892-1922*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1992/>
- Ancestry: *U.S., Civil War and Later Wars Index to Remarried Widow Pension Applications, 1848-1934*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2402/>
- Fold3: *Civil War "Widows' Pensions"*
<https://www.fold3.com/title/24/civil-war-widows-pensions> 21% complete
- Fold3: *Civil War Pensions Index*
<https://www.fold3.com/title/57/civil-war-pensions-index>
- National Archives: *How to Order Military Pension Application Files*
<https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records#natf85>

Army Enlistments

- FamilySearch: *United States Registers of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798-1914*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1880762>
- Fold3: *Army Registers, 1798-1969*
<https://www.fold3.com/title/899/army-registers-1798-1969>
- Fold3: *Army Register of Enlistments, 1798-1914*
<https://www.fold3.com/title/891/army-register-of-enlistments-1798-1914>

Regimental Histories and Lists

- FamilySearch: *United States Census of Union Veterans and Widows of the Civil War, 1890*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1877095>
- FamilySearch: *United States Records of Headstones of Deceased Union Veterans, 1879-1903*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1913388>
- FamilySearch: *United States, Burial Registers for Military Posts, Camps, and Stations, 1768-1921*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2250027>
- FamilySearch: *United States Headstone Applications for U.S. Military Veterans, 1925-1949*
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1916249>
- Ancestry: *U.S., Select Military Registers, 1862-1985*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2345/>

Additional Resources

- FamilySearch Wiki article: *United States Colored Troops in the Civil War*
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Colored_Troops_in_the_Civil_War
- FamilySearch Wiki article: *African American Military Records*
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Colored_Troops_in_the_Civil_War
- FamilySearch Wiki article: *United States Military Service Records*
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Military_Service_Records
- FamilySearch Wiki article: *United States Military Pension Records*
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Military_Pension_Records
- Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database
<https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>
- Ancestry: *U.S., Veterans' Gravesites, ca.1775-2019*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8750/>
- Ancestry: *U.S., Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850-2010*
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2441/>
- National Archives article: *Exploring the Live and History of the "Buffalo Soldiers"* by Walter Hill <https://www.archives.gov/publications/record/1998/03/buffalo-soldiers.html>
- National Archives article: *Buffalo Soldier and Black Infantrymen* by Trevor K. Plante
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/spring/buffalo-soldiers.html>

International African American Museum Center for Family History

<https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/united-states-colored-troops-usct-pension-files/>

National Archives Project: Buffalo Soldiers Pension Files

<https://www.archives.gov/innovation-hub/projects/buffalo-soldiers>

National Archives Catalog title: *Case Files of Indian Wars Pension Applications*
[Case Files of Indian Wars Pension Applications](#)