

# *First to Fight*

Black Civil War Soldiers from South Carolina  
by

[John Raymond Gourdin](#)

Former slaves from South Carolina were among the first Black soldiers to strike a blow for freedom during the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Long before President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation ex-slaves from the Sea Islands along the South Atlantic Coast were engaged in skirmishes with Confederate forces in the Union occupied area between Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia. These men eventually became members of the first regiment of colored troops to serve in the Federal Army.<sup>2</sup>

The First South Carolina Volunteer - African Descent (SCV) was an out growth of the famed "Hunter's Regiment" and is credited as the first regiment of colored soldiers mustered into Federal service during the Civil War.<sup>3</sup>

During March 1862, shortly after assuming command of the Department of the South, Major-General David Hunter declared martial law and liberated slaves in Union occupied areas. He immediately began recruiting able-bodied men to form a regiment of colored soldiers -- promising them freedom at the conclusion of the War as an inducement to enlist.<sup>4</sup> His orders were soon rescinded by President Lincoln "both because they had been given without authority from the War Department, and because Hunter was interfering with the President's own plans for emancipation."<sup>5</sup>

On August 25, 1862, however, Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War, authorized General Rufus Saxton, military governor of the region including South Carolina, to organize an army of five thousand Black soldiers for the purpose of "protecting the women and children of fellow-laborers who might be absent from home in the public service."<sup>6</sup> Before the end of war, a total of 5,462<sup>7</sup> ex-slaves from South Carolina had served in six infantry regiments and one artillery battery in support of the Union.

During January to July 1863, five regiments of colored soldiers from South Carolina were formally organized and mustered into service of the Union Army.<sup>8</sup> The 1st, 2nd and 3rd regiments were composed of ex-slaves from Sea Islands along the coast of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. The majority came from plantations in the Beaufort and Hilton Head area, but a good number came from areas surrounding Savannah, Georgia, including St. Simon's Island, and the vicinity of Fernandina, Florida. The 4th regiment was organized at Fernandina and consisted mostly of Floridian ex-slaves from Jacksonville and along the St. Marys River. The 5th regiment was never fully organized.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, administration at the War Department was so overwhelmed by the number of enlistment applications from free blacks in northern states and ex-slaves in Confederate states that it became necessary to organize a separate unit

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson. *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. Williamstown, MA: Corner House Publishers, 1870, p.263. Colonel Higginson served as the first commanding officer of the First South Carolina regiment (later -- the 33rd USCT). In 1870 he transcribed his diary recorded during his two years with the regiment.

<sup>2</sup> Susie King Taylor. (Patricia W. Rumero, and Willie Lee Rose - Ed). *A Black Woman's Civil War Memories*. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1988, p. 41. Mrs. Taylor served as a laundress, cook, teacher and nurse with the First South Carolina regiment from muster-in to muster-out. Around the turn of the century she documented her account of the time she spent with the regiment.

<sup>3</sup> Higginson, p. 263. The First Kansas regiment is recognized as the first colored regiment to be mustered into service during the civil war, however the men of Company "A", First South Carolina Volunteer Infantry, is given credit as the first colored soldiers to engage the enemy.

<sup>4</sup> The Department of the South included the areas of South Carolina, Georgia and the northern portion of Florida.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph T. Wilson. *The Black Phalanx: African American Soldiers in the War of Independence, the War of 1812, and the Civil War*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994, p.160.

<sup>7</sup> William A. Gladstone. *United States Colored Troops (1863-1865)*. Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1990, p. 120. Mr. Gladstone own the largest collection of civil war artifacts of black civil war soldiers. This book documents and displays his vast collections and details the contribution of black soldiers during the civil war.

<sup>8</sup> During August 1862, Secretary of War authorized the formation of the first regiment of colored troops from South Carolina, but the regiment was formally mustered into service on January 31, 1863.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick H. Dyer. *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*. Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Book Shop, 1978., p. 1636.

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for colored soldiers. On May 22, 1863 the War Department issue [General Order No. 143](#), establishing the Bureau of Colored Troops. The primary purpose of the Bureau was to provide administrative support for colored troops.

Prior to the establishment of the Bureau, colored regiments were organized and supported by state governments in free states and in areas in Confederate states occupied and controlled by Federal troops. However, after the establishment of the Bureau those regiments that were previously raised by state governments and carried state designations, were redesignated as regiments of United States Colored Troops (USCT) and assigned a USCT number.

During February and March of 1864, the 1st SCV was redesignated as the 33rd USCT Infantry Regiment; the 2nd was redesignated as the 34th USCT; and the 3rd, 4th and 5th SCV were redesignated as the 21st USCT. Prior to and after the redesignation elements of all three regiments participated in skirmishes in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Perhaps the most notably of these encounters were the battle of Jacksonville, Florida; the battles of Honey Hills and Boykin's Mills, South Carolina, as well as several skirmishes on James and Johns Islands, South Carolina.

During January 1865 federal troops occupied Charleston, South Carolina and in February several additional regiments were organized from the Charleston area and other areas north of Charleston along the Atlantic Coast. In order to implement these new regiments, Martin R. Delany, a leading abolitionist and recruiter from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was commissioned a Major of Infantry and dispatched to Charleston with orders to raise two regiments from that area -- the 104th and 105th.<sup>10</sup> There were much excitement and anticipation of the arrival of Major Delany. By the time he arrived in Charleston the word that preceded his arrival had it that he was a Major General.<sup>11</sup>

Major Delany was successful in raising and organizing the 104th regiment, which was mustered into service during June 1865, however, by that time the war was essentially over so the 105th regiment was never completed.<sup>12</sup> Two other regiments were being raised at the same time -- the 103rd and the 128th. Most of these soldiers were recruited from plantations in Charleston, Beaufort and Berkeley<sup>13</sup> counties. However, many ex-slaves came from other surrounding counties, not exclusively, but primarily from the counties of Georgetown, Williamsburg, Sumter, and Clarendon.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of 1866 all regiments were mustered out of service. In a little more than three years more than 5,000 men were transformed from slaves to veteran soldiers.

Very little can be found in South Carolina records of colored soldiers because they were Federal troops in a Confederate state, however, vast volumes of information are available in files stored and indexed by name<sup>15</sup> and by unit<sup>16</sup> at the National Archives in Washington, DC. Of particular interest and importance are pension applications filed by colored civil war veterans after the passage of a pension act during 1890. There are probably more than one million pages of documentation in pension files of South Carolina colored civil war veterans.<sup>17</sup> Many of these documents are affidavits and depo-

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<sup>10</sup> Frank A. Rollins. *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany: Sub-Assistant Commissioner, Bureau Relief of Refugees, Freedman, and of Abandoned Lands, and Late Major, 104th U.S. Colored Troops*. Boston: Lee Shepard, 1868, p. 177-78.

<sup>11</sup> Rollins, p. 189.

<sup>12</sup> Rollins, p. 200-02, 209-13; Dyer, p1738.

<sup>13</sup> NOTE: During the time of the Civil War the area designated as Charleston District included the area that is now Charleston and Berkeley counties. Berkeley County was incorporated as a separate county in 1882.

<sup>14</sup> John Raymond Gourdin. *Name Changing Since the Civil War: Colored Civil War Soldiers from South Carolina*. Paper presented at the African American Historical and Genealogical Conference: United States Colored Troops Memorial Symposium, Morris Conference Center, SUNY Oneonta and Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY, April 18, 1998. Freedmen from practically every county along the Atlantic coast, and a few areas of Georgia and Florida, served in the 103rd, 104th and 128th USCT.

<sup>15</sup> T288 - General Index to Pension Files. National Archives Record Administration. Washington, District of Columbia.

<sup>16</sup> T289 - Organization Index to Pension Files of Veterans who Served Between 1861 and 1900. NARA, WDC.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior. Bureau of Pensions, Pension Act of June 27, 1890. Declaration For Invalid Pension. NOTE: Text of Pension Acts can be found in pension folders at the National Archives

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sitions in their own words and the words of family members, friends, acquaintances, and other members of the community where they resided when applications were filed.

Another most useful document for researchers is a special census taken to identify Union civil war veterans who resided in South Carolina during 1890.<sup>18</sup> In cases where the veteran did not survive 1890 this special census lists the widows of veterans. It provides a variety of information on each veteran, including the name of the veteran, or if he did not survive, the names of both the widow and her deceased husband; the veteran's rank, company, regiment or vessel, date of enlistment, date of discharge and length of service; and the post office address.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gourdin, Author's estimate - based on a review of more than 2,000 pension records of the 103rd, 104th and 128th USCT.

<sup>19</sup> M123 - Special Schedules of the Eleventh Census of the United States (1890) Enumerating Union Veterans and Widows of Union Veterans of the Civil War. NARA, WDC. Abbreviated information listing of the census record was compiled and bounded in 1984, and are available in many public libraries throughout the state. Jackson, Ronald Vern (ed). South Carolina 1890 Census Index of Veterans. Salt Lake City, UT: Accelerated Indexing System International, 1984.