Lincoln’s January 1863 Emancipation Proclamation granted freedom to slaves in rebel states. That famous document also authorized the official enlistment of blacks into Union service. The story of the critical contributions of the roughly 200,000 black men who served the Union Army and Navy is slowly gaining more widespread attention. Less known locally, hundreds of black men from Montgomery County served in Union forces. Some of these men saw action at the Battle of the Crater, one of the battles leading up to the last year of the Civil War.

**POLITICAL HISTORY**

Although African-Americans participated in every major American war, their service in the Civil War had a contentious history. Black soldiers had much to prove; although there were some Northern officers with abolitionist viewpoints, there were also many who subscribed to the common white racial ideology of the times and did not believe former slaves could conduct themselves as soldiers. Blacks were caricatured as being cowardly, and not having the intelligence required for a soldier.¹

After some debate, Congress passed the 1862 Militia Act, which overturned a 1792 ban on black participation in militias.¹ The 1862 Act authorized the President to utilize blacks in the military in any way he chose. Unfortunately, the 1862 Act also set pay for black soldiers (and officers) at effectively $7 a month, while white soldiers were paid $13 a month. This blatant discrimination deeply affected black soldiers and their commanding officers who believed that equal pay was the only way to affirm the equality of blacks as men and soldiers.
The issue became a public debacle with no less an orator than Frederick Douglass joining loudly in the fray, whose own two sons also served as soldiers. Douglass campaigned tirelessly in his newspaper and in speeches to encourage blacks to enlist, famously saying that, “Once [you] 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 pocket, [then] there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship.” Unequal pay threatened black recruitment, and several black regiments refused to accept any pay at all at great personal sacrifice to themselves until the matter was resolved.

At a February 1864 meeting of prominent African-Americans in Baltimore, speaker Rev. J.P. Campbell articulated well the reasons for the stagnation of black enlistment: “If we are asked...why it is that black men have not more readily enlisted in the volunteer service ...since the door has been opened to them, we answer, the door has not been fairly and sufficiently widely opened. We ask the question...will you accept us upon equal terms with white men in the service of our country?” James Harding also articulated the soldier's feelings in a letter he wrote to President Lincoln in September 1863:

“...when the war trumpet sounded o'er the land, when man knew not the Friend from the Traitor, the black man laid his life at the altar of the Nation...and now he is in the War, and how has he conducted himself?...Obedient and patient and solid as a wall are [we]. All we lack is a paler hue and a better acquaintance with the alphabet... Now your Excellency, we have done a Soldier's duty. Why can't we have a soldier's pay?...We appeal to you, Sir, as the Executive of the Nation, to have us justly dealt with...Not that our hearts ever flagged in devotion...but we feel as though our country spurned us.”

Finally on June 15, 1864, Congress granted equal pay for all black soldiers with back pay.

In May 1863, the Bureau of Colored Troops began recruiting free blacks and slaves in Maryland under the direction of Colonel William Birney, who was the son of an abolitionist. Recruiters encountered extreme resistance from both slaveholders and whites who depended on the labor of free blacks. A white officer, Lieutenant Eben White, was killed by a slaveholder in St. Mary's County while attempting to recruit his slaves. Maryland State officials appealed directly to Lincoln and his Secretary of War, Stanton, to stop the practice.
Lincoln attempted a delicate dance in 1863, trying to appease citizens in a critical border state while at the same time he desperately needed men of any color to serve the war effort. It was finally decided that slaves would be enlisted with consent of their owners, or without their consent if militarily necessary, but with compensation. Even by October 1863, when the recruitment system was set up in Maryland with nineteen stations, there continued to be anger among many whites in Maryland who, even though they supported the Union cause, did not support the arming of slaves.7

In the midst of all the political wrangling, black men from Montgomery County both slave and free volunteered for service. Many were also drafted. These were men with deep family roots in the county, men with names like Snowden, Gaither, Warfield, Dorsey and Beckett. The largest number of Montgomery County men joined the 1st, 23rd, 30th and 39th regiments of the U.S. Colored Troops, while smaller numbers were in the 2nd, 19th, 28th and 31st regiments. Except for the 1st and 2nd regiments, all of these regiments served in the Army of the Potomac. One soldier's remarkable experiences, David Addison of the 23rd U.S.C.T. regiment, can be explored as illustrative of the group.

Service in the Army of the Potomac

David enlisted in Company C of the 23rd United States Colored Troops in Washington, D.C. on Feb 20, 1864 for a three year term of service.8 In May 1864, David’s regiment was combined with others to form the all-black Fourth Division serving under Brigadier General Edward Ferrero’s Ninth Corps. Their brigade was commanded by General Henry Thomas Goddard, one of the first white officers to request command of black troops.9 Ordered to join Grant’s Army of the Potomac in Virginia, they were the only colored troops ever to see directed combat as part of a Union Army. They were also the first black troops that Grant’s Army had seen and there was a mixture of reaction from his soldiers, both positive and negative. Grant’s Army was beginning what would be later called the Overland Campaign to capture Richmond.

As the capital of the Confederacy, it was believed that Richmond’s capture would end the bloody war that had dragged on for four long years.10 The colored troops of the Fourth Division were assigned combat support missions such as evacuating wounded soldiers and providing security for the supply trains of Grant’s huge Army.11 On May 15, 1864, David’s 23rd regiment was called upon to rescue a cavalry of white Ohio Union soldiers who were being pursued by Confederates during the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House. As the closest Union troops available, the 23rd successfully repulsed the Confederate aggressors much to the relief of their Ohio comrades. One of the Ohio cavalry men later wrote, “It did us good to see the long line of glittering bayonets approach, although those who bore them were Blacks, and as they came nearer they were greeted by loud cheers.”12

This was the first clash of black Union troops with Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, and Confederate soldiers were aghast at the sight of black men in uniform. Confederate soldiers saw black soldiers as the highest of insult, placing them on equal ground with white men. They believed it threatened the southern social order and flew in the face of their beliefs about “negro
inferiority.” Confederates determined that they would not treat any captured black soldiers as prisoners of war—they would give them “No quarter,” and they would be subject to death or sale as escaped slaves. Their white officers would be treated as insurrectionists of slave uprisings. This proved true in many cases, as the April 1864 slaughter of black troops at Fort Pillow in Tennessee illustrated. Confederate troops under General Nathan Bedford Forrest overran the fort and when its occupants tried to surrender (roughly 1/2 of whom were black) they were categorically murdered in grisly fashion. For the remainder of the war, black troops would use “Remember Fort Pillow!” and “No quarter!” as their rallying cries.

It became no small irony when on March 13, 1865, the Confederate Congress approved the use of blacks in the Confederate Army, a desperate gambit when Lee’s Army would be forced to surrender less than a month later. The Confederate Government had balked and derided Confederate Major General Patrick Cleburne’s suggestion to enlist blacks as soldiers in January 1864. Howell Cobb, a founding father of the Confederacy, had an eloquent response to that idea that spoke volumes: “…If slaves make good soldiers our whole theory of slavery is wrong.”

The colored troops of the Fourth Division liberated slaves they came across during their expedition across Virginia as Grant’s army moved towards its first target of heavily-fortified Petersburg in the spring of 1864. A black soldier with the 43rd regiment wrote:

“We have been instrumental in liberating some five hundred of our sisters and brothers from the accursed yoke of human bondage. You see them coming in every direction, some in carts, some on their master’s horses, and a great number on foot...Several of them remarked to me [that] it seemed to them like heaven, so greatly did they realize the difference between slavery and freedom.”

In June, the Fourth Division participated in the opening battles of Petersburg that eventually led to a siege. A regiment of white Pennsylvania coal miners suggested a novel plan: dig a 500-foot underground tunnel from their position to the Confederate lines and then use dynamite to blow a hole in Confederate defenses, and then attack. The colored troops helped build the mine for the planned attack but more importantly, they were chosen by Major General Burnside to lead the charge. “We were all pleased with the compliment of being chosen to lead in the assault.

Both officers and men were eager to show the white troops what the colored division could do,” said their brigade commander, Major General Henry Thomas. Unfortunately, just hours before the planned assault, General George Meade, Commander of the Army of the Potomac, overruled Major General Burnside and decided against having the colored troops lead the assault. When General Thomas informed the colored troops of the change, one of the soldiers soberly began to sing: “We looks like men a marchin’ on, we looks like men-o’-war.” Others joined in. “Until we fought the battle of the Crater, they sang this every night to the exclusion of other songs,” the General remarked.
Brigadier General James Ledlie’s division of white regiments was randomly chosen by pulling the shortest straw to lead the attack. His troops were as grossly unprepared and untrained as that selection technique would suggest. When the mine exploded at 4:45 am on July 30, they became hopelessly trapped during their assault and fell into the huge crater the blast created, which was described as being “130 feet long, 75 feet wide and 30 feet deep.” The black regiments had been trained in how to go around the crater itself. Ledlie’s regiments were unable to advance and take advantage of the surprise blast. While their troops were faltering and disaster loomed, Generals Ledlie and Ferrero were hiding in a rear bunker drinking rum. Their superiors, Generals Meade and Burnside were arguing via telegram.21

Several hours later, the First and Second Brigades of colored troops were ordered into battle. But by then, the Union had lost the element of surprise and the Confederates had regrouped and rallied. The colored troops and their white officers were easily mowed down in their attempts to move forward, trapped by the mass of men and debris crowded in and around the Crater.22 Lt. Beecham remembered of the Crater, “The black boys formed up promptly. There was no flinching on their part. They came to the shoulder...like true soldiers, as ready to face the enemy and meet death on the field as the bravest and best soldiers that ever lived.”23 Even in the midst of this chaos, black troops in the 30th and 43rd regiments in the first charge seized a Confederate trench and succeeded in capturing about 150 Confederate soldiers and holding a portion of the enemy’s trenchline. All of that ended when Confederate General William Mahone’s Virginia and South Carolina reinforcements joined the fray.24
Confederates stood at the rim and fired cannons and muskets down into the Crater, easily killing the desperately trapped Union soldiers. Their anger at the sight of black soldiers overrode the rules of engagement and Confederates commenced to outright murder of the trapped men. Many black soldiers were killed while trying to surrender and others were killed while being sent to the rear as prisoners. One South Carolina soldier wrote that the sight of the black men “had the same affect [sic] upon our men that a red flag had upon a mad bull.” A Georgia soldier witnessed the brutality and commented that “many of [the men] seemed infuriated at the idea of having to fight negroes. Within ten minutes the whole floor of the trench was strewn with the dead bodies of negroes.”

Indeed, the Confederate soldiers remarked upon the massacres freely in their letters and diaries after the battle. Another Georgian wrote, “When we got to the works, it was filled with negroes and they were crying out ‘no quarter’...and you may depend on it we did not show much quarter but slayed them. Some few negroes went to the rear as we could not kill them as fast as they passed us.” A Virginian added, “Nothing in the world could have exceeded the horrors that followed...for what seemed a long time, fearful butchery was carried on.” Mahone’s soldiers searched for black soldiers hiding in bombproofs and slaughtered most of them. Afterwards, captured Union soldiers were later marched through the streets of Petersburg, ridiculed and abused by onlookers for their “nigger equality.”

After eight and a half hours of battle in the scorching heat, the Union Army suffered over 4000 casualties. The Fourth Division lost just over 1300 men, killed, wounded and captured. Although Union rolls listed 410 black men as missing, the Confederates only captured 85 prisoners and killed 423 black men, the worst massacre of any Civil War battle involving black soldiers. David’s 23rd regiment suffered more losses than any other with almost 300 men killed, wounded, captured or missing.

Because of the plan’s failure, the siege of Petersburg lasted another eight long months. Accusations and blame flew in every direction after the disaster. “It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in war,” said General Grant. A lengthy congressional investigation assigned blame to Meade’s decision to override Burnside’s original plan to have black troops lead the assault. Both Burnside and Ledlie also paid a price for their lack of leadership: Burnside was relieved of his commands and Ledlie was dismissed from military service entirely. Confederate officer Mahone tried to deny the carnage at the Crater after the war, but was instead found to have incited his men to butcher the blacks.

Even in light of the disastrous battle, black soldiers won praise from their leaders. “The black men followed into the jaws of death,” said General Thomas, “and advanced until met by a charge in force from the Confederate lines.” He detailed their losses, noting that, “the 23rd regiment entered the charge with eighteen officers; it came out with seven.” General Sigfried, leader of the First Brigade of colored troops ahead of General Thomas’ Brigade, said, “Too much praise cannot be awarded to the bravery of officers and men; the former fearlessly led, while the latter as fearlessly followed, through a fire hot enough to cause the best troops to falter.” Even a Confederate soldier said that they “fought like bulldogs and died like soldiers.”
Decatur Dorsey, color bearer of the 39th colored infantry regiment was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Crater:

*[He] moved ahead of his unit during the advance and planted the flag on the Confederate fortifications. When the regiment was forced to pull back, he retrieved the flag and rallied his fellow soldiers for a second attack. In this second assault, the men of the 39th breached the Confederate works and engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the defenders. They captured two hundred prisoners and two flags before being pushed back again and ordered to withdraw.*

The failure of the Crater engagement extended the siege of Petersburg, but in April 1865, Lee was forced to withdraw his troops from Petersburg and Richmond. David’s 23rd regiment entered Richmond with the Army of the Potomac when it fell and was present at Appomattox for General Lee’s surrender of the South’s most popular and successful Army. David and his fellow soldiers participated in some of the Civil War’s most seminal moments.

**AFTER THE WAR**

David mustered out of the Army in Brazos Santiago, Texas, on November 30, 1865. Like most soldiers, he did not escape the War unscathed. In his pension file, a comrade testified that at the Battle of the Crater, David “got hurt by the limb of a tree falling on him caused by a shot from the enemies cannon.” Hospitalized for some time while in the Army, he suffered from heart trouble, rheumatism and asthma the rest of his life. David received a pension until his death on April 20, 1900, and his widow Jane was also awarded a pension for his service. They were fortunate; black soldiers generally were rejected at much higher rates than white soldiers, and understandably, many former slaves had extreme difficulty proving birthdates and marriages.

Surviving black soldiers returned to their homes and families. Former soldiers Nelson Brown, Israel Butler, Lloyd Duvall and Benjamin Snowden opened bank accounts at the Freedman’s Bank branch in Washington, D.C. A few men, like Mortimer King and Samuel Cole were able to buy small plots of land in the county. All former soldiers still needed to earn a living and most likely worked for former owners or other white landowners. Some migrated from Montgomery County to Baltimore or Washington D.C. for work.

While the black community celebrated the service and accomplishments of black soldiers, by the end of the century, white America would proceed down a path of reconciliation. As
the Lost Cause ideology gained strength, it all but erased not only slavery as the real reason for the war but also the military contributions of black Union soldiers and sailors. After a brief taste of expanded civil rights, the late 19th century brought a rise in lynchings and violence against blacks, the stripping away of hard-won voting rights, the creation of the Ku Klux Klan terror organization and new laws strengthening segregation and Jim Crow.

Still, the record of black soldiers in the Civil War speaks for itself. They served with distinction in battles at Fort Wagner, New Market Heights, Port Hudson and Milliken’s Bend. Their valor dispelled the doubts of many about their loyalty and ability. Amidst rampant racism, sixteen blacks were awarded the Medal of Honor for their acts of valor during the war, twelve in one battle. Their contributions are not lost to history as long as we keep telling their story.

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12 Price, “The 23rd USCT, Then and Now.”
13 Kevin M. Levin, “Until Every Negro Has Been Slaughtered” Civil War Times, October 2010, p. 32-34.
17 Price, “The 23rd USCT, Then and Now.”
18 Ibid.
19 Slotkin, “The Battle of the Crater.”

Slotkin, “The Battle of the Crater.”

Price, “The 23rd USCT, Then and Now.”


Levin, “Until Every Negro Has Been Slaughtered,” p. 34.


Slotkin, “The Battle of the Crater.”


Slotkin, “The Battle of the Crater.”


Wolfe, “Battle of the Crater.”

Ibid.


Thomas, “The Colored Troops at Petersburg.”

Ibid.


Price, “The 23rd USCT, Then and Now.”


David Addison (Pvt., Co. C, 23rd United States Colored Troops Infantry, Civil War), pension no. S.C. 276,653, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Men Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain, 1861-1934, Questionnaire dated 17 March 1898; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C. This document by included his claimant’s marriage date and place, wife’s maiden name, and birthdates of his children.


For King, see 1870 U.S. census, Montgomery County, Maryland, population schedule, 1st election district, Brighton PO, p. 232 A. (stamped), dwelling 128, family 116, Mortimer King; citing NARA M 593, roll 591. For Cole, see 1870 U.S. census, Montgomery County, Maryland, population schedule, 1st election district, Brighton PO, p. 264 B. (stamped), dwelling 558, family 540, Samuel Cole.


The Battle of New Market Heights in Virginia.