

African American Troops in Far West Kentucky
during the Civil War:
Recruitment and Service of the Fourth U.S. Heavy Artillery Colored

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For many years the historiography of the Civil War and the end of slavery portrayed African Americans as passive participants in both processes. African Americans were portrayed as people to whom things happened or people whose contributions were simply not worthy of serious academic discussion. In more recent years, however, historians have come to reassess the roles played by African Americans in both the Civil War and the end of slavery and a much more active, assertive picture of African American behavior in actively claiming their freedom is emerging.¹ Participation in military service by black men is also a central concern of the growing body of scholarship on the history of black manhood and masculinity.²

The important role African-American troops played in the Civil War is also gaining increasing recognition among those interested in the history of the Civil War. This is especially true for the role played by Kentucky African Americans whose enlistments were often recorded in other states because of opposition to the enlistment of African Americans by white state political leaders. While Kentucky is invariably listed second after Louisiana in the number of African Americans serving in the Union Army during the War, a strong case can be made that the number of African American troops credited to Kentucky is significantly understated because the intense and sustained opposition by the Commonwealth's political leadership to black recruitment caused many to be recruited in, or credited to, states that border the

¹ For the extent to which this interest has permeated popular awareness see, John Spalding, "Telling the Forgotten Story of Black Troops in the Civil War," *Chronicle of Higher Education* August 15, 1997, B 8-9. A great deal has been written on African American in the Civil War since Spalding wrote. Noah Andre Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), Howard C. Westwood, *Black Troops White Commanders and Freedmen during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), John David Smith, *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers during the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), Andrew Ward, *The Slaves War: The Civil War in the Words of Former Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), William A. Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862-1867* (New York: Sky Horse Publishing, 2013) and one state-level study of special note, Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

² A good introduction to this area of scholarship is Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, 2 vols. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 199, 2001). Part Five, "'Taking Freedom': Black Men as Soldier Citizens," focuses on the Civil War.

Commonwealth.³ One of the units in which African Americans served was the Fourth U.S. Heavy Artillery Colored, recruited primarily at Columbus, Kentucky and vicinity. The Fourth spent much of the war in west Kentucky on garrison duty and also served in West Tennessee and in Arkansas before being mustered out.⁴ They did not fight in a major battle or otherwise attract undue attention. They served the Union cause and the cause of their and their families' freedom. Their experience was not uncommon among African American units who had to overcome prejudice and discrimination both before and after they enlisted. It is clear, however, that from the beginning of the conflict African Americans, free and enslaved, were ready and willing to join the Union cause.

The Recruitment of African Americans in Kentucky

From the outbreak of the war abolitionists and especially African American abolitionists saw military service as an opportunity to disprove many of the negative stereotypes regarding black men that defenders of slavery and opponents of equality had circulated. In addition to lobbying for the end of slavery as a war goal they also advocated for opening military service to African Americans, both those born free and those born in slavery.⁵ With the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation the pressure on President Lincoln and the military to allow African Americans to join the army increased. One of the most forceful and widely noted was Frederick Douglass, "Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?" Douglass's nine reasons ranged from the practical to the idealistic but served as both a summary of the sentiments held by many in the abolitionist community and a stirring call to arms for a noble cause—freedom and equality.⁶ On May 22, 1863 U.S. War Department General Order 143 created the Bureau of Colored Troops

³ For a fuller discussion of these issues see Joseph E. Brent, ed., *Kentucky African Americans in the Civil War: A Defining Moment in the Quest for Freedom* (Frankfort: Kentucky Heritage Council, 1997); John David Smith, "The Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky, 1863-1865," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 72 (1974): 364-390; and John Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Colored Troops in Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri," *The Historian* 29 (1967): 533-545.

⁴ Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Dayton, OH: Press of the Morningside Bookstore, 1978; reprint of 1908 ed.). Records of the Fourth United States heavy Artillery (Colored) and other African American units are in National Archives RG 94 Adjutant General's Office, 1780s-1917 and National Archives RG 393 Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920 contains the records of specific districts and installations—such as Columbus, KY.

⁵ For a selection of these appeals and arguments see Peter C. Ripley, et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) Vol. 5, pp. 117-350.

⁶ Frederick Douglass, "Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?" *Douglass' Monthly*, April 1863. <http://www.frederick-douglass-heritage.org/why-should-a-colored-man-enlist/> accessed June 1, 2014; Ripley.

under Major C.W. Foster.⁷ Those slave states that had remained in the Union, however, were adamantly opposed to allowing African Americans to serve in the army. When active enlistment of African Americans for the Union Army began in 1863, opposition by Governor Thomas Bramlette and the entire Kentucky Congressional delegation led to the suspension of such enlistments in the Commonwealth. In that same year, both Gen. Jeremiah T. Boyle, then commander of the District of Kentucky, and Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside, then commander of the Department of the Ohio, formally requested that orders to begin enlisting black troops in Kentucky be suspended because of opposition among the white population.⁸ Kentucky was also exempted from the Comprehensive Draft Act of 1863 due to its opposition to the enlistment of black troops.⁹ This opposition continued throughout the war and became a point of serious contention between Kentucky's political leaders and its slave-owning population and the Federal government and Union commanders in the Commonwealth.

In January 1864 a recruiting station for enlisting African American troops was established in Paducah. Col. Richard Cunningham began openly recruiting for a heavy artillery regiment, offering a \$300 bounty, plus freedom for the enlistee and his family. Resolution 49, passed by the Kentucky General Assembly on Washington's Birthday, called such enlistments "impolitic." Governor Bramlette sent Lincoln a strongly-worded, nine-page letter of protest.¹⁰ Some effort was made to assuage the concerns of white Kentuckians. Both Lincoln and Major General Stephen G. Burbridge, then commander of the District of Kentucky, promised that black troops who enlisted in Kentucky would be trained out of state—Burbridge even made this a General Order (Number 34). Compensation of \$300 was offered to the owners of slaves who enlisted. These conciliatory efforts were short lived, however, and in March of 1865 Congress passed a law granting freedom to the wives and children of those who enlisted in the U.S. Army, which included Kentucky.¹¹

By March 1864 open recruiting of African Americans was underway in all parts of Kentucky under the direction of Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas and Brigadier General Augustus L. Chetlain, who recruited heavily in western Kentucky. While Chetlain's headquarters was in Memphis, Columbus, Kentucky was the site of a major Federal base that had attracted "contrabands" since the Union Army had first occupied the site at the beginning of

⁷ Orders and Circulars, 1797-1910, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives.

⁸ Smith, "The Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky," 372.

⁹ Smith, 374.

¹⁰ Smith, 374.

¹¹ Smith, 384.

March in 1862. Chetlain openly conducted his recruiting efforts in far western Kentucky, quite distant from the politically powerful and sensitive Bluegrass Region.¹²

Adjutant General Thomas established recruiting camps in Paducah, Owensboro, Bowling Green, Lebanon, Louisville, Covington, Louisa, Camp Nelson in Jessamine County near Nicholasville, Fort Smith at Smithland, and at Camp Halleck at Columbus.¹³ More than 5,000 African Americans joined the United States Colored Troops (USCT), as the African American units were designated, at Camp Nelson in Jessamine County alone. Columbus and the surrounding area, including a “contraband” camp that had been established on Island 10 in the Mississippi River, across from New Madrid, Missouri also became a significant source of black recruits. In June 1864 Chetlain was authorized to begin actively and openly recruiting in central and eastern Kentucky. By the end of July that same year fifteen African American regiments had been organized in the Bluegrass State and some 16,000 men had enlisted. All of these regiments were designated as United States Colored Troops, rather than as Kentucky regiments. No unit was allowed to use the word Kentucky in its designation, due to the continuing opposition of the state’s political leaders to their enlistment and the Lincoln administration’s desire to keep Kentucky in the Union camp. In all, 23,703 black Kentuckians enlisted in the Union Army, in twenty one regiments (two cavalry, four heavy artillery, and fifteen infantry) raised in the Commonwealth. This is approximately 56.4 percent of those eligible for military service and roughly one-third of the 75,760 troops of all races that that served in the Union Army from Kentucky. Only Louisiana, with 24,052, provided more African American troops. Recruiting African American troops continued in Kentucky until June 1865, two months after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Many of the Kentucky-raised units remained on active duty until 1866 and in several cases until 1867.¹⁴

The original intention of the Union Army was to use African American troops for garrison duty rather than in combat due to contemporary white concerns about the ability of African Americans to perform properly in combat. Disproving these preconceived ideas was a major motivation for African American leaders to push for enlistment and combat action. The war was a chance to prove equality. Before the end of 1864, some 200 black troops were stationed on garrison duty at Fort Anderson in Paducah on the Ohio River and another 600 were divided between Fort Smith in Smithland on the Cumberland and at Columbus on the Mississippi. During the course of the War African American troops did garrison, or other duty, in all parts of Kentucky including Bowling Green, Camp Wildcat near London, Catlettsburg, Covington, Crab Orchard, Danville, Elizabethtown, Glasgow, Ghent, La Grange, Lexington, Louisa, Mayfield, New Haven, Smithland, and in tiny, isolated places like Moscow where artillery

¹² Smith, 378-9.

¹³ Smith, 384.

¹⁴ Smith, 389; Dyer, 247, 252, 1721-2, 1737-40.

companies guarded railroad bridges. Black Kentuckians also served at Helena, Arkansas; LaGrange and Nashville, Tennessee; and Rock Island, Illinois as well as in the campaigns discussed below.

Garrison duty was not without its risks and often led to skirmishes with Confederate troops or guerrillas, especially in western Kentucky. The 108th Infantry United States Colored Troops (USCT) repulsed a Confederate raid on Owensboro in August 1864 while on garrison duty. The 117th Infantry lost two men in a skirmish near Ghent that same month, while the 108th lost three men in a skirmish near Henderson in September. Later in the War the 108th saw action again at Fort Brady in Virginia. The 109th fought a skirmish at Taylorsville on April 18, 1865, after Appomattox as the War wound down. Black troops, principally the 8th Heavy Artillery, were a significant part of the garrison at Fort Anderson in Paducah that repulsed a major attack by Nathan Bedford Forrest's troops in March 1864. After the battle their commander, Col. Steven Hicks, who had opposed the enlistment of African Americans, reported, "And here permit me to remark that I have been one of those men who never had much confidence in colored troops fighting, but those doubts are now all removed, for they fought as bravely as any troops in the fort."¹⁵

In many ways this could serve as a summary for all black units in the Civil War. Despite strong opposition to their enlistment and use in combat, African American troops won consistent praise for their courage in combat from their commanders and grudging respect from their foes.

African Americans at Columbus, Kentucky

The efforts, even the existence, of African American troops in Kentucky have largely been ignored. To a considerable degree there is a serious dissonance between the histories of Kentucky in the Civil War as it was and as it has been remembered. While efforts to preserve and interpret the major center of African American enlistment in the Commonwealth, Camp Nelson in Jessamine County are changing this omission, little has been done to document and interpret the role of the federal garrison at Columbus, Kentucky.¹⁶ The garrison at Columbus was second only to Camp Nelson as a center for black enlistment in Kentucky and as a refugee camp for "contrabands" - to use the contemporary term for those who had fled slavery for the protection of the Union army and thus claimed their freedom.

¹⁵ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, Volume 32, part 1, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880-1900), 548.

¹⁶ Richard D. Sears, *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Marion B. Lucas, "Camp Nelson, Kentucky, During the Civil War: Cradle of Liberty or Refugee Death Camp?" *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 63 (Oct. 1989): 439-452. W. Stephen McBride, "Camp Nelson: A Fortified Union Supply Depot, Recruitment Center, and African American Refugee Camp in Central Kentucky," Brent, ed., *Kentucky African Americans in the Civil War* summarizes McBride's extensive archeological work at Camp Nelson.

Columbus, Kentucky began its role in the Civil War as a major Confederate fortification, part of the initial Confederate western defensive line, in September 1861. It became a major Federal Army supply and transportation point and district headquarters after it was abandoned by the Confederates early in March 1862.

The experience of African Americans at Columbus during the Civil War begins at the very beginning. As with most things in the South during slavery African Americans were present, even if their presence was not always noted. When Confederate General Leonidas Polk occupied Columbus and began erecting fortifications at the beginning of September 1861 his “force” included African Americans who were personal slaves, sometimes called “body servants” for officers in his command. When the work of building the extensive fortifications constructed at Columbus began, numerous slaves were employed. In addition to the soldiers under his command, more than an estimated 13,000 at one point, more than 10,000 African American slaves were present at Columbus and worked erecting and maintaining the fortifications. Some of these enslaved laborers were the personal servants of officers; others were “hired” from their owners.¹⁷

After the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson and the loss of most of the garrison at Camp Beauregard in Graves County due to disease, Polk felt Columbus was untenable. He abandoned it without an attack by the Union Army. Federal troops moved in unopposed and it remained an important point. It was, perhaps, even more important as a supply base and transportation node for the incursions of the Union Army into the lower south. The Union Army occupied Columbus and established a major supply depot and transshipment point where troops and supplies disembarked from river boats and went south on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad, which had its northern terminus at Columbus. A large Union garrison protected the river and rail transportation links there and Columbus also served as a district headquarters for most of the war (and as a district headquarters for the Freedmen’s Bureau after the war.) There were also two named forts – Halleck and Quimby – as well as headquarters for the Quartermaster, Commissary and Transportation corps. It was a major Union facility.

Columbus, like all Union posts in slave states, quickly attracted large numbers of African Americans seeking freedom almost from its inception.¹⁸ Because of its location at the intersection of many transportation routes, and especially its location on the Mississippi River, large numbers African Americans began arriving in Columbus as soon as the Union troops established themselves there.

Union policy was initially unclear about how to treat these people seeking freedom, who were known as “contrabands,” and at first some were returned to their “owners.” This policy

¹⁷ Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., *The Battle of Belmont* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 32-44. Capt. Robert Hancock Wood, a Confederate officer at Columbus from the beginning makes frequent reference to his slave, William, in his correspondence with his wife. Robyn L. Warren, “In the Midst of a Cruel War’: The Family Papers of Robert Hancock Wood,” MA Thesis, Murray State University, 2002.

¹⁸ *The American Missionary* Vol. 7, no. 5, 112 mentions 500 contrabands at Columbus on March 13, 1863. See also, Howard C. Westwood, “Grant’s Role in Beginning Black Soldiery,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 79 (1986): 197-212.

caused problems within the Union Army as some officers resisted complying. In July 1862 Brigadier General G. M. Dodge, commander of the post at Columbus, arrested an officer who refused to follow orders to send “contrabands” back.

“. . . I have turned out of their [7th Kansas Cavalry] lines all negroes [sic] I know were clearly contraband. Among these were one family of a Mr. Sims and also one of Mr. Davis. I prepared to enforce my orders at all hazards, and only met with some opposition from one officer, Capt. Rafferty who had some difficulty with the Provost Marshal, and whom I send to you under arrest. . . .”¹⁹

This policy also proved politically unpopular with more radical Republicans in Congress and was quickly stopped. In November U.S. Grant was told by General Henry Halleck by telegram to “employ the Negroes as teamsters, in building fortifications, and in picking cotton.”²⁰ In December 1862 Grant sent instructions through an assistant adjutant general to Brig. Gen. J. A. Davies, the new commander at Columbus regarding the treatment of escaped slaves. “Make the best disposition of the negroes you can in tents and vacant houses, and issue rations to them. Let them be employed in the Quartermaster Department and in the levee, and hired to steamboats for work on the river, reporting in the meantime to the Secretary of War, asking what final disposition shall be made of them. They were sent there without the order of the General commanding.”²¹

In December 1862 Rev. S.G. Wright, a former missionary to the Ojibwa Indians, then working among former slaves in western Kentucky for the American Missionary Association, wrote a series of letters published in *American Missionary* about condition of former slaves at Columbus.

There are some 2,000 (colored people) here, of all ages and descriptions, (150 more have this hour arrived). They are encamped in little huts and tents, a little back of the town. I learned from *them*, and from a gentleman employed by the Government to oversee their work, that the men had labored faithfully, from one to seven months, for Gov., but in not a *single instance* had they been paid, further than [sic] a few of them had received some old cast off garments. They also received light rations of meal and a little pork; upon this their families have subsisted, with what little the women have picked up in the town. The men are universally much discouraged – they are suffering much from lack of food and exposures: 22 died in one night. Three were buried to day.²²

¹⁹ Gen. G. M. Dodge to Capt. Rochester, July 2, 1862. RG 393, Pt. 2, entry 6159, Vol. 32., National Archives.

²⁰ Halleck to Grant (telegram) November 19, 1862. Ibid., Pt. 1, Entry 4719, Vol. 1, Book 7.

²¹ U.S. Grant to Brig. Gen. J. A. Davies, Dec. 16, 1862. Ibid., Pt. 1, entry 4709, Vol. 1, p. 139.

In January 1863 Grant wrote to his superior, General Halleck, regarding the contraband question. “The contraband question is becoming serious. What am I to do with the surplus negroes? I authorized an Ohio philanthropist a few days ago to take all that were at Columbus to his State at government expense. Would like to dispose of more in the same way.”²³

Sheltering those who sought freedom proved equally unpopular with Kentucky’s white political leaders, however, and became a serious point of contention between them and the federal government. Increasingly, they came to see Kentucky’s interests as different from those of the Union, but the large number of Union troops in the state prevented any real action on their part. This conflict, and the post-War Thirteenth Amendment, shaped Kentucky’s political discourse for several generations after the Civil War.²⁴

The numbers of men and women seeking the protection of the Union Army at Columbus consistently overwhelmed its resources and the physical space available. After Polk abandoned Island Number 10, down river across from New Madrid, Missouri, to Union control 1,000 former slaves were settled there in an agricultural colony, protected by a Union army garrison. This colony continued throughout the war and, after African Americans were allowed to enlist in the Union Army, it was garrisoned for a time by members of the 4th United States Colored Heavy Artillery.²⁵

Throughout the war, but especially in 1862 and the first few months of 1863, African Americans who had fled to the protection of the Union Army were used as casual labor. They loaded and unloaded river boats and railroad cars in Columbus, maintained the fortifications, and were sent as far away as St. Louis and Cincinnati when requested by Union commanders at posts further north. It is unclear from the records, however, whether or not they were paid wages for their labor. In Cairo, Illinois, “contrabands” were enlisted into the Navy to serve on the new gunboats on the western rivers. Their pay, \$80 per month, was \$10 less than that of white sailors.²⁶

When the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified ending slavery in Kentucky—the Emancipation Proclamation had not applied to Kentucky because the Commonwealth never seceded from the Union—the District Commander in Columbus made the public announcement

²² *American Missionary*, Vol. 7, number 2, 37.

²³ Grant to Halleck, January 6, 1863. RG 393, Part 1, entry 4709, Vol. 2, National Archives.

²⁴ E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926; reprint Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966).

²⁵ Dyer, *passim*.

²⁶ James M. Merrill, “Cairo, Illinois: Strategic Civil War River Port,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 76 (1983): 251. There is a great deal of correspondence in RG 393 regarding the use of contrabands that went to Columbus as laborers as well as in the Grant Papers.

of freedom for all African Americans in the Jackson Purchase. After the war ended and the military base at Columbus was decommissioned, Columbus served as a district office for the Freedmen's Bureau. The Bureau provided legal advice and assistance to former slaves, allowed them to record their marriages, and provided assistance in the construction of schools and churches by the Freedmen. It also helped eligible veterans apply for pensions and other government assistance.²⁷

Fourth United States Heavy Artillery Colored

In July 1863 Grant wrote to Adjutant General Thomas about the recruitment of African American troops from Vicksburg within days of his success there.

All new organizations of negro regiments have been broken up and their men transferred to those regiments for which you had appointed officers. I found that the old regiments never could be filled so long as authority was granted to form new ones. I am anxious to get as many of these negro regiments as possible, and have them full and completely equipped. The large amount of equipment captured here will enable me to equip these as rapidly as they can be formed.

I am particularly desirous of organizing a regiment of heavy artillerists from the negroes to garrison this place, and shall do so as soon as possible, asking the authority, and commissions for the officers named after it is organized. I will ask now if this course will be approved.²⁸

Grant received word from Halleck on August 3 that his plan had been approved. A few days later he heard from the president on the same subject.

A word upon another subject. General Thomas has gone again to the Mississippi Valley with the view to raising colored troops. I have no doubt that you are doing what you reasonably can upon the same subject. I believe it is a resource which if vigorously applied now, will soon close this contest. It works doubly: weakening the enemy and strengthening us. We were not fully ripe for it until the river was opened. Now I think, at least, one hundred thousand can, and ought to be, organized along its shores, relieving all the white troops to serve elsewhere. Mr.

²⁷ The records of the Columbus district office of the Freedmen's Bureau are in RG 105, National Archives. See also Patricia A. Hoskins, "The Freedmen's Bureau in the Jackson Purchase Region of Kentucky, 1866-1868," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 110, nos. 3 & 4 (2012): 503-533. The operation of the Freedmen's Bureau took place after the time period discussed here.

²⁸ Grant to Thomas, July 11, 1863 RG 393, Part 1, entry 4709, Vol. 2, p. 51, National Archives.

Davis understands you as believing that the emancipation proclamation has helped in your military operation. I am very glad if this is so.²⁹

The Fourth United States Colored Heavy Artillery was initially organized as the Second Tennessee Heavy Artillery, African Descent and also was known briefly as the Third Mississippi and the Third Heavy Artillery. Despite its initial designation as a Tennessee unit and subsequent assignment to Mississippi, the Fourth was actually recruited largely in the Columbus, Kentucky area. Many of those who enlisted in the Fourth came there from the surrounding area or the lower South seeking freedom. Because of opposition of Kentucky's political leaders to the enlistment of African Americans in the Army, no such units have a Kentucky designation, as noted earlier. The Fourth maintained its headquarters at Columbus from its creation in July of 1863 through June 1865 when it relocated to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. It was mustered out of Federal service February 25, 1866 while serving at Pine Bluff. The regiment was either attached to the District Headquarters at Columbus or the garrison at Fort Halleck, one of the names used for the sub-units of the Federal installation at Columbus, for much of its history. The entire regiment did not serve in the same place at all times. In fact, the entire unit seems to have only rarely, if ever, been together in one place. In this regard artillery regiments appear to be different than infantry or cavalry units. Company C, for example, was sent to Island 10 to guard the contraband colony there between June 25 and July 25, 1863. They then accompanied Lt. Col. Roberts on a brief expedition to Arkansas before returning to Columbus.

Companies were frequently assigned to recruiting duty, which took them away from Columbus for extended periods to enlist other African Americans into the Army. Companies D, I, and K were on recruiting duty, helping raise the 119th United States Colored Infantry, when they encountered Col. Chenoweth's force near Fort Donelson in October 1864.

Companies D, I, and L, a total of 85 men, saw action in a skirmish near Fort Donelson on October 11, 1864. Company I lost an officer, Lt. Johnson, and three enlisted men with an additional nine wounded. The 119th Infantry USCT and the three companies of the Fourth successfully repelled this Confederate cavalry force, led by Col. J.T. Chenoweth. Lt. Col. T.R. Weaver, commander of the 119th Infantry USCT, with whom the men from the Fourth were serving, reported after the battle, "As for the colored troops, they behaved nobly. There was not a single instance in which they did not surpass my expectations of them."³⁰

Other companies of the Fourth served at many towns in the Purchase region of Kentucky and Tennessee, guarding the railroad bridges, key roads, and river ports. These communities included Hickman and Moscow in Kentucky and Union City, Pine Bluff, and Crockett in Tennessee. Since the District of Columbus included all of Kentucky west of the Tennessee River and much of the western part of Tennessee, companies and detachments from the Fourth served

²⁹ Lincoln to Grant, August 9, 1863. *Ibid.*, p. 174-5.

³⁰ *The War of the Rebellion, Series 1, Volume 39, part 1*, 857-858.

in many other communities and patrolled large areas, protecting communication and transportation lines. These patrols, along with picket duty, were a regular part of the routine of a soldier's life.

The Fourth shared the duties of post life at Columbus with the other units, all white, stationed there throughout the War. Because Columbus was a key transshipment point these duties frequently involved unloading riverboats and loading rail cars and then escorting the rail cars to their destination. Black and white troops shared in these duties, as they did picket and patrol, which, in the strongly pro-Confederate Purchase region, could be hazardous duty. On March 7, 1864 Colonel William H. Lawrence, commander at Columbus, reported that pickets from Company E had driven off 30 guerrillas who had tried to infiltrate their position. He further reported that their captain spoke very highly of his men's conduct.³¹ After deactivation many members of the Fourth returned to Columbus and its vicinity and settled there. There are numerous mentions of the men in the local office of the Freedmen's Bureau correspondence.³²

Conclusion

From one perspective the Fourth United States Heavy Artillery Colored operated entirely within the restrictive role first envisioned for African American troops. They did garrison duty in far western Kentucky and west Tennessee. They guarded railroad bridges, courthouse towns, and other places away from the main action. They served on picket duty and did all the things garrison troops would do at a major transportation node, loading and unloading steamboats and rail cars. They never fought in a battle that attracted much attention outside the immediate area. They hardly appear in the most recent work on black troops in the Civil War.³³ This should not diminish what they did, however, because of the simple fact that they served, and by all accounts served well, at whatever they were asked to do. The experience of the Fourth was perhaps more common than that of the regiments that fought in major engagements. The words that Col. T.R. Weaver, commander of the 119th Infantry USCT, used to describe their actions in combat near Fort Donelson, can serve as a final assessment of their service: "As for the colored troops, they behaved nobly. There was not a single instance in which they did not surpass my expectations of them."³⁴ They enlisted to claim their freedom and to give lie to those who said black men lacked the qualities of manhood necessary to fight and be free.

³¹ *Tennesseans in the Civil War: A Military History of Confederate and Union Units with Available Rosters of Personnel*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Civil War Centennial Commission, 1964), 370-1.

³² Columbus District Office of the Freedmen's Bureau, RG 105, National Archives, *passim*.

³³ Trudeau, *Like Men of War*.

³⁴ *The War of the Rebellion, Series 1, Volume 39, part 1*, 857-858.

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