

### After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans

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## Review

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**Shaffer, Donald R.** *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans.* University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 700613285

Postwar prominence

Former soldiers experienced elevated status

Donald R. Shaffer has written an important book that examines the lives of African-American Civil War veterans from the war's end to the turn of the 20th century. While the years of actual combat are receiving increasing scholarly attention, **After the Glory** addresses a significant void in the literature by presenting the first extended analysis of black veterans' postwar experiences. Shaffer makes extensive use of a wide range of sources, including published biographies, memoirs, early histories, scattered manuscript collections and Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) records, Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves, and, most impressively, Civil War pension files housed at the National Archives. Using a random sample of over 1,000 pension claims from black veterans or their survivors to complement assorted published descriptions of veterans' lives, Shaffer constructs a collective biography that augments statistical data (much of which is presented in a brief Appendix) with the rich personal details that many of the pension files contain. While the book makes a valuable contribution, some of its emphases and interpretations are open to question.

After a brief Introduction that effectively lays out the volume's argument and organization, Shaffer offers a Prologue and first chapter that respectively summarize black soldiers' wartime experiences and key facets of their postwar transition to civilian life. These sections are useful in providing basic background information for lay readers and nonspecialists, and in focusing readers' attention on Shaffer's overriding concern with black veterans' relationship with the concept of manhood. Indeed, so pervasive is this theme that one wonders why the word manhood did not somehow work its way into the

book's title. Pages 3-5 in the Introduction alone contain at least 22 uses of the word manhood, along with other references to manly power, manly service, manly status, and the like. Each subsequent chapter--dealing in turn with black veterans' general life patterns, political activism, attitudes toward family and marriage, access to social welfare benefits, comradeship with other veterans, and memories of the war--revolves around the author's contention that black veterans oriented their lives around their assertion of manhood and their quest to be recognized in society as men. More on this later.

The most valuable contribution of **After the Glory** is the enormous amount of detail Shaffer provides about black veterans and their involvement with various postbellum movements and institutions. One of the great challenges of African-American history is the relative paucity of information available about the experiences and attitudes of ordinary working class men and women. Shaffer makes exceptional use of the pension files and other sources in order to piece together a composite profile that is sensitive to the range and variations of experience among black veterans. While the data understandably revolve around black men, the lives of their wives and families also receive attention. Shaffer's discussion of postwar black family life allows us to see a complex and detailed picture of this central social institution during that critical transition out of a slavery that denied the very viability of black marriages and families. Scholars will benefit greatly from Shaffer's illumination of black veterans' efforts to establish social and economic stability for themselves and their families, their aspirations toward community leadership and political participation, their pursuit of pensions and unpaid bounties, and their multifaceted quest for inclusion as members of the community of Civil War veterans, as heroes in the nation's collective memory of the war, and more broadly as American citizens.

Shaffer is convincing in his assertion that black veterans, especially during the immediate postwar years, enjoyed an exalted status within African-American communities, and that they even found an increased level respect among many whites, most notably within the GAR. While discrimination was far from absent, this Union veterans' organization maintained a formally colorblind admission policy, and many black veterans were accepted in integrated posts, with some even holding office. Their status as veterans could open doors to political participation, and those who received pensions often experienced economic opportunities beyond what was typical for most black men. Shaffer's discussion of the complexities and ambiguities black veterans experienced in these areas indicates both his great respect for his subjects, and his success in avoiding the

trap of facile lionization. Black veterans are presented as complicated men facing multifaceted problems in a society that seemed to oppose their ambitions at every turn.

For all its accomplishments, **After the Glory** is problematic in two key respects. First, while Shaffer demonstrates that black veterans by and large tended to have greater economic and social standing in society compared with black nonveterans, he sometimes overextends that argument. In many instances, it is not altogether clear from the evidence provided that the leadership positions some veterans attained derived primarily from their military experience and not from a more complex array of factors, or that black veterans' postwar attitudes and experiences differed substantially from those of other African Americans. For example, on page 80, Shaffer argues that veterans were more reluctant to accept inferior treatment and more trained . . . in the skills of resistance than nonveterans. While this may have been the case, the assertion needs to be demonstrated, not simply presumed true. As Stephen Hahn has argued in his *A Nation under Our Feet* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2003), the tools of resistance and political empowerment were widely dispersed among rural black southerners, even during slavery. Whether speaking of emigration movements, general goals for race advancement, or the black church as a path to community leadership, black veterans are often discussed without reference to nonveterans in comparable circumstances. It is understandable that, since Shaffer's research concentrated on black veterans, he would direct his analysis primarily toward that group. My concern is that his presentation implies that black veterans were distinctive in ways that perhaps they were not. It seems that the author could have done more to acknowledge the fact that nonveterans often held similar views, took similar actions, or similarly established themselves as community leaders.

The second problematic feature of the book relates to the overarching theme of black manhood. Without question, the era's gendered constructions of citizenship and other forms of social, economic, and political power were central to black men's sense of their place in what they hoped would be a new postbellum order. Especially given the purposefully emasculating components of the slave regime, black men were greatly concerned with demonstrating their manhood and claiming the attendant privileges. Shaffer is right to make this a central part of his argument. Yet, again, it seems that the author overreaches. The author reads the rhetoric of manhood into virtually everything, giving the impression that little else was on black veterans' minds, even when the veterans

themselves never use those words. For example, on page 17 Shaffer quotes, and then comments on, black veteran John Sweeny stressing the benefit of education 'To make ourselves capable of business . . . to become a People capable of self support as we are Capable of being soldiers.' In other words [Shaffer adds], Sweeny and other black soldiers believed that in order to operate autonomously as men in the postwar period, they needed to learn how to read or write. . . . In their opinion, not to be educated was to be lesser men, dependent on others. On page 121 the author notes that black veterans aggressively sought the bounty money due them, and used it to better themselves and their families materially. In other words, they used it in ways that augmented their role of manly provider. On page 134 black author Pauli Murray is quoted, recalling that her veteran grandfather would walk a little straighter on the days when he picked up his pension check, understandably proud of the government's recognition of honored service and of the disability he suffered in his country's cause. Shaffer hastens to add his own commentary: In other words, the money paid to Fitzgerald made him feel more like a man. Black veterans are described on page 40 as seeking manly economic independence, rather than simply economic independence. These interpretations are not without validity, but they would be far more convincing had the subjects themselves spoken explicitly of manhood. As in these few examples, the overwhelming majority of the occasions when Shaffer invokes the rhetoric of manhood, the words are his own, not those of his historical subjects.

Despite these reservations, **After the Glory** is an important addition to the fields of African-American social history, gender studies, military history, and the late 19th century generally. Given that Shaffer is the first to explore the lives and experiences of black Civil War veterans with this degree of depth and detail, we should not be surprised to encounter disagreements regarding emphasis and interpretation. My raising these questions suggests the richness of the material in a work that should be read widely and pondered by scholars with a variety of interests and specializations.

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