

The 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops in the Civil War: a History and Roster

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Review

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Bryant, James *The 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops in the Civil War: A History and Roster*. McFarland, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-4878-2

Another in a Line of Important Studies of African American Soldiers in the Civil War

James K. Bryant II's slender *The 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops in the Civil War: A History and Roster* is a micro study of a unit that Thomas Morris Chester, the African American war correspondent for the *Philadelphia Press*, described as "a model regiment, and, wherever it has operated, it has been distinguished by the undaunted bravery of the men and the gallantry of its officers." In his book Bryant promises a fresh examination of the regiment's origins, organization, officer crops, military service, social history, and muster out.

Bryant's work joins an increasing number of regimental histories on the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) of varying originality and usefulness. These include James G. Hollandsworth Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience during the Civil War* (1995), Dorothy L. Drinkard, *Illinois Freedom Fighters: A Civil War Saga of the 29th Infantry, United States Colored Troops* (1998), Edward A. Miller Jr., *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored Infantry* (1998), James M. Paradis, *Strike the Blow for Freedom: The 6th United States Colored Infantry in the Civil War* (1998), Versalle F. Washington, *Eagles on Their Buttons: A Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War* (1999), Edward Longacre, *A Regiment of Slaves: The 4th United States Colored Infantry, 1863-1866* (2003), Stephen V. Ash, *Firebrand of Liberty: The Story of Two Black Regiments that Changed the Course of the Civil War* (2008), and Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era* (2008). Reid devotes considerable attention to Bryant's so-called "model regiment," the 36th USCT.

The unit first organized in July 1863, entering service in October 1863 as the 2nd North Carolina Colored Volunteer Infantry. The enlistees, largely ex-slaves recruited in Union-occupied sections of eastern North Carolina and southeastern Virginia, initially served in General Edward A. Wild's "African Brigade" (in February 1864 the regiment became federalized as the 36th USCT). In December 1863 the 2nd North Carolina Colored participated in an expedition, one that outraged citizens in North Carolina's northeastern counties, to liberate slaves, to fight guerrillas, and to secure black recruits. It later served at Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia. The unit eventually became part of the XVIII Corps and, after that, the XXV Corps. Approximately 51 percent of the 36th USCT's men listed North Carolina as their birthplace. Forty-three percent of the men were native Virginians. The average age of the regiment's enlisted men was 26. Most of the men had labored as agricultural slaves. Their white officers predominantly came from Massachusetts.

The 36th USCT fought in six engagements, most notably in Virginia. The regiment earned recognition at New Market Heights in September, and soon after at Fair Oaks and Darbytown Road, in October 1864. At the federal assault at New Market Heights, Private James Gardiner of Company I, a Virginia oysterman before the war, distinguished himself for gallantry. Among the first Union troops to enter the Rebels' defensive works, Gardiner bayoneted a Confederate officer who attempted to rally his troops. Gardiner's actions garnered him the Medal of Honor, one of twelve awarded to black soldiers from other regiments who fought in that bloody campaign.

The 36th USCT finished the war serving in the Petersburg and Richmond trenches. Significantly, it became one of the earliest federal units to enter the abandoned Confederate capital on April 3, 1865. During presidential Reconstruction it performed garrison duty in Texas and mustered out in October 1866 at Brazos Santiago, Texas. Following Appomattox ten of the regiment's enlisted men and three of its white officers served in the regular army.

Bryant frames the history of the 36th USCT as part of the larger transition of black men and their families from bondage to freedom. "Black southerners," he explains, "like those connected to the 36th USCT during the Civil War, would not be passive bystanders on the road to preserve the Union, but would set the stage of becoming active participants in the unprecedented struggle for freedom" (pp. 22-23). Whereas former slaves fought to secure their freedom, free black northerners entered the service to prove their worth and to gain equality.

The 36th USCT may have been a “model” regiment, but it also was in fact a quite typical black unit, suffering the same multilayered discrimination that all USCT regiments experienced, including institutionalized segregation, condescension and racism from white officers and enlisted men, inferior equipage and medical care, unequal pay, and a disproportionate amount of duty as fatigue laborers. For example, from February to July 1864 the 36th USCT guarded Rebel troops at the Union prisoner of war camp at Point Lookout, Maryland. In November 1864 the unit conducted fatigue labor, digging the Dutch Gap Canal. And the men of the 36th USCT repeatedly faced (false) accusations of “outrages” committed against defenseless white women.

Though in terms of argument or method *The 36th Infantry United States Colored Troops in the Civil War* adds little to the historiography of the USCT, Bryant nonetheless unearths a subject largely ignored by previous scholars—the “subtle tensions” that existed between northern USCT units (composed largely of free-born recruits) and those from the South (generally containing former slaves) (p. 78). For example, he draws insightful comparisons between the 5th USCT, recruited largely among free black Ohioans, and the former slaves who constituted the 36th USCT’s rank and file.

“While conflicts between black soldiers who had been born free recruited in the North and those who had been former slaves recruited in the South has [*sic*] not received adequate attention in Civil War scholarship,” Bryant notes, “it was nevertheless an important issue within the larger African–American community. Since black men in the North were recruited into the Union army in greater proportions to their population than those recruited in the South, most of the wartime views expressed by black Union soldiers often came from the perspective of free black men living in the North.” Bryant notes correctly that by privileging the voices of free black recruits, historians inadvertently pay short shrift to the ex-slave, “who by joining the Union army had to trust the welfare of his family to the Union military authorities in contraband and refugee camps often located very close to major battlefronts. Class differences between free men and freed men of color in the Union army added another dimension to how African Americans viewed their roles during the Civil War” (p. 78).

Aside from those insights, and from some useful detail he brings to light on the 36th USCT, Bryant’s book breaks little fresh ground. His declaration that “Not only has . . . [the] necessary link between military and social history been

ignored in scholarship dealing with the role of African Americans in the Civil War, but nineteenth-century social history itself has been neglected in general Civil War scholarship," suggests just how removed Bryant stands from today's best writings on the USCT and the emancipation process (p. 7).

John David Smith is the Charles H. Stone Distinguished Professor of American History at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His many books include, most recently, Seeing the New South: Race and Place in the Photographs of Ulrich B. Phillips (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013) [with Patricia B. Bixel], A Just and Lasting Peace: A Documentary History of Reconstruction (New York: Signet Classics/New American Library/Penguin, 2013), Race and Recruitment: Civil War History Readers, Volume 2 (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2013), Abraham Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), and The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013) [with J. Vincent Lowery].