

Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era

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Review

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Reid, Richard M. *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era.* The University of North Carolina Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9780807831748

Fighting for Freedom

While many excellent books recount the broad story of African American soldiers who served in the Union army during the American Civil War, Richard M. Reid's, *Freedom for Themselves*, is the first such account that focuses exclusively on the experience of black troops and their families in a single southern state. Broadly, the book is at once a history of Civil War era North Carolina as well as a penetrating study of the War's impact on the state's enslaved African American community. In more specific terms, of course, its primary subject is four regiments: the 35th, 36th, 37th United States Colored Troops and the 14th United States Colored Heavy Artillery, all formed essentially from fugitive slaves in eastern or coastal North Carolina who left their owners and joined the Union army. Intelligently written, and with clarity, the book lays bare not only the triumphs and tragedies of the soldiers, but also posits refreshingly new insight into what it really meant for African Americans ---"black refugees"--- to enlist and serve in the United States Colored Troops, both during and after the end of the Civil War.

Overall, this is not a book littered with uplifting tales of glory, heroism, and unbridled hope. But, on the other hand, neither is it a litany of stark disappointment, grievances, sacrifices, hardships and woe. Instead, in this brilliantly conceived and contextually engaging study, Reid shows that from the point of enlistment in 1863 until the last black recruit was mustered out in 1867, the men never became hopeless or dispirited; but that, at the same time, their daily lives were checkered as much with navigating some of the dangerous pitfalls of racial prejudice as it was with surviving the actual perils of physical combat and live enemy fire. In the main, the portrait here is one of black enlisted

men fighting simultaneously the vicissitudes of what may be loosely characterized as two different and separate Civil Wars, one against the Confederate army and another against racially prejudiced whites within and without the ranks of their own individual units. The book is remarkable, moreover, for the ways in which it highlights in masterful detail the distinct and fundamental objective of the black troops----which was always “Freedom for Themselves”---- but nevertheless concludes that in the final analysis, the “Union veterans from Southern states realized as least as many liabilities as benefits from their service” (xvii).

The experiences of the men in the four regiments varied widely. Only the 35th saw significant combat action and was involved in the Battle of Olustee; three were relocated away from North Carolina; the last of the four “was never properly conceived or trained for combat” (58); only the white leaders of the first three regiments, men selected because of their commitment to “abolitionism and temperance,” had a core of basic values that invariably had a measured positive impact on officer-troop rapport (213); the least recognized of the four units was the 14th United States Colored Artillery, which “fought no battles and won little praise” (187). It was demobilized in the fall of 1865. Of the four regiments, only the 37th remained in North Carolina until its troops were mustered out in the winter of 1867. The book provides separate chapters on each of the four regiments, another on the families of soldiers, and two on the location and activities of the regiments during the early years of Reconstruction.

There is quite a lot to admire in this book. Its treatment of the soldiers’ families highlight the intricate threads that held together in one common cause the general plight of all black refugees who sought freedom and a better life in the interior lines of the Union army. Reid provides clear and solid evidence on the dangers and risks that were always present, including capture by Confederates, former owners, or the failure to find hospitable accommodation in the ranks of white Union soldiers, many of whom had little if any sympathy for the hordes of black fugitives, contraband, or refugees. Not even black enlisted men, moreover, could boast of any support from local, state, and federal agencies that was generally available to their white comrades. Yet a point carefully documented is that despite the many obvious and unsettling disparities they faced, both black troops and their families, especially after 1862, did find in the Union army and its refugee camps “a wider range of occupational choices than had existed previously” (216). A strategy that is particularly valuable and promising is Reid’s focus on the refugee camps established at Roanoke Island,

New Bern, and surrounding port towns to explore the lot of black families whose relatives served in one of the four black regiments. Although Roanoke (often referred to as the Roanoke Colony) eclipsed in federal activity all such settlements for black refugees, New Bern was a very powerful "magnet" and had an estimated 6,000 individuals as early as 1863. Beginning in late 1862, Union army officials in the New Bern area adopted a policy of creating refugee camps from confiscated lands that was similar to practices in other parts of the South, particularly South Carolina and Georgia. In what was undoubtedly an exceptional case, the city of New Bern even set aside a thirty-acre farm and erected a facility that became known as the "U.S. House of Refuge" to provide aid to widows, orphans, and other indigents. While Reid's objective here is not comparative history, he nevertheless establishes a good probable basis for such a study, and concludes from his own more limited evidence that the camps in the New Bern vicinity did in fact "closely resemble camps elsewhere in the South" (221).

From refugee camps around New Bern to their post-War lives as military veterans, Reid draws on an impressive array of primary and secondary sources to trace the journey of black troops in North Carolina from enlistment in the early 1860s to their first full decade of freedom in the 1870s. And he shows in bold relief the stark contrast between their euphoric quest for freedom and the harsh reality of black life in a largely hostile and unrepentant South after the Confederate guns fell silent in April of 1865. All of the troops had been mustered out by 1868, but the 35th and 37th U.S. Colored Troops, both stationed in South Carolina and North Carolina respectively, were early and obvious targets of white Southerners who clung to the old order of their antebellum past. Across the region, the overall percentage of black troops jumped from about ten percent of the Union army at War's end to more than one-third of Federal troops policing the South in late 1865. Of North Carolina's four black regiments, Reid indicates that the "35th USCT was the most involved in efforts to help Southern blacks in the transition from slavery to free labor." (p. 257) Troops in the 14th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery ended their period of enlistment in 1865 and saw very little post-War action; and the men in the 36th U.S. Colored Troops were removed from Virginia in response to angry whites and dispatched to Texas, near the Rio Grande and away from any significant population of newly freed blacks. For many post-War North Carolina troops, therefore, service was linked more to matters such as isolation, illness, boredom, and loneliness than protecting freedmen from former owners and other proslavery white

Southerners.

By 1870, when at least 40 to 50 percent of the veterans could still be located, the men had experienced some upward mobility (most had enlisted as “illiterate slaves ”), resided in one of the state’s most prominent congressional districts, the “Black Second,” had developed new leadership skills and also improved their basic level of literacy. Yet for the vast majority of veterans, Reid found little evidence of significant political or economic success. Owing primarily to source limitations, and despite the careful use of U.S. census and pension records, reconstructing the lives of North Carolina’s Civil War veterans and their families is clearly difficult terrain. While not a major weakness, it probably comprises the single least developed section of Reid’s otherwise deeply researched and handsomely written 420-page book.

But the latter observation notwithstanding, Reid has nevertheless made an extremely valuable and welcome contribution to the literature on African Americans and the Civil War; and his superb model of scholarship may well become one of the best extant examples to be emulated by a new generation of Civil War historians.

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