

An We Ob Jubilee: The First South Carolina Volunteers

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Review

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I often tell my students to never go to the movies with a desire to be educated because essentially movies are made to entertain, not educate their audiences. On the other hand, well-made movies are often authentic reflections of an event, time or place that can be educational. The movie *Glory* is responsible for offering millions of Americans their first glimpse into the contributions of freedmen and the volunteer regiments of former slaves recruited to fight for the Union army. In one scene, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment is joined by the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers Regiment of contraband soldiers as they approach a set of homes in previously held Confederate territory. Upon the order of their commander, Colonel James Montgomery, the 2nd South Carolina Volunteer Regiment begins to ransack, pillage and burn the dwellings to the ground while physically assaulting a white woman. This display of deviant behavior as an undisciplined mob of marauders preying on the weak is, unfortunately, the image one receives of this historic military unit.

While there is no debate that the first all-black volunteer regiments were recently freed former slaves and not professional soldiers, according to John Saucer in *An We Ob Jubilee: The First South Carolina Volunteers* the successful metamorphosis from slave to soldier of these men allowed for the recruitment of hundreds of thousands of freemen and former slaves that changed the course of the Civil War. Dr. Seth Rogers, First South Carolina Volunteers, Regimental Surgeon believed that the African American Volunteers behaved admirably and with professionalism in the company of Whites. He wrote, "...a crowd of homeless (white) women and children are around me and I am glad to record that they prefer to be here with the poorest accommodations rather on the *Boston* or *Delaware* with nice staterooms [in the company of white Union soldiers]. Because black soldiers do not offer them insults and they do not feel secure with the white ones [soldiers]. It is established beyond all controversy, that black troops with worthy commanders are more controllable than white troops (267)."

An We Ob Jubilee is an extraordinary story of how African American soldiers were recruited, trained, and fought to free their subjugated brethren throughout the South. It also documents how abolitionist Union officers such as Major General David Hunter, Brigadier General Rufus Saxton, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and countless others attempted to manage the political complexities associated with arming former slaves, receiving official recognition of those units and gaining political support from President Abraham Lincoln and his administration. Saucer argues that the “creation of this unit [First South Carolina Volunteers], with its subsequent experiences, involved numerous people from different backgrounds, both soldier and civilian, enemy and supposed comrades-in-arms. There were glory seekers, war profiteers and individuals involved for idealistic and religious reasons. There was the professional soldier trying to do his duty and the politician riding the wave for further advancement (13).”

Moreover, although the subject of emancipation often fails to highlight the significance and influence of African American military service, the author clearly establishes that the military necessity to recruit 200,000 black soldiers and the citizenship implications of doing so, had a profound impact on the desire and timing to shift the focus of the war to the abolition of slavery. According to Saucer, “With this proclamation [Emancipation Proclamation], he [Abraham Lincoln] also knew he had changed the goal of the war forever and there could be no going back. Lincoln was also under no illusion that the Rebel states would refuse his ultimatum. For good or bad, depending upon one’s opinion, the goal of the war was now twofold, to restore the Union and also to destroy slavery as an institution in the eleven rebelling states as a means to help wage war.” (p. 80)

An We Ob Jubilee: The First South Carolina Volunteers is well-written and effective in documenting the complexities of the African American fight for the right to fight while highlighting corresponding support, resistance, political intricacies, military expediency and how the success of arming black men for the battlefield enhanced the fear and hatred of white Southerners in the decades to come. It is also successful in managing a balance of voices, perspectives, and motivations without omitting the presence of significant protagonists and critics of this social experiment. There are very few detectable flaws in this manuscript. In contrast, it was a little disconcerting to read an impactful quote or passage and learn that it did not include a citation and source evidence. Though it did not diminish the importance and

success of the study, generally brilliant history monographs are commonly associated with source evidence for the benefit of the reader.

Nonetheless, the evolution of self-discovery that John Saucer embarked upon in 1993 has evolved and manifested into a significant contribution to our understanding and appreciation for the fact that the American Civil War was not a '*White Man's War*.' Though African Americans had previously demonstrated their capabilities as non-citizen soldiers prior to this moment in history and certainly thereafter, *The First South Carolina Volunteers* and similar Black units organized in Louisiana and Kansas were able to provide the foundation to African American freedom and emancipation and fuel the struggle for civil rights and social equality well into the twentieth century.

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