

Searching for Black Confederates: The Civil War's Most Persistent Myth

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Countless anecdotes, narratives, rumors, half-truths, and myths have circulated since the Civil War. Perhaps the most persistent is the notion that thousands of free and enslaved black men fought as soldiers for the Confederate Army. So-called Black Confederates have been at the center of controversy and debate for decades, particularly in the realm of public opinion. Kevin Levin effectively challenges this myth in his recent book, *Searching for Black Confederates*. In an extensively researched and readable manner, Levin convincingly refutes the assertion that large numbers of African Americans served and fought as true soldiers for the Confederate States.

Levin traces the origin and development of the black Confederate soldier myth from the years after the war to its present iteration. Just as Southern slave apologists created the image of the loyal obedient slave, so too did former Confederates perpetuate the image of the loyal Confederate slave. Later, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s pushed Confederate heritage groups to attempt to transform the war from one about slavery to that of a Southern rights movement. Levin shows how claims that the Confederate government recruited significant numbers of black men into the army emerged in response to the shift in popular memory of the Civil War. The Sons of Confederate Veterans and other Confederate heritage organizations hoped to demonstrate that if black men, free and enslaved, fought in Confederate ranks then the war could not have been fought to abolish slavery. Their concept of black Confederates provided a platform to separate the "Lost Cause" from its racial foundation. The myth of the Black Confederate soldier was thus part of a desire to reconfigure the war and its causes.

Levin argues that much of the confusion today centers on the failure to understand the critical roles that blacks did occupy in the Confederate war effort. Levin understandably spends a significant portion of his book on a very real constituency, that of the camp slave or body servant. Indeed, five of the six chapter titles in *Searching for Black Confederates* contain the term "camp slaves." Camp servants, however, were not soldiers. As Levin correctly explains through an exhaustive analysis of government and military records, the Confederacy refused to allow black slaves to become soldiers in the army for most of the war. It was not until just before its defeat that the Confederate government allowed black men to join their armies.

As Levin contends, a mixture of deliberate falsehoods and misunderstandings or misinterpretation of the sources provide the basis of the Black Confederate soldier myth. In particular, applications for state pensions of former camp servants have been misunderstood and misrepresented as evidence that free and enslaved black men received pensions for service they rendered as Confederate soldiers. In a thorough analysis, Levin demonstrates that a closer look at these documents reveals that the pensions were for their actions as camp servants not as soldiers.

A photograph often used to propagate the idea that blacks served as soldiers for the Confederacy is that of Silas Chandler and his owner, both men in uniform and flaunting weapons of war. As Levin reveals, the true relationship of the subjects in that photograph is that of master

and slave, a slave who acted as his master's body servant during the war. Silas never served as a soldier in the Confederate Army. Levin uses this photograph as the front cover of *Searching for Black Confederates*. Given that Levin's objective is to dispute the idea represented in the Chandler image, perhaps the photograph on page 31 would have been a better representation for Levin's cover page. This photograph, of Lt. J. Wallace Comer of the 57th Alabama and Burrell, his camp slave, depicts the clear distinction between the white Confederate soldier in uniform and Burrell in Confederate attire but not a soldier's uniform per se. Unlike Chandler, Burrell displays no weapons. Burrell is decidedly not a Confederate soldier.

As Levin demonstrates, the internet has exacerbated the myth. Levin does an excellent job of walking the reader through the process whereby a genuine photograph from the Civil War has been altered, manipulated, and turned into propaganda supporting the idea of Black Confederate soldiers. He uses as an example a photograph of black Union soldiers taken in 1864 in a Philadelphia studio that has been manipulated by proponents of the Black Confederates myth and used as a photograph of black Confederate soldiers in the Louisiana Native Guard. Levin leaves no question that the black Confederate soldier has been fabricated into historical falsehood through an intentional misleading of the public.

In debunking any myth one must take care not to go too far in the other direction either. Myths generally have some thread of truth to them. Although women were not *soldiers* in the Civil War, there were female soldiers. A small number of women did disguise themselves and join the Union and Confederate armies. *Searching for Black Confederates* does not acknowledge that any black men fought as soldiers in the Confederate Army, but there were black men, albeit an extremely small number, who fought for the Confederacy. One such man was John Buckner, grandson of William Ellison, born a slave. Freed as a young man, Ellison became a wealthy plantation owner, cotton gin maker, and slave owner. On March 27, 1863, Buckner enlisted as a private in the 1st South Carolina Artillery and was later wounded in action on July 12, 1863, at Battery Wagner (Confederate Military Records). As historians Michael Johnson and James Roark note, Buckner's family reputation made Buckner an honorary white man as a soldier.

By describing the evolution of the Black Confederate myth, Levin's book is a reflection of how Americans understand their history. From the mischaracterization of black camp servants as soldiers, so-called photographic evidence of black Confederate soldiers, and pension records created after the war, Levin provides a proper historical context to the narrative, allowing the reader to see how over time the truth became distorted.

Sharon A. Roger-Hepburn is chair of the history department at Radford University. She is the author of *Crossing the Border: A Free Black Community in Canada*, recipient of the Albert B. Corey Award. She is currently working on two projects: *Dear Mother: The Civil War Letters of Private John Lovejoy Murray, 102nd United States Colored Troops* and *Always Brave*, a regimental history of the 102nd United States Colored Troops during the Civil War