

Civil War Treasures: Black Soldiers in the Civil War and Elite White Union-Sympathizing Women

Melissa Smith

Louisiana State University, msmith11@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Smith, Melissa (2021) "Civil War Treasures: Black Soldiers in the Civil War and Elite White Union-Sympathizing Women," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.2.02

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss2/2>

Feature Essay

Smith, Melissa

Summer 2021

Recently, the Manuscripts Department at LSU Libraries Special Collections made some noteworthy acquisitions to complement its Civil War holdings.

Among the acquisitions is the 25th United States Colored Infantry Regiment, Company H Descriptive Book, Mss. 5374, which contains lists and registers of commissioned officers, non-commissioned officers, men transferred, men discharged, deaths, and deserters and a descriptive roll of Company H. The roll lists names, physical characteristics (including complexion), birthplace, occupation, enlistment information, and general remarks about company soldiers. Going through the book, one can see where soldiers mustered in as they traveled from Pennsylvania through the Deep South, gaining recruits primarily in Alabama.

The 25th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment was organized and trained near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in January 1864 under the command of colonel Gustavus A. Scroggs. The regiment served mainly in Louisiana and Florida and was mustered out of service in December 1865. This book will be of great use for families performing genealogical research and those studying African American regiments during the war.

Another war-related item to land in the Manuscripts Department is the United States Army 6th Infantry Regiment Muster Roll, Mss. 4695. This Civil War muster roll for Company I of the First Louisiana Colored Troops, originally assembled as the Corps d'Afrique out of the 1st Louisiana Native Guard Infantry, the oldest African American Union regiment to form in Louisiana. In April 1863, the U.S. War Department sent Brigadier General Daniel Ullman to New Orleans to raise a brigade of African American troops. Soon thereafter, Major General Nathaniel P. Banks, while in Opelousas, Louisiana, proposed the formation of what would be eventually called the Corps d'Afrique. Under the command of Colonel Alban B. Botsford, the regiment organized on September 4, 1863, at Port Hudson.

This muster roll records payroll for July and August 1863, just a month after the unit was organized. Captain Edward Carter was in command, and though the unit is noted as having

"good" military appearance, their arms are noted only as "fair" and their clothing and accoutrements as "very much worn." The roll lists 66 men enlisted as privates, as well as a list of nineteen dead, seven discharged, and five deserted. Those who have died are listed with causes, and ten of the nineteen men are noted as having been killed in action at engagements "before Port Hudson," with the date noted. Almost all the men have signed their receipt of pay by simply making their mark, an X, above their name. Excepting the captain and two lieutenants, pay was \$14 for the month.

Rank and file soldiers are listed by their names, rank, time and location of enrollment many committing to a term of service for three years, time and location mustered into service, and pay roll information. For example, Charles Baptiste and Teamster Anthony Coffee mustered in at New Orleans, Joshua Brown in St. Mary Parish, and Thomas Redwood at Ft. Jackson. Most soldiers enrolled and were mustered in at New Orleans, but that others were coming on board at Baton Rouge, St. Mary Parish, Bayou Ramos, Fort Jackson, Fort St. Leon, and Thompson Creek.

The verso of the muster roll also contains lists of the deceased, discharged, deserted, and resigned. The unit mustered out of service January 6, 1866.

What makes this roll so remarkable is that it offers enough information about someone from the Corps d'Afrique that it opens the door to research within census counts and city directories. For example, the aforementioned Charles Baptiste survived the war, returned home to New Orleans and his wife Rosalie, would spend his career as a laborer in the cotton industry, and lived out the remainder of his life from his home on Dumaine Street in the Treme neighborhood. He died in his late 70s in 1924 and is buried at Chalmette National Cemetery.

Also among the correspondence recently received, the Mary Duncan Letter, Mss. 5378, stands out as an excellent example of a white woman seeking protection for her family's properties in Louisiana and Mississippi during the war and a reflection of Unionist sympathies from families with holdings in the Deep South. Mary Duncan, a northern woman who was the wife of Henry P. Duncan of Mississippi and daughter-in-law to Dr Stephen Duncan, devoted herself to the Union cause while protecting family assets from her perch on Fifth Avenue in New York.

The letter to Major General Henry Halleck, General-in-Chief of the United States Army, seeks protection for her father-in-law Stephen Duncan's plantations and lands in Natchez, Mississippi and Franklin, Louisiana, from Confederate forces and U.S. Army confiscation

practices. She mentions that the Duncan family members are Unionists and claims that her family's bales of cotton have been destroyed by Confederate forces and that U.S. Army forces have depredated the Duncan family's nine plantations, causing them to lose "many negroes," and her brother-in-law Stephen Duncan, Jr.'s house. There is no indication of whether or not Major General Henry Halleck responded to her request for protection.

Each item brings a unique perspective to the war experience, whether it's the comments of a high-born woman in New York to those fighting for the rights of African Americans and the enslaved.

Melissa Smith is Assistant Curator of Manuscripts at LSU's Hill Memorial Library.