

Black History Month



1st Missouri Regiment of Colored Infantry

This Union army regiment was organized in St. Louis in December 1863 after the signing of Order No. 135 authorizing the recruitment of "all Negroes, free or slaves" after the fall harvest. Renamed the 62nd Regiment United States Colored Troops, the unit was sent south in June 1864, first to Louisiana and then the Rio Grande in Texas, where it fought in the Battle of Palmito Ranch. The soldiers, who were learning to read and write, decided to create a school for free blacks, and this led to the establishment of the Lincoln Institute (later Lincoln University) in Jefferson City, Missouri. The Soldiers' Memorial (above), a bronze sculpture by Ed Dwight, was dedicated on the historic black college campus in 2007.

Image courtesy: Waymarking.com

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Colored Battery at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

This photograph shows the men of the Independent Battery, U.S. Colored Light Artillery, positioned in front of the guard house at Fort Leavenworth. The battery, organized in June 1864, was one of just a handful of Union units led by African American officers. Its commander, Captain H. Ford Douglas, worked tirelessly to better the conditions under which his men served. Of the 208 enlisted men in the battery, more than 160 were recruited from Leavenworth. Others came from Fort Scott, Kansas, and the Wyandotte and Quindaro communities in what is now Kansas City, Kansas. As the federal troops occupied the South, similar black batteries were organized in Arkansas, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Image courtesy: Kansas Historical Society

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The flag of the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry

This blue silk regimental flag was carried into battle by the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry, the Civil War's first African American regiment from a northern state. The unit first saw action at Island Mound, Missouri, in October 1862, but established its reputation at Honey Springs, Oklahoma, in July 1863. There the 1st Kansas held the center of the Union line, moving to within 50 paces of the Confederates and exchanging fire for 20 minutes until the rebels broke and fled. This success encouraged federal commanders to increasingly rely on black troops. During the war the 1st Kansas suffered 354 casualties. The flag bears the names of eight battles, including Baxter Springs and Cabin Creek. In 1864 the regiment was redesignated the 79th United States Colored Regiment.

Image courtesy: Kansas Historical Society

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William D. Matthews

First Lieutenant William Dominick Matthews was an African American officer of the Independent Battery, U.S. Colored Light Artillery, at Fort Leavenworth. Prior to the Civil War Matthews, a free black man, operated a Leavenworth boarding house which became a stop on the Underground Railroad. Assisted by Daniel R. Anthony (brother of women's rights advocate Susan B. Anthony), Matthews helped many Missouri slaves escape to Kansas and other free states. With the outbreak of the war Matthews recruited his fellow African Americans into the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry and helped protect eastern Kansas from General Sterling Price's Confederate invasion of Missouri, which climaxed with the Battle of Westport in October 1864.

Image courtesy: Kansas Historical Society

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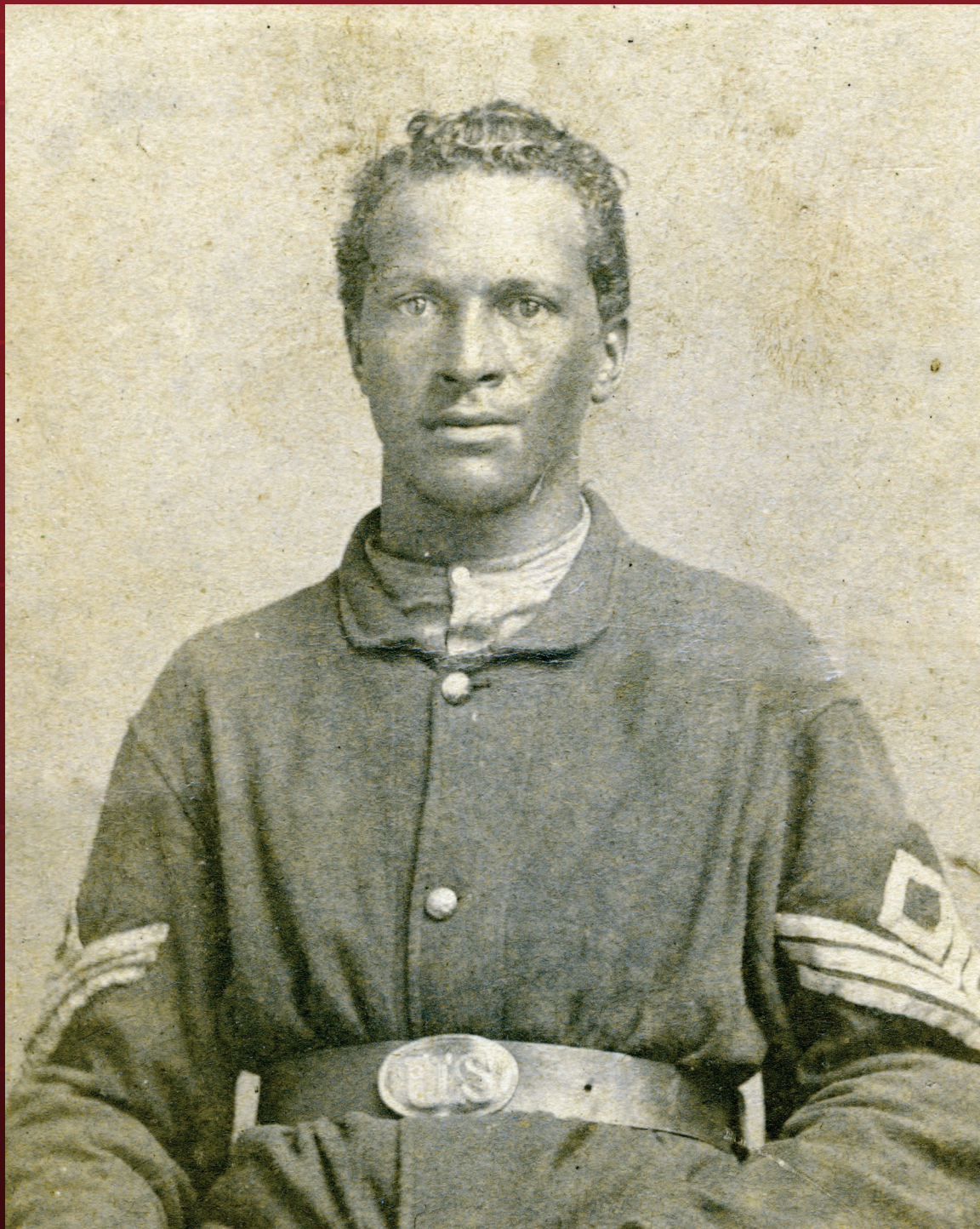


Island Mound

This illustration from the March 14, 1863, issue of *Harper's Weekly* magazine – titled “A Negro Regiment in Action” – depicts the Battle of Island Mound, Missouri, in October 1862. This series of skirmishes with Confederate guerrillas was unremarkable in terms of casualties (on the Union side only 8 were killed and 11 wounded) but the incident marked the first time in the Civil War that African American soldiers engaged in combat. The bravery shown by the troops of the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry received national coverage in the newspapers of the day and undermined the widespread belief that blacks were incapable of fighting. The success of the 1st Kansas helped convince President Abraham Lincoln that the time was right to issue his Emancipation Proclamation.

Image courtesy: Kansas Historical Society

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Sergeant William Messley

First Sergeant William A. Messley (also known as Measley) of Company C, 62nd United States Colored Troops, posed for this portrait shortly after his enlistment in late 1863. The 62nd originated as the 1st Regiment Colored Infantry, Missouri Volunteers. Messley and his fellow troopers spent most of the war in Louisiana and Texas, guarding the Gulf Coast and preventing Southern efforts to export cotton, a cash crop on which the Confederacy relied for income. Their commander, Brigadier General William A. Pile, described the 62nd as “a well drilled and disciplined regiment and well fitted for field service.” However, Pile’s request that black troops replace some of his ineffective white units was rejected by his superiors.

Image courtesy: Wilson’s Creek National Battlefield