

Acknowledging Black Confederates

by Jodie Gilmore

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Despite differing definitions of "soldier" and questions about motivation, the historical record is clear: Many black Americans supported the Southern cause.

*In 1861, Company H, 14th Georgia Infantry, double-stepped along the road, headed for northern Virginia to meet the Union "invaders." Marching along with the men, drummer Bill Yopp kept up a smart, inspiring beat that lifted the men's hearts and kept their feet moving strongly.

*After the desperate 1862 battle of Sharpsburg, Bill Doings became separated from his cooking utensils. Knowing his Confederate comrades needed bread to keep on the march, Doings threw convention to the winds. Mixing water with flour right in the flour barrels, he baked loaf after loaf on the river bank, using fence rails and barrel staves as fuel.

*In 1863, after many members of a Tennessee regiment had fallen in battle, Chaplain "Uncle Lewis" read sincere and earnest eulogies to his fallen comrades, and prayed over the wounded with unsurpassed zeal.

*In 1997, a young man named Anthony Cohen, proud of his family's Confederate heritage, was sworn in as a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV).

Sounds like standard Civil War history, perhaps, and it is. But in each of these cases, the men were not white, but black.

Keeping the History Alive

Anthony Cohen, a prominent Civil War historian, has both white and black ancestors who fought for the Confederacy. In particular, Cohen relates the story of one black forebear by the name of Sheftall, who served as a Confederate drummer. Sheftall was captured and taken to New York as a prisoner of war. But when he was released prior to the war's end, he returned to the South and joined the military again.

"The truth was that blacks, just like whites, served for various reasons," Cohen told *The New American*. He reminds us that both the North and South had a draft, and that many soldiers on both sides were made to go to war. But Cohen also makes the point that "these weren't Africans who were fighting, they were Southern-born Americans fighting for the only homeland they knew."

Although their roles and motivations differed widely, black Confederates appeared to have one thing in common: pride in their service to what they considered their country. As late as 1933, blacks as well as whites attended Confederate veterans reunions. This was not an anomaly at that time. In 1876, Colonel William Sanford, speaking at a reunion of the 7th Tennessee Cavalry, gave this tribute to black Confederates: "And to you our colored friends, we say

welcome. We can never forget your faithfulness in the darkest hours of our lives. We tender to you our hearty respect and love, for you never faltered in duty nor betrayed our trust."

Nelson Winbush, like Cohen, is also a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Nelson's grandfather, a Tennessee slave who served as a forager with General Nathan Bedford Forrest, attended some 39 reunions after the war. Peruse the photographic record of the late 1800s and early 1900s Confederate veterans reunions, and you will see that Winbush's grandfather wasn't an exception to the rule. Instead, you will see numerous aging black faces among the aged white faces.

Acknowledging, and developing pride in, their Confederate legacy is becoming more common among black Americans. But sometimes other family members are not comfortable with this. In 1999, Katheryne Hamilton asked the SCV to honor her great-grandfather, Jason Boone, who was a freeborn black man who served as a laborer for three years with the 41st Virginia Infantry. Although some family members were appalled at having their ancestor's Confederate history spotlighted, Hamilton disagreed. "We can't judge 1865 by the standards of 1999," Hamilton told the Washington Post. "Jason marched under that flag [the Confederate battle flag]. He wasn't ashamed. He was proud of it. I can't be in the way of that." The SCV provided an official military stone for Boone's grave, which reads in part, "Jason Boone gave valuable aid to Co. K, 41 VA, Inf., CSA, 1831, 1936, age 105, free born." Boone received a pension from the state of Virginia for his service to the Confederate cause. He was not alone: Virtually every Southern state's pension records include pensions paid to blacks for their service during the Civil War.

While Cohen and Hamilton have taken primarily an academic interest in their Confederate heritage, others take a more active role. Consider Willie Levi Casey Jr. from North Carolina. A U.S. Army major in his professional life, he is Private Casey of the 6th North Carolina State Troop during his Civil War re-enactment activities. Casey does not see any contradictions in a 21st-century black man re-enacting as a 19th-century soldier in gray. People who have seen Casey in his gray uniform and learned of his SCV membership have asked him, "Do you support slavery?" Casey's reply: "No. I support preserving Southern history and telling it like it is."

Central Issue Was Secession

The confusion between acknowledging Confederate heritage and supporting slavery has its roots in the myth that slavery was the central issue in the Civil War, when, as a matter of fact, it wasn't. For the majority of the war, the central issue was whether the Southern states had a right to secede from the Union. Charles Kelly Barrow, the SCV's historian-in-chief, points out that the Civil War had its beginnings in economics. "It was about money and government control," said Barrow, referring to the fact that, if Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia were allowed to secede, the federal government would lose a significant chunk of tariff revenue.

Slavery didn't become a paramount issue until well into the war, when President Lincoln, in an attempt to economically cripple the South, issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which applied only to those areas under Confederate control. Remember also that at the outbreak of the war, "runaway blacks" caught by Union troops were returned to their Southern owners. (For more information on the North's claim to being the slaves' savior, see the sidebar, "North Good, South Bad, Not So Simple.")

In addition, a thorough study of the mid-1800s Southern social and political structure reveals that slavery was on its way out in the South, without Lincoln's interference. For example, by 1860 there were more free blacks in the South than in the North, according to Barrow. (He also likes to remind people that Jim Crow laws in the North predate those enacted in the South.) Barrow has helped compile two excellent books on black Confederates and has performed a staggering amount of historical research, which indicates that about 87 percent of the existing slave narratives from the Civil War period speak kindly of their Southern homeland.

Although Confederate officers such as Robert E. Lee and Pat Cleburne supported officially mustering blacks into the Confederate Army, the Confederate Congress was initially reluctant to do so. They eventually decided that winning the war for Southern independence preempted preserving slavery, and offered to free slaves who served for the South. But this decision came too late to affect the course of the war. Appomattox followed only a few months later.

Southerner First, Slave Second

Many of the blacks present in the Confederate forces were slaves; many of the others, though freemen, had been drafted. But it appears that being there "by force" did little to dim their enthusiasm for the Southern cause. (Many Union soldiers, both black and white, were also in service "by force," through conscription. And, of course, many white Confederates were conscripted as well.)

There are several reported instances of black sharpshooters making life miserable for Union soldiers. In April 1862, during the siege of Yorktown, Virginia, a black Confederate sharpshooter perched in a tree was reported by Union soldiers to have "done more injury to our men than any dozen of his white compeers." When this sharpshooter was offered the chance to surrender by a Union advance, he refused. Less than an hour later, he paid for his dedication to the Southern cause with his life.

The same dedication, from both slaves and free blacks, is a recurrent theme in contemporary accounts. Slaves, captured by the Union forces, often made their way back to their regiments at the earliest opportunity.

Certainly, the Union didn't understand this behavior and was frustrated by it. The expected insurrections on plantations never materialized; instead, both slaves and free blacks organized balls to raise money for the war effort. Writing in 1861, the Northern publication Exchange stated: "The war has dispelled one delusion of the abolitionists. The Negroes regard them as enemies instead of friends.... [T]hey have jeered at and insulted our troops, have readily enlisted in the rebel army and on Sunday, at Manassas, shot down our men with as much alacrity as if abolition had never existed." In the same vein, the Providence Post reported in 1862: "Negroes as a mass have shown no friendship to the Union, have neither sought to achieve their liberty nor to subdue their masters.... Their sympathies are with the rebels."

In the Charlotte Daily Bulletin, Bell Wiley wrote of a slave named Titus, who was captured at Gettysburg. When pressed to join the Union army, Titus refused to "fight' ginst my government." In the same way, a black man imprisoned on Johnston's Island retorted to Union officers, "Sah, what you want me to do is desert. I ain't no deserter and down South, where we live, deserters always disgrace their families. I'se got a family doen home, sah, and if I do what you tell me, I will be a deserter and disgrace my family, and I am never going to do that."

One slave, assigned to building breastworks in Mobile, summed up the underlying theme behind many of the blacks who supported the Confederate cause: "If you would give us guns, we will fight for these works, too. We would rather fight for our own white folks than for strangers."

Serving in Key Support Roles

It is true that almost no blacks were on the muster rolls of the Confederate Army, since the Confederate Congress delayed until 1865 the approval for official participation of blacks in the army. However, their presence cannot be denied. Several Southern state militia regiments contained blacks, both slave and freemen. For example, in June 1861 the Tennessee legislature authorized their governor to enlist for service "all male persons of color between the ages of fifteen and fifty." In 1862, Alabama authorized colored militia units.

Most blacks serving in the Confederate forces were not officially armed and sent to the front. Instead, they served primarily in support roles, such as musicians, teamsters, cooks, bodyguards, chaplains, nurses, and laborers. These roles, far from being incidental, were central to the Confederate war effort. Frontline troops must eat; forts must be protected; supplies must be hauled; and the sick and wounded must be tended. And, as historian Wayne Austerman, Ph.D., points out, it is "not a large step from tapping a drum to drawing a ramrod."

In fact, J. B. Briggs, captain and assistant quartermaster of 4th Regiment Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry, reported that the 40 colored men in his regiment had gradually armed themselves and some were even better equipped than their white compatriots. According to Briggs, each boasted one or two revolvers and a fine carbine or repeating rifle. When Southern forces marched through Frederick, Maryland, Lewis Steiner (a member of the U.S. Sanitary Commission) noted that "over 3000 Negroes must be included [in the count of the Southern forces]. They had arms, rifles, muskets, sabers, bowie-knives, dirk, etc."

Dr. Arthur Bergeron Jr., through his historical research, has found and identified 15 black soldiers from Louisiana serving in white Confederate units. One of his books, *Louisiana's Free Men of Color in Gray*, is about the Louisiana Native Guards, a state militia unit composed entirely of persons of color, most of them fairly well-to-do mulattoes and Creoles.

Some Union accounts record that "two black Confederate regiments not only fought but showed no mercy to the Yankee dead or wounded." Similarly, Erwin Jordan's book, *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*, cites eyewitness Union accounts of "armed blacks in rebel columns bearing rifles, sabers, and knives and carrying knapsacks and haversacks."

A Question of Why

Of course, some black Southerners eventually joined the Northern war effort. But many did not. How can this be, with slavery still existing in the South? Why would a captured Confederate black man sneak back across Union lines, turning his back on freedom? And why would slaves support the Southern war effort, particularly after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation?

Looking back over 150 years, it is difficult for our contemporary minds to grasp the answer. Certainly the nuances and complexities of Southern social structure were a major factor. J. H. Segars writes in *Black Confederates*: "The bonds between southern families and their African-American allies are not easily understood.... In many instances deep devotion and affection

transcended the slave-master relationship." Captain J. W. Williams, Company D, 5th Alabama Infantry, wrote of the slaves in service in his Company, "Their devotion to their masters when they were sick or wounded was beautiful to see." As Williams passed through a hospital in Richmond, he commented that in every ward (of which there were about 30 in that hospital) "sat two or three of those kind, sympathetic faces, watching over and caring for every want of their young masters."

J.K. Obatala, an expert on the roles of black Americans in history, commented in a 1979 Smithsonian article that "the Rebel black seems to have had at least a primitive, instinctive feeling that his fortunes were tied inextricably to those of the South."

Free blacks held property (yes, there were many instances of blacks owning other blacks as slaves). They had attained a certain standing in their communities and were as unwilling as any white plantation owner to see the "Northern invaders" trample their property or homeland. The Louisiana Native Guards stated in a letter to the New Orleans Daily Delta:

The free colored population love their home, their property, their own slaves and recognize no other country than Louisiana, and are ready to shed their blood for her defense. They have no sympathy for Abolitionism; no love for the North, but they have plenty for Louisiana.

As succinctly stated by Harvey Wish, an author from the 1930s, the antebellum South was a home worth fighting for and living in for the majority of the blacks who were born and lived there.

Southerners at Heart

To ignore the very real participation of black Confederates in the Civil War is to overly simplify a complex and nuanced conflict. As the re-enactor Willie Casey points out, these were people whose ancestors had been living in the South for 150 years. They may have been Southerners by force, admitted Casey, but they were Southerners. Exactly how many blacks served in the Confederate forces, and whether the majority of them served with or without guns on their shoulders, is not the central point. As historian Charles Kelly Barrow said, black Confederates, "whether on the front lines or behind the lines, were not exempt from dysentery, being rained on, shot at, or homesickness." In other words, they suffered the same hardships as the white Confederates in their regiments.

Perhaps the best representation of the role of black Confederates is the Confederate monument at Arlington National Cemetery, designed in 1914. Included in this memorial is a black Confederate soldier, not marching behind, not being dragged, but marching in step, with his Confederate regiment,

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