

African Americans and the U.S. Civil War

On the black soldiers who fought for the Union, 80 percent of whom were from the South

"By the end of the Civil War, nearly 200,000 black men had served in either the Union army or the Union navy, and that alone was an enormous military assistance to the Union at a time when volunteering had fallen drastically and when there was a great deal of hostility to the draft. So these 200,000 men significantly contributed to giving the Union army the volume, the bulk, the size that they needed to cope with their Confederate opponents, and that gave the union the power, ultimately, to overwhelm the opposition."

On the response among blacks to Union recruiting efforts

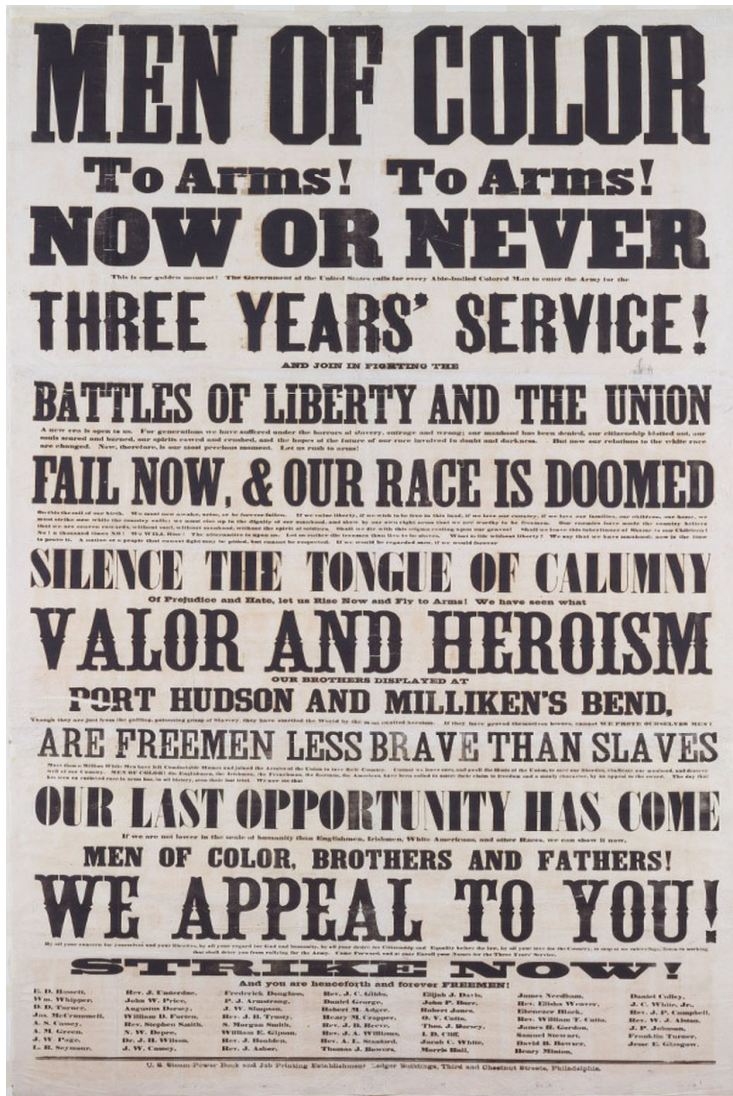
A Union army recruiting poster aimed at black men.

The Library Company of Philadelphia

"There were at least some slaves who still believed what others had been telling them during most of the war, namely ... 'This is a white man's war, stay out.' ... And others, because of having just been freed and finally given the opportunity to live the life of free men and women, didn't relish the prospect of immediately being separated from their families and possibly killed before they could realize the benefits of that freedom. But very, very large numbers responded very enthusiastically to the chance finally to, in great numbers, take organized collective action in pursuit of the freedom of their people."

On the radicalizing effect fighting in the South had on many Union soldiers

"Large numbers of Northern whites, who may previously have had no sympathy for blacks, are, by virtue of moving into ever more deeply the land of slavery, being confronted with the brutalities of slavery and being confronted with the fact that much pro-slavery propaganda that they have been hearing for decades by Northern allies of the slave owners are lies, and that this system is pretty horrible. And many of them start writing in letters home that, contrary to their original assumptions, they have now become, in effect, abolitionists and they will never tolerate slavery again."



African-American Faces of The Civil War

by Claire O'Neill

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Source:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2012/11/16/163887404/african-american-faces-of-the-civil-war>



This rare portrait shows an identified Confederate noncommissioned officer, Sgt. Andrew Martin Chandler (left), and his named slave, Silas Chandler (right). It is the only Confederate photograph in the book by Rod Coddington, *African American Faces of the Civil War*. Born into slavery, Silas "was one of thousands of slaves who served as [body servants] during the war," writes Coddington.

The impulses to collect and to doodle have always been in Ron Coddington's blood. As a kid, it was baseball cards. As a teen, he took an interest in old flea market photos — and simultaneously became "obsessed," he says, "with learning to draw the human face."

[African American Faces of the Civil War](#)

An Album

by [Ronald S. Coddington](#) and [J. Matthew Gallman](#)

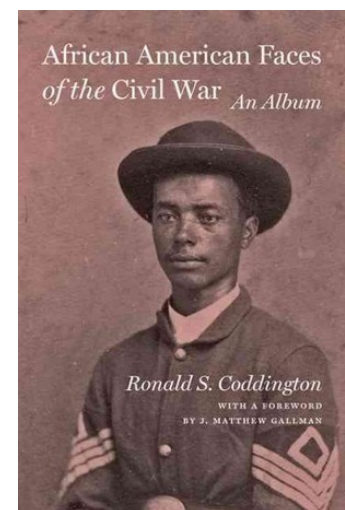
More on this book:

- [NPR reviews, interviews and more](#)

That explains a lot. Coddington kicked off a career in journalism as an illustrator doing caricatures — eventually growing into the position of art director at *USA Today*. These days, he's the head of the data visualization and multimedia team at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. And he's still collecting.

"I don't know what my problem is," he says with a laugh on the phone. "When I went to college, I didn't have a lot of belongings, but the one thing I brought in the front seat with me was a cigar box with my collection in it."

These photos are called *cartes de visite*: little portrait cards that were easily reproduced and therefore immensely popular for decades — especially during the Civil War. And Coddington's obsessive collecting has yielded three books so far: *Faces of the Civil War*, *Confederates of the Civil War* and, most recently, *African American Faces of the Civil War*.



Finding these images is a major investigative undertaking. Because for Coddington, finding the photo isn't enough.

"It's more than just a face," he says.

The *story* is what's important — and those details are incredibly rare. So what makes Coddington's collection special are the biographical details that accompany the images. If you take the time to read their stories, the individuals spring to life — well after they've died.

The Picture Show asked Coddington to choose 10 highlights from his most recent book. But you can really dig into the rest of the collection [on this website](#).



“We Will Not Degrade the Name of an American Soldier”

On December 14, 1863, Sgt. Maj. James Trotter and the rest of the colored Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Infantry assembled for an announcement regarding their pay. The federal government would not be giving give them the promised soldier's salary of thirteen dollars per month but ten dollars a month, a sum paid to black freedmen who worked for the army as laborers and cooks. (1) The state of Massachusetts planned to make up the balance.

The regimental historian reported, “Several non-commissioned officers and privates expressed their views and those of their comrades, in a quiet and proper manner, the remarks of Sergt.-Major Trotter being especially good.” They declared that, on principle, they would accept no pay unless they were given the usual soldier's pay.

After an initially frustrating search for identifiable Civil War portraits, Coddington finally came across this image of William Wright of the 114th U.S. Colored Infantry. That find inspired his continued hunt for similar images.

Courtesy of Ron Coddington





Corp. Wilson Weir was a slave when he joined the Union army at age 21. "My initial attraction to old photos was purely aesthetic, and this still continues to be the dominant motivating factor," writes Coddington. "This *carte de visite* meets and exceeds my criteria. ... He wears his hat at a jaunty angle, perhaps reflective of his character."

Collection of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Corp. Henry Gaither. "One of the few free men of color in this book when the war began, Gaither and his regiment, the 39th U.S. Colored Infantry, fought as hard as any white organization in the Union army," writes Coddington. "This is one of my favorite images in the book."

Collection of the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum



Folks: More pictures of all kinds of soldiers from the Civil War can be accessed here:

<http://facesofthecivilwar.blogspot.com/>