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Amistad

By: Purdy, Elizabeth R.

On 28 June 1839 the schooner *La Amistad* sailed from Havana, Cuba, en route to Puerto Príncipe, carrying fifty-three Africans, including four children. These so-called slaves were in fact free Africans who had been stolen from their homes in West Africa and brought to Cuba. Two Spanish planters, José Ruiz and Pedro Montes, purchased them, gave them Spanish names, and falsely labeled them as native Cubans. After the schooner's cook jokingly told them that they were to be “killed, salted, and cooked,” the Africans decided to revolt. Three days after setting sail, the captives Joseph Cinqué and Grabeau led the Africans in using wood and knives to overpower the crew. During the battle three Africans as well as the schooner's captain and cook were killed.

“Death of Capt. Ferrer, the Captain of the Amistad, July, 1839,” lithograph by John Warner Barber from his compilation *A History of the Amistad Captives*, 1840.

New York Public Library, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

After the revolt the Africans ordered the*Amistad* crew to return them to Africa. However, the Spaniards secretly turned the ship around each night and headed for America, where they were sure the Africans would be classified as property and returned to Cuba. After a journey of more than sixty days, in which several additional African lives were lost due to malnutrition and disease, the *Amistad* was discovered on 26 August 1839 off Culloden Point in Long Island Sound.

On boarding the *Amistad*, crew members of the Coast Guard brig *U.S*. *Washington* found that the schooner was under the control of forty-three surviving Africans. After being set free Ruiz and Montes informed the Americans that all the Africans were slaves. The schooner was then towed to New London, Connecticut, where the Africans were arrested and held for trial. Antonio, the cabin boy, was also held as a material witness. Unable to speak English, the Africans initially could not explain what had happened. After Josiah Willard Gibbs, a language professor at Yale, located an interpreter, James Covey, by shouting out African words on the docks, the full horror of the kidnappings became public knowledge. Covey, assisted by Grabeau, who spoke four languages, discovered that the Africans were Mende rather than Cuban.

The contents of the *Amistad*, including the Africans, became a hotly debated topic with international complications. Under a 1795 treaty that required that all property seized on the high seas be returned to its rightful owner, Spain demanded return of the schooner and all its contents or reimbursements for the total worth of the lost property, estimated at approximately seventy thousand dollars. President Martin Van Buren supported the Spanish position and insisted that the Africans be tried for murder and piracy or that they be returned to Cuba as slaves. The crew of the *Washington* also filed a successful claim under American salvage laws that allotted them a portion of any profits made from the seized vessel.

Sensing that the publicity was bound to sway public opinion in favor of their movement, abolitionists immediately adopted the cause of the Africans and formed the*Amistad* Committee. Leading the effort to get the story out and use it to highlight the evils of slavery were Lewis Tappan, an affluent New York merchant and abolitionist; Simon Jocelyn, a draftsman who had opened the first black church in New Haven, Connecticut; and Joshua Leavitt, a lawyer, minister, and editor of the abolitionist

journal the*Emancipator*. The three men worked with the attorney Roger Sherman Baldwin to prepare the defense. The *Amistad* Committee also guided fund-raising efforts to defray legal costs. Tappan and Leavitt visited the jail and reported that the prisoners were generally healthy and comfortable. Abolitionists unsuccessfully pushed for Ruiz and Montes to be arrested and tried.

By this time Cinqué had become the hero of the *Amistad* drama, arousing the interest and admiration of a number of prominent Americans, including Frederick Douglass. In the speech "The Significance of Emancipation," Douglass told an audience in Canandaigua, New York, that Cinqué had endeared himself to American slaves by leading the slave revolt on the *Amistad*. Douglass's continued admiration for Cinqué was demonstrated by the fact that he hung an engraving of the African on the wall of his home library.

Representing the Africans, Baldwin argued that the United States had no authority to return the Africans to Spain, where the African slave trade was illegal. In September 1839 a federal district court agreed, determining that the Africans were not slaves and that the revolt had been undertaken in self-defense. A circuit court later agreed. The Africans were incarcerated for eighteen months while the case wound its way through the U.S. court system. Abolitionists and locals used this time to teach the Africans English and to convert them to Christianity.

John Quincy Adams, popularly known as "Old Man Eloquent," was an abolitionist by nature and had spearheaded opposition to the congressional rule in the mid-1830s. However, he was somewhat skeptical of the abolitionist movement because of what he saw as the radicalism of its members. As a former president of the United States and a member of the House of Representatives, he took a lively interest in the *Amistad* case from the beginning, although he initially refused to take an active role. After conceding that someone with experience and impeccable credentials should argue the case before the Supreme Court, Adams took the case and shaped his arguments around both natural and constitutional law and the premises set forth in the Declaration of Independence. He reminded the Court that many of the founding fathers, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, believed that slavery should be abolished because it violated the laws of God and nature. Adams declared that states had no power to declare slavery within their sovereign rights because it violated the concept of government by contract since slaves had no voice in government. While Adams gave the longest and most emotional argument, Baldwin was more persuasive and had more influence over the Court.

Amistad. A scene from the Steven Spielberg film, *Amistad* (1997).

On 9 March 1841, in a 7 to 1 decision, the Supreme Court announced that the Africans were not slaves but free Africans and agreed that they had a right to defend themselves from their kidnappers. Therefore, Spain had no right to compensation for their lost "slaves." The Court did not declare slavery illegal in the United States, but it did rule that the U.S. government had no legal obligation to spend money to return the "Amistads," as they were called, to Africa.

Thus, abolitionists were forced to fund the trip privately. While the Africans waited to be returned home, they planted and harvested their own crops, sold handcrafts, drew pictures, wrote about their stories, and went on speaking tours to help earn money for their passage. After months of fund-raising efforts the thirty-five surviving Africans set sail for home on 27 November 1841. Five members of the Union Missionary Society went with them to establish missions and schools in Sierra Leone. Cinqué, like a number of others, disappeared from the historical record after returning to Africa. Sarah Magru, one of the children enslaved on the *Amistad*, later attended Oberlin College and returned to work at the Mende mission.

The *Amistad* is seen as a turning point in the antislavery movement because the case educated millions of Americans about the barbarity of slavery. The story of the *Amistad* received renewed attention after the 1997 release of Steven Spielberg's movie *Amistad*.

See also Adams, John Quincy; Africa, Idea of; Antislavery Movement; Douglass, Frederick; Film and Filmmakers; Foreign Policy; Jefferson, Thomas; Slave Trade; Slavery; Slavery and the U.S. Constitution; Supreme Court; and Tappan, Lewis.

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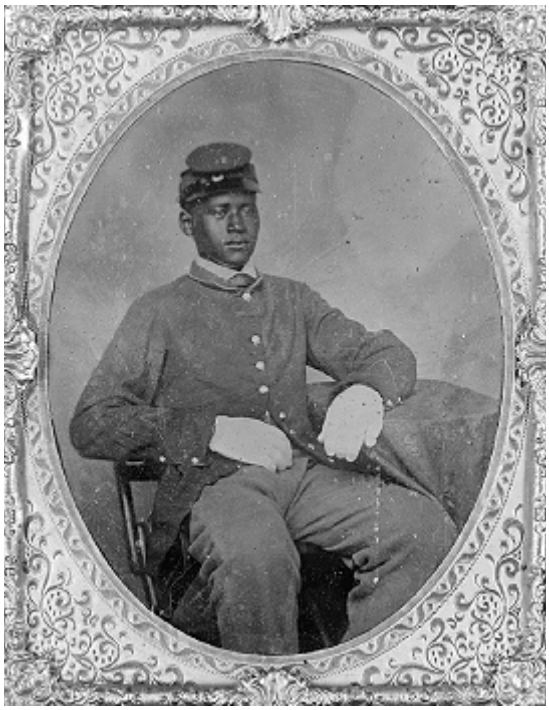
Civil War

By: DeBlasio, Donna M.

Few events in American history are more significant than the Civil War. The four years of conflict from 1861 to 1865 changed the nation more profoundly than any other single event. The bloody war finally laid to rest the contentious issue of slavery, ending half the nation's horrendous reliance on the buying and selling of human flesh. The Union's industrial power, which the war only provided a glimpse of, grew and strengthened throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. The way Americans saw themselves also changed. The war brought a new sense of nationalism, especially to the Union; Americans began to refer to "*The* United States" as opposed to "*These* United States." Americans also started to view the federal government and the presidency differently. Instead of being some entity in far-off Washington, D.C., during and after the war the federal government came into much closer contact with the average citizen than ever before. The presidency also began to assume more importance than it had in the past; over time, Americans grew to expect strong leadership from their president. Women found themselves in new roles; many were involved in some aspect of public service, in the workforce, or in running the family farm for the very first time.



African American soldier, tintype, 1862–1865. The second Confiscation Act of 17 July 1862, which freed slaves owned by rebels, also empowered the president to enlist black soldiers. By the end of the Civil War, some 200,000 blacks had served in the U.S. military.

Library of Congress.

More has been written on the Civil War than on any other single event in American history. Historians are still debating the causes of the conflict that tore the nation apart in April 1861. The institution of slavery, however, is the key to understanding why North and South literally came to blows. As the North eagerly industrialized in the first half of the nineteenth century, the South remained basically agrarian. There was some industry in the South, but for the most part, it was a much smaller part of the economic system compared with the system in the North. Without slavery, the North relied more on immigrant labor; thus,

such new industries as textiles, iron, and coal mining drew many newcomers. The South, with its pool of slave labor, was not as attractive as the North to these immigrants.

The increasing numbers of immigrants led to a greater degree of urbanization in the North; the established eastern cities grew rapidly, as did new western cities like Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis. The progressively more disparate cultures of the North and South made the latter far more defensive about such issues as slavery and states' rights. These different patterns of development, coupled with the perceived strength of abolitionism, the Mexican-American War, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the *Dred Scott* decision, and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, supplied the makings of the conflagration of the Civil War. The election in 1860 of Abraham Lincoln, who many southerners viewed as a dangerous and radical abolitionist, was the final straw and led to the secession of the Lower South beginning in December 1860. Despite attempts at compromise, the war began on 12 April 1861, after Lincoln tried to resupply Fort Sumter in South Carolina. Following Lincoln's subsequent call for seventy-five thousand volunteer troops, four additional states in the South seceded, giving the Confederate States of America a total of eleven states.

Major Battles and Campaigns

From the outset, both sides set as their goal the capture of each other's capital. There was also a general belief in the North and South that the war would be over in ninety days. The first major engagement of the war took place on 21 July 1861 at the battle of Bull Run, where the Union suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Generals Joseph E. Johnston and P. G. T. Beauregard. For more than a year thereafter, the Union was hard-pressed to win a battle in the eastern theater. In the West the Union had two goals: to keep the border states loyal to the North and to gain control of the full length of the Mississippi River; both efforts proved to be successful. Union victories in 1862 at Shiloh in Mississippi and Forts Donelson and Henry in Tennessee, as well as the capture of New Orleans by Commander David Farragut, helped strengthen the Union position in the West.

For the most part, the eastern theater in 1861 and 1862 was a disaster for the federal forces, with major losses in the peninsula campaign under the leadership of General George McClellan. A Union victory in the East finally came at the battle of Antietam in September 1862. Although the Union won at Antietam, McClellan failed to follow Robert E. Lee's army back to Virginia—a display of indecisiveness that infuriated Lincoln. For his part, Lincoln used the victory at Antietam as justification for issuing his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves in areas still in rebellion on 1 January 1863. Meanwhile, Lincoln continued his search for a general who would fight and replaced McClellan in November 1862 with Ambrose E. Burnside, the “hero” of Antietam.

Burnside, however, suffered a major defeat at Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December 1862. Continuing the string of Union disasters, Lee again defeated the federal forces under the command of Joseph J. Hooker at Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863. Although Lee won the battle, the death of Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson proved to be a major loss for the Confederacy. Lee's decision the following summer to invade the North provided one of the major turning points of the war. The battle of Gettysburg on 1–3 July 1863 pitted the two sides in a horrendous encounter outside a small town in southern Pennsylvania, which resulted in a major Union victory. The federal troops under General George G. Meade did not push their advantage, however, and pursue Lee's army back across the Potomac. At the same time as the battle of Gettysburg, Union troops under the command of Ulysses S. Grant finally took the town of Vicksburg, Mississippi, after a long siege. The capture of Vicksburg essentially cut off the western section of the Confederacy from its eastern sector by putting control of the Mississippi River in Union hands. Grant's success led Lincoln to promote him to the rank of lieutenant general and place him in command of all Union armies.

Under the command of General William Tecumseh Sherman, the Army of the Tennessee began its move east. Sherman pursued Confederate troops through Georgia in the famous Atlanta campaign during the summer and early fall of 1864, capturing the major railroad terminus of Atlanta in early September. Throughout the fall, Sherman conducted his scorched-earth “march to the sea” and captured the city of Savannah in December. While Sherman's troops devastated the countryside of Georgia and the Carolinas, General Philip H. Sheridan and the Union cavalry wreaked havoc on the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. From 31 May through 12 June 1864, Lee and Grant engaged in the bloody battle of Cold Harbor, Virginia. A few days later both sides were bogged down in the siege of Petersburg, which lasted until April 1865. In early April the Confederate government evacuated Richmond and the federal troops then occupied the capital. Lee surrendered his forces to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on 9 April 1865, essentially ending the Civil War. Sporadic fighting continued in the West, however, through 26 May 1865.

Struggle for Emancipation

The path to Emancipation was not straightforward. Responding in August 1862 to the reformer Horace Greeley's famous editorial in the New York Tribune, “The Prayer of Twenty Millions,” Lincoln declared that this conflict was a war to preserve the Union.

"My paramount object in the struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. … If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that."

(Donald et al., pp. 331–332) Frederick Douglass, however, preferred to let the Union “perish” if the only way to keep it together was to make concessions to slave owners. The former slave believed that the war to save the Union was inextricably linked to the elimination of slavery. Indeed, while abolitionists wanted this conflict to focus on ending slavery, most were not overtly critical of Lincoln and his administration, at least in the beginning. Generally, abolitionists felt that battling the “slave oligarchy,” as William Lloyd Garrison put it in a letter of 1861, would destroy slavery in the end. Douglass vehemently disagreed with this position, noting that fighting slaveholders without the ultimate goal of Emancipation was “a half-hearted business and paralyzes the hands engaged in it.” Agreeing with Lincoln that the South had had no right to secede from the Union, Douglass saw the war as the opportunity to build a new nation in which African Americans were free and equal citizens.

Throughout 1861 and 1862 Republicans and abolitionists, including Douglass, pressed Lincoln to commit himself publicly to ending slavery. The president's silence perturbed many, especially Douglass, who believed Lincoln to be the “tool” of “traitors,” meaning those who opposed Emancipation, especially northerners. For his part, Lincoln tried to soften opposition to ending slavery by coupling Emancipation with a plan for colonization in Central America. Lincoln believed that whites and blacks could not live together and proposed establishing a colony in Central America where American blacks could resettle and have more opportunities. One of Lincoln's main concerns was not alienating the border states, lest those that permitted slaveholding leave the Union. The proponents of Emancipation, however, argued that freeing the slaves would help to defeat the Confederacy because it would eliminate an important labor source for the South. In the first two years of the war, slaves had been put to work building fortifications, delivering supplies, working in mines and factories, and digging trenches, thus freeing up white Southerners for combat service.

Moreover, the realities of frontline combat forced the federal government to deal with the issue of slavery. As the Union armies pushed forward, slaves either were captured or fled behind Union lines. General John C. Frémont, who tried to contain rampant guerilla warfare in Missouri by declaring martial law, also decreed, on 30 August 1861, that all the slaves in Missouri were now free. Lincoln revoked Frémont's orders and removed him from command, dashing the hopes of Douglass and other abolitionists. General Benjamin F. Butler set a precedent when he began treating captured slaves as “contraband of war,” considering them to be property forfeited by owners who were in rebellion against the United States. As more slaves found themselves in Union hands, the question of their status became a pressing issue. Were they still slaves? Were they free?

Congress responded by passing the First Confiscation Act in August 1861, which declared that slaves could be seized as rebel property if they were employed to aid the war effort. Slavery was finally abolished in the District of Columbia in April of the following year. The second Confiscation Act of 17 July 1862 freed the slaves owned by rebels and also empowered the president to enlist black soldiers. The same day, Congress passed the Militia Act, which freed “soldier slaves” of all owners, including slaveholders loyal to the Union, who would receive compensation for the loss of their former slaves. These pieces of legislation were steps on the way to Lincoln's announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on 22 September 1862, following the Union victory at Antietam.

Two months before the September announcement, Lincoln read his proposal for Emancipation to his cabinet. Only Montgomery Blair, the Postmaster General, was completely opposed to the president's proposal. Blair believed that declaring Emancipation would cost the Republicans control of Congress in the upcoming elections. Lincoln invited a group of free African Americans to the White House in August 1862, when he gave a speech on colonization. In this speech, Lincoln essentially cited the presence of blacks in the United States as the reason for the war. He also stated that he believed that racial equality was impossible and that the two races could not live together harmoniously. An irate Frederick Douglass reprinted Lincoln's words in his newspaper, *Douglass' Monthly*, in September 1862, followed by a scathing commentary. Douglass wrote that Lincoln's view was like “a horse thief pleading that the existence of the horse is the

apology for his theft"—a classic instance of blaming the victim. In his speech, Lincoln also reiterated his scheme for colonization, which struck great fear into Douglass's heart. Clearly the Emancipation Proclamation was only one step in the direction of full Emancipation and equality when it finally took effect on 1 January 1863.

Douglass rejoiced, however, when news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached Boston, where he spoke on this momentous occasion. The former slave later wrote of this great day of jubilee: "We were waiting … as for a bolt from the sky, which should rend the fetters of four million slaves; we were watching … by the dim light of stars, for the dawn of a new day, we were longing for the answer to the agonizing prayer of centuries." The Emancipation Proclamation finally turned the Civil War into the holy cause Douglass believed it should have been all along; as he had stated in *Douglass' Monthly* in July 1861, "not a slave should be left a slave in the returning footprints of the American army gone to put down this slaveholding rebellion. Sound policy, not less than humanity, demands the instant liberation of every slave in the rebel states."

African Americans with Meade's army in Culpeper, Virginia, photographed by Timothy H. O'Sullivan in November 1863. For three years during the Civil War, working for Alexander Gardner, O'Sullivan photographed soldiers before and after battle. His images were included in *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War*, 1866.

Library of Congress.

Slavery and Emancipation then became a key issue in the presidential election of 1864. Lincoln interpreted the Republican victory in that election as a mandate for ensuring the end of slavery once and for all with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Congress passed the amendment on 31 January 1865, and ratification by the necessary twenty-seven states was completed by 6 December 1865.

Blacks in the Military

From the beginning of the Civil War, not only did the issue of slavery consume the thoughts of participants on both sides, so did the question of black combatants. After Fort Sumter, many blacks in the North tried to enlist in the armed forces on the Union side in the hope that slavery would end with the defeat of the Confederacy. At the time, the U.S. government refused their help. Frederick Douglass strongly supported the enlistment of African Americans to fight the war, stating, "Let the slaves and colored people be called into service, and formed into a liberating army to march into the South and raise the banner of Emancipation among the slaves." Several Union commanders, including Benjamin Butler, David Hunter, and James Lane, took it upon themselves to organize black troops into combat units. Hunter, who commanded the Department of South Carolina, was the first to allow blacks to fight for their own cause. The Union formally created regiments of black troops in August 1862; however, these units were to be led by white commanders.

While the recruitment of black soldiers made sense to many Northerners, the persistent racism of some people engendered a distrust and even fear of such forces. Once in military service, blacks were segregated into their own units and used

primarily not for actual combat duty but to build fortifications and perform other general labor duties. The only exception to the racially segregated armed forces was in the Union navy, in which twenty thousand black sailors served alongside their white comrades. African American soldiers were also discriminated against in terms of salary (although Congress eventually authorized equal pay for black soldiers in 1864), reenlistment bonuses, and even medical care. Yet despite these obstacles, the United States Colored Troops served their country valiantly.

Burial party in Viriginia, April 1865. These African Americans were collecting bones of Union soldiers killed nearly a year earlier, in June 1864, in the battles of Gaines Mill and Cold Harbor. Sixty thousand men died or were wounded here—so many that the local residents had not been able to bury the dead as was the usual custom. The photographer, John Reekie, worked for Mathew Brady's studio; some of his images appeared in Alexander Gardner's *Photographic Sketchbook of the War*.

Library of Congress.

The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, commanded by Robert Gould Shaw, was one of the most famous regiments of black soldiers. Among its numbers were two of Frederick Douglass's sons, Charles and Lewis, who served with distinction. The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts lost 40 percent of its men as they fought courageously in the battle of Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in July 1863. The performance of the Colored Troops at Fort Wagner as well as in other engagements did much to dissipate objections to black soldiers and, in fact, gained them respect and admiration. Douglass actively recruited African Americans for military service, throwing himself into this activity with the same conviction and enthusiasm as he had done with abolitionism.

Douglass used his considerable oratorical skills to convince black men that they would be able to contribute to the destruction of slavery by enlisting in the armed forces. As he put it, “Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S. … and there is no power on Earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.” He held on to his dream that African Americans would receive the full benefits of American citizenship and equal treatment before the law by serving the United States in a time of crisis. While Douglass understood the depth of racism in nineteenth-century America, he also believed that the loyalty and dedication his people showed toward the Union would help soften at least some of the hostility and mistrust of his race and eventually lead to full equality.

By the end of the war, more than 200,000 AfricanAmericans had served in the U.S. army and navy, with about 37,000 casualties. Black soldiers made up about one-ninth of the Union army by the summer of 1864. It is clear that the United States Colored Troops made, as Douglass and others insisted, significant contributions to the Union's victory. Besides participating in over forty engagements, in which they often made the difference between defeat and victory, black soldiers also provided much of the labor that supported the troops in the field, such as guarding and delivering supplies, building defenses, driving supply trains, and numerous other vital tasks. The Colored Troops also provided a psychological advantage for the Union. The idea of so many armed African Americans, many of whom were former slaves, struck fear into the hearts of many Southerners. For countless years, Southerners had trembled at the thought of slave rebellions; now it

looked as if those nightmares were becoming reality. The opportunity to fight the Confederacy also inspired numerous slaves to make their way to Union lines and join the Union army—not only swelling the federal ranks but at the same time depriving the Confederacy of an important source of labor. Although there were many after the war who tried to belittle the contributions of the Colored Troops to the North's war effort, it is clear that black soldiers and sailors were important to the Union's final victory.

When the Civil War began, Frederick Douglass had high hopes for a better future for African Americans. He believed that the conflict was a war against slavery and that a Union victory would mean more than freedom for his people—he believed that despite the deep racism harbored by many white Americans, African Americans would be able to participate fully as American citizens. Late in the war, Douglass summed up his feelings for the future:

"I end where I began; no war but an abolition war; no peace but an abolition peace; liberty for all, chains for none; the black man a soldier in war; a laborer in peace; a voter in the South as well as the North; America his permanent home, and all Americans his fellow countrymen."

(Donald et al., pp. 345–346) The war did end slavery, but equal justice for all was a promise deferred.

See also Antislavery Movement; Black Militias; Brown, John; Buffalo Soldiers; Butler, Benjamin Franklin; Civil War, Participation and Recruitment of Black Troops in; Colonization; Compromise of 1850; Confederate States of America; Constitution, U.S.; Douglass, Charles Remond; Douglass, Frederick; Douglass, Lewis Henry; *Douglass' Monthly*; Dred Scott Case; Election of 1860; Emancipation; Emancipation Proclamation; Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment; Grant, Ulysses S.; Greeley, Horace; Harpers Ferry Raid; Immigrants; Kansas-Nebraska Act; Laws and Legislation; Lincoln, Abraham; Mexican-American War; Military; Racism; Republican Party; Segregation; Slavery; Slavery and the U.S. Constitution; Taney, Roger B.; Thirteenth Amendment; Union Army, African Americans in; Union Army, African Americans in; and Women.

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