

THE BURIAL OF UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS AT ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

by George W. Dodge

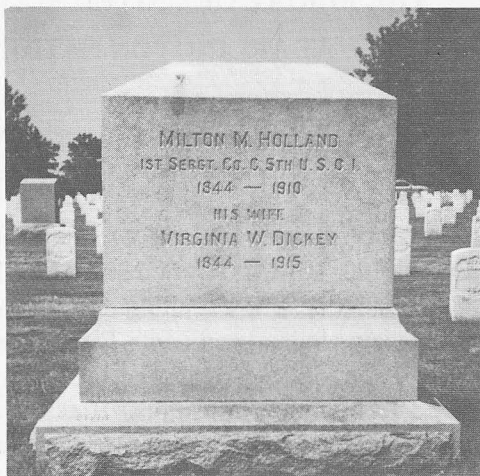
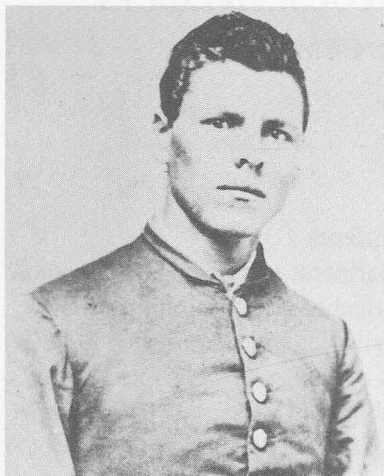
Medal of Honor Recipients

On May 22, 1863, the United States War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops for recruiting African-Americans, commissioning officers and organizing federal regiments. During the Civil War, approximately 179,000 African-Americans served in the U.S. Army as members of the United States Colored Troops and an additional 10,000 served in the U.S. Navy.¹ This represented about 10% of all Union forces. Hundreds of United States Colored Troops are buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The following is a story of certain African-American soldiers and sailors (hereinafter referred to as colored or black soldiers and sailors consistent with the terminology of the Civil War era) that eternally rest at the nation's most renowned military cemetery.

The Medal of Honor was awarded to sixteen black infantrymen for their conduct during the Civil War. Two recipients are buried in Arlington National Cemetery: Sergeant James H. Harris of the 38th United States Colored Troops in Section 27 and Sergeant Milton M. Holland of the 5th United States Colored Troops in Section 23, grave 21713. Harris, a native of St. Mary's County, Maryland, was bestowed the Medal of Honor for "gallantry in the assault" at New Market Heights, Virginia, on September 29, 1864. Leading Company C of the 5th USCT to victory at the Battle of New Market Heights, or Chaffin's Farm, was Milton Holland, a former slave.²

Milton Holland was born in 1844 at Austin, Texas. He and his two brothers, William and James, were slaves. They were purchased by Byrd (Bird) Holland, a Texas politician, in the late 1850s. Prior to the Civil War, Bird Holland sent his three slaves north to Albany Enterprise Academy in Ohio, an early black educational institute owned and operated by blacks. In 1861, Holland became a servant to Colonel Nelson H. Van Vorhes, an officer in the 3rd, 18th and 92nd Ohio Infantry. Once blacks were officially able to be recruited into the Union Army, Holland enlisted in the 127th Ohio Infantry (Colored) in August 1863. The regiment was redesignated as the 5th United States Colored Troops in January 1864.³

Before daybreak on September 29, 1864, Union troops under the command of Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler positioned themselves for a two-pronged attack on Confederate defenses southeast of Richmond, Virginia.



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On September 29, 1864, Holland, a former slave, James Harris, and three other black sergeants led fellow black infantrymen to victory at the Battle of New Market Heights, 8 1/2 miles east of Richmond.

Butler ordered the XVIII Corps under Major General Edward O.C. Ord to strike the Confederates at Fort Harrison. Major General David B. Birney's X Corps of fourteen black regiments were to assault the Confederate line along the New Market Road. Birney's force headed north from Deep Bottom on the James River amidst a heavy fog.⁴

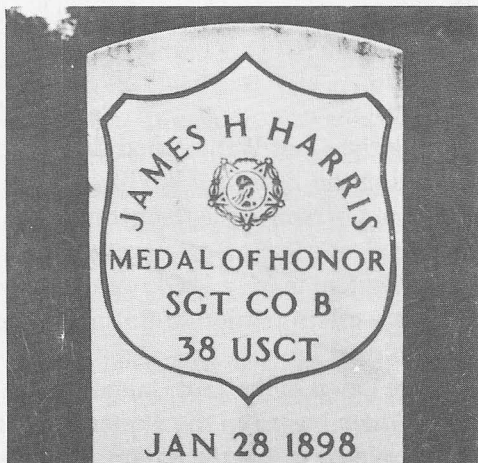
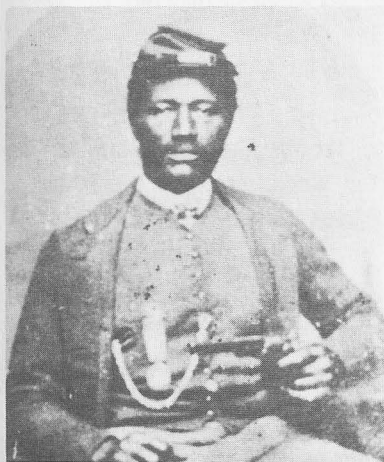
General Butler wanted black brigades to lead the attack that morning. In his autobiography, Butler revealed his motive: "I determined to put them in a position to demonstrate the value of the negro as a soldier and that the experiment should be one of which no one should doubt, if it attained success."⁵ At around 8 a.m. Colonel Alonzo G. Draper's brigade (The 5th, 36th, and 38th USCT) advanced up the slopes toward the New Market Road. Facing them from left to right were the following Confederate infantry regiments: 3rd Arkansas, 5th Texas, 4th Texas, and 1st Texas. Next to the veteran 1st Texas Infantry was the inexperienced and dismounted 24th Virginia Cavalry. Although outnumbered, the Confederates, under the command of General John Gregg, were entrenched upon high ground with two lines of abatis obstructing the approach.⁶

The attack against 1800 entrenched Texans, Arkansans and Virginians would be modestly supported by the 22nd USCT as skirmishers on Draper's left and skirmishers from General Alfred H. Terry's command on their right. Draper's brigade charged across an open field 800 yards from the Confederate works. During the attack sixteen white United States commissioned officers were struck down. Heavy losses and, of course, the abatis, stalled the Union assault within twenty to thirty yards of the Confederate line. For thirty minutes,

Draper's black soldiers stood in the open and fired upon the entrenched Confederates. Unknown to Draper and his men, hundreds of Confederate defenders were being withdrawn during the battle and sent to reinforce the more significant, and threatened, position at nearby Fort Gilmer. Nevertheless, enough defenders remained to halt the Union advance.⁷

Holland, Harris, and three other black sergeants rose from the ranks and took command of their companies due to the loss of the white commissioned officers, and then assisted in getting the brigade in motion again.⁸ As the sergeants led their fellow comrades upon the parapet of the Southern earthworks, a Confederate officer, in attempting to rally his men, waved his sword and shouted "Hurrah my brave men." Private James Gardiner of the 36th USCT shot the officer and "then ran the bayonet through his body to the muzzle."⁹ At the other end of the Union assaulting line stood Milton Holland who "took command of Company C, after all the [white] officers had been killed or wounded, and gallantly led it."¹⁰ The Confederate position was captured. Holland's regiment, the 5th USCT, bore the brunt of the New Market Heights attack, suffering the highest casualties of any black regiment that day — 213 killed and wounded along with 23 missing.¹¹ Holland's commanding general officer, Major General Benjamin F. Butler, said of Holland: "Had it been within my power I would have conferred upon him in view of it, a brigadier-generalship for gallantry in the field."¹²

Holland participated in the Carolina Campaign and was mustered out of the service in September 1865. After the Civil War, Holland worked as a clerk.



In this post Civil War picture, James Harris wears his Congressional Medal of Honor, which was not issued to him until February 18, 1874. Of the sixteen black infantrymen who were awarded the Medal of Honor for valor during the Civil War, fourteen received it for their heroism at the Battle of New Market Heights.

He later was employed with the federal government, becoming chief of the collection division of the Sixth Auditor's office. He married Virginia W. Dickey and in the 1890s founded the Alpha Insurance Company in Washington, D.C., one of the nation's first black insurance companies. Holland died of a heart attack on May 15, 1910 and was buried in Section 23, grave 21713, at Arlington National Cemetery.¹³ His privately-purchased headstone omits his Medal of Honor status.

Seven black sailors of the U.S. Navy were recipients of the Medal of Honor for their exploits in the Civil War. One recipient, William H. Brown, is buried in Section 27, grave 565-A. Brown was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1836. He was a landsman on board the USS Brooklyn during its August 5, 1864

attack at Mobile Bay, Louisiana. His Medal of Honor citation reads:

Stationed in the immediate vicinity of the shell whips which were twice cleared of men by bursting shells, Brown remained steadfast at his post and performed his duties in the powder division throughout the furious action which resulted in the surrender of the prize Rebel ram Tennessee and in the damaging and destruction of batteries at Fort Morgan.¹⁴



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Section 27

During the Civil War, United States Colored Troops and black civilians who died at the Freedman's Village in Arlington were buried in the lower cemetery portion of Arlington, now designated as Section 27. A superintendent's lodge now traverses that section. The initial Civil War burials at Arlington, in May 1864, were in the eastern part of Section 27. In July 1864, the western portion of Section 27 became a burial ground for United States Colored Troops.

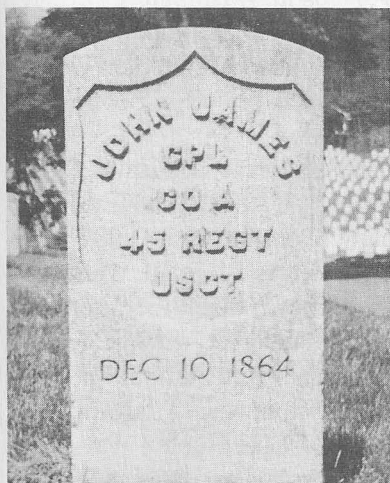
George Lewis of the 23rd United States Colored Troops was one of the first black soldiers buried in the western part of Section 27. His burial in grave 2230 is isolated in that the terrain permits no other burials next to or beyond his to Section 49. A 19-year-old native of Virginia, Lewis enlisted on July 5, 1864 and died four days later of "typho malarial fever," a medical term intro-



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duced in 1863 by Joseph J. Woodward to describe prolonged, intermittent fever which develops into pneumonia.¹⁵ The regiment lost 165 enlisted men to disease, twice as many as were killed or mortally wounded.¹⁶ This 2 to 1 ratio of deaths to disease compared to those killed in action is the same ratio for the deaths of all Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War.

At least twenty black soldiers of the 45th United States Colored Troops, including Corporal John James, were buried in Arlington National Cemetery, the most burials of any black regiment in the cemetery during the Civil War. The 45th was raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from June 13, 1864, to August 19, 1864, roughly the time period of the Gettysburg Campaign. The soldiers were equipped with Springfield .58 caliber rifles.¹⁷ Companies A, B, C, and D were stationed at Arlington Heights on the Custis–Lee estate from July 1864 until March 1865. The other six companies were on duty at Petersburg, Virginia.¹⁸

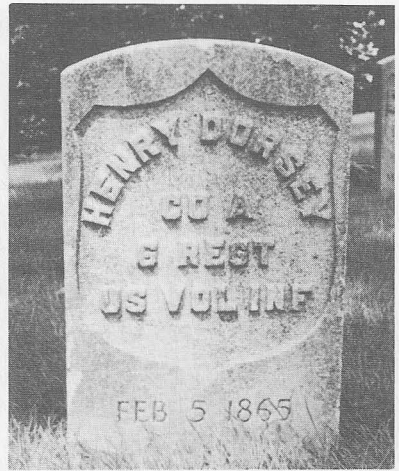


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Corporal John James appears to be the first black non-commissioned officer buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Corporal James died of disease.¹⁹

Also buried in Section 27 is Henry Dorsey, a native of Allegheny County, Maryland. On July 24, 1863 he enlisted at Greensburg, Pennsylvania into Company A of the 6th USCT. Although Dorsey and many others in the 6th USCT had not been

slaves, the motto on their regimental flag was "FREEDOM FOR ALL." The time was right for them to fight for freedom. On July 30, 1864 at the Battle of the Crater near Petersburg, Virginia, private Dorsey was struck by a shell fragment. He was admitted to a Philadelphia hospital for a shell "contusion" wound. He later was admitted to Armory Square Hospital in Washington, D.C. and died on February 3, 1865. Surviving Dorsey was his father James Dorsey of Johnstown, Maryland.²⁰



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The grave marker of Henry Dorsey incorrectly lists his date of death. According to Dorsey's military service record, he died on February 3, 1865 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery on February 5, 1865.

Section 1

Buried in a row close to the Ft. Myer Chapel along Meigs Drive are a black minister, lawyer, doctor, and professional soldier. William H. Hunter was born a slave on June 21, 1831 in Raleigh, North Carolina. On October 4, 1863, he was commissioned as Regimental Chaplain of the 4th USCT. Along with his duties as chaplain, Hunter also recruited black soldiers. Hunter's first wife died in 1868. He remarried, to a seamstress, Henrietta, on December 23, 1873 and lived in Anacostia, Washington, D.C. at 567 Stanton Avenue, named after Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, a lawyer. Hunter served as an African Methodist Episcopal minister. He died on October 16, 1908 and is buried in Section 1, grave 123.²¹



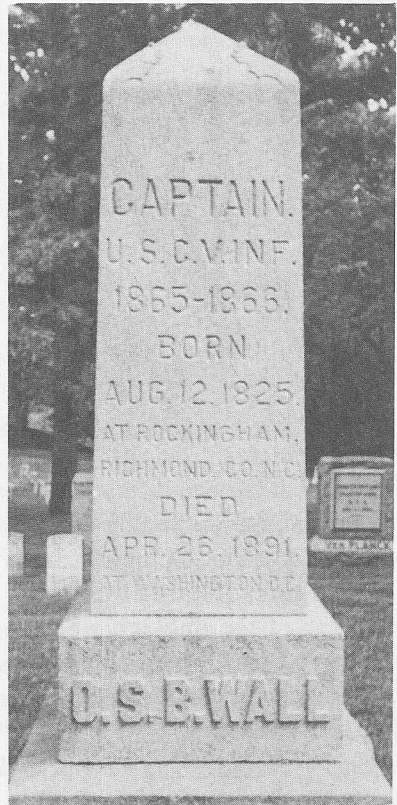
Buried near Hunter is Orandatus S. B. Wall. On March 3, 1865, Wall enrolled into Company K of the 104th USCT and was commissioned as a captain. Wall was one of twelve known black recruiters of black soldiers.²² He served with the newly formed Freedman's Bureau until his discharge at Charleston, South Carolina on February 5, 1866. Like Hunter, Wall was born in North Carolina and lived in Washington, D.C. after the Civil War, where he was employed as a lawyer. Wall, along with his wife Amanda A. Thomas, daugh-

ter Laura, and adopted son Chester, lived at the corner of 4th and Pomeroy Street, N.E., Washington, D.C.²³ Wall died on April 26, 1891 at the age of 76 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in section 1, Grave 124-B, next to Dr. Alexander Augusta, the highest ranking black soldier during the Civil War.

Alexander Thomas Augusta was born on March 8, 1825 in Norfolk, Virginia. He was not a slave.²⁴ Augusta was tutored in elementary medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, while employed as a barber. He moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was denied admission to medical schools in Pennsylvania and Illinois.²⁵ He returned to Baltimore and married Mary O. Burgoin on January 12, 1847 at St. Patrick's Church. Unable to gain admission to medical school in the United States, Augusta was accepted into Trinity Medical College of the University of Toronto, Canada in 1850 and was awarded of Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1856. Augusta then practiced at Toronto City Hospital and became its chief.²⁶

On January 7, 1863, Alexander Augusta wrote to President Abraham Lincoln requesting "appointment as surgeon to some of the coloured regiments," adding that he had "been in practice for about six years."²⁷ Augusta received his commission with the rank of major as a surgeon of the 7th USCT on April 4, 1863.²⁸ His medical commission made him the first of eight black physicians to obtain a commission during the Civil War.²⁹

Major Augusta's initial assignment placed him in charge of the Freedman's Hospital in Washington, D.C. (also known as Camp Barker), making him the first black doctor to be in charge of a hospital in the United States.³⁰ Immediately, Major Augusta complained of the unequal pay between white and black military doctors.³¹ Then, on February 1, 1864, Augusta again protested against inequality when he was removed from a streetcar in Washington, D.C. for refusing to sit in the section set aside for blacks.³² Later that month, while Augusta was stationed at Camp Stanton in Maryland, several white surgeons of the rank of captain complained, in writing, to President Abraham Lincoln



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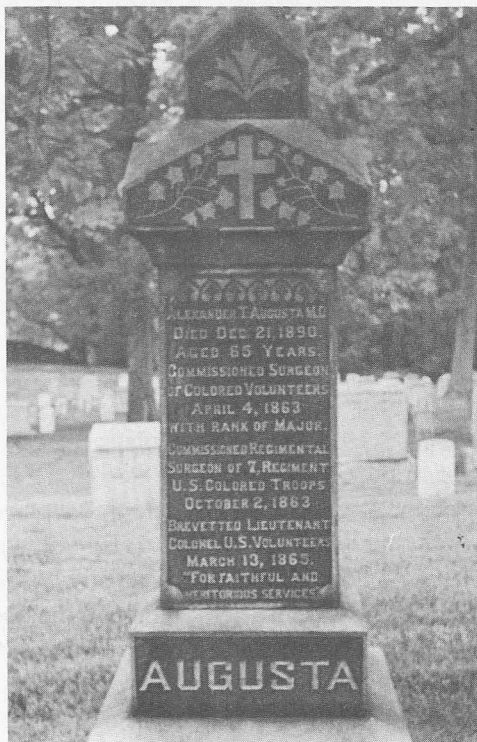
Alexander Augusta

riers when, on March 13, 1865, he was promoted to brevet Lieutenant Colonel, making him the highest ranking black officer in the Civil War era.³⁷ In October 1866, Augusta was mustered out of the military, whereupon he returned to Washington, D.C. and began the private practice of medicine.³⁸

In 1868, Dr. Augusta was elected to the faculty of the medical department of Howard University, making him the first black faculty member of an American medical school.³⁹ An honorary medical degree was conferred upon Professor Augusta by the university in 1869.⁴⁰ For the next eight years, he served as a professor and was on the Freedman's Hospital staff. However, he was refused admission to the Medical Society of the District of Columbia.⁴¹ This induced Augusta to help found the Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia, a medical society

that, although they desired "the elevation and improvement of the colored race, in this country...", they would not serve as "subordinates to a colored officer."³³ During this period, Major Augusta was able to meet President Lincoln at the White House.³⁴

In the spring of 1864, Major Augusta succeeded in obtaining the same pay as that of white officers of equal rank in federal service.³⁵ However, pressure from white officers probably caused Major Augusta to be transferred for duty to Baltimore, Maryland and later to South Carolina.³⁶ Augusta overcame more racial barriers



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open to all races.⁴² In 1877, Augusta left Howard University and resumed his private practice. He died at his residence, 1319 L Street, N.W., at the age of 65 on December 21, 1890. On Christmas Eve, his funeral was conducted at St. John's Episcopal Church at Lafayette Square.⁴³ In Section 1, grave 124-C, the private marker of Augusta, one of the most eminent black soldiers of the Civil War, humbly states: "For Faithful and Meritorious Services."

The most well-known black regiment of the Civil War, both prior to and after the 1990 film *Glory*, was the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. During the Civil War, 15 states raised black regiments that were redesignated as U.S. Colored Troops. At least three states — Connecticut, Louisiana, and Massachusetts — maintained the state designation for their black regiments (The Louisiana regiments were raised during federal occupation).⁴⁴ The men of the 54th Massachusetts had a regimental song written by an unknown member of Company A, "Give Us a Flag," a black Congregational chaplain, Samuel Harrison, and three other black commissioned officers: Lieutenants Stephen A. Swails, Peter Vogelsang, and Frank M. Welch.⁴⁵ Buried in Section 1, two graves from Chaplain Hunter, is Frank Welch, one of approximately 109 black commissioned officers in the Civil War.⁴⁶

Frank M. Welch was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1841. He lived in West Meriden, Connecticut, before the war where he worked as a barber. On May 12, 1863, he enlisted into Company F of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry. The next day he became sergeant.⁴⁷

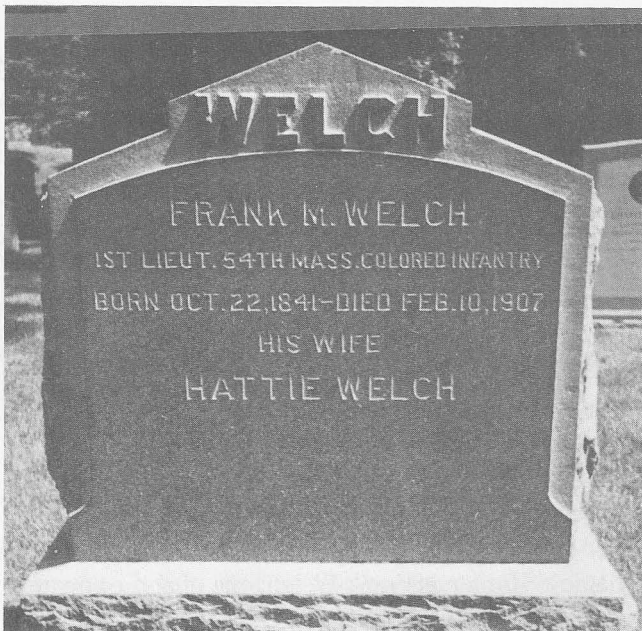
On July 18, 1863, at 7:45 p.m. Welch advanced with 624 members of his regiment along the beach at Morris Island, South Carolina. Welch's regiment,



Frank M. Welch, wearing uniform as major, Connecticut National Guard

along with several white regiments, assaulted Fort Wagner where they faced a debilitating fire from the enemy. Colonel Robert G. Shaw was killed at the parapet of the fort after shouting to his men "54th forward"; however, on that day, the fort was impregnable.⁴⁸ Casualties in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment were 45% including Frank Welch, who was wounded in the neck and taken to a hospital in Beaufort, South Carolina.⁴⁹ Welch was granted a commission as second lieutenant and later appointed first lieutenant on July 22, 1865.⁵⁰

After the Civil War, Welch continued his military career. He served briefly as a



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lieutenant in the 14 U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery. Welch was appointed captain of the Welch Guard in Bridgeport, Connecticut, on May 27, 1879. From 1881 to 1890 Welch served as a major in the Connecticut National Guard.⁵¹ Welch died in 1907. He and his wife, Hattie, are buried beneath their private marker in Section 1 of Arlington National Cemetery. Welch's marker does not list the battles he was engaged in as do some other private markers. His marker does not suggest any valor either for himself or for his regiment, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the most illustrious black regiment of the Civil War.

Notes and References

George W. Dodge is an Arlington resident who has contributed frequently to the *Magazine*, writing primarily about Arlington National Cemetery. He would like to recognize and thank his school teachers, from elementary school on, who encouraged him in his love of history. All the pictures accompanying this article are from the author's personal collection.

¹ William A. Gladstone, *Men of Color* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Thomas Publications, 1993), pp. 3–4.

² *The Congressional Medal of Honor* (Chico, California: Sharp & Dunnigan Publications, 1988), pp. 797, 807.

³ Frank L. Levstik, *From Slavery to Freedom*, *Civil War Times Illustrated*, November 1972, p. 10.

⁴ National Park Service, *Black Soldiers* (U.S.A.: Eastern National Park, 1996), p. 48; see also John E. Aliyesti, *Gallantry Under Fire*, *Civil War Times Illustrated*, October 1996, p. 53.

⁵ Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book* (Boston, Massachusetts: A.M. Thayer and Co., 1892), p. 742.

⁶ Richard J. Sommers, *Richmond Redeemed, The Siege of Petersburg* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday

- Company, Inc., 1981) pp. 28–34. See also R.J.M. Blackett (ed.), Thomas M. Chester, *Black Civil War Correspondent* (New York, New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1989), pp. 139–141 and 149–153.
- ⁷ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881–1902), Vol. 42, Part I Reports, pp. 819–820. See also Sommers, *Richmond Redeemed*, pp. 34–38.
- ⁸ NPS, *Black Soldiers*, p. 48.
- ⁹ *Medal of Honor*, p. 781.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 807.
- ¹¹ William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War 1861–1865* (Albany, New York: Brandow Printing Company, 1898; reprinted Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1985), p. 456.
- ¹² Levstik, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 10.
- ¹³ Pension of Milton M. Holland, invalid application no. 1,061,000 certificate no. 1,125,249, National Archives. See also Levstik, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 10.
- ¹⁴ *Medal of Honor*, p. 731.
- ¹⁵ Military Service Record of George Lewis, National Archives; Frank R. Freemon, *Microbes and Minie Balls, An Annotated Bibliography of Civil War Medicine* (Cranberry, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1993), p. 142.
- ¹⁶ Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines, IA: F.H. Dyer, 1908; reprinted Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1978) p. 1727.
- ¹⁷ Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 215.
- ¹⁸ Dyer, *Compendium*, p. 1731.
- ¹⁹ Military Service Record of John James, 45th USCT, National Archives.
- ²⁰ Military Service Record of Henry Dorsey, 6th USCT, National Archives.
- ²¹ Pension of William H. Hunter, invalid application member 1195670, certificate no. 947384, National Archives and Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 50.
- ²² Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 202. Frederick Douglass was among the twelve known black recruiters.
- ²³ Pension of Orandatus S. B. Wall, widow application no. 520643, certificate no. 363203, National Archives.
- ²⁴ Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston (eds.), *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company), p. 19.
- ²⁵ Sandra Fitzpatrick and Maria R. Goodwin, *The Guide To Black Washington* (New York, New York: Hippocrene Books, 1993), p. 129. See also Herbert M. Morias, *The History of the Negro in Medicine* (New York, New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1967) p. 37.
- ²⁶ Logan and Winston (eds.), *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, p. 19; Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 49; Morias, *The History of The Negro in Medicine*, p. 37.
- ²⁷ Ira Berlin (ed.), *The Black Military Experience* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 354.
- ²⁸ Pension of Alexander T. Augusta, widow application no. 498755, National Archives.
- ²⁹ Berlin, *Black Military Experience*, p. 311. See also Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 49.
- ³⁰ Morias, *The History of the Negro in Medicine*, p. 37.
- ³¹ Charles H. Wesley and Patricia W. Romero, *Negro Americans in the Civil War* (New York, New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 103–104.
- ³² Morias, *The History of The Negro in Medicine*, p. 37.
- ³³ Berlin, *Black Military Experience*, pp. 356–357.
- ³⁴ Logan and Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, p. 19.
- ³⁵ Wesley and Romero, *Negro Americans in the Civil War*, pp. 103–104.
- ³⁶ Morias, *The History of the Negro in Medicine*, p. 37.
- ³⁷ Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 49, and interview with William A. Gladstone, 1997.
- ³⁸ Logan and Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, p. 19.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ Morias, *The History of the Negro in Medicine*, p. 213.
- ⁴¹ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *The Guide To Black Washington*, p. 129. See also Morias, *The History of the*

Negro in Medicine, pp. 52, 57 and 216.

⁴² Morias, *The History of the Negro in Medicine*, p. 57.

⁴³ Logan and Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Gladstone, *Men of Color*, pp. 3–4 and 201.

⁴⁵ Gladstone, *Men of Color*, pp. 205–206, 50, 53, and 58.

⁴⁶ William A. Gladstone, *United States Colored Troops 1863–1867* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Thomas Publications, 1990), p. 110.

⁴⁷ Lewis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment, History of the Fifty–Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry 1863–1865* (Boston, Massachusetts: The Boston Book Company, 1894; reprinted New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), p. 336.

⁴⁸ Brian C. Pohanka, *Carnival of Death, America's Civil War* (Leesburg, Virginia: Empire Press, 1991), pp. 30–36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34, and Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Gladstone, *Men of Color*, p. 58.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*