

“There Are Some Very Bright Scholars Among Them”

Literacy in the Second United States Colored Infantry

By Michael A. Schaffner

The story of the Second United States Colored Infantry during the Civil War is a quintessentially Arlington one of opportunity and achievement. Like many people through much of the County's history, few of the men were born in Arlington but came to it drawn by its promise. Like much of the immigrant population today, they came to escape tyranny, earn a living, and ultimately enjoy the benefits of citizenship. Altogether some 900 Black men trained in the first of two Black regiments formed at Camp Casey, “not very far from the late residence of the far-famed rebel general Lee.”¹

Lee was in Arlington for the first three days of the war. Men of the Second were here for half a year, drilling within sight of the Capitol dome before leaving for the front. When they returned in January 1866, they mustered out with \$250,000 in back pay and bounties, or nearly \$280 for each man, which would have a labor value of more than \$45,000 today. As the *Alexandria Gazette* aptly noted, “the amount thus put in circulation will be a great relief to many.” Not only was it a “relief,” it was the basis for a new prosperity for some, including Private William H. Butler of Company H. Missing and presumed dead after the battle of Natural Bridge, he survived rebel imprisonment to return to Arlington, become a county magistrate, and build a house that still stands today at 2407 2nd Street South. Others became the cadre of a Black community that by 1870 comprised 63% of the County's population.²

Butler's story and that of the regiment began with the Civil War itself as enslaved African Americans in rebel states immediately started to emancipate themselves. Some in fact began a month before Sumter, at Pensacola, but the officer commanding Fort Pickens promptly turned the escapees over to the town marshal.³

After Sumter, policies changed. In May 1861 General Benjamin Butler (no relation to Company H's William) at Fortress Monroe reported that he had already received entire families "of this species of property," and put the able-bodied to work. Within months Congress passed the first Confiscation Act, authorizing the confiscation of "any property of whatsoever kind or description" used by rebels against the United States, including the "species" employed by Butler and, by that time, other officers. All such property was designated "contraband" and very quickly this term became widely applied to the African American refugees themselves.⁴

As months passed, more refugees came. In May 1862, Oliver Willcox Norton would write from the Peninsula that "Contrabands are pouring in on us every day" (Fig. 1). In June he added, "They are rapidly taking the place of white men as teamsters." In whatever

Fig. 1: "Arrival of Negro Family in the Lines," 1863.



Courtesy of Library of Congress.

capacity they labored, they became a force multiplier for the US army and a loss to the rebels.⁵

They would soon become even more. In July, Congress amended the Militia Act to allow the employment of “persons of African descent [...] for constructing entrenchments or performing camp service, or *any other military or naval service for which they may be found competent*” (italics added).⁶ While the amendment implied noncombatant service, several generals found African Americans competent for far more and began enlisting them. By the end of 1862 five regiments of Black troops were in the field, and two had already seen combat.⁷

Recruiting accelerated after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. In January 1863 Governor Andrew of Massachusetts began recruiting the famous 54th Massachusetts.⁸ In March Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas went to the Mississippi valley to organize more Black regiments. Soon military department directors began recruiting Black men wherever possible. In May 1863 Thomas’s office created the Bureau of Colored Troops (BCT), and from then only they could authorize recruiting Black soldiers. It also provided for boards to examine officer candidates, and directed all regiments be designated “Regiment of US Colored Troops.”⁹

The first regiment so titled was one then being raised in Washington itself, known locally as the “First District Colored Volunteers.” The BCT assumed control of it in June and promptly retitled it the “First Regiment of US Colored Troops.” The same month the BCT took a company recruited in Norfolk and a second one from Portsmouth, and these became Companies A and B of the new “Second Regiment of US Colored Troops,” which organized at Camp Casey in Arlington, spreading over what is today the southeast corner of the intersection of Courthouse Road and Columbia Pike.¹⁰

Over the next five months the Second’s remaining eight companies would join Company B at Camp Casey. Company A joined them later on Ship Island, Mississippi. Baltimore forwarded two additional companies, and six more came from Arlington and the District. A further handful, discussed further below, were drafted in New York and assigned to the Second. All the men who were residents were enlisted except those from Baltimore, who enlisted at recruitment offices throughout Maryland. In fact, nearly half the men forwarded

from Baltimore were actually born in Talbot County, giving this one Black regiment almost as many “Talbot Boys” as those honored by a rebel monument that once stood in front of the county courthouse in Easton.

Companies A and B represented men from every county in Virginia and North Carolina circling the Great Dismal Swamp. Some twenty

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of the men were teenagers when Nat Turner rose in Southampton; five younger men from that county would have heard about it from their parents. They represented one of the oldest Black populations in the country. Some might have proved descent from the first group brought here in chains, had only such records been kept of the enslaved.

Now they took up arms in Turner’s cause.¹¹

For those enlisted in Arlington and Washington, what the “Superintendent of Contrabands” in Norfolk said equally applied: “They come here from all over [...] We have had men here who have gone back 200 miles” (to retrieve their families). Already diverse in 1860, with an enslaved and free Black population born throughout the country, with war the area’s Black population gained a new mix. The weekly *Anglo-African* said of Alexandria, “The number of colored people [...] is very great, and increasing daily [...] All making their escape to Meade’s army are forwarded by railway to this place, where they get plenty of work and good wages [...]”¹²

Innumerable challenges would face these refugees. With few possessions and little if any money, from most Whites they faced indifference, disrespect, and hostility in instances too numerous to recount. But for the army the greatest challenge presented by their Black recruits was that most were formerly enslaved and illiterate.

The popular literature of the Civil War highlights heroic battles and figures of monumental stature. This tends to obscure a more mundane aspect of the great epic of American history: the army of the 1860s was a bureaucracy—a bureaucracy that killed—but nonetheless one that depended as much on paperwork as its horses and mules depended on forage. Army regulations in 1861 ran to 500 pages including 160

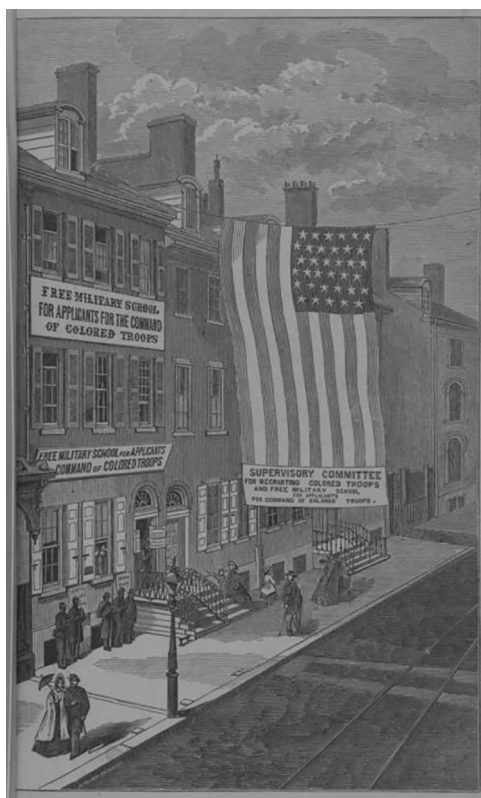
forms—43 for the Quartermaster Department alone. Morning reports, guard reports, and monthly or quarterly returns of equipment, formed only part of the paperwork. The most challenging, yet essential, form was the payroll, a document about a yard square with space for every soldier and every change in status for the previous two months, including promotions, reductions, and stoppages. Four copies were required.¹³

Clumsy as it was with steel pens and red tape the system helped manage pay and property and collect the data necessary for an army of unprecedented size. It could be a nuisance, but Thomas Wentworth Higginson remarked that no one “attempts a short cut without finding it the longest way, and rarely enters on that heroic measure of cutting red-tape without finding at last that he has entangled his own fingers in the process.”¹⁴

Most White regiments had within their ranks literate enlisted personnel who as noncommissioned officers (NCOs) or clerks could relieve the officers of much of the drudgery. Confronting the USCT was the challenge of finding or creating soldiers who could do the same.

The BCT attempted to help. A “Free Military School” in Philadelphia for training officer candidates also accepted Black enlisted men for training as NCOs (Fig. 2). For the Second the BCT assigned eleven men drafted in New York as potential corporals and sergeants. Six did earn rank, including Theodore Brown from

Fig. 2: “Free Military School for Applicants for Command of Colored Troops,” 1864.



Courtesy of Archive.org.

Binghamton who became the Sergeant Major, assisted the regimental adjutant with the regiment's paperwork, and directly managed the ten company First Sergeants. The New Yorkers also included Moses Ray, a barber from New Jersey drafted in Saratoga who became a Principal Musician. Hiram Peterson, a mechanic drafted in Scio, became First Sergeant of Company G, and Charles Briggs of Whitehall, another barber, later became commissary clerk for the District of Key West and Tortugas—still a private, but in an “extra duty” job that would raise his pay to more than the Sergeant Major's.¹⁵

Besides the New Yorkers the regiment had more than 260 other men free when the war started and, according to the 1860 Census, about 80 percent of them might have been literate. Still, the number with sufficient proficiency to serve as NCOs could easily have fallen short of the number required. And in practice, while free men in the regiment would become more than twice as likely as those who began the war enslaved to receive promotions, they also proved half again as likely to be demoted afterwards. The regiment could not rely solely on them for its NCOs.¹⁶

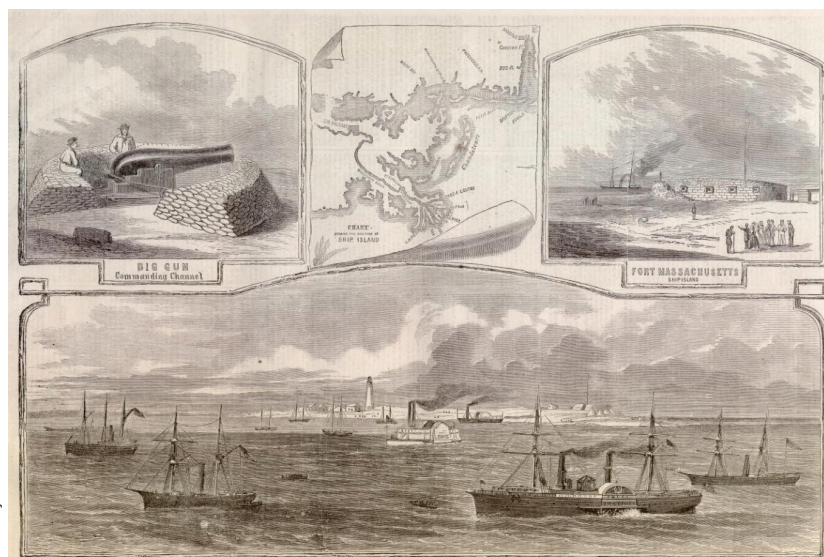
Enter the regimental Chaplain, James H. Schneider. Raised in Turkey and Syria as the son of congregationalist missionaries, he came to Massachusetts in his teens to prepare for the ministry. After attending Philips Andover and Yale, he studied theology and taught at Bridgewater, Massachusetts, until July 1863 when he received his draft notice. “I am called,” he wrote his mother back in Syria. “God wills it.” Rather than serve in the ranks, Schneider applied to the Washington examination board for a commission, admitting to Major General Silas Casey, who ran the Board and for whom the camp was named, that his principal goal was to minister to Black enlisted men. Casey approved and Schneider came to the Second as a Lieutenant in September 1863. He wrote approvingly of Lieutenant Colonel Stark Fellows, a Dartmouth law graduate who little more than a month earlier had himself been but a First Lieutenant in the 14th New Hampshire. Schneider noted that most of his fellow officers were former enlisted men from various states who passed before Casey's board, and while some had seen only picket and garrison duty, others were hardened combat veterans. They made up a diverse group of White men placed over an even more diverse group of Black men, and the audacity of the army's

experiment in raising the USCT could only be redeemed if both groups determined to make it work.

With Fellows's support and a brief leave home to obtain ordination Schneider became chaplain. He gave his first service on November 15, 1863, preaching from the middle of a hollow square formed by the regiment after Sunday morning inspection. The following week the Second received orders to pack and on November 24th, by train and ferry, traveled to New York City. The following day, Thanksgiving, found them marching up Broadway just months after the draft riots stained the cobbles with the blood of Black victims of the mob, thus becoming the first Black regiment to march through the city. From New York the Second sailed for the Gulf, landed in New Orleans and after a day there landed at Ship Island, Mississippi (Fig. 3).¹⁷

Conditions for the regiment in their new camp were brutal—cold, windy, several miles from a supply of firewood, and tented on sand so bright some of men became night blind from the glare. Still, Schneider had a Sibley tent flanked by two “very large tents” providing several hundred square feet for combined quarters, chapel, and school room.¹⁸

Fig. 3: “Ship Island,” from January 4, 1862, Harper’s Weekly.



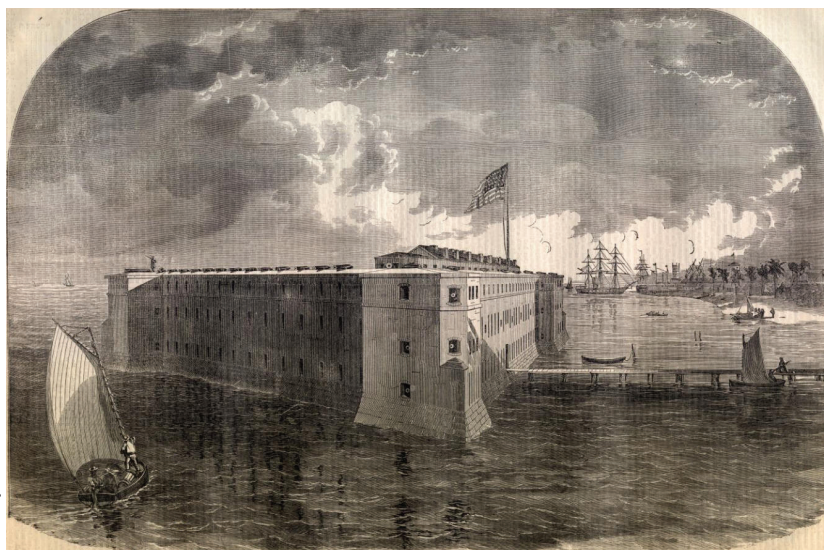
Courtesy of Sonofthesouth.net

The space was not wasted. By mid-December Schneider was spending eight hours a week teaching reading and writing to two classes of beginners and one of more advanced students. There were prayer meetings three nights a week and regular Sunday services. Schneider also served as the soldiers' postmaster, ensuring their letters home were properly addressed.¹⁹

In February 1864 the regiment came to Key West and settled in with its headquarters at Fort Taylor and companies encamped at two other sites in town (Fig. 4). Weekly services continued in the fort, but now Schneider's teaching changed to meet increasing demand. He selected two or three "*competent teachers*" from each company, allowed each six students, and promised fifty cents a month for each man instructed. The teachers would "*recite*" for him weekly, and the Post Fund would cover the payments.²⁰

Schneider remained busy, extending his preaching to prisoners in Fort Taylor, men in hospital, and the city's African American population. He planned to unite the Black Methodist and Baptist congregations and establish a school for Black children. He was happy, and his health was good. He had even agreed to serve as defense counsel on a murder

Fig. 4: "Fort Taylor," from March 2, 1861, Harper's Weekly.



Courtesy of Sonofthesouth.net.

trial, and on the trial's opening day, April 21, showed signs of a defense that might have saved the defendant's life. But that night he took ill.²¹

On April 26, 1864, the man Colonel Fellows called "the best army chaplain I ever saw" died of yellow fever. Commissary Sergeant Taylor, writing to the *Anglo-African* on May 18 noted, "The health of the regiment is not so good at present [...] Among the deceased are our worthy Chaplain James H. Schneider." The chaplain was followed by young Colonel Fellows on May 23, three more officers in May, and eventually a total of eleven. Moreover, the adjutant, on detached service in New Orleans, wrangled a transfer to the Signal Corps; the Surgeon went home on sick leave in July and would not return for months, and one of the two Assistant Surgeons obtained a medical discharge.²²

Half the officers at Key West died. Fortunately, three companies had deployed to Fort Myers on the coast of Florida in April, two more followed in June, and every man in them avoided the virus. More fortunately, of nearly 500 enlisted men at Key West, only nineteen died. These included William K. Murray, a sergeant and clerk from Washington; Company B's First Sergeant Allen Mitchell of Pasquotank; and Sergeant Olmsted Hall, an oysterman from Gloucester, Virginia. But overall the noncommissioned officers remained largely untouched and kept the regiment functional during the crisis. The number of sick soldiers peaked at 59 in May.²³

With disease abating among the men the regular work of drill, fatigue, and guard details at Key West continued. Meanwhile the companies on the coast conducted raids into the interior of Florida, interrupting the supply of cattle to rebel armies and occasionally skirmishing with rebel cavalry. In one of the larger engagements a platoon of Company E, led by Sergeant William Wilson, formerly a waiter in the District, scattered the rebels in a bayonet charge conducted "in fine style."²⁴

Education also continued unabated. A Council of Administration in March 1864 had appropriated \$50 for a regimental school. Because Schneider had already "got up a reading room for the men" in one of the ordnance rooms of the Fort, the sum covered school supplies rather than a structure. A subsequent Council in April noted payment of \$75 in cash to Schneider, which would have provided for teaching as many as 150 of the men according to the chaplain's system.²⁵

Other evidence suggests the men continued their studies on their own (Fig. 5). One of Schneider's last letters mentioned his writing class, adding, "There are some very bright scholars among them; one of them, Richard B., is particularly so." There were only two soldiers of that name, one a 33-year-old man who left little in the records. The other was Richard Burton, a 21-year-old self-emancipated farmer from Madison, Virginia, who received his corporal's warrant in January 1864 and made sergeant in June, two months after Schneider's death.²⁶

Councils of Administration also continued. Though they often recorded only sums paid rather than items purchased, the regiment's report for March through May 1865 shows a teacher, "Mr. Moore," receiving \$60 a month. In July Commissary Sergeant Taylor wrote the *Anglo-African* that he still received packages of the paper, distributed them to the soldiers, and "by that means the Anglos have been made use of to good purpose." An avidity for reading remained, with or without the teacher.²⁷

More signs of learning as ongoing rather than occasional appear in Company K's fund report for January through April 1865. The company spent nearly all its time in Florida at Key West, the one exception taking them to the battle of Natural Bridge. But their report shows a desire to benefit from their time in the army. Among a half dozen pages of itemized expenditures for dried fruit, pickles, and other luxuries one finds three dozen Wilson's readers, six slates, two dozen copy books, ink,

Fig. 5: Soldiers seated with books, ca. 1861–1865.



Courtesy of Library of Congress.

penholders, math and geometry texts, an atlas, writing paper, and envelopes (Fig. 6).²⁸

Clearly these men wanted literacy for more than processing army paperwork. And just as clearly their officers were willing to assist and encourage them. The ultimate illustration of the efforts of both parties came on Saturday, April 1, 1865, as the adjutant read the following to the regiment at evening dress parade:

Sergeant Richard Burton of Company C this Regiment, having been fully recommended is hereby appointed Quartermaster Sergeant in the Second U.S.C.I.

This promotion is made for the following reasons: because of his faithful attention to duties, activity, intelligence, diligent application to studies and persevering industry in endeavoring to acquire for himself an education.

When Sergeant Burton originally joined the Regiment, he was unable to read or write his own name, but by close application to his studies he has since learned to read, and to write a good hand, and has thus qualified himself for the position to which he is now promoted.

The Colonel hopes that others in the Regiment will emulate his example, not only by preparing themselves for promotion in the Regiment, but also for a life of usefulness hereafter, when they

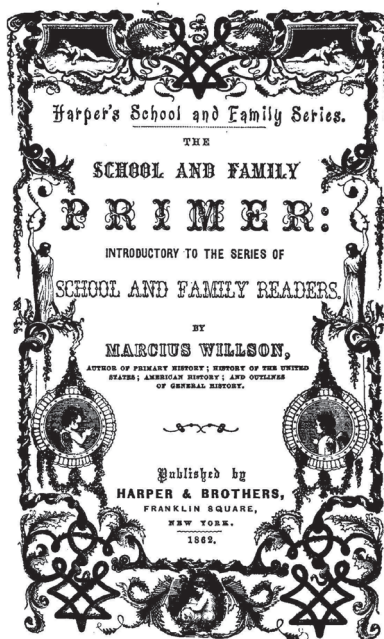


Fig. 6: Frontispiece from Marcius Wilson's School and Family Reader, 1861.

Courtesy of Archives.org.

*shall no longer be soldiers but become citizens of the United States.*²⁹

The war soon ended and after many months of occupation duty the regiment finally returned home. In January 1866 they received that massive amount of back pay noted at the beginning of this article. But as important as the money might have been, the men would also soon indeed become citizens. And more than that, many now returned with skills they could only imagine attaining a scant few years before.

About the Author

Longtime Arlington resident Michael A. Schaffner lives with spouse and pugs in a tenant farmer's cottage built cheaply 110 years ago and now precariously holding on against an encroaching tide of McMan-sions. A retired civil servant and amateur military historian, Schaffner has given presentations to Civil War roundtables and similar organizations from Baltimore to Charleston, as well as participated in living histories and battle reenactments as a member of Company B, 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the Chesapeake Independent Blues, and other groups of black powder aficionados. For the last several years, when not recycling realtor's offers to buy their property, Schaffner has focused on compiling a history of the Second Regiment, United States Colored Infantry from archival sources while continuing (as "M. A. Schaffner") to write and publish poems and other ephemera.

Endnotes

1. *Anglo-African*, "A Visit to the Second Regiment US Colored Troops at Camp Chase, VA," by "R. H." (Robert Hamilton), October 31, 1863, letter dated October 20.
2. Dowdey & Manarin, eds. *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, New York, 1961, 8–11; *Alexandria Gazette*, January 18, 1866, with average amount for each man calculated from 900 soldiers mustering out compared to labor value (relative to unskilled wage at the time) at "Measuring Worth" site—using a straight CPI measure the equivalent would be \$4,890: <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/relativevalue.php>; Liebertz, John A., *Guide to the African American Heritage of Arlington*, 2nd Ed. (Arlington Historical Society, 2016), 38,

- 47–48; Rose, C. B., *Arlington County Virginia, A History* (Arlington Historical Society, 1976), 126.
3. *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. 1, 361–62.
 4. *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. 2, 53; *New York Times*, “The Confiscation Act,” September 2, 1861.
 5. Norton, Oliver Willcox, *Army Letters 1861–1865*, privately printed, 1903, 79, 88. Norton, the bugler who helped compose “Taps,” would later be commissioned in the 8th USCT.
 6. *General Orders of the War Department Embracing the Years 1861, 1862 & 1863*, Vol. I., Thos. M. O’Brien & Oliver Diefendorf (New York, 1864), G.O. No. 91, Series 1862, July 25, 1862, 334, 349–50.
 7. William A. Dobak, *Freedom by The Sword* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), 8, 10, 34, 96, 165.
 8. Luis Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*, 3rd ed., (Salem, NH, 1990), 2–4.
 9. *War of the Rebellion*, Series III, Vol. 5, 118–24, on Thomas’s efforts; *General Orders, Adjutant General’s Office, for 1863*, Washington, G.P.O. 1864 (pages numbered by General Order).
 10. C. R. Gibbs, *Black, Copper, & Bright*, (Silver Spring, MD, 2002), 43, 50, 57; “Bob Logic,” “Letter From Washington,” *The Anglo-African*, July 5, 1863. For a fuller analysis of the camp’s location, with a slightly different conclusion see “Camp Casey, Arlington Virginia, Research and Historic Context,” EHT Traceries for Stantec Architecture, May 1, 2019, https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/190501_CampCasey_FinalReport.pdf. On July 18, 1863, the “regiment” (then but two companies of recruits) was at a “Camp Chase” when it received orders from General DeRussy, then commanding the defenses south of the Potomac, to move either outside the circle of forts or a mile back of them (NARA RG94 Regimental Books 2nd US Colored Infantry, Letters and Endorsements). Since the latter would have put the men on low ground in the brickyards next to the Potomac or in the river itself rather than on Arlington Heights, Camp Casey was somewhat to the left and a little below where indicated on the EHT’s map, 7. The currently assumed location shows on a map in the vertical file on the Arlington View Neighborhood at the Center for Local History in Arlington County Central Library and was brought to the author’s attention by Jessica Kaplan, a member of the board of directors of the Arlington Historical Society. On the layout of a camp of infantry: *Revised U.S. Army Regulations*, 1863, 76–78.

11. Regimental Books of the 2nd United States Colored Infantry, Vols. 1–6, Record Group 94 (RG 94), National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). The volumes contain both Regimental and Company “Descriptive Books.”
12. C. B. Wilder to the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, 9 May 1863, RG 94, O-328 1863, NARA; Letters Received, Series 12; *The Anglo-African*, “Alexandria, VA.” “R. H.” (Robert Hamilton), October 31, 1863, letter dated October 20.
13. *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861* (Washington: GPO, 1863); August V. Kautz, *The Company Clerk, Showing How to Make Out All the Returns, Reports, and Rolls and What to Do With Them*, (Philadelphia, 1863); *Instructions For Making Muster-Rolls, Mustering Into Service, Periodical Payments, and Discharging From Service Volunteers or Militia* (Washington: GPO, 1863), 4–5.
14. T. W. Higginson, “Regular and Volunteer Officers,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, no. 14 (September 1864).
15. John Taggart, *Free Military School for Applicants for Command of Colored Troops* (Philadelphia, 1864), 13; August V. Kautz, *Customs of Service for Non-Commissioned Officers and Soldiers* (Philadelphia, 1864), 43, 289–90. In June of 1864 Congress raised the pay of all enlisted men, including USCT. A private made \$16 a month compared to a sergeant major’s \$26, but “extra duty” pay for skilled workers, including clerks, came to an additional 40 cents a day at stations east of the Rocky Mountains (*Revised Regulations*, paragraph 902, 127).
16. CDL sorted by men noted as “free on or before April 19, 1861” under “Remarks.” One company (D) failed to report and another (C) omitted any men who had died or been discharged, so the total of men free when the war started may have approached 300. Census data comes from *Population of the United States in 1860, Compiled by the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington: GPO, 1864), under “Miscellaneous Statistics: Educational Statistics, Libraries, Schools, Colleges, etc.,” 508. The number who “can not read or write” was self-reported with no distinction between absolute and functional illiteracy. For comparison of promotions and reductions, CDL sorted for the number of men free or enslaved at the war’s start and number and percentage of each category promoted and reduced.
17. Date of appointment comes from the officers’ Descriptive List. Details of travel to New York from Increase N. Tarbox, *Missionary Patriots: Memoirs of James H. Schneider and Edward M. Schneider* (Boston, 1867), 138–40. Earlier biographical information is summarized from the first seven chapters.

18. Approved Pension Files SC-537694 for Scipio Capeheart and WC-263921 for Isaac Fuller's widow, NARA. Tarbox, 141–44, for Schneider's description; tent dimensions from George Crossman, *The 1865 Army Quartermaster Manual*, Earl J. Coates and Frederick C. Gaede, eds. (Arbor House Publishing, 2013), 232–42.
19. Tarbox, 145–46.
20. Ibid., 164–65, italics in original. Also see *Revised Regulations*, 34–36; Kautz, *Company Clerk*, 25–27; Post, or Regimental Funds, came from taxes on the regimental sutler, savings from rations, and miscellaneous sources like fines. Company Funds came mostly from unexpended Regimental Funds. Officers managed the funds through Councils of Administration.
21. Tarbox, 165–66, 172, 181.
22. Regimental Books 2nd US Colored Infantry, Regimental Descriptive Book of Officers, RG94, NARA.
23. CDL sorted for deaths and causes; NARA, RG 94, "Miscellaneous Records Second United States Colored Infantry," letter of Lt. Col. Townsend to General Woodbury, July 2, 1864.
24. *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. 5, part 1, 408. The quote comes from Major Weeks, 2nd Florida Cavalry (US) who commanded the expedition.
25. Tarbox, 178; Regimental Books of the 2nd US Colored Infantry, "Councils of Administration 2d U.S.C. Troops, No. 7 of Vol. 2," RG 94, NARA.
26. Tarbox, 181, and Consolidated Descriptive List entries for Richard Berryman and Richard Burton.
27. Regimental Books, "Councils of Administration 2d U.S.C. Troops"; *Anglo-African*, "From the Boys in Blue," July 26, 1865, RG 94, NARA.
28. Miscellaneous Records, 2nd USCI, "K Co. 2d U.S.C.I. Jan, Feb, Mar, Apr Company Fund," RG 94, NARA.
29. Regimental Books, 2nd USCI, Order Book, RG 94, NARA.