

Fall 1998

Volunteers for Freedom: Black Civil War Soldiers in Alexandria National Cemetery, Part I

by
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It is in a quiet corner of Alexandria, and few know of it. The Alexandria National Cemetery is overshadowed by nearby Arlington National Cemetery, yet the Alexandria National Cemetery is of great significance for it is the last resting place of approximately 280 African-American soldiers. This article will explain the processes by which African Americans became soldiers, how these soldiers ended up spending their last days in Alexandria, and how the African-American section of the National Cemetery came to be. A list of African-American soldiers buried at the National Cemetery will be included in Part II.

Like Arlington Cemetery, The Alexandria National Cemetery was begun during the Civil War when Washington was on the front line between Union and Confederate territories. At that time, Alexandria was a major Union Army supply center and the site of many army general hospitals to which sick and injured soldiers were evacuated from battlefields and camps in the field. Alexandria medical facilities eventually provided the Union Army with 6,500 beds. Death rates were high from combat wounds and disease. Most casualties were from illnesses which were often caused by the imperfectly understood consequences of poor sanitation. In those days, the dead soldiers' bodies were not returned to relatives at government expense, instead, the army had to find a burial place for them.



*"Contraband" Laborers.
(The National Archives)*

The Alexandria burial ground, a five-and-a-half-acre plot, was acquired by the local army quartermaster in May 1862. During the war, and in a few years after it approximately 3,500 soldiers were interred there. Over 250 of these were African American, and they were placed in their own corner of the cemetery. Had black troops been enlisted in the army from the beginning of the war, rather than mostly during its last year, there would have been more burials because of the high death rates in the battles they engaged in. For these troops, the process of finding acceptance in the white army was neither rapid nor straightforward because of complex political, legal, and racial issues.

**This Issue of the Historic Alexandria Quarterly is sponsored by
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A typical black soldier
(*Harper's Illustrated*, 2 July, 1864)

Finding a Place

The law did not allow blacks to join the militia, and regulations of the army provided that "any free white male person above the age of eighteen . . . might be enlisted," which meant that volunteer regiments also could not accept African Americans, Asians, or American Indians. At the start of the war, patriotic volunteers were not difficult to enlist since everyone believed that the war would end quickly. By the second year of the war, however, enthusiasm for joining the armed forces declined while manpower needs grew. Various means were tried to increase volunteers: modifications of the militia law allowing state conscription; payment of federal, state, and local enlistment bounties; and purchase of substitutes to serve in the place of drafted men. These methods did not, however, fill the army's need for troops, so some changes were needed. The implementation of these new changes permitted black men to wear the uniform. ¹

Slaves overwhelmingly made up the black population of the nation, and the Fugitive Slave Law provided that escaped slaves would be turned over to their owners when found in any state. Military operations freed many slaves, and these and other blacks took advantage of the presence of Union Army troops near their homes in order to seek the protection and support of Northern forces. At the same time, able-bodied free and escaped slaves could provide labor for the army. That slaves who had fled from their owners could be claimed for continued bondage when found made their positions precarious. Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, a Massachusetts officer with a political background, when in command at Fort Monroe in Virginia refused to turn over slaves to Southern owners on the grounds that the enslaved would assist the Confederate war effort if returned. They were, he said, contraband of war. Other Union commanders turned blacks over to owners, however. Congress took note of the confused situation and approved the first Confiscation Act, on 13 March 1862. The Act prohibited officers or other persons in the military or naval service of the United States from using forces under their commands to return fugitives from service or labor. Punishment was dismissal from the service if found guilty by a court-martial. The reason was not sympathy for the plight of the blacks but rather recognition that black labor could further the war aims of the North at the expense of the South. ²

From the beginning of hostilities, free black men in the North offered themselves as soldiers, but they were not accepted. President Lincoln's priority was restoration of the Union, and arming blacks would alarm the border slave states that he wished to keep loyal. Cautious new laws and orders allowing African Americans to serve the nation in organizations supporting the military did not cause the beginning of a flood of blacks seeking enlistment in the Union Army. On 22 September 1862, following the dubious Union victory at Antietam, Lincoln moved the issue along with his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation which proposed to free few slaves

not already out of bondage. This proclamation had important political consequences. It had the symbolic effect of changing the nature of the war, because now abolition was an admitted war aim. Compensation for states that adopted gradual emancipation and continued colonization was provided for, but the most significant section declared freedom for all blacks in states or portions of states in rebellion.

Although the preliminary proclamation freed no slaves not considered de facto free, it was recognized as the vehicle of emancipation by blacks everywhere. On 1 January 1863, the president, acting under his authority as commander in chief of the armed forces, followed up with the promised implementing Emancipation Proclamation which was presented as a "fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion," in other words, a matter justified by military and not social reasons. The proclamation addressed the question of black soldiers and sailors specifically, saying that blacks "will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places and to man vessels of all sorts in said service." This authority was somewhat short of promising the black soldier full opportunities to fight for his country, but it went beyond earlier authorized labor duties. The issues of unequal pay and other financial incentives were not addressed.³

Raising Black Regiments

Early black regiments were organized as Native Guards, Volunteers of African Descent, South Carolina Contrabands, and State Volunteers. The War Department, perhaps to distinguish black from white regiments of volunteers, decided that the new regiments would not carry customary state designations. Black volunteers were to be mustered directly into U.S. service and were not to be identified as state troops. Beginning in 1863, new regiments were numbered sequentially based on date of mustering in.⁴

All black regiments were organizations of U.S. Colored Troops (USCT), made up of 120 U.S. Colored Infantry regiments (USCI), twelve

U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery regiments (USCHA), seven U.S. Colored Cavalry regiments (USCC), and ten light artillery batteries. Unlike white volunteer regiments, officers were not appointed by state governors but were usually commissioned after approval by boards of officers in several northern cities. All were white men until late in the war except for those black officers in early Louisiana regiments who were dismissed or forced from the service. Noncommissioned officers were black. Nearly all company officers were former enlisted men in white regiments, and many named to field grades had been company officers in those regiments. The War Department created the Bureau for Colored Troops within the Office of the Adjutant General of the Army to manage USCT units.

Because the Bureau for Colored Troops was not established until 22 May 1863, there were exceptions to the control and designation of black regiments. The officers of the Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Regiments of Massachusetts Volunteers (Colored) were appointed by the governor and these regiments retained their regimental numbers through the war. The Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment (Colored) kept its state number, but it is not certain that the governor appointed officers in the same manner as was done with white regiments. The Twenty-ninth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry (Colored) was the fourth and final exception to the USCT numbering system, and some regiments



Brig. Gen. Edward Ferrero commanding all-black Fourth Division, Ninth Army Corps, and staff at Petersburg, June or July, 1864. (The Library of Congress)

begun by states served some time in federal service before redesignation as USCT.⁶

At the start of hostilities, black soldiers were thought unneeded because popular opinion was that the war would be over rapidly, negating any requirement for what would have widely been seen as serious social engineering. Indeed, white volunteers filled the ranks rapidly until expiration of the enlistments of short-term soldiers, rising casualty lists, and the draw of booming job markets in northern states dampened enthusiasm for military service. Consequently, the War Department began to rely on forms of conscription from July 1863. The draft was not as absolute as it would be in later wars. Each state was given a quota for each call that the President made for troops. The quota was further broken down by counties, electoral districts, townships, and other jurisdictions. Any male citizen between the ages of 18 and 45 was subject to call. Exemptions were provided for, but the most important feature of the system was that the draft was inoperative where volunteers exceeded the quota, and purchase of substitutes or cash payments in lieu of service were allowed. A payment of \$300 allowed a man to escape conscription. Alternatively, he could pay another to serve in his place, the amount of money exchanged to be arranged privately between the parties. When black men were first accepted into the army, those meeting the age qualification could enlist in the place of white men. But the provost marshal general, who administered enlistments, said that this method was used "to take advantage of the ignorance and necessities of Negroes and buy them up at a cheap rate as substitutes for drafted white men." The loophole was changed by regulation, but the system and its abuses still continued in some places.⁷

Another incentive for enlistments was the system of federal bounties and similar schemes by states and localities. After black men were placed on the rolls of those eligible for the draft, they were denied the federal bounty (they could receive local bounties). Instead, if a slave had an owner loyal to the Union, that owner would be paid the \$100 bounty. In the case of an enlistment by a slave, a loyal owner could receive up to \$300,

depending on length of the enlistment. The funds for the bounties were drawn from the monies paid for exemptions from service. The bounty inequity was ended in the war's last year when black soldiers were permitted the same payment as white men.

Other benefits and protections for which black troops eventually qualified were pensions for soldiers disabled through army service and pensions for survivors of war casualties, but the widows had to prove by affidavits of credible witnesses two years cohabitation with the soldier. The final inequity between white and black troops, differences in pay, was also ended in February 1864 when all soldiers received the increase in pay to which their rank entitled them. A remaining qualification affecting black soldiers was that to receive the back pay authorized for any period prior to the law's effective date a black soldier had to have been free on 19 April 1861. Certification of this status was left to officers of the black regiments, who often ignored the restriction in favor of payments to all, and eventually the restriction was removed.⁸

After the war and termination of recruiting for USCT regiments, the Bureau for Colored Troops had recorded almost 179,000 black men enlisted from every state, including those formerly Confederate. Louisiana supplied the most, 24,052, and Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky also added significant numbers. Some states provided less than 500 men, and many of these troops were recruited by agents in other states and attributed to states they had never seen. About 5,050 were recruited at places under Union control in states in rebellion, and all of these were credited to the Northern states whose agents signed them up. For reasons associated with the draft and state quotas, wherever a man enlisted was recorded; it did not matter that he was just brought into the state by enlistment agents. Because of these situations and methods of recruiting, the list of all states from which the total of black men recruited does not accurately reflect the soldiers' states of origins. Even in some regiments enlisted early in the North, such as the Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Massachusetts, a minority of recruits were residents of the Bay State. The others came from the Old Northwest (i.e., those states covered by the

Northwest Ordinance: Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana Ohio and part of Minnesota), and New England. Regiments recruiting in the same areas later found freemen scarce and had to be satisfied with escaped slaves from other states to be able to organize their regiments.⁹

Competition for recruits was intense. This led to abuses of the bounty systems and some irregularities in the recruiting process. There do not seem to have been many examples of coercion of black recruits, although it must have been simple for state recruiting agents to fool the mostly uneducated black candidates. The army's provost marshal general reported after the war that the worst abuse and unnecessary expenses seemed to him to have been the result of allowing agents from loyal states to recruit in rebel ones. He said:

No material advantage to the service resulted from this undertaking. All, or nearly all, of the recruits to be had in the rebel States were being obtained through the proper military officers and agents of the War Department. Without increasing the number of men enlisted, the law enabled States in the North to lay claim to credits for men enlisted in the South, and thus reduce their quota for draft. To obtain these credits local bounties were lavishly provided. They were unnecessary, and did not have the effect of increasing the number of recruits obtained, but in many instances enriched bounty brokers and corrupted military officers.¹⁰

Black soldiers were organized into regiments that met a common standard, and states established camps where the new units could be assembled before being ordered to field duty. Recruiting was done by agents of the state or regiment and was often accomplished by prospective officers awaiting federal commissions and appointments to their new positions. An infantry regiment had ten companies, a cavalry regiment twelve. A company's complement was a maximum of 83 privates and eleven noncommissioned officers, but it was considered organized when about 75 enlisted men were

mustered in by an officer of the army. In all, 7,122 officers and 178,895 enlisted men were mustered into USCT regiments; the maximum number on active duty at any one time was 123,156 on 15 July 1865 when the last regiment was mustered in.¹¹

Role of the Black Soldier

Although the formation of black regiments was at its height when the Union Army's need for men was greatest in the spring and summer of 1864, not all of the USCT units saw immediate action. Some of the army's leadership had confidence in the value of black soldiers, although more generals saw them as ill-trained and unproven. Acceptance of the black man was a gradual process. Even after showing that they fought as well as whites, black regiments often were relegated to arduous garrison and fatigue duties instead of further front line assignments. Black soldiers nevertheless were engaged in almost 450 battles, skirmishes, and other fights. Casualty rates among black soldiers were lower than among white regiments because USCT regiments were in the war for less time than veteran white organizations. Ninety-one officers and 1,514 enlisted men were killed by the enemy, and another 1,348 were declared missing in action. Many of the missing deserted or were killed in battle or by Confederate soldiers after surrendering, and others died of poor treatment in prisoner of war camps. Army records show that 194 officers and 31,866 men died of disease, accidents, or battle wounds, but the army was unable to determine the number who were fatally wounded in action.¹²

Hospitals and Cemeteries

The Union Army's hospital system which was primitive early in the war had become better organized by the time black soldiers were recruited in numbers. Some of the medical operations were army responsibilities, but civilian organizations, such as the United



States Sanitary Commission, provided essential supplies and assistance. Each regiment was authorized a surgeon, two assistants, and an enlisted hospital steward. In combat, regiments set up aid stations at the front to process casualties. The wounded were sent to the regiment's field hospital, which often was many miles from the engagement. Late in the war, at least in the Virginia theater of operations, these regimental facilities were consolidated into brigade, division, and corps hospitals. For long-term care, seriously sick and wounded soldiers were evacuated by a branch of the Sanitary Commission or the army to general hospitals in major Northern cities. Washington, D.C., and neighboring Alexandria were important hospital centers. Although segregation of races was not yet established by law, black soldiers had their own facilities, and it is not clear that these hospitals were inferior to those provided for white troops once an organization was perfected.¹³

From regiment to general hospital, much of the staff providing services and care for the sick and injured was made up of civilian volunteers and convalescent soldiers. One unpaid volunteer was Helen Gilson, a young New Englander who in 1864 established the Colored Hospital Service under the Sanitary Commission at City Point, the supply center for General Grant's armies before Richmond. Gilson turned this particular facility from what an observer called "a depot for wounded men" into a model hospital with low mortality rates. Another said that Gilson's City Point hospital for black troops was raised "from a disgrace to an object of pride." Many of the soldiers with illnesses and wounds that could not be treated satisfactorily at City Point were sent to Alexandria.¹⁴

Most of the African-American soldiers who died during the war and were buried in the Alexandria National Cemetery were reported as victims of respiratory or intestinal diseases, but it can be concluded that the real cause of death was usually the result of unsanitary conditions. Acute diarrhea was the most common symptom. The actual cause of death may have been tuberculosis, malaria, or cholera. There was no understanding



*Brig. Gen. John P. Slough, military governor of Alexandria.
(Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site)*

of bacteria, and every operation—particularly amputations and procedures to repair wounds—was septic.¹⁵

Alexandria was the site of several general hospitals, the army's highest level of care facilities. Most of these occupied existing buildings commandeered for the purpose, and eventually some pavilion hospitals were constructed. Pavilion hospitals had better records of patient survival because of good ventilation and up-to-date medical facilities.

The military government of Alexandria was formed following the occupation of the town in late May 1861. It was headed by Col. (later Brig. Gen.) John P. Slough, a native of Ohio who entered the army from Colorado and who served at Alexandria until the end of the war. His headquarters was at 201 S. St. Asaph Street. The chief surgeon in charge of all the general hospitals in Alexandria was Connecticut-born Edwin Bentley. Bentley was appointed in the U.S. Volunteers in early September 1861 and served out the war in this post.¹⁶

The Old General Hospital, the first military hospital in town, was opened in mid-July 1861 on the corner of Washington Street between Cameron and Queen Streets. By early 1862, new facilities were opened as branches of the general hospital were designated general hospitals in their own right. Among these were Mansion House, King

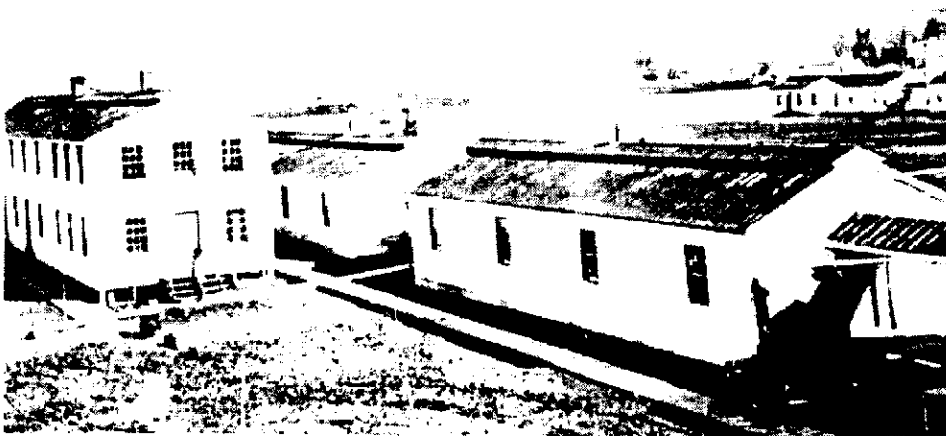
Street, Fairfax Street, Wolfe Street, St. Paul's Church, New Hollowell, Queen Street, Bruin's Slave Pen, Baptist Church, Grace Church, Washington Hall, and others. None of these were for the care of black soldiers. The first facility for contrabands was opened at Clarmont, an estate two-and-a-half miles west of the center of Alexandria on the Orange and Alexandria Rail Road. The Clarmont hospital was converted from use by contrabands to specialize in "smallpox eruptive" diseases on 20 January 1864, other facilities then being available for blacks. Dr. Bentley purchased this property, which was apparently confiscated from its Confederate absentee owner for nonpayment of war taxes and sold by the U.S. marshal of the eastern district of Virginia, while it was still in hospital use. Clarmont consisted of a mansion and 320 acres of land, and Bentley paid \$1,900 for the estate.

By that time, black soldiers-in-training from Camp Casey on nearby Arlington Heights and from the First U.S. Colored Infantry on Mason's (now Roosevelt) Island in the Potomac near Georgetown, D.C., needed more care than could be provided by regimental surgeons. This necessitated the opening of a new facility on 15 February 1864. L'Overture General Hospital, named after one of the liberators of Haiti, Toussaint L'Overture, was opened in existing and some new buildings to be used exclusively for black troops. Its headquarters building still stands at 217 S. Payne Street. At its fullest extent the

hospital occupied much of the area between Duke, Prince, South Fayette, and West Streets.¹⁷

L'Overture was also used for the treatment of contrabands who were not soldiers, but their numbers are not recorded. It seems likely that most of them were army civilian employees or dependents of army workers and possibly some family members of soldiers. The black hospital acquired branches among existing care facilities, probably because casualties were received before new facilities could be constructed. These were Grace Church, in use (but not at first for blacks) from 5 July 1862 to December 1864, near Patrick Street; Baptist Church, same dates, at Washington and Prince Streets, and the Lyceum Hall on Washington Street. The Lyceum Hall was a ward of the Baptist Church General Hospital from September 1862, but it was abandoned as a military care facility shortly thereafter. USCT soldiers were cared for elsewhere as the army hospital organization changed over the years. Some blacks were treated at the Soldiers' Rest after that temporary lodging facility near the Orange and Alexandria Rail Road depot was converted into a general hospital in May 1864. The buildings were returned to lodging use in early October of the same year. Slough Barracks General Hospital with six wards in new wooden buildings on Duke Street opened in late May 1864, and it became the last remaining hospital after the military government was abolished in July 1865. Slough was a temporary installation, made up of a headquarters

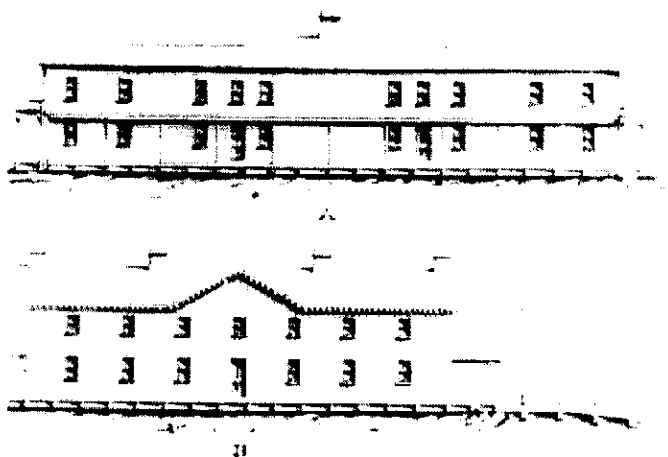
building, 16 barracks originally for the town's garrison, a mess hall, a laundry, a storehouse, a stable, and a "dead house." In October 1865 when L'Overture was closed, its patients were sent to Slough, which itself was closed in January 1866. A few black soldiers were cared for in the Washington Street Military Prison on the corner of Oronoco Street, one of several confinement



Slough General Hospital Buildings. (Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site)

locations in the town but the only one with a hospital. Other sites included the post hospitals at Fort Lyon, one of the defenses of Washington on Hunting Creek a mile southwest of the town, and Battery Rodgers on the Potomac River near Fort Lyon.¹⁸

It became apparent early in the war that the army had to make some provision for burial of soldiers who died in Alexandria camps and hospitals. A cemetery was set up by the quartermaster department on the southeastern edge of the town sometime in the spring of 1862. The taking of what was then city land was ratified by the City Council on 1 June 1862, the property being leased to the government for 999 years for the sum of \$800. The five-and-a-half-acre plot was called the Soldier's or Military Cemetery, and only white men were buried there. It would be two years before the first black fatalities arrived in Alexandria. Another burial ground, known as the Contraband or Freedmen's Cemetery, was established in January 1864 on a plot seized temporarily by the army as abandoned property. The land measured one-and-a-half acres and was located in the 1000 block of S. Washington Street near the Catholic cemetery. This burial ground was certainly not the first place where blacks were interred in the town. About 1,000 blacks for whom names are not recorded died from April 1862 to February 1864. It is not known how many of these deceased people initially were buried in the Freedmen's Cemetery, were buried in some unknown place, or who may have been moved to the new contraband burial ground later. The job of maintaining the records of the Freeman's Cemetery, supervising its operation, and conducting services there was left to Rev. Albert Gladwin, a black clergyman thought to have been associated with the then new Beulah Baptist Church at 320 S. Washington Street. Gladwin was appointed superintendent of contrabands or freedmen by the military government in October 1863. He hired three gravediggers, and, from January 1864, coffins and a hearse were furnished on his request by the quartermaster department.¹⁹



Elevations and section of hospital pavilion buildings constructed in Alexandria. (Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site, original in The National Archives).

Seeking Equal Treatment

The first black soldier who died in Alexandria was given to Gladwin for burial in the Freedmen's Cemetery. This man was Pvt. John Cooley, a soldier of the Twenty-seventh U.S. Colored Infantry, a regiment raised in Ohio, who "died upon entering [L'Overture] hospital" on 5 May 1864. Because Cooley's death was sudden, its cause was not known by the hospital which also did not discover his regiment. Julia Wilbur, a Quaker teacher from New York working for the Sanitary Commission, observed the funeral proceedings and recorded them in her diary: "Between 4 & 5 P.M. went to Funeral of a Colored Soldier, the first one who has died here. Had a white escort & was buried in the New Freedmen's B. Ground. Mr. Gladwin officiated." She was not, however, impressed with the preacher and wrote: "He made no allusion to the peculiar circumstances of the Country, not a word of encouragement to its brave defenders. He shows no sympathy for the people, nor for the Country." Mrs. Wilbur, as will be seen, had something to do with the clergyman losing some of his official responsibilities.²⁰

Mrs. Wilbur's job was to take supplies to the many Alexandria hospitals, to care for destitute contraband families, to visit the ill, and to help organize Sanitary Commission assistance in medical facilities. Because of these roles, she had

a broad view of conditions and personalities in the town. She was acquainted with the Freedmen's Cemetery, having visited it on 12 April when she reported that there were already 65 graves there, none of them yet for soldiers. Wilbur thought the facility was "as good a place as they could get." The next day, she went to see Surgeon Bentley at L'Overture Hospital, "my first interview with him." Once again, an official did not meet with her approval. The issue was the management of the hospital. Wilbur was for assigning Sanitary Commission ladies to manage the hospital, the operation of which Bentley left to convalescing soldiers who lacked management skills. Wilbur wanted matrons to be designated, "who should be white for the present, & . . . intelligent too." Bentley, she surmised, was willing to accept a matron or two, but he "wants to run a black machine entirely." Finally, she said with some bitterness, "He's like so many others, thinks anything is good enough for niggers."²¹

By June, Wilbur wrote in her diary that the L'Overture facility was coming along although there was a steady stream of deaths among the black soldiers. She thought, however, that the "Patients [were] doing very well." A few days later two matrons, a Miss Hassard and a Miss Semmes, were installed by Dr. Bentley, but within a week the matrons were "not very well pleased with things. I hope some things can be better arranged." One of the problems appeared to have been a white ward master at L'Overture whose "tyranny" was likely to "make the men do something desperate." What the problem was is not clear, but it may have had to do with women patients or workers for Wilbur says, "One woman was arrested and marched off. Oh! dear. There will be trouble as long as such women are kept there." She was sensitive to matters such as this, and she wrote that she "found Colored Soldiers in a disreputable house. Some of 54th Mass. going to their Regt., one of their officers with them. Shame on him. I have been ashamed of my race today." By mid-July Wilbur found further racial tension. Visiting Dr. Bentley she concluded that "He does not regard these people as I do." There was more trouble at L'Overture. Miss Hassard refused to

work as she and her fellow matron had not been paid. Wilbur said, "I do not blame them." Somehow, these problems were resolved, but another surfaced.²²

For the next seven months, despite the existence of the Soldiers' Cemetery and its improvement, Superintendent Gladwin caused the bodies of approximately 125 black soldiers to be buried in the Freedmen's Cemetery. This created great unrest among the soldier-patients. Wilbur saw the culmination of this affair when she visited L'Overture on 26 December, 1864. She found the hospital office full of men, arguing with Reverend Gladwin over interring black soldiers in Freedmen's and not in the Soldiers' Cemetery. Gladwin claimed that he had instructions from General Slough, the military governor, "to bury soldiers (Colored) in the Col. Cemetery." Wilbur wrote, "Soldiers resent it." Late on the following day, Gladwin buried two more soldiers at Freeman's, arousing "great excitement." In fact, "the soldiers at hos. are furious [and] refused to go as escort," causing Gladwin to have at least one of them confined in the Slave Pen prison.²³

That this near-mutiny was occurring seems initially to have escaped the notice of Capt. James G. C. Lee, General Slough's quartermaster, who had responsibility for the Soldiers' Cemetery including the burials and records. Lee explained the situation in his 27 December 1864 letter to the army's quartermaster general in Washington, Slough having recommended that the matter be settled in the capital. Lee wrote:

I have recently learned that Mr. Gladwin, Superintendent of Freedmen at this place has caused the interment of colored soldiers be made at the contraband burying-ground. This ground is not owned by the U.S., is not fenced, as I learn, nor is it taken care of, as the regular cemetery is.

On learning this I directed that the interment of colored men, as well as white, be made in the military cemetery, keeping them in a separate portion. This has been done since then until Mr.

Gladwin prevailed on Gen. Slough, Military Governor, to issue an order that they be interred at the contraband burying-ground. A copy of this order not being sent to me officially, I continued my duties, without conferring with Gen. Slough on the subject.

Yesterday however while the hearse and the escort were proceeding to the military cemetery, Mr. Gladwin and a party of soldiers arrested my driver, took him from my hearse and drove it where they pleased, the escort returning to the hospital. As might be expected, the most intense feeling on the part of officers was felt, that this man, a citizen, should be allowed to interfere.²⁴

It cannot be explained why Gladwin thought it necessary to see black soldiers buried in the Freedmen's Cemetery, and it may have been that a burial fee was his incentive. Slough had told Lee that his only concern in changing Gladwin's instructions was the disposition of the bodies already interred, but Lee assured him that "these could be removed very easily and without additional expense by the men who take care of the military cemetery." It was not, however, only Gladwin's actions that provoked Lee to recommend that black soldiers be buried in the government cemetery with their white comrades. On 27 December, Surgeon Bentley had received a petition signed by over 440 of the patients at L'Overture hospital. The soldiers said that they had heard that "some dissatisfaction exists in relation to the burrial [*sic*] of colored soldiers," so they were expressing their views on the question. The petition noted that the government had established a cemetery for soldiers and had another for contrabands, "or freemen, so called." They said:

We are not contrabands, but soldiers in the U.S. Army, and we have cheerfully left the comforts of home, and entered into the field of conflict, fighting side by side with the white soldiers, to

crush out this God insulting, Hell deserving rebellion.

As American citizens, we have the right for the protection of her flag, that right is granted, and we are now sharing equally the dangers and hardships in this mighty contest, and should shair [*sic*] the same privileges and rights of burial in every way with our fellow soldiers, who only differ from us in color.

To crush this rebellion, and establish civil, religious, & political freedom for our children, is the hight [*sic*] of our ambition. To this end we suffer, for this we fight, yea and mingle our blood with yours, to wash away a sin so black, and to destroy a Plot so destructive to the interest and Prosperity [*sic*] of this nation, as soldiers in the U.S. Army. We ask that our bodies may find a resting place in the ground designated for the burial of the brave defenders, of our counties flag.

It has been said that the colored soldiers desire to be buried in the Contrabands Cemetery, we have never expressed such a desire, nor do we ask for any such distinction to be made, but in the more pertinent language of inspiration we would say, (Ruth 1:16-17) "Entreat me not to leave thee, for wither thou goist I will go" "and where thou fightest I will fight," and where thou diest I will die," and there I will be burried," and for this your petitioners will ever pray, the unanimous voice of our Soldiers was given, and their names herin [*sic*] enrolled.²⁵

The matter remained undecided for two weeks to Mrs. Wilbur's dismay. Tracking progress in her diary, she said, "Mr. Gladwin reigns yet," and on the next day, "Mr. Gladwin is in power yet, & the people suffer." By 10 January she saw an unexplained "new instance of Mr. G's tyranny," but five days later James English Ferree, a hospital chaplain with the nominal rank of captain, was appointed to replace Gladwin as superintendent of



Grave of Pvt. Reuben Wilson, Twenty-ninth WSCI, who died of wounds received at the Battle of the Crater, 30 August 1864. Headstone is at Alexandria National Cemetery. (Photo by the author)

freedmen in Alexandria. Mrs. Wilbur was content that Gladwin temporarily left for Washington and that Ferree had come to stay. She was proud that she "threw my Flag to the breeze today," meaning that she had taken her stand against

Gladwin.

Her friend called on Gladwin three days later, and he said that he blamed the friend for putting the flag out, "& it cuts him dread-fully." The last chapter to the hospital unrest may have been a "serious affray at L'Overture Hos." on 27 January when two black men were wounded by white soldiers, but no details are known.²⁶

And so the black soldiers were soon recognized as soldiers like their white comrades and entitled to the same consideration with respect to burial in an army cemetery. Consequently, during the war and shortly thereafter, about 230 USCT soldiers were interred in the Alexandria Soldiers' Cemetery (now the Alexandria National Cemetery), including all the black soldiers who were earlier interred in Freedmen's Cemetery. Another 40 veterans of the Civil War found resting places in later years. A few other black men were also buried in the black soldier section. The men who petitioned, many of whom died in Alexandria hospitals afterward, would have been pleased that their fellow soldiers are still remembered.

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1. Report, Provost Marshal General's Bureau to Secretary of War, 17 March 1866, *A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion*, 127 vols. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1902) (hereafter cited as *ORA*), ser. 3, vol. 5: 654; Francis A. Lord, *They Fought for the Union* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960), 2-5.
2. *ORA*, ser. 3, vol. 5: 654.
3. *Ibid.*; James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 7:3297-99, 3358-60; compensation for slave owners and colonization provisions were dropped in the final Emancipation Proclamation.
4. *ORA*, ser. 3, vol. 5: 660-61.
5. *Ibid.*, 215-16, 660-61. The number of regiments was adjusted for various reasons during the war. Twenty-seven regiments of infantry and one of heavy artillery were consolidated with other regiments, *ibid.*, 139.
6. *Ibid.*, 661.
7. *Ibid.*, 626-29; Emory Upton, *The Military Policy of the United States* (Washington: U.S.

Government Printing Office, 1911), 440-43.

8. *ORA*, ser. 3, vol. 5: 657-60.

9. *Ibid.*, 138.

10. *Ibid.*, 662.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 1030; Noah A. Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 466, Trudeau finds 2,870 succumbed to wounds.

13. George W. Adams, "Caring for the Men: Hospitals, Medicines, Doctors, and Do-Gooders," William C. Davis and Bell I. Wiley, ed. *Photographic History of the Civil War*, 2 vols. (reprint, 1983-84; New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 1994), 236-38; William Howell Reed, *The Heroic Story of the United States Sanitary Commission, 1861-1865* (Boston: G. H. Ellis Co., 1910), 6-10.

14. Edward A. Miller Jr., "Angel of Light: Helen L. Gilson, Army Nurse," *Civil War History* 43 (March 1997), 33-34.

15. Adams, "Caring for the Men," 234-35, 237.

16. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army from Its Organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903*, 2 vols. (1903; reprint, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1965), 1: 892, 212.

17. Alexandria, Field Records of Hospitals, 1841-1912, Record Group 94, Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *Alexandria Gazette*, 20 July 1864; James H. Barber, *Alexandria in the Civil War* (Lynchburg: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1988), 95; William B. Hurd, *Alexandria, Virginia, 1861-1865* (Alexandria: Fort Ward Museum, 1970), 9; Claremont General Hospital in the Daingerfield house in the 200 block of South Washington Street, not to be confused with Clermont, had

some black soldier patients in mid-1864.

18. Field Records of Hospitals, NA; the Washington Street facility was also used as a barracks for convalescents and soldiers awaiting orders, Papers of Capt. Rufus D. Pettit, Inspector of Alexandria Prisons, Lloyd House, Alexandria Public Library.

19. *Alexandria Gazette*, 4 March 1864; Wesley E. Pippenger, *Alexandria, Virginia, Death Records, 1863-1896 (The Gladwin Record)* (Westminster, Maryland: Family Line Publications, 1995), 9-10; Pamela J. Cressey, "Summary of Research Findings, Freedmen's Cemetery," April 1997, 4-6.

20. Cooley, *Compiled (Military) Service Records*, RG 94, NA, (hereafter CMSR, NA); 5 May 1864 entry, Wilbur Diary, microfilm, Lloyd House, Alexandria Library, original in Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library, Pennsylvania.

21. 13 April 1864 entry, Wilbur Diary.

22. *Ibid.*, 17 May; 9, 14, 20, 22, 23, and 28 June; and 13 July 1864.

23. *Ibid.*, 26 and 27 December 1864; the soldiers buried on 27 December, the last in the Contraband cemetery, were likely Pvts. Frank Wade (plot 123) and Shedrick Murphy (plot 124), CMSR, NA.

24. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 1: 624, Lee was quartermaster at the Alexandria depot from November 1862 to July 1864; he joined the regular army after the war and retired a colonel and assistant quartermaster general in 1897; Letter, Lee to Maj. Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs, 28 December 1864, *General Correspondence and Reports relating to National and Post Cemeteries*, RG 576, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, NA.

25. Lee's 28 December 1864 letter; petition from L'Overture General Hospital to Bentley, 27 December 1864, to which are attached signature

sheets, *Quartermaster General Correspondence*, RG 92, NA.

26. 29 and 30 December; and 10, 15, 16, 17, 20, and 28 January 1865 entries, Wilbur Diary; Heitman, *Historical Register*, 1: 417; Ferree was chaplain of the Eleventh Illinois Infantry for the first eight months of the war, resigned, and was appointed a hospital chaplain of volunteers in July 1862. He was mustered out in March 1866.

27. Davis and Morton, CMSR, NA; cemetery records.

28. Jacobs, CMSR and pension record, NA.

29. CMSR, NA.

30. William Henry Glasson, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1918), 124, 234.

31. *Ibid.*, 234-36, 244.

32. Pension records for individual soldiers are in *Case Files of Approved Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War With Spain, 1861-1934*, Civil War and Later Pension Files, Records of the Veterans Administration (now Department of Veterans Affairs), RG 15, NA. An individual soldier's file contains all applications made by him and his dependent wife, children, and other relatives. Files are indexed on microfilm by soldiers' names and also by companies in regiments. A file always has an application number or numbers and will have a certificate number for each approved application.

33. Alexandria National Cemetery Records; U.S. Army Quartermaster General, *Roll of Honor: Names of Soldiers, Victims of the Rebellion, Buried in the National Cemetery at Alexandria, Virginia* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 64-69.

34. Biographical sketches of each of the black soldiers in the National Cemetery are filed in the office of the Alexandria Archaeologist, 105 N. Union Street.

35. Alexandria City Council proclamations, 10 June 1997 and 12 May 1998.

About the Author

Edward A. Miller Jr. received an M.A. and a PhD in American history from the University of Denver and a B.A. in history from the Virginia Military Institute. A career Air Force officer, he taught military, modern Far East and American history as an assistant professor at the Air Force Academy. Following his military service, Miller directed the Center for Defense Information, a defense policy study organization. He served on Capitol Hill as Legislative Aid to Senators Les Aspin and Gary Hart. At the Pentagon, he was special assistant to the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force. He has also managed environmental science and computer consulting operations. His books, *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915* (published in 1995); *Lincoln's Abolitionist General: The Biography of David Hunter* (1997); and *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored Infantry* (1998), all were published by the University of South Carolina Press. Mr. Miller is researching and writing several Civil War subjects. He is completing a study of the American prisoners of war held in Ireland during the American Revolution. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

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The
Historic Alexandria Quarterly
is published by the Office of
Historic Alexandria.
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