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## Black Servicemen on the Seas: African Americans in the Union Navy

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# Black Servicemen on the Seas: African Americans in the Union Navy

## **Abstract**

When the Civil War began, the United States Navy's Atlantic Squadron, commanded by Commodore Silas H. Stringham, sought to blockade the entire Eastern Seaboard of the Confederacy. It faced two major problems: a shortage of manpower and an abundance of fugitive slaves flocking to the Union fleet. The commander of one vessel, Commander O.S. Glisson, had fifteen refugees on his ship, none of whom he intended to return to their owners. Glisson wrote to Commodore Stringham asking for advice, and Stringham wrote to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles with an idea. Arguing that "if Negroes are to be used in this contest . . . they should be used to preserve the Government," Stringham asked permission to recruit these fugitive slaves. Secretary Welles knew the Navy needed men, so he approved the request.

## **Keywords**

African American History, Hannah Christensen, Navy, Special Collections, United States Colored Troops

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### **Black Servicemen on the Seas: African Americans in the Union Navy**

By [Hannah Christensen '17](#)



*Unknown sailor. Tintype. Approximately 19,000 black men served in the Navy, a much smaller number than the 180,000 who served in on land. The entire Union military totaled 2,000,000; one in ten Union soldiers was a black man. Courtesy of Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College.*

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their owners. Glisson wrote to Commodore Stringham asking for advice, and Stringham wrote to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles with an idea. Arguing that “if Negroes are to be used in this contest . . . they should be used to preserve the Government,” Stringham asked permission to recruit these fugitive slaves. Secretary Welles knew the Navy needed men, so he approved the request.

Two factors made this solution possible. The first was the Navy’s perennial manpower problem. Ever since the Revolutionary War, the Navy had never had enough sailors. Time and again, they turned to African Americans for help filling the ranks. While a quota had been instituted in the 1830s, it was dropped in 1862 when the Second Confiscation Act and the Militia Act became law. The latter technically allowed African-American recruitment for any kind of military service, so the Navy took full advantage. The second factor behind Welles’s decision was the naval recruiting process itself. Naval recruitment was a federal responsibility, so the states had no say in how—or who—the Navy recruited. This put the Navy a couple of years ahead of the Army, which relied largely on state-based recruitment and did not allow African-American enlistment until 1863.

Not only were they allowed to enlist sooner, African American sailors faced a much different experience than of many United States Colored Troops in the Army. The Navy itself did not really mind the presence of tens of thousands of African Americans, men not unlike the unidentified sailor in this photograph. To many career sailors, it was nothing new. In addition, naval vessels had integrated crews and African Americans had equal pay, benefits, standards of living, healthcare, and status within the naval bureaucracy. Rank restrictions were dropped when the Navy started to compete with the Army for African American enlistment after the establishment of the United States Colored Troops in 1863.

While most African Americans served as low-ranking sailors, the Navy also hired some as pilots. Many African Americans were familiar with the coastal waterways of the Deep South, and could easily guide Union troops and ships to attack Confederate positions inland. These pilots made up something resembling an officer class, with ranks of acting master pilot and acting ensign pilot. One such pilot was Robert Smalls, famous for sailing a Confederate steamer called the *Planter* past the Fort Sumter batteries to the Union blockade in May 1862. After this escapade, Smalls served as the master of the *Planter*, in addition to piloting Army and Navy vessels on many occasions, including the assault on Charleston, South Carolina in April 1863. Smalls was but one of the many African Americans who offered invaluable service to the Union Navy throughout the course of the war.

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