



10-2-2017

We All Bleed Red: African American Soldiers and the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery

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Labbe, Savannah A., "We All Bleed Red: African American Soldiers and the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery" (2017). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 284.
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We All Bleed Red: African American Soldiers and the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery

Abstract

Years before the United States military was officially desegregated in 1948, African Americans fought alongside white men in the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery during the Civil War. Most African American men that fought for the Union in the Civil War did so in United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.) units, separated from white men. Because of this segregation, many black men, such as Andrew J. Williams of Industry, Maine, left home to find and fight with a U.S.C.T. regiment. Williams would not be accepted into a Maine regiment, or at least so he thought. His brother, Aaron E. Williams, decided to try his luck with the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery, a white regiment. He mustered in on December 26, 1863 and served in Company G. He was not the only African American to join the 1st Maine, either. Lemuel Carter and Franklin Freemont from Bath joined, as did George Freeman from Brunswick. Carter and Freeman enlisted on January 5, 1864, while Freemont enlisted the day prior. They were all members of Company M. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

1st Maine Heavy Artillery, African American History, African American Soldiers, United States Colored Troops

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

We All Bleed Red: African American Soldiers and the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)

Years before the United States military was officially desegregated in 1948, African Americans fought alongside white men in the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery during the Civil War. Most African American men that fought for the Union in the Civil War did so in United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.) units, separated from white men. Because of this segregation, many black men, such as Andrew J. Williams of Industry, Maine, left home to find and fight with a U.S.C.T. regiment. Williams would not be accepted into a Maine regiment, or at least so he thought. His brother, Aaron E. Williams, decided to try his luck with the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery, a white regiment. He mustered in on December 26, 1863 and served in Company G. He was not the only African American to join the 1st Maine, either. Lemuel Carter and Franklin Freemont from Bath joined, as did George Freeman from Brunswick. Carter and Freeman enlisted on January 5, 1864, while Freemont enlisted the day prior. They were all members of Company M.

These African American soldiers fought alongside white men in the fierce battles that the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery took a part in. The 1st Maine started off as an infantry regiment, the 18th Maine. However, they had spent so much time drilling with artillery that they were re-designated as an artillery regiment on January 6, 1863. While the 1st Maine had been mustered into service on August 21, 1862, they had not left the state come May of 1864. They finally left later that month and saw their first action near Fredericksburg on May 19, 1864. The 1st Maine was involved in many of the well-known battles of the later war, but they are best known for their efforts at Petersburg, where they were responsible for breaking through the center of the Confederate lines on the first day of the siege. They did not have much battlefield experience and had little idea what it would mean to charge towards the center of a heavily fortified line. They soon found out. The 1st Maine lost over 50 percent of its men, killed and wounded, in this charge, the single greatest loss of any regiment in one action; 632 out of 900 men became casualties. The regiment also participated in the Battle of Sayler's Creek, the last major battle of the war in Virginia, where they captured many prisoners three days before Robert E. Lee surrendered. They returned to Bangor and were mustered out on June 6, 1865, with only 1,761 men returning from the original 2,202.



Soldiers surround a bombproof shelter during the siege of Petersburg, 1864. Photo via Library of Congress.

One of the men that did not return with the 1st Maine was Aaron Williams. He fought at Petersburg and took a gunshot wound to the arm on June 18, 1864. He survived these wounds only to die on January 21, 1865. Sources differ on how he died. According to the history of the 1st Maine, entitled *The First Maine Heavy Artillery, 1861-1865*, Williams died of "exhaustion from overwork." Other sources report that he died of disease. Lemuel Carter survived the war, dying in Brunswick, Maine on January 31, 1891. Freeman also died in Brunswick, Maine on January 8, 1887. He had survived gunshot wounds to the hand and foot at the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House. Freemont survived the war as well. While these men "were of African descent," as the history of the 1st Maine puts it, they were still allowed to fight alongside white men, and one even sacrificed his life for the Union cause. The white men of the 1st Maine were aware that Williams and the others were African American but accepted them anyways, knowing that they would fight and die just like any other man in the regiment. The story of the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery is a curious and rare one, but it is proof that men of all races fought alongside each other in the Civil War, and that race does not make a difference in a soldier's ability to fight and die for his country.

The unusual circumstances surrounding the 1st Maine provides a lot to think about in terms of race relations during the Civil War. Although some African Americans could pass as white and join white regiments, this was not the case with the men of the 1st Maine, as their enlistment papers listed their complexions as dark or black. The recruiter knew they were African American, as did the men who fought alongside them.

These African American men served in a combat role and were not simply laborers, as two of them were wounded. Regardless of whether or not they were strictly combat soldiers, however, they still shed blood or otherwise sacrificed for the Union cause.

It is hard to tell how the white men of the 1st Maine felt about having African American men in their regiment; just because they were allowed to fight does not mean they were liked or respected. In addition, Northerners could be just as prejudiced and racist as Southerners during this time period. For example, Walt Whitman, a prominent New York poet, believed that African Americans were less evolved and did not deserve the right to vote, even comparing them to baboons. The Maine men might have welcomed African Americans into their ranks if only in the hope that they would be the ones to take a bullet first. Thus, the fact that the 1st Maine was unique in allowing African American men to fight does not necessarily mean these soldiers were necessarily more tolerant and accepting than the rest of the country.

However, it may be the case that the Maine men were more progressive than the rest of the country. Perhaps because there were so few African Americans living in Maine at the time race was not as big of an issue. Either way, it is important to ask just how these men managed to be accepted into a white regiment at a time when this was strictly forbidden. What made these men so different and special that their recruiting officer was willing to risk going against policy and potentially threaten the cohesion of the regiment by allowing them into the ranks? One may never know how these four African Americans became part of a white regiment, but these questions are important ones to ask, and they complicate the traditional narrative of African American involvement in the Civil War.

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