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## “Rebellion in the Ranks”: Desertion and the United States Colored Troops: An Interview with Jonathan Lande

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# “Rebellion in the Ranks”: Desertion and the United States Colored Troops: An Interview with Jonathan Lande

## **Abstract**

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming 2018 CWI conference about their talks. Today we are speaking with Jonathan Lande, a doctoral candidate in History at Brown University, where he was the 2016 Peter Green Scholar. Jonathan teaches courses in American and African American history at Tougaloo College as the 2017-2018 Brown-Tougaloo Exchange Faculty Fellow. His current project, “Rebellion in the Ranks,” examines the desertion, mutiny, and courts-martial trials of former slaves serving in the Union army. Looking at African American soldiers who found military service offensive to their visions of freedom, “Rebellion in the Ranks” traces the resistance of African American soldiers and remaps the process of emancipation in the Union army. A portion of his research entitled “Trials of Freedom” appeared in the *Journal of Social History*. The African American Intellectual History Society blog, *Black Perspectives*, also featured a guest posting from Jonathan on desertion and black military service. He is the recipient of the William F. Holmes Award from the Southern Historical Association and the Du Bois-Wells Award from the African American Intellectual History Society. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

CWI Summer Conference, Desertion, United States Colored Troops

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### “Rebellion in the Ranks”: Desertion and the United States Colored Troops: An Interview with Jonathan Lande

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

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*Jonathan Lande Image courtesy of the Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery*

*2018 CWI conference about their talks. Today we are speaking with Jonathan Lande, a doctoral candidate in History at Brown University, where he was the 2016 Peter Green Scholar. Jonathan teaches courses in American and African American history at Tougaloo College as the 2017-2018 Brown-Tougaloo Exchange Faculty Fellow. His current project, “Rebellion in the Ranks,” examines the desertion, mutiny, and courts-martial trials of former slaves serving in the Union army. Looking at African American soldiers who found military service offensive to their visions of freedom, “Rebellion in the Ranks” traces the resistance of African American soldiers and remaps the process of emancipation in the Union army. A portion of his research entitled “Trials of Freedom” appeared in the *Journal of Social History*. The African American Intellectual History Society blog, *Black Perspectives*, also featured a guest posting from Jonathan on desertion and black military service. He is the recipient of the William F. Holmes Award from the Southern Historical Association and the Du Bois-Wells Award from the African American Intellectual History Society.*

**CWI:** Many traditional narratives of emancipation and African-American participation in USCT units frame military service as the symbolic pinnacle of freedom and empowerment for former slaves. How does your work expand upon such narratives? What was it about military service that many runaway slaves found offensive to their conceptions of freedom?

**Lande:** After the war, William Wells Brown, Joseph T. Wilson, and George Washington Williams told the story of African American military service as an achievement. Following these works, though, most historians dismissed or overlooked African American contributions to the war, including the soldiers' part. After decades of writing African American soldiers out of Civil War history, historians beginning with W. E. B. Du Bois revealed again black men fighting for their freedom and helping the Union win the war. Since these important revisions to the story, black Union soldiers have been venerated. The 1989 film *Glory* epitomizes the heroic image and does, as you say, place soldiering as the symbolic pinnacle of freedom.



*Unidentified USCT soldiers. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress*

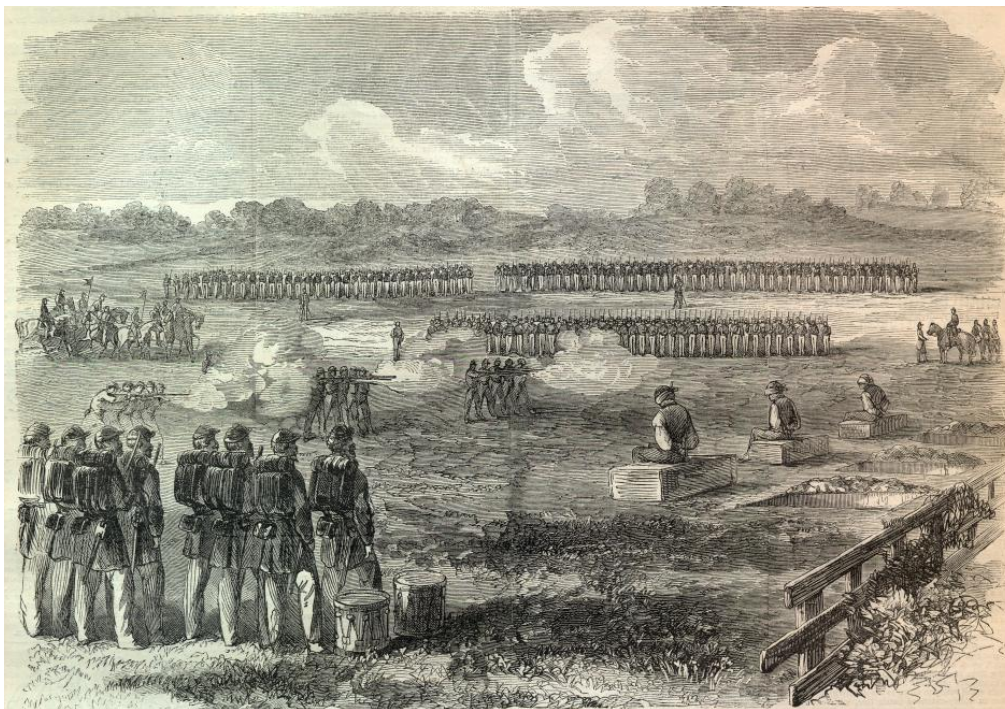
My research into African American desertion, as well as other modes of resistance to the U.S. army by African American soldiers, does not challenge that narrative. The history of African American soldiers' contribution to the Union fight and determination to take their freedom remains persuasive and intact.

Instead, I expose a parallel story. I demonstrate that formerly enslaved soldiers who served in the Union army lived through and attempted to influence the process of emancipation. My findings reveal how black Union army soldiers, like freedpeople in other aspects of wartime emancipation, struggled against the chaos of war while

endeavoring to make freedom how they envisioned it. Not all men found army discipline offensive to their vision of freedom, but thousands of men thought the army and certain white officers recreated aspects of racial bondage, including not just whippings but also denying opportunities to the men to enjoy their families or even to take a few hours to relax at a fishing hole.

**CWI:** What sources have informed your scholarship to this point? What challenges have you encountered with this particular project?

**Lande:** Looking for new sources on African Americans in the Civil War era presents challenges. Black troops did not leave diaries or sentimental letters home to mothers, brothers, and sweethearts to the same extent white soldiers did because many black soldiers lacked the opportunities for education or were not permitted to learn to read and write under slavery. Looking for deserters presented an even greater challenge because I searched for black soldiers who do not fit within heroic stories that veterans catalogued in the wake of war. After all, I was looking for men doing their best to elude capture and to leave the army without a trace. To find evidence of these deserters—or U.S. army runaways—I had to identify sources that mentioned black soldiers facing discipline, such as their officers' letters and diaries or official records discussing the problem of desertion and the culprits' punishment.



*"Execution of Deserters," Harper's Weekly, August 8, 1863. Condemned deserters sitting on their coffins next to their graves, awaiting execution. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress*



These sources present further challenges. By their nature, the sources are biased, framing the men as criminals. Rather than accept the army's characterization, and to appreciate the soldiers' experience, I used tools scholars developed to better understand enslaved peoples' rebellion and distinct modes of African American activism, including Stephanie M. Camp's descriptions of enslaved women's resistance and Robin D. G. Kelley's explanation of African American activism under Jim Crow. I also drew from Critical Race Theorists' toolbox, finding the means to understand the African American experience in the American legal system and the issue of how race influences legal processes.

**CWI:** What role did coercion (either by the Federal government, white officers, or other members of the black community) play in the formation—and retention—of USCT units? What percentage of USCT troops deserted over the course of the war? How widely publicized were instances of USCT desertion, and how did whites (including white officers) tend to understand—and represent—the phenomenon of USCT desertion?

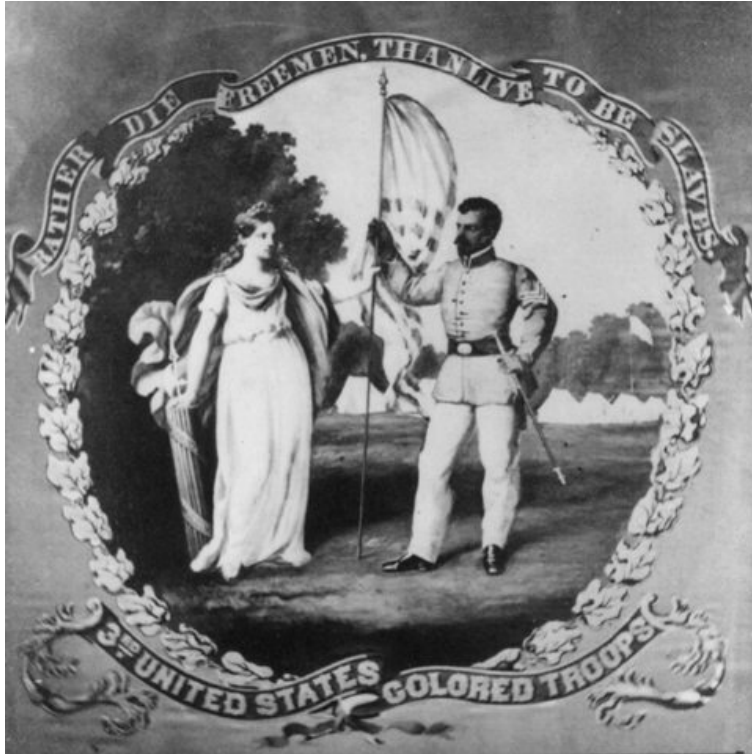
**Lande:** As in all regiments in the war, whether they were white or black, discipline played a crucial role in making soldiers and ensuring that soldiers followed military orders. At times, officers indeed foisted coercive discipline. In black regiments, however, white officers imposed discipline with more zeal because the white officers either feared arming black men or were responding to such fears among the general population of northern whites. In the antebellum era, white northerners and southerners recalled stories of Denmark Vesey's planned rebellion, Virginia rebels who supported Nat Turner's prophetic vision, and John Brown's failed assault on Harper's Ferry. White Americans also knew well the outcome of arming slaves in Saint Domingue—the Haitian Revolution. In 1860, secession advocates believed that the president-elect, Abraham Lincoln, insidiously planned to unleash slave rebels. Later in the war, as Congress debated arming black men in the Union army, Democrats espoused the same rhetoric. White officers leading black soldiers grew up with the same racial fears, yet most wanted to make black regiments, and the larger project of emancipation, a success even as they harbored racial fears. To avert the black violence that they believed might erupt, white officers stressed discipline, to the point of coercion, to prevent any element of violence. The harsh discipline often led to desertion.

Both white and black troops deserted on both sides during the war, and black Union men left as readily as white Union men. When black men deserted, white officers worked hard to show the nation that the army did not permit leniency for black deserters, as word of undisciplined black soldiers might trigger racial fears. In a highly publicized case, as I detail in "[Trials of Freedom](#)," a former slave named William Johnson fled service. The army tried and convicted Johnson. To show Americans of the Union and of the Confederacy that desertion would not be tolerated, they executed him in front of both Union and Confederate forces and invited a photographer to capture the execution. The image of William Johnson's body appeared in the illustrated newspaper, *Harper's Weekly*, not long after. While not common, the ritual execution

before the whole nation demonstrated that the army took great interest in controlling deserters and displayed how the army punished African American deserters for the entire country.

**CWI:** Have you found any differences in USCT retention ranks between those units formed largely of formerly free blacks versus those filled with formerly enslaved blacks? How did formerly free blacks perceive members of USCT units who deserted and their reasons for doing so? Were formerly free blacks' conceptions of military service different from those of many runaway slaves?

**Lande:** I treat soldiers as individuals, attempting to understand each man's reasons for enlisting and leaving the army rather than addressing the men categorically. Many men, especially former slaves, joined for specific reasons related to their circumstances. However, I have discovered trends that differentiate formerly enslaved men and free black northerners, suggesting that they often entered the Union ranks for different reasons. To understand formerly enslaved soldiers and military service, I look beyond patriotic motivations and place black military service in the Atlantic context of slave soldiering. By recalibrating soldiering as a form of unfree labor similar to the black regiments in the Caribbean and South America, I am able to distinguish reasons for enlistment among various soldiers. Although their motivations overlapped and coalesced as the men interacted in regiments, I have found that free African American northerners fought for national belonging, against the slaveholding Confederacy, and in the hope of attaining citizenship. Accounts of formerly enslaved southerners show the same motives layered on top of the obvious motive of a desire to escape slavery and achieve individual freedom. With regard to USCT soldiers' peers and their views on desertion, unfortunately, the sources do not show support or condemnation by the deserters' comrades. I do gather from the absences of the sources that many USCT soldiers understood why the soldiers deserted and empathized with them, choosing to let the would-be deserter make his decision and follow through and desert; yet, I cannot substantiate that support because there are no declarations of understanding. In my research on mutiny in USCT units, though, I do find evidence of support, including disgruntled soldiers gaining followers, and of black soldiers whose officers had ordered them to stop mutinies ultimately ignoring the officers' commands.



*USCT regimental flag. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress*

**CWI:** How does your research reframe our understandings of runaway slaves' specific notions of freedom, citizenship, and racial empowerment? Of differences between white soldiers' and black soldiers' definitions of honor, cowardice, and masculine duty with regards to desertion?

**Lande:** African American army runaways demonstrate that formerly enslaved men did not become free simply donning uniforms or signing enlistment contracts. Rather, formerly enslaved soldiers experienced emancipation as a process, and the men spent their time in the U.S. army as freedpeople living out—or attempting to live out—their visions of freedom, as freedwomen and freedmen did in contraband camps and other parts of the wartime South. The men lived out freedom in ways that fit within prominent frameworks like masculinity and citizenship, yet other men acted on visions of freedom that diverged from such ideals. These men articulated notions of freedom specific to their individual lives and circumstances.