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## Fact or Fiction: African American Confederate Veterans

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# Fact or Fiction: African American Confederate Veterans

## **Abstract**

As an intern this past summer at The National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, I came across many intriguing artifacts. One of the artifacts that stood out to me most was the photo above, which I discovered when the museum's CEO conducted a behind-the-scenes tour. When I look at this photo, I see, on the surface at least, a group of 13 African American men who are presumably Confederate veterans. Several of these men are dressed up for the occasion. Many are wearing ribbons, one man has a Confederate flag, and another has a trumpet. There are also two white men standing on the right side. Looking at this photo, I was fascinated by the possibility that Africans Americans would fight for the South. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Black Confederates, Steve Eberhart

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

### Fact or Fiction: African American Confederate Veterans

By [Isaac Shoop '21](#)

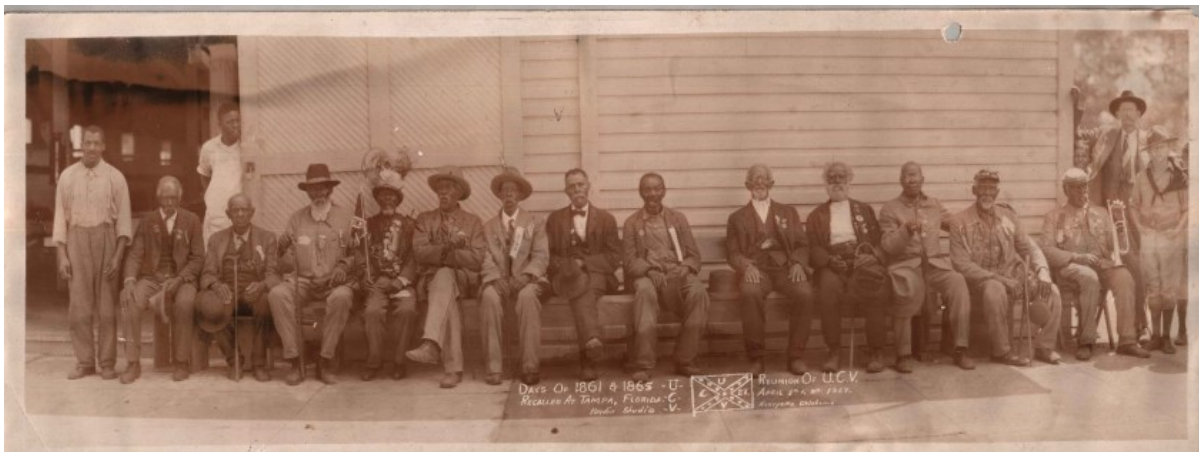


Photo of African Americans from a U.C.V. reunion in Tampa, Florida in 1927.  
(Courtesy of The National Civil War Museum.)

As an intern this past summer at The National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, I came across many intriguing artifacts. One of the artifacts that stood out to me most was the photo above, which I discovered when the museum's CEO conducted a behind-the-scenes tour. When I look at this photo, I see, on the surface at least, a group of 13 African American men who are presumably Confederate veterans. Several of these men are dressed up for the occasion. Many are wearing ribbons, one man has a Confederate flag, and another has a trumpet. There are also two white men standing on the right side. Looking at this photo, I was fascinated by the possibility that Africans Americans would fight for the South.

The stamp at the bottom of the photo states it was taken at the United Confederate Veterans reunion in Tampa, Florida held from April 5th-9th, 1927. The South was still under the influence of Jim Crow in the 1927, and the two white men served as a reminder to me of the social, political, and economic control whites wielded over African Americans on a daily basis, as well as at UCV reunions such as the one captured in the image. As I continued looking at the photo, I couldn't help but wonder who these men were and what story the photo was supposed to tell. The men may have been proclaiming that they were veterans of the Confederate Army, army musicians, or they

possibly were ex-slaves attending a reunion at the behest of their former masters. The photo itself may have been orchestrated by white men to show the loyalty of slaves during the war and as proof that they supported the Confederate cause. Today, some people would use this photo as evidence that African Americans fought for the South and thus the institution of slavery.

Slavery was one of the major underpinnings of southern society on the eve of the Civil War, forming the foundation of the southern economy and political structure, and infiltrating the lives, either directly or indirectly, of nearly all classes of whites. When war broke out in April 1861 after the firing on Fort Sumter, the status of these slaves and their role in southern society expanded. Slaves were now not only instrumental on the home front in keeping plantations running and maintaining the economic backbone of southern society, but they were also a key component in the labor force of the Confederate military. As the white South rushed off to war, it was not uncommon to see a master take his slave to war to serve as his own personal aide-de-camp. The military also employed a large number of slaves to work as teamsters, hospital workers, cooks, and laborers who did anything from moving supplies to building fortifications. While these slaves accompanied the Confederate armies on their marches and battles, they were not considered soldiers or true defenders of the cause.

However, in the years since the Civil War, claims have arisen asserting that African Americans did fight as soldiers in the Confederate Army, and photos like this one have been cited as evidence. The earliest of these claims seemed to be offshoots of the Lost Cause mythology. By stating there were black Confederates, claimants attempted to show that the African American population of the South supported the Confederate cause, thus proving that the war was over states' rights, and not slavery. Citing states' rights as the cause of the Civil War then cast the South as righteous and moral. Historians often disagree with this argument, though, because numerous southerners themselves explicitly cited slavery as the cause of the Civil War. One only needs to look at Alexander Stephens's infamous Cornerstone Speech for perhaps the most blatant example of such claims.

Although photos like the one above have often been used as evidence of black Confederates, scholars have been skeptical of them. Photographs like this one often raise more questions than answers when it comes to African Americans fighting for the Confederacy. To start, this image does not indicate what regiment these men supposedly fought in. That seems odd given someone painstakingly inscribed when and where it was taken. Although the 13 men seated on the bench are wearing medals and one is holding a Confederate flag, the sixth one from the left is wearing a ribbon that reads "Ex Slave." Next to the "Ex Slave" ribbon is an American flag, which is quite intriguing considering these men were attending a U.C.V. reunion. The American flag may have been handed out as a symbol of the reconciliation between the North and South. A common thread of the Lost Cause involved Northerners and Southerners putting aside their differences and uniting under one flag; the American flag.

It is possible that these men were simply ex-slaves rather than Confederate veterans. These ribbons were likely handed out by whites to emphasize the African Americans' formerly enslaved identities and to create the image that they were proud to be former slaves. Making this statement would play into southern whites' argument that slavery was a paternalistic institution. We can see this racial divide in the photo by noting the whites are together in one corner of the photo and the African Americans take up the rest of the photo. There is no intermingling of the races in this photograph just like there was supposed to be no intermingling of the races in the Jim Crow South.



Close-up of "Ex Slave" ribbon.  
(Courtesy of The National Civil War Museum.)

The presence of Steve Eberhart, who is seated fourth from the left, is another indicator that these men were ex-slaves and not veterans. According to George Magruder Battey's *A History of Rome and Floyd County*, Eberhart is a "slavery time darkey" who served with his master, Colonel Abraham Eberhart, on the west coast of Florida during the Civil War. Battey claims that Eberhart was the "mascot" of Confederate veterans in Rome, Georgia and that he entertained the crowds at Confederate veteran reunions. Why Eberhart and other ex-slaves went to Confederate veteran reunions is a mystery. They might have felt they could curry favor with the white population by attending and playing the compliant role of an ex-slave or maybe they were coerced into going. It is also possible that ex-slaves were able to make money from attending Confederate reunions and acting happy to be with former masters. Whites may have been accepting of these ex-slaves at reunions because, through them, they could reminisce about the days of slavery and what life used to be like. Some whites may also have seen this photo

as proof of the loyalty of slaves, which again casts the Southern cause as moral and righteous.

Photos like this one have a lot to tell us in regards to the connection between African Americans and the Southern cause in history and in memory. It also raises numerous questions about the politics of Civil War photography that were often involved in the highly crafted staging of and iconography captured in images such as this one. While this photo poses still unanswered questions about the specifics who, exactly, the black men were who are featured so prominently in the foreground and why, for certain, they participated in this fascinating photo, the surrounding context of the image provides provocative and telling clues about the multiple uses of and meanings ascribed to the image by both its subjects and its viewers, past and present.

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