

Information and image below courtesy of the African American Civil War Memorial & Museum, Washington, D.C. Visit their site at <http://afroamcivilwar.org/about-us/memorial-a-museum-history.html> for more information.



### **United States Colored Troops**

The United States Colored Troops made up over ten percent of the Union or Northern Army even though they were prohibited from joining until July 1862, fifteen months into the war. They comprised twenty-five percent of the Union navy. Yet, only one percent of the Northern population was African American. Clearly overrepresented in the military, African Americans played a decisive role in the Civil War.

In July of 1862, Congress passed the Militia Act of 1862. It had become an “indispensable military necessity” to call on America’s African descent population to help save the Union. A few weeks after President Lincoln signed the legislation on July 17, 1862, free men of color joined volunteer regiments in Illinois and New York. Such men would go on to fight in some of the most noted campaigns and battles of the war to include, Antietam, Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign.

On September 27, 1862, the first regiment to become a United States Colored Troops (USCT) regiment was officially brought into the Union army. All the captains and lieutenants in this Louisiana regiment were men of African descent. The regiment was immediately assigned combat duties, and it captured Donaldsonville, Louisiana on October 27, 1862. Before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, two more African descent regiments from Kansas and South Carolina would demonstrate their prowess in combat.

After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863, the War Department publicly authorized the recruiting of African Americans. The first regiment raised with such authority was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry. (Leading many to report that it was the first African descent regiment.) By the end of 1863, General Ulysses S. Grant viewed the African descent population armed with the Proclamation as a “powerful ally.”

African Americans fought in every major campaign and battle during the last two years of the war earning twenty-five Medals of Honor. USCT regiments captured Charleston, the Cradle of Secession, and Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. Lincoln recognized their contributions. He declared, “Without the military help of the black freedmen, the war against the South could not have been won.” And without the Emancipation Proclamation, these soldiers and sailors would have had little reason to fight for the Union.