



Library of Congress Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, Fort Lincoln, District of Columbia, ca. 1862-1865, photograph (detail)

“I knew the Yanks were going to win, from the beginning.”

African American Military Laborers and Soldiers in the Civil War: Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans, 1936-1938*

Over 2300 former slaves were interviewed during the Great Depression of the 1930s by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Note: Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. In the WPA narratives, some white interviewers, despite project guidelines, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See “A Note on the Language of the Narratives” at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and “Guidelines for Interviewers” at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

I was born in slavery [in 1850] and I enlisted in the Union Army, January 1, 1864, at Oberlin, Ohio, and according to the National Tribune, I was one of the youngest soldiers in the ranks.

I was present at the battle of Petersburg, Virginia, July 30, 1864; one of the disasters to the Northern forces of the war, and present on June 15, 1864, at the initiatory battle of Deep Bottom, and also at Cold Harbor.

I was in the Ninth Army Corps, under Burnside, and was transferred around, in front of Richmond, Virginia.

General Butler went down to Fort Fisher [North Carolina] and failed, which was the last open port of the Confederacy. Another expedition was organized and General Terry given command. We embarked on the night of December 31, 1864; landed the morning of January 13, 1865, on the peninsula. On the night of January 15, 1865, we captured Fort Fisher.

We had a terrible, terrible time landing! There was an awful storm! I was told to jump overboard, and oh my! I swallowed a good deal of the Atlantic. . . .

I want to tell you of one of the tragic things that happened during the war, and I was there and saw it.

It was at the Southside railroad, at Petersburg, on September 27, 1864.¹ I was put on picket duty. The “Rebs” had built a fire and the wind was driving it toward us. They began to holler and cheer, very happy over the fact.

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Text and photographs of interviewees courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division: WPA Slave Narrative Project, Federal Writers' Project, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA). Digital images of the typed transcribed interviews at memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html. Bracketed annotations and some paragraphing added, and several typographical errors corrected by NHC when necessary for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

* For more narratives on the African American experience in the Civil War, see Resource Toolbox, The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865, at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm, specifically IDENTITY #7: Soldiers; EMANCIPATION #5-7: Civil War I & II (Slaves and Soldiers), Emancipation: 1864-1865.

¹ The WPA Interviewer typed 1865 in error. The Richmond-Petersburg campaign occurred from June 1864 to March 1865; the war ended in April 1865. (The two ellipses in this excerpt represent deleted transitional comments by the interviewer.)

All at once we could hear someone coming toward us. The pickets opened fire on what they thought were “Rebs,” and found out to their distress that it was a bunch of recruits from our own lines. Many were killed. . . .

If I could choose my weapons for the next war, I would choose doughnuts, to be thrown at each other across the Atlantic.

SIM YOUNGER, Union army: Ninth Army Corps;
enslaved in Missouri, interviewed in Missouri, 1937 ■

■ Do you want to hear how I runned away and jined the Yankees? You know Abraham Lincoln ’claired freedom in ’63, first day of January. In October ’63, I runned away and went to Pine Bluff [Arkansas] to get to the Yankees. . . The young boy what cut the whips — he named Jerry — he come along wif me, and we wade the stream for long piece. Then we hide in dark woods. It was cold, frosty weather. Two days and two nights we traveled. That boy, he so cold and hongry he want to fall out by the way, but I drug him on.

When we gets to the Yankee camp all our troubles was over. We gets all the contraband [food taken by the troops] we could eat. Was they more runaways there? Oh, Lordy, yessum. Hundreds, I reckon. Yessum, the Yankees feeds all them refugees on contraband. They made me a driver of a team in the quarter-master’s department. I was always keerful to do everything they telled me. They telled me I was free when I gets to the Yankee camp, but I couldn’t go outside much. Yessum, iffen you could get to the Yankees’ camp you was free right now.

BOSTON BLACKWELL, Union army;
enslaved in Georgia & Arkansas, interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■

■ When I wuz twenty one, me and one of my brothers run away to fight wif the Yankees. Us left Souf Hampton county and went to Petersburg. Dere we got some food. Den us went to Fort Hatton where we met some more slaves who had done run away. When we got in Fort Hatton, us had to cross a bridge to git to de Yankees. Dey give us food and clothes. . . .

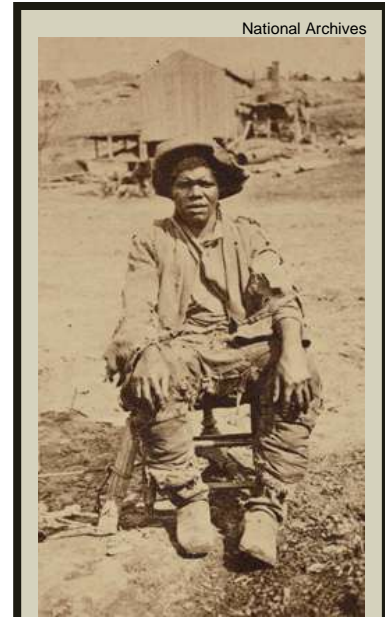
Yer know, I was one of de first colored cavalry soljers, and I fought in Company “K.” I fought for three years and a half. Sometimes I slept out doors, and sometimes I slept in a tent. De Yankees always give us plenty of blankets.

During the war some un us had to always stay up nights and watch fer de rebels. Plenty of nights I has watched, but de rebels never ’tacked us when I was on.

Not only wuz dere men slaves dat run to de Yankees, but some un de women slaves followed dere husbands. Dey use to help by washing and cooking.

One day when I was fighting, de rebels shot at me, and dey sent a bullet through my head. I wuz lucky not to be kilt. Look. See how my hand is? . . . But dat didn’t stop me, I had it bandaged and kept on fighting.

The uniform dat I wore wuz blue wif brass buttons; a blue cape, lined wif red flannel, black leather boots and a blue cap. I rode on a bay color horse — fact every body in Company “K” had bay color horses. I tooked my knap-sack and blankets on de horse back. In my knap-sack I had water, hard tacks and other food.



Hubbard Pryor, runaway slave
in Tennessee, before and
after enlisting in the 44th U.S.
Colored Troops, 7 April 1864

When de war ended, I goes back to my mastah and he treated me like his brother. Guess he wuz scared of me 'cause I had so much ammunition on me. My brother, who went wif me to de Yankees, caught rheumatism doing de war. He died after de war ended.

ALBERT JONES, Union army: Ninth Cavalry, Company K;
enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Virginia, ca. 1937 ■

Thomas Cole escaped from his Alabama slaveholder and served with the Union army in the Battle of Chickamauga.²

I helps sot dem cannons on dis Chickamauga Mountain, in hidin' places. I has to go with a man and wait on him and dat cannon. First thing I knows, bang, bang, boom, things has started, and guns am shootin' faster dan you can think . . .

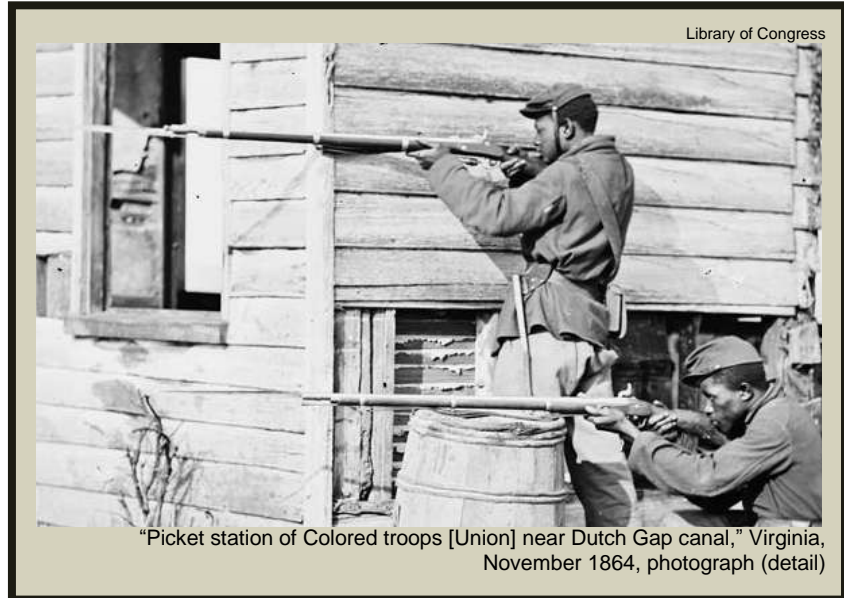
White folks, dere was men layin' and wantin' help, wantin' water, with blood runnin' out dem and de top or side dere heads gone, great big holes in dem. I jes' promises de good Lawd if he jes' let me git out dat mess, I wouldn't run off no more, but I didn't know den he wasn't gwine let me out with jes' dat battle. He gwine give me plenty more, but dat battle ain't over yet, for nex' mornin' de Rebels 'gins shootin' and killin' lots of our men, and Gen. Woods ain't come, so Gen. Rosecrans³ orders us to 'treat, and didn't have to tell me what he said, neither. De Rebels come after us, shootin', and we runs off and leaves dat cannon what I was with settin' on de hill, and I didn't want dat thing nohow.

We kep' hotfootin' till we gits to Chattanooga and dere is where we stops. Here comes one dem Rebel generals with de big bunch of men and gits right on top of Look Out Mountain, right clost to Chattanooga, and wouldn't let us out. I don't know jes' how long, but a long time. Lots our hosses and mules starves to death and we eats some de hosses. We all like to starve to death ourselves. Chattanooga is in de bend de Tennessee River and on Look Out Mountain, on de east, am dem Rebels could keep up with everything we done. After a long time Gen. Thomas⁴ gits in some way. He finds de rough trail or wagon road round de mountain 'long de river and supplies and men come by boat up de river to dis place and comes on into Chattanooga. More Union men kep' comin' and I guess maybe six or eight generals and dey gits ready to fight. It am long late in Fall or early winter.

Dey starts climbin' dis steep mountain and when us gits three-fourths de way up it am foggy and you couldn't see no place. Everything wet and de rocks am slick and dey 'gins fightin'. I 'spect some shoots dere own men, 'cause you couldn't see nothin', jes' men runnin' and de guns roarin'. Fin'ly dem Rebels fled and we gits on Look Out Mountain and takes it. . . .

I never did git to where I wasn't scart when we goes into de battle. Dis de last one I's in and I's sho' glad, for I never seed de like of dead and wounded men. We picks dem up, de Rebels like de Unions, and doctors dem de bes' we could. When I seed all dat sufferin, I hopes I never lives to see 'nother war. Dey say de World War am worse but I's too old to go.

THOMAS COLE, Union army;
enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■



"Picket station of Colored troops [Union] near Dutch Gap canal," Virginia, November 1864, photograph (detail)

² Battle of Chickamauga (south central Tennessee and northwestern Georgia), 18-20 September 1863; Confederate victory.

³ Brigadier General Thomas Wood; General William Rosecrans.

⁴ General George Thomas.

When the war started, my master sent me to work for the Confederate army. I worked most of the time for three years off and on, hauling cannons, driving mules, hauling ammunition and provisions. The Union army pressed in on us and the Rebel army moved back. I was sent home. When the Union army came close enough I ran away and joined the Union army. There I drove six-mule team and worked at wagon work, driving ammunition and all kinds of provisions until the war ended. Then I returned home to my old master, who had stayed there with my mother. My master owned about four hundred acres of good land, and had had ten slaves, Most of the slaves stayed at home. My master hired me to work for him.

BILL SIMMS, Confederate & Union armies; enslaved in Missouri, interviewed in Kansas, ca. 1937 ■

One day Marster Bob comes to me and says, “Jim, how you like to jine de army?” You see, de war had started. I says to him “What does I have to do?” And he says, “Tend hosses and ride ’em.” I was young den and thought it would be lots of fun, so I says I’d go. So de first thing I knows, I’s in de army away off east from here, somewhar dis side of St. Louis and in Tennessee and Arkansas and other places. I goes in de army ’stead of Dr. Carroll.⁵

After I gits in de army, it wasn’t so much fun, ’cause tendin’ hosses and ridin’ wasn’t all I done. No, sar, I has to do shootin’ and git shooted at! One time we stops de train, takes Yankee money and lots of other things off dat train. Dat was way up de other side of Tennessee.

You’s heard of de battle of Independence?⁶ Dat’s whar we fights for three days and nights. I’s not tendin’ hosses dat time. Dey gives me a rifle and sends me up front fightin’, when we wasn’ runnin’. We does a heap of runnin’ and dat suits dis nigger. I could do dat better’n advance. When de order comes to ’treat, I’s all ready.

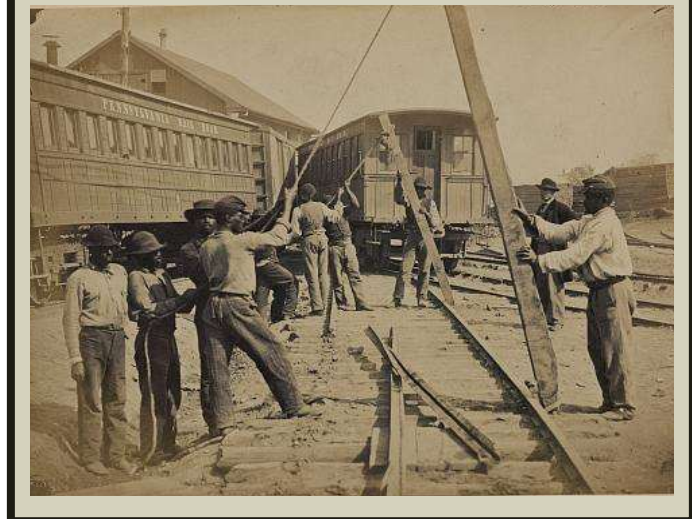
I gits shot in de shoulder in dat fight and lots of our soldiers gits killed and we loses our supply.

JAMES CAPE, Confederate army; enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

Then de war came and we all went to fight the Yankees. I was a body servant to the master, and once a bullet took off his hat. We all thought he was shot but he wasn’t, and I was standin’ by his side all the time.



African Americans working on military railroad operations (Union), northern Virginia, 1863



⁵ Dr. Carroll was not Cape’s slaveholder; he is unidentified in the narrative. Many enslaved men were sent to the Confederate army in the place of white men. The WPA interviewer writes in the introductory note that Cape “was wounded and has an ugly shoulder scar.”

⁶ Probably the Second Battle of Independence (Missouri), 21-22 October 1864; Confederate victory.

I remember Stonewall Jackson. He was a big man with long whiskers, and very brave. We all fought wid him until his death.

We wan't beaten. We wuz starved out! Sometimes we had parched corn to eat and sometimes we didn't have a bite o' nothin', because the Union mens come and tuck all the food for their selves. I can still remember part of my ninety years. I remembers we fought all de way from Virginia and winded up in Manassah's Gap.

When time came for freedom most of us wuz glad. We liked the Yankees. They was good to us. "You is all now free." "You can stay on the plantation or you can go." We all stayed there until old massa died. Den I worked on de Seaboard Airline [Railroad] when it come to Birmingham. I have been here ever since.

In all de years since de war I cannot forget old massa. He was good and kind. He never believed in slavery but his money was tied up in slaves and he didn't want to lose all he had.

I knows I will see him in heaven and even though I have to walk ten miles for a bite of bread I can still be happy to think about the good times we had then. I am a Confederate veteran but my house burned up wid de medals and I don't get a pension.

GUS BROWN, Confederate army;
enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Alabama, 1937 ■

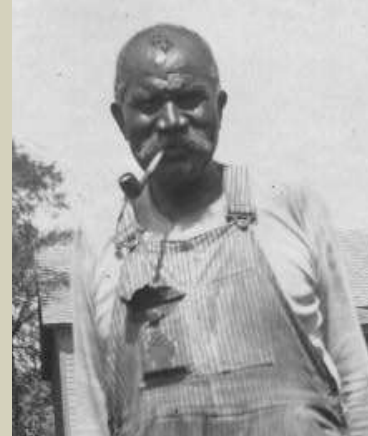
■ It was this way, Boss, how come me to be in de War. You see, they 'quired all of de slaveowners to send so many niggers to de army to work diggin' de trenches an' throwin' up de breastworks an' repairin' de railroads what de Yankees done 'stroyed. Every mars [master] was 'quired to send one nigger for every ten dat he had. Iffen you had er hundred niggers, you had to send ten of dem to de army. I was one of dem dat my mars 'quired to send. Dat was de worst times dat dis here nigger ever seen an' de way dem white men drive us niggers, it was something awful. De strap, it was goin' from 'fore day till 'way after night. De niggers, heaps of 'em just fall in dey tracks give out an' them white men layin' de strap on dey backs without ceastin'. Dat was zackly way it was wid dem niggers like me what was in de army work. I had to stand it, Boss, till de War was over.

TINES KENDRICKS, Confederate army;
enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■

■ I was here in Texas when the Civil War was first talked about. I was here when the War started and followed my young master into it with the First Texas Cavalry [Confederate State of America]. I was here during reconstruction, after the War. I was here during the European World War [1914-1918] and the second week after the United States declared war on Germany I enlisted as cook at Camp Leon Springs.

This sounds as if I liked the war racket. But, as a matter of fact, I never wore a uniform — grey coat or khaki coat — or carried a gun, unless it happened to be one worth saving after some Confederate soldier got shot. I was official lugger-in of men that got wounded, and might have been called a Red Cross worker if we had had such a

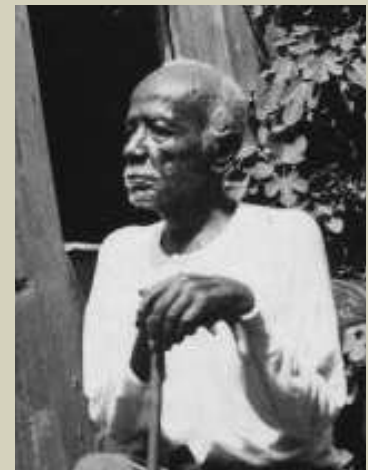
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James Cape
"I was young den and thought it would be lots of fun"



Gus Brown
"We liked the Yankees. They wuz good to us. 'You is all now free.'"



Martin Jackson
"I wanted them to win and lick us Southerners, but I hoped they was going to do it without wiping out our company."

corps connected with our company. My father was head cook for the battalion and between times I helped him out with the mess [military dining hall or tent]. There was some difference in the food served to soldiers in 1861 and 1917!

Just what my feelings was about the War, I have never been able to figure out myself. I knew the Yanks were going to win, from the beginning. I wanted them to win and lick us Southerners, but I hoped they was going to do it without wiping out our company. I'll come back to that in a minute. As I said, our company was the First Texas Cavalry. Col. Buchel was our commander. He was a full-blooded German and as fine a man and a soldier as you ever saw. . . .

Lots of old slaves closes the door before they tell the truth about their days of slavery. When the door is open, they tell how kind their masters was and how rosy it all was. You can't blame them for this, because they had plenty of early discipline, making them cautious about saying anything uncomplimentary about their masters. I, myself, was in a little different position than most slaves and, as a consequence, have no grudges or resentment. However, I can tell you the life of the average slave was not rosy. They were dealt out plenty of cruel suffering. . . .

It was in the Battle of Marshall, in Louisiana, that Col. Buchel got shot.⁷ I was about three miles from the front, where I had pitched up a kind of first-aid station. I was all alone there. I watched the whole thing. I could hear the shooting and see the firing. I remember standing there and thinking the South didn't have a chance. All of a sudden I heard someone call. It was a soldier, who was half carrying Col. Buchel in. I didn't do nothing for the Colonel. He was too far gone. I just held him comfortable, and that was the position he was in when he stopped breathing. That was the worst hurt I got when anybody died. He was a friend of mine.

MARTIN JACKSON, Confederate army: First Texas Cavalry;
enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■



⁷ Colonel Augustus Carl Buchel died in April 1864 after being mortally wounded in the Battle of Mansfield/Pleasant Hill in Louisiana (Confederate victory). Perhaps Jackson incorrectly recalled the battle name after seven decades, or the interviewer typed Marshall for Mansfield. (The First Texas Cavalry [CSA] did not fight in the 1863 Battle of Marshall in Missouri.)