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Tracing African Americans during the Civil War

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*"I was a slave of George Miller of Lincoln County Ky. I have always resided in Kentucky and am now a Soldier in the service of the United States. I belong to Company I 124 U.S.C. Inft now stationed at Camp Nelson Ky."*¹

That's how Joseph Miller informed the assistant quartermaster at Camp Nelson in Kentucky about his status in the military in November 1864. About a month prior to this he had gone there to enlist, his wife and four children accompanying him. Similarly, William Jones, a man of color, indicated that he was "a soldier in the 124th U.S.C. Inft. Before enlisting I belonged to Newton Craig Scott County Ky My wife belonged to the same man. Desiring to enlist and thus free my wife and serve the Government during the balance of my days I ran away from my master in company with my wife on Saturday March 11th between nine and ten O'clock at night." Jones also indicated that he had three sons and a son-in-law who were "in the service of the United States."²

African Americans have served continually in the military since the colonial era. These two examples are among the many documents that describe their various activities during the Civil War, whether they were slave or free. These records are located in such repositories as the National Archives, state archives, historical societies, and libraries.

Index to compiled service records

To begin the search for information on African Americans, researchers should check the index to compiled service records which is now available in three formats. The National Archives microfilm (M589) version of the *Index to the Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who served with United States Colored Troops* (USCT) shows the name of the soldier and the unit in which he served. A second option is in print form. *The Roster of Union Soldiers, 1861-1865: United States Colored Troops*³ is a two-volume alphabetical listing of volunteer Union soldiers who served with the USCT. The original

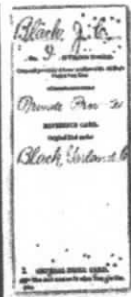


Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, LC-B811-2553.

source for this index was the previously mentioned National Archives microfilm. Like the microfilmed version, this index shows the name of the soldier and the unit in which he served. Perhaps a more convenient way for some family historians is to navigate to the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System website at <<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/index.html>> for basic information about both Union and Confederate servicemen. This site contains a database of more than 6 million names that were taken from the general index cards in the compiled military service records at the National Archives. A search for Merriday Foley reveals that he served in the 83rd Regiment, United States Colored Infantry—New Organization (2nd Regiment, Kansas Colored Infantry). The soldier's record shows the source of the information, providing the National Archives microfilm number and roll. The site also contains a brief history of the serviceman's unit as well as the names of other soldiers in the same unit as Foley.⁴

Detailed Soldier Record
Click on the question marks for help with this form.

Merriday Foley (Last, First)	
Regiment Name:	83 U.S. Col'd Inf. (New)
Side:	Union
Company:	A
Soldier's Rank, In:	Pvt
Soldier's Rank, Out:	Pvt
Alternate Name:	Maraday/Foley
Notes:	
Film Number:	M589 roll 29
African American Civil War Memorial	
Displayed as:	Merriday Foley ★
Plaque Number:	C-89



Compiled military service records

Compiled military service records (CMSR) may contain a variety of documents. In addition to a soldier's military record, such as enlistment papers and casualty sheets, the file may include deeds of manumission, proofs of ownership, and bills of sale. Richard Stephenson, born in Prince George, Maryland, enlisted on 24 December 1863, at Calvert, Maryland. Evidence of title to the slave showed that his owner, Ellen Beet, had purchased him in November 1845. A copy of his deed of manumission appears in the file as well as a casualty sheet showing that he was wounded on 23 June 1864.⁵ William Alexander, who enlisted 1 August 1864, in St. Louis, was the slave of Morton J. Hines of Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Hines's claim for compensation included the name of William's mother (Harriet) who had been inherited

from Hines's father, Wiley Hines. These are all excellent clues for further research on Alexander.⁶

Pension records

After locating relevant service records, researchers should check pension records. *The General Index to Pension Files, 1861–1934*, available as National Archives microfilm T288, contains references mostly to Civil War service. Information on each card includes, for example, the serviceman's name, rank, and unit; names of dependants; the certificate number; the application number; and the state from which the claim was filed. An index to T288 is available on Ancestry.com at <<http://www.ancestry.com/>>. The card for Merriday Foley shows that he was also known as Meridee Sadler, that his widow's name was Harriet E. Sadler, and that he joined Company A in the 83rd U.S. Colored Infantry. The card contains file numbers that are needed to order his pension papers from the National Archives.⁷

Pension files may contain a wealth of genealogical information. For instance, one such document in Merriday Sadler's packet shows that he enrolled at Leavenworth, Kansas, under the name of Merriday Foley, on 26 July 1863, as a private in Company A, 83 Regiment USCT Infantry (this unit was also known as the Second Kansas Colored Infantry). In addition to details on his military service, this file is rich in family data, including the names of his former owner, wife, mother-in-law, and father; Sadler's date and place of birth; and date and place of his marriage, as well as names and birth dates of his children.⁸

Descriptive recruitment lists

The National Archives recently microfilmed a valuable set of enlistment records of free and enslaved African Americans who resided in Missouri. In addition to the soldier's name, the documents may include his age, county and state of birth, and physical description. If the recruit was a slave, his owner's name may be included, as well as other details about them. Several examples illustrate the importance of this resource.

Wilson Cockrill, who claimed to have been the slave of Henry C. Cockrill, was 5 feet 2 inches and 16 years old, had black eyes and hair, was born in Platte County, Missouri, and was described as "light copper." Wilson had belonged to the estate of Jerry V. Cockrill and was "in the hands of his widow as guardian for the minor heirs."⁹

A different recruit, Charles Alexander Edward, whose owner's name and place of residence were shown in the record, enlisted in Plattsburg, Missouri, on 29 December 1863. Edward was a 29-year-old recruit who was born in Lewis County, Kentucky, had black eyes and hair, and was 5 feet 9 inches. We also learn that "his master is in Kentucky and sent him to Missouri to work for Dr. Coleman Brown and he was to have his freedom in 1858, but is still kept in slavery. He purchased his freedom of his master in 1858." The information in these records provides excellent clues for further research in Missouri and Kentucky, such as searching for manumission records.¹⁰

War Department collection of Confederate records

Free people of color and slaves also served in the Confederate military. The *War Department Collection of Confederate Records in the National Archives* (Record Group 109) contains records that chronicle their activities. The "Register of Free Negroes Enrolled and Assigned, Virginia, 1864-65" includes, for example, names of African Americans, ages, physical descriptions, places of birth, and occupations. A "Register of Slaves Impressed, 1864-65" shows, for instance, the date of impressment, name of slave and slaveowner, and slave value. Slave payrolls were records of slaves who worked on military defenses and contain the name and occupation of the hired bondsman, names of slave owners, and where the slaves worked. African Americans worked in a sawmill in the Mobile area, and records show the name of the slave and slave owner and the nature of the work.¹¹

For more on this topic, see "Searching for Confederate Soldier records at the National Archives" on page 15.

Adjutant General's Office records

Numerous other records in the National Archives document the war time experiences of slaves and free people of color during the Civil War. Among the holdings of the Adjutant General's Office (Record Group 94) are records of slave claim commissions, 1864-66, which consist of registers of claims of slave owners looking for reimbursement for bondsmen who served in the Union Army. Volumes for Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and West Virginia are available. Proceedings for some commissions are also extant. Registers of claims for USCT, 1864-67, for Kentucky, Maryland, and Tennessee contain claims by slave owners for reimbursement for slaves who joined or served the U.S. Army in some capacity. Name and residence of claimant as well as name and date of enlistment of slave are among the data in the registers.¹²

Freedmen's Bureau records

An act of Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (commonly referred to as the "Freedmen's Bureau"). Bureau officials provided assistance, for example, to former slaves, destitute persons, and refugees by issuing clothing, rations, and medicine to them, establishing schools, supervising the writing of labor contracts, and helping African American soldiers and sailors with filing claims for pensions and bounties. For help in locating these claims and other valuable

COLORED VOLUNTEER DESCRIPTIVE LIST of <i>Wilson Cockrill</i>										<i>Wilson Cockrill</i> Colored Volunteers, enlisted in the				
service of the United States under General Order, No. 135, Head										Quarters, Department of the Missouri, St. Louis, November 14th, 1863.				
Claimed to have been the slave of <i>Henry C. Cockrill</i> , a citizen of										<i>Clinton</i> County, State of Missouri.				
Name	Description						Where	Born		Enlisted				
	YEARS OF AGE	HT.	HAIR	COMPLEXION	EYES	TEETH		State	County	Occupation	When	Where	By whom	Period
<i>Wilson Cockrill</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>Blk</i>	<i>Blk</i>	<i>Light</i>	<i>Blk</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>Missouri</i>	<i>Platte</i>	<i>Farmer</i>	<i>Jan 1st</i>	<i>1864</i>	<i>Plattsburg</i>	<i>Tennessee</i>	<i>1 year</i>
<p>REMARKS.</p> <p><i>I am informed by the Henry C. Cockrill that the above slave belongs to the estate of Jerry Cockrill deceased, and was in the hands of his widow as guardian for the minor heirs. The above mentioned Jerry Cockrill deceased Sept 15th 1856. I have taken this from the</i></p>														

Colored Volunteer Descriptive List for Wilson Cockrill.

records family historians should consult one of the finding aids for Bureau records—preliminary inventories or descriptive pamphlets that provide roll by roll descriptions of the records. Some of these pamphlets appear at <http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/jkh/sc_jkh_main.htm>.

Southern Claims Commission records

The Southern Claims Commission was one of three claims commissions that the Federal government established to compensate loyal southerners who suffered losses inflicted by Union soldiers during the war. Testimony from whites and nonwhites, slave and free, appear in many of the files, and some mention the activities of nonwhites during the war. For instance, Demar Green of Bibb County, Alabama, who spoke on behalf of a white claimant, testified that he “used to belong to widow Green, mother-in-law of Newton Smith. I am sixty years old or pretty near. I worked at the tan yard of Smith and Potts during most of the war. I work for Newton Smith now and live on his lot. Have lived there pretty much all the time since surrender. I work on his farm. I remember when the Yankee soldiers came. I was at the tan yard that day.”¹³ Nelson Turner, an African American, informed the commission that until the Emancipation Proclamation he had been a slave of James B. Turner of Madison County, Alabama, and that in August or September 1862 Union soldiers took his horse, which he claimed was worth \$150.¹⁴

1890 Census

The 1890 special schedule of the Eleventh Census of the United States, surviving soldiers, sailors, and Marines, and widows contains information about veterans of the Civil War. Information in the enumeration may show the person’s rank, company, name of regiment or vessel, dates of enlistment and discharge, place of residence, and any disability incurred. The schedules for states and territories beginning with “A” through Kansas and part of Kentucky have been lost. This census is searchable on Ancestry.com at <www.ancestry.com>.

Congressional hearings

In 1871, the United States Congress established a joint Senate-House committee to investigate conditions in North and South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama, especially regarding the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. Testimonies by former

The image shows a handwritten 'GENERAL AFFIDAVIT' from the State of Kansas, County of Osage. The document is dated August 1, 1866, and is sworn to by James B. Holland, a resident of Osage County, Kansas. The affidavit states that Meridee Sadler was a widow of James Sadler, who was a soldier in the Confederate Army. The document includes a notary seal for James B. Holland and a stamp from the Osage County Office.

Affidavit from Meridee Sadler's Widow's Pension file.

slaves and free people of color in these states reveal much about their lives, including military experience, former owners, and birthplace. James H. Alston testified that he was a slave in the Confederate army. When asked if he carried a musket he replied no and stated that “I have always have been a musician.”¹⁵ When asked if he had been in the Civil War, Joseph Davis, who resided in Monroe County, Mississippi, at the time of the war, answered that he was “in it a little.” Davis did not elaborate on what type of work he performed.¹⁶

Freedmen and Southern Society Project

When discussing the lives of African Americans during the Civil War years, the work of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project deserves mention. Members of the Project have published several volumes that contain transcriptions of National Archives records pertaining to the history of emancipation, 1861–67, including, for instance, letters and depositions to government employees by former slaves. Some of the records include “correspondence between black soldiers and their families and between kinfolk who had been separated during slavery.”¹⁷ The group’s website at <<http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen>> provides additional information on the project, a list of its publications, and sample documents consisting of

either copies of actual records or transcriptions of such. For instance, a copy of a slave marriage record appears on the site, as well as a transcription of a letter that a slave woman wrote to President Lincoln.

Despite certain obstacles, the lack of records not being one of them, family historians can document the wartime activities of slaves and free people of color who made valuable contributions during the Civil War. Whether they were soldiers on the battlefields, cooks in the kitchens, or railroad workers in Tennessee, historians and genealogists have shown that they can trace the lives of free and enslaved African Americans with the many different types of records that are available. Tracing enslaved African Americans before the 1870 census has long been one of the most challenging tasks for a family historian. Many of the records mentioned in this article, and many more not discussed, may help researchers identify former slave owners and thus open the way for further research. 🌱

Notes

1. Ira Berlin, editor, *The Black Military Experience, Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, Series II* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 269–70.
2. *Ibid.*, 276.
3. Janet B. Hewett, ed., *The Roster of Union Soldiers, 1861–1865: United States Colored Troops* (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1997).
4. Merriday Foley, Detailed Soldier Record, *Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System*, online at <<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/index.html>>, viewed 21 June 2005.
5. Richard Stephenson, CMSR, Co. B, 19th U.S. Colored Infantry, *Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who Served with the United States Colored Troops*, RG 94, National Archives (NA) microfilm publication M1822, roll 101, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.
6. William Alexander, CMSR, Company A, 18th U.S. Colored Infantry, *Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers who Served with the United States Colored Troops*, RG 94, NA microfilm publication M1822, roll 65.
7. Merriday G. Foley, pension card, Civil War Pension Index, *Ancestry.com*, online at <<http://www.ancestry.com/>>. A guide to ordering pension records can be found at <http://www.archives.gov/research_room/obtain_copies/veterans_service_records.html#nara>.
8. General Affidavit of Leanna Samuels, 2 April 1910, and Statement of Meridee Sadler, 21 April 1915, Meridee Sadler (alias Merriday G. Foley) Widow's Certificate #1639426, *Civil War and Later Pensions*, RG 15.
9. Wilson Cockrill, Colored Volunteer Descriptive List, *Descriptive Recruitment Lists of Volunteers for the USCT for the State of Missouri, 1863–65*, RG 94, NA microfilm publication M1894, roll 5.
10. Charles Alexander Edward, Colored Volunteer Descriptive

List, *Descriptive Recruitment Lists of Volunteers for the USCT for the State of Missouri, 1863–65*, RG 94, NA microfilm publication M1894, roll 5.

11. Elizabeth Bethel, *Preliminary Inventory of the War Department Collection of Confederate Records (Record Group 109), Originally Compiled by Elizabeth Bethel, Additions and Indexing by Craig R. Scott* (Athens, Ga.: Iberian Publishing Company, 1994), 150. This source contains other relevant records on African Americans. The Union Army hired slaves to complete the Nashville and North Western Railroad, and the impressment rolls are among the holdings of the Tennessee State Library and Archives in Nashville. See Gale Williams Bamman, "African-Americans Impressed for Service on the Nashville and North Western Railroad, October 1863," *NGS Quarterly* 80 (September 1992): 204–10.
12. Lucille H. Pendell and Elizabeth Bethel, *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Adjutant General's Office* (Washington, D.C.: The National Archives, 1949), 71–72.
13. Demar Green, Deposition, 9 October 1872, *Thomas E. Potts v. United States*, Case File No. 12231, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871–1880: Alabama*, RG 217, NA microfilm publication M2062, roll 1. An index to case files is available in Gary B. Mills, *Southern Loyalists in the Civil War: The Southern Claims Commission: A composite directory of case files created by the U. S. commissioner of Claims, 1871–1880, including those appealed to the War Claims Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Court of Claims* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1994). For help in researching Southern Claims records see <<http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/scc/scc-main.htm>>. The other two commissions were the Mixed Commission of British and American Claims and the French and American Claims Commission.
14. Nelson Turner, Deposition, 13 April 1872, *Nelson Turner v. United States*, Case File No. 12931, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871–1880: Alabama*, RG 217, NA microfilm publication M2062, roll 27.
15. James H. Alston, Testimony, 17 October 1871, *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in The Late Insurrectionary States, Alabama*, 42 Cong., 2d sess., 1871, S. Rept. 41, pt. 9, serial 1492, 1020. Alston also reported that he had fought in the Mexican War. White citizens also testified and sometimes mentioned African Americans.
16. Joseph Davis, Testimony, 13 November 1871, *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in The Late Insurrectionary States, Mississippi*, 42 Cong., 2d sess., 1871, S. Rept. 41, pt. 12, serial 1495, 808.
17. Berlin, *The Black Military Experience*, xviii.

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