

African American Civil War Memorial

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Mall and Memorial Parks
Washington, DC



“Who would be free themselves
must strike the blow. Better even
die free than to live slaves”

Frederick Douglass
Douglass's Monthly
March 21, 1863

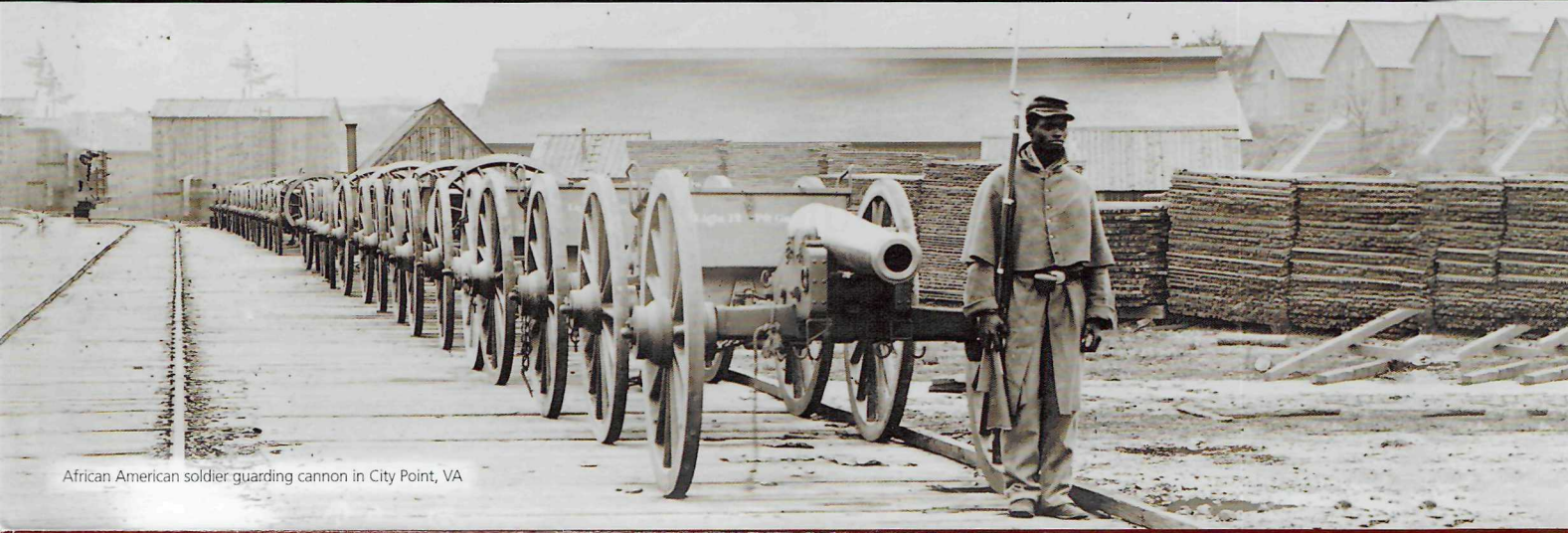


A Monumental Fight for Freedom

Freedom. A simple word, but to the enslaved it meant a whole new life. A life of liberty previously denied to them. At the onset of the Civil War, more than four million African Americans lived in bondage. In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln authorized the formation of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). From 1863 to 1865 more than 180,000 African Americans enlisted in the US Army, joining the 29,000 African American sailors in the US Navy. Although faced with limited rank advancement and unequal pay, black

servicemen knew the fight was for much more; it was about their freedom. By war's end, the USCT comprised nearly a tenth of all Union troops. USCT soldiers were among the first Union forces to enter Richmond, Virginia after its fall in April of 1865. The African American Civil War Memorial is dedicated to the memory of these men and all they sacrificed. Their names, along with the names of white officers, are inscribed on the Wall of Honor.

African American Civil War Memorial



African American soldier guarding cannon in City Point, VA

The Struggle to Fight—African Americans in the Civil War

From the beginning of the Civil War, African American leaders such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman knew that it was an opportunity to question the duality of America; slavery within a free society.

African American men wanted to enlist to fight, but President Lincoln's stance was firm; it was a war of Union preservation not abolition. The exception was the Navy where almost 29,000 African Americans served. Many African Americans aided the Union effort as laborers, cooks, laundresses, blacksmiths, and spies.

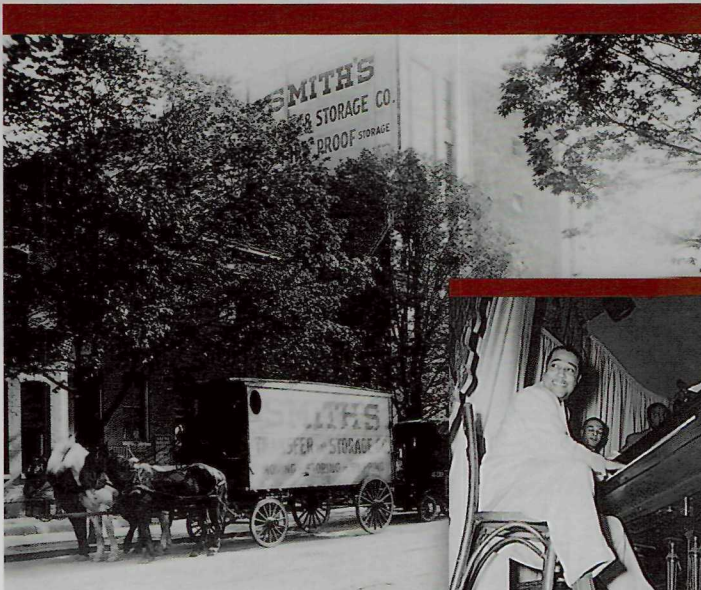
As the war progressed with neither side clearly prevailing, President Lincoln took a radical step and issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The proclamation drastically altered the course of the Civil War and officially allowed the creation of the United States Colored Troops (USCT).

The experience of African Americans in the Civil War was unlike that of any other American in war. All warriors enter battle with fears of injury or death, but African Americans in the Civil War faced the additional possibility of enslavement or execution if captured. White commanders doubted their abilities and courage and relegated blacks to manual labor. For much of the war, African Americans were paid less than whites. In spite of discrimination, African Americans fought bravely and were instrumental in leading the Union to victory in 1865.

After the war, the service of African Americans was overlooked as the nation sought to reunite. On May 23rd and 24th of 1865 Union veterans marched in a Grand Review. African Americans were not invited. In the years that followed, African Americans were rarely included in reunions. Despite public ignorance, African Americans understood they had fought for and accomplished "a new birth of freedom."

U Street Neighborhood: A Corridor of Distinction

During the Civil War, many formerly enslaved people sought refuge in an Army encampment around Washington, DC's U Street. Later, the founding of nearby Howard University attracted many leading African American intellectuals to the neighborhood. By the early twentieth century, U Street had earned a reputation as "Washington's Black Broadway" and was home to theaters, cafés, restaurants, and night clubs. Influential African Americans like Louis Armstrong and Langston Hughes frequented the neighborhood. Legendary jazz musician Duke Ellington called it home. Following the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., riots erupted along U Street. In the decades that followed, economic depression ravaged the neighborhood. Today, a revitalized U Street is once again a home for shops, restaurants, and the arts. The African American Civil War Memorial is located in the heart of the U Street corridor. The surrounding neighborhood, Shaw, is named for the Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the famed 54th Massachusetts regiment, one of the first African American units in the Civil War.



Smith Transfer and Storage Co.
13th & U Streets, NW, Washington, DC, 1920
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Duke Ellington, 1943
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/GORDON PARKS

Building the Memorial

On October 14, 1992, President George H.W. Bush authorized the creation of the African American Civil War Memorial. It is the only national memorial to honor the contributions of sailors and the regiments of the USCT during the Civil War. Inscribed on the Wall of Honor are the names of more than 185,000 black soldiers and 7,000 white officers. The centerpiece of the memorial is sculptor Ed Hamilton's bronze statue, Spirit of Freedom.



Visiting the Memorial

The memorial is located at 1925 Vermont Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001. It is open 24 hours a day. The African American Civil War Museum is next door.

More information
African American Civil War Memorial, National Mall and Memorial Parks
900 Ohio Drive SW
Washington, DC 20024
nps.gov/afam

African American Civil War Museum
202-667-2667
afroamcivilwar.org