Resource #14. The United States Colored Troops

A. Susie King Taylor

This account of the experience of African Americans who had joined the United States Colored Troops comes from Susie King Taylor. Taylor was writing about the area around Savannah, but the issue she describes also applied to the experience of African Americans who had decided to become soldiers in the Charleston area.

> *The first colored troops did not receive any pay for eighteen months, and the men had to depend wholly on what they received from the commissary, established by General Saxton. A great many of these men had large families, and as they had no money to give them, their wives were obliged to support themselves and children by washing for the officers of the gunboats and the soldiers, and making cakes and pies which they sold to the boys in camp. Finally, in 1863, the government decided to give them half pay, but the men would not accept this. They wanted "full pay" or nothing. They preferred rather to give their services to the state, which they did until 1864, when the government granted them full pay, with all the back pay due.*
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> *I remember hearing Captain Heasley telling his company, one day, "Boys, stand up for your full pay! I am with you, and so are all the officers."*

Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S.C. Volunteers* (Boston, 1902), pp. 5-21, digitized by Digital Schomburg: African American Woman Writers of the Nineteenth Century.

B. General Rufus Saxton

Writing from Union-occupied Port Royal Island, below Charleston, General Rufus Saxton reported to the secretary of war about the recruitment of the 1st South Carolina Infantry — the first regiment of black soldiers enlisted with official sanction during the war. He gave two reasons that enlistment was proceeding more slowly than expected. For one thing, most of the ex-slave men in Union lines were already working for the army or navy in other capacities, and for another, the experience of men who had joined a unit organized earlier (and without War Department approval) by General David Hunter had soured them on soldiering.

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Beaufort South Carolina October 29th 1862.

Sir. I have the honor to report that I am organizing the 1st South Carolina Vol[unteer]s. as rapidly as possible.

I think you will be disappointed with regard to the number of recruits I shall be able to obtain. I labour under many disadvantages in this matter. In the first place, the sphere of our operations is very limited. The Quartermaster's Department has a large number of able-bodied men in its employ, also the Engineer Department. All the officers servants are negroes and numbers of others [drive] a flourishing business as fishermen, workmen on steam-boats and for private traders. Large numbers are also employed in the Navy Department as sailors servants pilots &c.

I believe it is your intention that all these demands should be supplied before enlisting into the U.S. Service.

When the colored regiment was first organized by Gen[era]l Hunter no provision was made for its payment and the men were discharged after several months service receiving nothing for it in the mean time their families suffered those who did not enlist in the first regiment were receiving wages all this time. Accustomed as these people are to having their rights disregarded this failure to pay them for their service has weakened their confidence in our promises for the future & makes them slow to enlist If I could be authorized to give them a small bounty as an evidence that they were really to be paid for their services they would all readily enlist. …

Your obedient servant
R Saxton

Brig. Genl. R. Saxton to Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, 29 Oct. 1862, S-2104 1862, Letters Received, series 12, Records of the Adjutant General's office, Record Group 94, National Archives [FSSP K-568].

Questions for Students:

- Why do you think former enslaved men and free African-Americans would have wanted to enlist in the United States Colored Troops?

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- How do you think members of the United States Colored Troops felt about not being paid for their work as soldiers?
- How do you think this would affect the interest of other African-Americans, both free and slave, in joining up with the USCT?