

# Appomattox Court House

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Appomattox Court House  
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## United States Colored Troops at Appomattox

During the latter half of the American Civil War more than 180,000 African-American soldiers served in the ranks of the Union Army, they were known as United States Colored Troops. Of the more than 150 units of USCT organized, seven regiments, totaling more than 5,000 soldiers, participated in the Battle of Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. This engagement resulted in the surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and the beginning of the end of the Civil War. With Federal victory came not only the restoration of the Union but the realization of emancipation for more than three million formerly enslaved individuals.

### The Men



Ron Rittenhouse Collection

Sgt. John Peck of Pa., 8<sup>th</sup>  
U.S. Colored Infantry

These African-American soldiers, led by white officers, reflected the diversity of black society in America in the 1860s. Roughly one-third were Northern born free men, particularly from northeastern cities. More than ten percent were free blacks from slave states. A small percentage were foreign born, representing nearly every corner of the globe. However, more than half of the troops had escaped slavery in the Confederacy or the pro-Union border slave states. The majority of these black soldiers hailed from Kentucky, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland and were overwhelmingly young men; eighty percent were under 30. Their occupations included farmers, laborers, sailors, barbers and waiters. Together, they represented the most diverse group of soldiers found during the war.



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Unidentified Former Slave

### Enlistment and Organization



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Unidentified Artillery Soldier

The vast majority of these men were volunteers, but roughly ten percent were drafted into Federal service and nearly one in three enlisted as a substitute for a white draftee. The seven regiments at Appomattox on April 9th (8<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 41<sup>st</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup>, 116<sup>th</sup>, and 127<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry) contained a variety of combat experience. The 8<sup>th</sup> was organized in Philadelphia in 1863 and fought their bloodiest battle at Olustee, Florida. The 29<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, formed in early 1864 in Illinois and New York, both suffered heavily at the Battle of the Crater near Petersburg. The 116<sup>th</sup> was recruited almost entirely from newly freed slaves in Kentucky while the remaining three units were all organized at Camp William Penn in Philadelphia. These latter regiments, raised in the summer and fall of 1864, had seen little combat during their time in the siege-lines outside of Petersburg and Richmond.



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1863 Lithograph by H. L.  
Stephens

## The Appomattox Campaign



Civil War Gazette

The 25<sup>th</sup> Corps Headquarters Flag contains the corps badge insignia

In early April 1865, the 2nd Division of the all black 25<sup>th</sup> Corps participated in General Ulysses S. Grant's final attacks on Petersburg. Although the division did not see any serious fighting, they were some of the first Federal troops to march into Petersburg on the morning of April 3. While Lee's army retreated and Grant's followed, the USCT marched along the South Side Railroad. On April 7 near Farmville, the two brigades commanded by Colonels Ulysses Doubleday and William Woodward were attached to the white troops of the 24<sup>th</sup> Corps. As Lee's forces fled westward on April 8, the USCT and the remainder of the Army of the James moved parallel to the south in an attempt to cut off the Confederate retreat. After marching thirty miles in less than twenty hours, the troops reached the vicinity of Appomattox Station around 1:30 a.m. on April 9.

"The men, though short of rations, and almost always worn out with fatigue, moved on without a murmur, as long as there was an enemy to follow." - *Lieutenant Colonel James Givin, 127<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry*

"In an experience of more than three years I never witnessed greater powers of endurance. There was no straggling, and the men were constantly in the best of spirits." - *Surgeon C.P. Heichold, 25<sup>th</sup> Corps*

## Battle of Appomattox Court House



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Unidentified Infantry Sergeant

Before 8:00 a.m. on April 9, Confederate troops attacked the Federal cavalry roadblock just west of Appomattox Court House. Lee's final attempt to escape was initially successful, until the Army of the James arrived. Advancing to the left of the developing battle line, Doubleday's Brigade (8<sup>th</sup>, 41<sup>st</sup>, and 45<sup>th</sup>, minus the 127<sup>th</sup> left to guard supply wagons) drove back a force of Confederate cavalry. Meanwhile, Woodward's Brigade (29<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, and 116<sup>th</sup>) moved forward amidst the white troops of the 24<sup>th</sup> Corps. One soldier described this line as looking like a blue checkerboard, the white and black troops advancing together. The arrival of Federal infantry forced the Confederates back; General Lee surrendered that afternoon. Though the battle was short, it proved to be decisive. Of the roughly 300 Federal casualties, at least three were USCT who played a key role in blocking the Confederate escape route.

"What cared we for the color or race of those men who brought relief to us. We saw courage and determination in their coal-black faces." - *Captain Luman Tenney, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ohio Cavalry*

"Early we advanced and our skirmish lines met those of the enemy. We expected a fight...I never felt more like it...the Rebs gave way and all was quiet." - *Colonel Samuel Armstrong, 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry*

## After Appomattox

On April 11, the USCT brigades began their return march to Petersburg. Following a month of occupation duty near Richmond, the 25<sup>th</sup> Corps was ordered to Texas. Garrisoned along the Rio Grande, the USCT spent the rest of 1865 discouraging resurgent Confederate activity and guarding the border with Mexico. Epidemics of cholera, scurvy and dysentery ravaged the troops, killing hundreds of soldiers who been present at Appomattox. These seven regiments began mustering out of service in late 1865, but the 116<sup>th</sup> would not be released from the army until early 1867. Despite an uncertain future and the continued realities of racism and discrimination, the veterans of the USCT could rightfully be proud of their vital contribution to the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery.

"I was with General Grant when Lee surrendered at Appomattox...that was freedom." - *Private William Harrison, 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry*

"No set of men in any country ever suffered more severely than we in Texas. Death has made fearful gaps in every regiment." - *25<sup>th</sup> Corps Chaplain*



Wisconsin Veterans Museum

Pvt. Horace Artist of Va., 31<sup>st</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry

"We the colored soldiers, have fairly won our rights by loyalty and bravery...shall we obtain them? If they are refused now, we shall demand them! - *Sergeant Major William McCoslin, 29<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry*

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