Unit 3
Who Will Fight the War?

“Recruiting in the New York City Hall Park,” in P.F. Mottelay The Soldier in our Civil War (New York, 1890).
Collection of the New-York Historical Society.
Background

Early in the Civil War, President Lincoln set quotas for the number of soldiers each state was required to contribute to the U.S. Army. For the first two years, these quotas were met by white volunteers, many of whom took advantage of the bounties funded by groups of New York merchants to aid the Union cause. As a rule, these volunteers were willing and determined supporters of the war. As time went on, however, it was no secret that the war was going badly for the North. Battlefield photographs, some of them very shocking, circulated on the home front within days of the events they showed. Newspaper articles recounted Confederate victories and Union mistakes. If New Yorkers had any doubts about the war, they had only to look at the many soldiers they saw in the streets, deserters too afraid to fight again or men with missing limbs.

The political picture in largely Democratic New York City was complicated by unusual alliances. Lincoln had carried upstate New York in the 1860 election, but he had won only 35% of the city’s vote. Bankers, insurers, and other city businessmen with ties to the South opposed the war that had cost them $180 billion in defaulted loans from southern planters. They formed the base for a faction of the Democratic Party, known as the Peace Democrats, who hoped for an end to the war and a return to the Union as it had been, with slavery intact. There were War Democrats as well, who supported the fighting but opposed President Lincoln and all talk of emancipation.

Other businessmen in the city, however, were likely to be Republicans. Increasingly a manufacturing center, New York City would take advantage of the war to shoot ahead of its rivals in the production of iron goods, garments, pharmaceuticals, and other commodities. The new manufacturing class tended to support the president and the war, since they profited from Lincoln’s protective tariff. Republicans did not support abolition, but they were less opposed to it than Democrats, so abolitionists and blacks tended to side with them.

The new factor in New York City was the huge population of recent immigrants, mostly desperately poor refugees from the famine that struck Ireland in the mid-1840s. Immigrants tended to support the Union cause, but they were mostly Democrats who opposed emancipation, partly out of fear that they would lose work to free blacks and partly out of a much deeper racial hostility and the desire to maintain higher status than blacks. Most native-born whites, in the meantime, looked down on blacks and Irish both.

By late 1862, in New York and elsewhere, the number of men willing to volunteer for the Union had fallen off dramatically, just as General Lee, with the upper hand, was preparing to invade the North. The Lincoln administration had to reconsider who would fight the war and how the ranks of the Union army and navy would be filled. In New York City, where tensions between Democrat and Republican, black and white, rich and poor, immigrant and native were already high, these questions would bring increased conflict and violence.

By the President of the United States of America:

A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

“That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom...

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service...

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN
WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State
In the first years of the war, as the northern army moved into the South, thousands of slaves fled their masters and crossed into Union territory. According to the rules of war, they should have been returned as contraband, but most were not. Instead, they were housed in camps and many began helping the army. In time, their numbers swelled and their contributions became essential. This development, in effect, forced President Lincoln’s hand on emancipation, which he had resisted out of fear that it would drive the border states to the Confederate side. On September 22, 1862, the President gathered his cabinet together and read them his draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, scheduled to go into effect the following New Year’s Day. It declared that if the Union won the war, slaves in the rebel states would be free and welcomed in the Union army. Black regiments had served in the army from late 1862, taking support roles in New Orleans, South Carolina, and Missouri. But not until the Emancipation Proclamation did President Lincoln authorize black soldiers to take part in combat.
Whereas there now exist in the United States an insurrection and rebellion against the authority thereof, and it is, under the Constitution of the United States, the duty of the government to suppress insurrection and rebellion, to guarantee to each State a republican form of government, and to preserve the public tranquility; and whereas, for these high purposes, a military force is indispensable, to raise and support which all persons ought willingly to contribute; and whereas no service can be more praiseworthy and honorable than that which is rendered for the maintenance of the Constitution and Union, and the consequent preservation of free government: Therefore –

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That all able-bodied male citizens of the United States, and persons of foreign birth who shall have declared on oath their intention to become citizens under and in pursuance of the laws there-of, between the ages of twenty and forty-five years, except as hereinafter excepted, are hereby declared to constitute the national forces, and shall be liable to perform military duty in the service of the United States when called out by the President for that purpose...

SEC.13. And be it further enacted, That any person drafted and notified to appear as aforesaid, may, on or before the day fixed for his appearance, furnish an acceptable substitute to take his place in the draft; or he may pay to such person as the Secretary of War may authorize to receive it, such sum, not exceeding three hundred dollars, as the Secretary may determine, for the procuration of such substitute; which sum shall be fixed at a uniform rate by a general order made at the time of ordering a draft for any state or territory; and thereupon such person so furnishing the substitute, or paying the money, shall be discharged from further liability under that draft. And any person failing to report after due service of notice, as herein prescribed, without furnishing a substitute, or paying the required sum therefore shall be deemed a deserter, and shall be arrested by the provost-martial and sent to the nearest military post for trial by court-marshal, unless, upon proper showing that he is not liable to do military duty, the board of enrolment shall relieve him from the draft.
The conscription act instituted a draft for the first time in the nation’s history. President Lincoln had no other choice; by 1863 almost no one was volunteering to fight, and General Lee’s forces were winning most battles. The act required eligible men to begin enrolling for the draft in May and June. A lottery to select the names of the men who would serve was scheduled to begin on Saturday, July 11, 1863. Black men were ineligible for the draft because they were not considered citizens, a pervasive attitude confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1857 Dred Scott decision.
Men of Color, To Arms!

When first the rebel cannon shattered the walls of Sumter and drove away its starving garrison, I predicted that the war then and there inaugurated would not be fought out entirely by white men. Every month’s experience during these dreary years has confirmed that opinion. A war undertaken and brazenly carried on for the perpetual enslavement of colored men, calls logically and loudly for colored men to help suppress it. Only a moderate share of sagacity was needed to see that the arm of the slave was the best defense against the arm of the slaveholder. Hence with every reverse to the national arms, with every exulting shout of victory raised by the slaveholding rebels, I have implored the imperiled nation to unchain against her foes, her powerful black hand. Slowly and reluctantly that appeal is beginning to be heeded. Stop not now to complain that it was not heeded sooner. It may or it may not have been best that it should not. This is not the time to discuss that question. Leave it to the future. When the war is over, the country is saved, peace is established, and the black man’s rights are secured, as they will be, history with an impartial hand will dispose of that and sundry other questions. Action! Action! not criticism is the plain duty of this hour. Words are now useful only as to stimulate to blows. The office of speech now is only to point out when, where, and how to strike to the best advantage. There is no time to delay...

I wish I could tell you that the State of New York calls you to this high honor. For the moment her constituted authorities are silent on the subject. They will speak by and by, and doubtless on the right side; but we are not compelled to wait for her. We can get at the throat of treason and slavery through the State of Massachusetts...

Massachusetts now welcomes you to arms as soldiers. She has but a small colored population from which to recruit. She has full leave of the general government to send one regiment to the war, and she has undertaken to do it. Go quickly and help fill up the first colored regiment from the North. I am authorized to assure you that you will receive the same wages, the same rations, and the same equipments, the same protection, the same treatment, and the same bounty, secured to the white soldiers.
Governor Horatio Seymour refused to permit the formation of a black regiment in New York, even though it would have helped meet the state quota for volunteers. In Massachusetts, however, Governor John A. Andrews was eager to mount a black regiment and sought the help of Frederick Douglass and other black leaders in drawing volunteers. Great numbers of northern blacks, including Frederick Douglass’s two sons and many black New Yorkers, answered the call and joined the 54th Massachusetts. It was the North’s first official all-black regiment and, more than a century later, the subject of the movie *Glory*. 
Document 4 (Part I)


New York City’s draft lottery began as planned at the office of the provost marshal of the Ninth Congressional District on Saturday, July 11, 1863. The first day passed without incident. On Sunday, however, immigrant anger mounted. Since wealthy whites could buy their way out of service, and since blacks were ineligible for the draft, poor immigrants expected to be called in unfair numbers to fight. Irish men had volunteered and fought since the beginning of the war, but the draft would force them to serve in a conflict that the South appeared to be winning. Even worse, the Emancipation Proclamation seemed to make abolition the new goal of the war, and Irish men were unwilling to put their lives on the line to end slavery. The draft threatened to ignite animosities that had been building in the city for years.

City leaders recognized the potential for trouble. Most of New York’s police and military personnel had been called to Gettysburg, where the Union was fighting hard to push General Lee’s troops back into southern territory. The city had so few men in uniform that it was nearly defenseless if problems arose when the draft resumed at 10:00 a.m. Monday.

Very early Monday morning, a large group of Irish men met in Central Park, some intending to join a peaceful one-day strike against the draft. They marched to the provost marshal’s office and stood outside as the selection of names began again. When a pistol shot was heard, tensions exploded, and four days of mayhem began. The *New-York Tribune*’s offices, and its Republican editor, Horace Greeley, became targets of the mob’s rage, but the paper did not miss an edition during the riots. The headlines that marked each day’s coverage summarize the events the embattled *Tribune* learned about and found most notable among the chaotic happenings of those days.
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### Unit 3, Document #4 (Part III)


**NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JULY 17, 1863**

**THE RIOT**

**Fighting in the 18th, 20th, and 21st Wards.**

**The Risters Again Moved Down.**

**Thirty Shot and Bayoneted in One Attack.**

**SPECIMENS OF KILLED AND WOUNDED.**

**Quiet Elsewhere for White Men in the Daytime.**

**THE CARROTTERS WATCHWORD.**

**ATTACKS ON NEGROES.**

**THE FEROCITIES OF THE MOB.**

**RETURN OF OUR MILITIA REGIMENTS.**

**THEY ARE EASY TO SWEEP THE STEERYS.**

**CARS AND STAGES RUNNING.**

**BUSINESS PARTIALLY RESUMED.**

**Newspaper clipping of a draft riot newspaper report.**

**NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JULY 18, 1863**

**THE RIOT.**

**Quiet Restored and Business Resumed.**

**THE INSURGENTS SUBDUE.**

**Gen. Canby Supersedes Gen. Harvey Brown.**

**PROCLAMATION BY MAYOR ODYKE.**

**LARGE MILITARY FORCE ON DUTY.**

**MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS.**

**Meeting of the Archbishops Residence.**

**ADDRESS OF THE ARCHEPISCOP.**

**Orders of the Secretary of the United States.**

**Police and Military Ordered Not to Interfere.**

**The rioters, after the terrible punishment they received on Thursday at the hands of the military, subsided during the night. The main body dispersing at Jackson Avenue.**
Document 4 (PART II)

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*Presentation of Colors to the 20th U.S. Colored Infantry, Col. Bartram, at the Union League Club House, N.Y., March 5.* Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, March 26, 1864. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.
The Union League Club included some of New York’s richest and most influential citizens. Formed in February 1863, the club fiercely supported the war, and just as fiercely opposed the Peace Democrats who wanted a return to the prewar status quo. When the draft riots broke out, several members carrying muskets gathered at a member’s home. They promised one another that if they survived, they would mount a black regiment and march it right through the streets of New York. This at last became possible in the fall, when Governor Seymour lost his reelection bid and gave his half-hearted approval to a black regiment from New York State. On December 3, 1863, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton authorized the Union League Club to form the 20th USCT (United States Colored Troops). After training on Riker’s Island through the winter, the regiment of 1000 men paraded through New York to a viewing stand at the club’s headquarters. As vast crowds of New Yorkers watched and cheered, a group of white women associated with the Union League Club presented the “colors” — the regimental flag that had been specially designed for the 20th.

Unit 3, Document #6

“Picket Station of Colored Troops Near Dutch Gap Canal.” November, 1864.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. LC-B811-25538.
Despite the great numbers of blacks who volunteered to fight, and despite the courage shown by black units, some in the U.S. Army did not believe blacks would be equal to white soldiers and did not want them in life-or-death combat situations. General Grant and President Lincoln disagreed with this position, but the question remained. When weapons were issued to black units, they were often of poor quality or insufficient for the number of men. Black soldiers assigned to battle roles often landed in dangerous picket positions, where the job was to man an outpost and protect the main body of soldiers from attack. The two men shown in this photograph are probably being trained as picket guards, not actually involved in a fight.

Transparencies of this photograph and another nearly identical to it were mounted side-by-side and viewed in a stereoscope. The slight differences between the two images made the picture appear three-dimensional. Extremely popular with the middle class, stereoscopes gave people at home a fairly vivid sense of the first war to be extensively photographed. This photo does not focus on the manual work done by most of the black volunteers at Dutch Gap. It shows black men with guns, a reality that would have pleased some viewers and terrified others.
Unit 3, Document #7

Document 7


Harper’s Weekly covered the Civil War extensively, battle by battle, and was widely read throughout the North. In 1863, newspaper technology did not yet permit the printing of photographs. So Harper’s Weekly employed engravers to make meticulous copies, capturing every detail the camera had seen. The original photo of the Dutch Gap Canal was taken by Captain S. L. Langdon to show the final stages of work on the canal. The area where the soldiers are standing will be underwater after dynamite explodes the bulkhead, the mass of land left in place to hold back the river during construction. In this image, the bulkhead looms in the background, bathed in bright sunlight.
Henry Highland Garnet
1815-1882

New York’s Governor Seymour would not budge. In January 1863, the Lincoln administration had opened the way for blacks to fight as soldiers in the Civil War. The Governor of Massachusetts had immediately requested and received permission from the federal government to organize a black regiment. Governor Seymour refused to do the same, even though black volunteers would have helped New York meet its quota of men in uniform. While Irish and German immigrants complained bitterly about the prospect of being drafted, Henry Highland Garnet knew that many black New Yorkers would eagerly volunteer if there was a black regiment for them to join. In fact, blacks had tried to volunteer since the beginning of the war but were rejected. So many black New Yorkers joined the new 54th Massachusetts.

Henry Highland Garnet was the descendent of Mandingo chiefs and southern slaves. In 1824, he escaped from Maryland on the Underground Railroad with his parents and seven siblings. In the North, he graduated from the African Free School and went on to become a well-educated man, a minister, and an important abolitionist. In 1840, he helped organize the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society after a split over tactics with William Lloyd Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society. This development relocated the leadership of the political wing of the abolition movement from Boston to New York, and Garnet became well known both among those who supported anti-slavery and those who did not.

Garnet was not a man who played it safe. In 1843, he antagonized other black leaders, including Frederick Douglass, with a speech he delivered at the Black National Convention in Buffalo. At a time when some in the black community sought ways to win victories without alarming whites and inviting retribution, Garnet advised slaves who wanted to be free to strike the blow for freedom themselves. It was better to die free, he said, than to live enslaved. It seemed like a call to open revolt.

Rev. Garnet surely did believe in fighting to correct wrongs. He believed that blacks should join the Union forces, fight alongside white soldiers, return to the South in uniform, and help put an end to slavery once and for all. He asked President Lincoln to pressure Governor Seymour to permit the formation of a black regiment in New York. For political reasons, Lincoln was unwilling to do so. Garnet continued to argue that black New Yorkers should have the right to serve as soldiers. He designed rousing posters to help find recruits for the 54th Massachusetts.

During the draft riots of 1863, Rev. Garnet’s prominence and activism made him an early target of the mob. In the late afternoon of the first day of rioting, as he sat in the parlor of his home with a few friends, he heard the mob coming down Thirteenth Street, calling his name. His daughter had taken a life-saving precaution, however. She had used an axe to pry the name plate from the door. Unable to identify the Garnet house, the crowd moved on. Rev. Garnet and his friends spent the remainder of the night in the unlit house, dreading every noise outside, but the mob did not return.

In the fall, Governor Seymour lost his reelection bid and retreated from his opposition to forming a black regi-
The 20th New York (USCT) was formed by the Union League Club, a group of prominent white Republicans. By Christmas, the regiment had its required 1000 volunteers, ready for training. On March 5, 1864, the unit paraded through New York City on its way to the troop ship, passing the reviewing stand where Rev. Garnet and his wife watched in triumph.

Fernando Wood was not born rich. His father had failed in business, and as a young man he got by on one low-paying job after another. Eventually he made a fortune in real estate, but he had a poor man’s fighting streak all his life. The Daily News, which he ran with his brother Ben, once lambasted the “kid-glove, scented, silk-stocking, poodle-headed, degenerate aristocracy” and praised “the hard-working, bone and sinew, hard-fisted, noble, laboring-men of New York.” One of the despised aristocrats, George Templeton Strong, retaliated by calling Wood’s supporters “a miscellaneous assortment of suckers, soap locks, Irishmen, and plug uglies.”

Hardworking people helped elect Fernando Wood Mayor of New York, a position he held for much of the 1850s. Like many in the city, he was a Democrat who supported the South and slavery. In fact, though Republican Abraham Lincoln won New York State in the 1860 election, he lost the city of New York, where Democrats dominated. As relations between North and South worsened, many of the city’s leaders begged Lincoln to do whatever necessary to avoid war, even to let the South leave the Union peacefully. After South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860, Mayor Wood even suggested that New York City might do the same. Many southerners believed this could really happen, that the nation’s first-ranking metropolis might become a Confederate city.

After the attack on Fort Sumter, New York’s Democrats were divided. Some sided patriotically with the Union and supported the war. Others, including Fernando Wood, remained favorable to the South; because they opposed the war, they became known as Peace Democrats. They wanted not only peace but a return to the world as it had been, with southern slavery intact and unchallenged. Many New Yorkers apparently agreed with Wood: voters elected him to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1862. He was serving there in January 1863, when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and followed it with a plan to institute a draft.

For Wood, Lincoln’s actions were the last straw. Freeing southern slaves had never been the goal of the war. He saw it as a radical shift in purpose, a dangerous idea that would seriously damage New York City. As for the draft, he knew who would be called from the city: the laboring-men who kept him in office. The aristocracy would buy their way out, as the Conscription Act so generously allowed.

Fernando Wood used his considerable power to go on the offensive. In February 1863, he joined New York’s Governor Horatio Seymour and others in launching the Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge. The society published pamphlets against the war and against emancipation. In June, Wood organized a huge Peace Convention at Cooper Union. Over 30,000 people heard Wood and other speakers thunder against the rich man’s war and predict ruin for New York’s working people if freed slaves flooded into the city willing to work for next to nothing.

The pages of the Daily News, which Fernando Wood owned and which his brother Benjamin edited, printed articles guaranteed to inflame the fears and prejudice of the city’s immigrants. Over the weekend of July 11-12, one
or both of the Wood brothers wrote an article that linked jobs, slavery, and the draft in no uncertain terms:

“It is a strange perversion of the laws of self-preservation which would compel the white laborer to leave his family destitute and unprotected while he goes forth to free the negro, who, being free, will compete with him in labor. Let the laboring population assemble peaceably in mass meeting, and express their views upon the subject….If they would avoid Conscription, let them speak in opposition to that which had given birth to Conscription. Let them protest against the continuance of the War. Let them swell the cry for Peace that is already ascending from all parts of the North. Let them make it a necessity with the Administration to give up its insane Emancipation scheme. Let them insist that in place of the Conscription of white men to serve the blacks we shall have Negotiation, Compromise, and Peace.”

The article appeared in the paper on July 13, 1863, as the rage of white immigrant workers boiled over and the draft riots began.

The Lyons Family

On the surface, the first few hours of the draft riots were about the draft. But very soon, they were about race. In the afternoon of the first day, July 13, some in the mobs started to target the city’s black residents. A man who left his home to buy bread was brutally murdered. At 4:00, the Colored Orphan Asylum at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street was attacked. Staff members on duty – Dr. James McCune Smith was out sick that day – heard the mob coming and managed to lead over 200 terrified children out a back entrance. A young Irish policeman named McCafferty, with the help of some streetcar drivers and firemen, then led the children to the safety of the local police precinct. The asylum building, however, was looted of toys, beds, everything worth taking, and then set on fire. By Monday night, a race riot was underway. Several separate mobs prowled the city, mostly unchallenged by the few police on hand.

Albro and Mary Lyons lived with their children – Therese, Maritcha, Pauline, and Albro, Jr. – in the Seaman’s Home on Vandewater Street. Albro Lyons owned the Home, which he ran as a boardinghouse for black seamen. It was also a station on the Underground Railroad, the comings and goings of the guests covering the comings and goings of fugitive slaves. Albro Lyons was well known in the city and prominent among black activists. James McCune Smith was a close friend and godfather to the Lyons children.

Mary and Albro Lyons and two of their children were at home on the first day of the riots and could hear the mayhem in the streets outside. Maritcha Lyons, fifteen at the time, later wrote about what happened. Late on Monday, “a rabble attacked our house, breaking windowpanes, smashing shutters, and partially demolishing the main front door” before being distracted. Maritcha’s parents picked up the stones that had been thrown and used them to barricade the exposed front door. They kept watch all night, in “darkness, indignation, uncertainty, and dread.” At one point they heard someone yell outside. Albro Lyons stood in his doorway and fired a shot into the crowd; there was no attack.

Before dawn, the two Lyons children were shepherded to safety, and the parents remained to guard their house and property. Early in the morning, they heard footsteps and a voice: “Don’t shoot, Al. It’s only me.” Officer Kelly from the local precinct had heard of the attack on the Seaman’s Home and come by to make sure that the Lyons family was all right. Overcome by the violence and his helplessness, Kelly sat on the Lyons’s steps and “sobbed like a child.”

A few hours later, the mob arrived again, more determined. This time Albro Lyons ran to the police station – chased the entire way – and Mary raced to the home of a German neighbor, who had already loosened boards in his fence in case she needed to escape. He was later assaulted for helping his black neighbor.

With the Lyons house empty, the rioters entered, destroyed everything they could find, and set a fire in an upstairs room. They stopped when the police arrived. Mary and Albro spent that night in the precinct with many other black New Yorkers. After midnight, the police helped them cross the East River to Williamsburg. Albro and Mary collected their children and fled the city.
Finally the Union army arrived and restored order, but over 100 blacks had been killed in brutal ways. Women, children, men – no black person was safe from the mob’s wrath. In the uneasy calm that followed, Albro Lyons wrote an inventory more than 12 pages long, listing the household items he had lost: mirrors, chairs, children’s clothes, china vases. It amounted to over $2000, a sign of the Lyons family’s prosperity when many workers earned one dollar a day. The family was partly reimbursed by the Committee of Merchants, which had organized a relief effort for the black victims of the violence. They remained in New York for about a year after the riots, but eventually they joined the great migration of blacks who could no longer bear the stress of living in New York City. The Lyons family resettled in Providence, Rhode Island, where Maritcha finished school. As an adult, she returned to New York to become a teacher and assistant principal at Public School 83, Brooklyn.

Soon after the draft riots in July, 1863, a war story reached the North. On the 18th of that month, as the city arrived at a tense peace, the black regiment from Massachusetts took part in the Union assault on Fort Wagner in Charleston harbor. The 54th Massachusetts had led the assault, and the white regiments followed. Black men had carried weapons and fought hand to hand against rebel soldiers in one of the capitals of southern slavery. Sergeant William Carney, a former southern slave himself, had managed to raise the Union flag over the fort, despite terrible wounds. The Union lost the battle, and the 54th lost a third of its men, but the story of black heroism survived, and northern newspapers told the tale. The Christian Recorder, published in Philadelphia, wrote: “The Mass. 54th (colored) led the van. They fronted the hottest of the battle, and fought like tigers.”

The issue that had sparked the riots – the conscription of men to serve in the Union army – did not affect black men because they were not eligible for the draft. Throughout the North, however, and perhaps especially in New York City, black men were eager to enlist in the war that would end slavery forever. They may have been even more eager after the stirring accounts of the 54th Massachusetts. Since New York’s governor, Horatio Seymour, refused to allow the establishment of a black regiment, some New Yorkers joined units from other states, including the 54th Massachusetts. Many others waited for the formation of a black regiment from New York. This happened at last, late in 1863, when the Union League Club formed the 20th Regiment USCT (United States Colored Troops). John Jones 1st was among the many volunteers who overwhelmed the recruiting office, eager to sign up. These men volunteered even though black soldiers were at grave risk if captured by Confederates, and even though they were paid less than whites — $10 per month, from which $3 was deducted for clothing. White soldiers were paid $13 per month, plus a $3 clothing allowance.

John Jones 1st was not his real name. He was born William H. Wright in Brooklyn, around 1845. When enrolled as a private on December 11, 1863, he was eighteen, 5’ 2 ½” tall, and working in a hotel. He enlisted as a musician, so he must have played either a horn or drum. The man at the Brooklyn enlistment station told him he should use the name John Jones 1st, which he did, though the recruiter did not say why. With the other volunteers, Jones was transported to Riker’s Island for training; this was well before a prison was located on the island. Experienced white officers had been assigned to train and lead the regiment. By regulation, the only rank above lieutenant that could be held by a black man was that of chaplain. Rev. Henry Highland Garnet proudly took this role.

It was an especially cold winter in New York. Jones and the other recruits were assigned to tents, but the government had not sent enough tents for the number of men. The recruits had to crowd together, which provided their only warmth, since the tents had neither floors nor stoves. Exposed to the cold, many of the men became ill, and there was no hospital or medical staff to help them. These were not the first problems the 20th had faced. In the beginning, the Union League Club had trouble renting rooms to use as recruiting stations, since many landlords wanted no part of a black regiment.
Help arrived for the 20th USCT. A hospital was built, and Rev. Garnet arranged for a committee of black women, many of them the wives or mothers of the recruits, to tend to the sick. More tents were shipped to the regiment, as well as tent floors, stoves, newspapers, and tobacco, all sent by the Union League Club. Within weeks, the soldiers were trained and ready to go, but were held up by a lack of officers, a delay in the delivery of weapons, and problems with paperwork.

Finally, on March 5, 1864, New York City saw an extraordinary sight. Less than eight months after the draft riots, a ferry brought the 20th Regiment, all sharply dressed in Union blue, across the East River to Manhattan. As the streets jammed with onlookers, black and white, the soldiers marched in formation to the Union League Club in Union Square, where dignitaries awaited to wish them well. The president of Columbia University spoke first. Then the 20th Regiment’s commanding officer, Lt. Colonel Nelson B. Bartram, praised his men’s courage and patriotism and reminded listeners of the bravery of the black soldiers at Fort Wagner and elsewhere. After the speeches and festivities, the 20th USCT returned to formation and began its march to its ship at South Ferry.

John Jones 1st did not play music that day. He marched with his regiment, one of a thousand black men in uniform in a grand procession through the streets of New York. A white military band played music, and one hundred policemen accompanied New York’s first black regiment as it prepared to go to war. At the docks, Rev. Garnet shook the hand of each soldier boarding the USS Ericsson, bound for New Orleans.

Walter Thorn

Walter Thorn was a native of New York City, but he joined the 116th USCT (United States Colored Troops), organized in Kentucky during the summer of 1864, before New York State had a black regiment of its own. In the fall of that year, Thorn’s unit joined General Benjamin Butler’s Army of the James in Virginia. It was one of many regiments of black volunteers to enter Confederate territory. Black soldiers were usually assigned to manual labor, not sent into battle, but being black, in uniform, and in the South put them at extreme risk. The Confederacy had refused to treat captured black soldiers as prisoners of war; the policy was to send them immediately into slavery and to execute their white officers. The Lincoln administration threatened to treat captured Confederates in the same way, and the South retreated somewhat from its position. But black men knew when they volunteered that they would be much more endangered than whites. Nearly 80% of those eligible enlisted anyway.

In the summer of 1864, Union forces were planning a massive assault on the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. It would involve several armies, approaching the city from different directions. General Butler was to lead his army up the James River toward Richmond. Unfortunately, the James was not a good highway. It twisted and curved and bent so much that it would slow the army’s progress to a crawl. In one spot, it went seven miles out of its way, and then returned to course just 200 yards from where the detour had begun. General Butler decided that building a straight canal would save valuable time when the assault came.

Work on the Dutch Gap Canal began on August 10, 1864. The 116th arrived some weeks later and took over much of the digging. Walter Thorn was among these soldiers. As a second lieutenant in Company G of the 116th Regiment — later he would be promoted to first lieutenant — he was one of the few black officers in the Civil War. The soldiers at Dutch Gap did the hard labor of digging the canal by hand, carting the earth out by wheelbarrow until a rail system was built for this purpose. For all the months the soldiers worked, Confederate marksmen held positions on the high banks around the canal bed. When the rebels built batteries to lob mortar into the work area, black soldiers had to construct shelters to protect the workers. All this digging and construction took place in low, muddy ground, and the soldiers suffered from fever brought on by the dampness. They also suffered from the Confederate weaponry. During the building of the canal, 50 men were killed, and 200 wounded.

By mid-November, 15,000 cubic yards of earth had been removed. The only remaining task was to destroy the bulkhead, the mass of land left standing to keep the James River from flowing into the canal bed before it was ready. Sixty tons of dynamite were put in place, and detonation was scheduled for 4:00 on the afternoon of January 1, 1865.

After the fuse had been lit to explode the dynamite, Lt. Thorn learned that the picket guard had not been withdrawn from his post on the bulkhead. With little time, and at great personal risk from both the explosion and Confederate troops, Lt. Thorn raced onto the bulkhead, warned the sentry, and saved the man’s life. For this act of bravery, Lt. Walter Thorn became one of about two dozen black soldiers and sailors to receive the Medal of Honor. Some men were granted their medals as a group on April 6, 1865, but many soldiers, black and white,
waited more than two decades for their bravery to be acknowledged. Walter Thorn received his Medal of Honor on December 8, 1898, almost 34 years after the building of the Dutch Gap Canal.

Postscript

• On August 19, 1863, one month after the draft riots, the draft resumed in the Republican stronghold of Greenwich Village, with soldiers maintaining order over the process. White resentment had cooled after Governor Seymour persuaded President Lincoln to cut New York State’s quota by more than half, to 12,000 men.

• In the months that followed the riots, many black New Yorkers moved away from Manhattan, and the city’s black population dropped by 20%. Dr. James McCune Smith and the Lyons family were among those who left.

• On June 15, 1864, the U.S. Congress ruled that black soldiers would receive the same pay as whites, retroactive to January 1, 1864. Five days later, the monthly pay of all privates in the U.S. Army was raised to $16.

• The 20th USCT – the unit in which John Jones 1st served — arrived in New Orleans on March 20, 1864. It served in Louisiana, Texas, Florida, and Tennessee. In October 1864, the Union League Club noted that the 20th “is admitted to be the best drilled and best disciplined regiment in the department of the Gulf.” By the time the regiment was mustered out in October 1865, one enlisted man had died from battle wounds. Another 263 soldiers had died of disease, as well as one white officer. Civil War soldiers were much more likely to die of disease than of war injuries, and black soldiers were more at risk than whites, possibly because of the nature of the work they were often given. Malaria, typhoid fever, and pneumonia were common, and nearly every soldier suffered from chronic diarrhea or dysentery.

• John Jones 1st was discharged from the Army on October 15, 1865. Some three decades later, the federal government offered pensions to soldiers who had medical difficulties related to their service. In an 1895 application, Jones said he had had “disease of the Stomach” since the war. Then working as a waiter, he calculated that he had lost a month’s salary every year because of this illness. His application was rejected in 1899. He applied again a few years later, and in 1908 he was awarded a pension of $12/month, increased to $36/month in 1911. His widow received the monthly pension until her death in 1934.

• In the spring of 1865, the 116th USCT – Walter Thorn’s regiment – was among the units that pursued the Confederate army from Petersburg to Richmond, leading to the surrender of General Robert E. Lee on April 9, 1865. In May, the regiment left for Texas, where it joined the Department of the Gulf. It was not mustered out of the army until January 1867.
