

Orleans men served in USCT regiments

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS: Four area natives served in U.S. Colored Troops regiments during Civil War

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ALBION — The recent vote by the Hoag Library Board of Trustees to sell the 26th U.S. Colored Troops “National Color” in March has raised questions about local connections to that particular unit and other Colored Infantry regiments.

U.S.C.T. regiments, established under the direction of the Bureau for Colored Troops, appointed white officers to lead black soldiers. According to a dissertation entitled “The Selection and Preparation of White Officers for the Command of Black Troops in the American Civil War,” by Paul Renard, the government utilized various methods of electing officers to lead U.S.C.T. regiments.

Early U.S.C.T. regiment officers were selected by a board of divisional officers while others were selected in a process similar to white regiments. Renard argues that the selection of officers through an examination board overseen by the Bureau for Colored Troops was the most effective method used.

Racism permeated the Union Army, which refused equal pay to black soldiers and relegated segregated units to manual labor behind the front lines. Early efforts to allow freedmen and escaped slaves to enlist in the ranks of the Union Army were met with harsh opposition by political forces.

Despite this, primary source evidence suggests that a large number of the commissioned officers appointed to lead these regiments held a degree of racial liberalism that was not seen in white regiments.

Many white officers were abolitionists who believed in freedom and equal rights for the men they commanded. They viewed military service as a means for black soldiers to rise

against their former masters — men who truly had something to fight for.

However, it is impossible to create a generalization considering that military life for men in segregated regiments was reminiscent of slavery — relegated to manual labor, and still under the command of a white master.

Men within these regiments had no hope of working their way up the ranks, would never lead their own regiments, and yet their lives were at far greater risk than white enlisted soldiers.

Still, it is worth calling attention to the complex relationship between white officers and the black soldiers they led. Perusing the pages of the local town clerks’ registers of Union soldiers, at least eight local men received commissions to lead black regiments; two of those men received commissions with the 26th U.S.C.T.

■ Charles Henry Mattison, born March 27, 1837, at Barre to Alvah Mattison and Orpha Bull. Raised on the farm in his hometown, Mattison enlisted with Company D of the 151st New York Infantry on September 9, 1861, and was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

He received a commission as a second lieutenant with the regiment but turned it down, later receiving a commission with the 26th U.S.C.T. at the same rank. He reported for duty on Jan. 14, 1864, and was later promoted to first lieutenant and adjutant.

He was with his regiment during a skirmish at St. John’s Island on January 5, 1864, and the Battle of Bloody Bridge on July 7th when 1,000 soldiers of the 26th U.S.C.T. fought an inconsequential battle; 2,000 Confederate soldiers fended off a Union force of 8,000 men. After the war, Mattison returned to Barre Center.