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U.S. Colored Troops: a history and legacy in Alexandria

Halfway through the Civil War, high mortality rates and low recruitment left the Union desperate for manpower. Determined to win the war and prevent the South from having the advantage of extra troops, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, freeing all enslaved peoples in the states that seceded from the Union. This act, on top of freeing slaves, enabled African Americans to officially begin fighting for the Union, as many had long wished to do.

The United States Colored Troops encompassed about 175 regiments in the Union Army during the Civil War. The USCT consisted of 135 regiments of infantry soldiers, six regiments of cavalry, one regiment of light artillery and 13 regiments of heavy artillery.

Additionally, 19,000 African Americans served in the United States Navy, and women served in roles such as cooks and nurses. The troops were predominantly African American, but Asian Americans, Native Americans and Pacific Islanders also served under the USCT.

For part of the war, Battery Rodgers garrisoned a company of soldiers from the USCT. Their experiences show the continual fight for freedom and equality in the tumultuous post-war period.

Upon hearing that African American soldiers were going to be buried at the new Freedmen's Cemetery and not the Soldier's Cemetery – now Alexandria National Cemetery – 443 soldiers at L'Ouverture Hospital signed a petition to be buried at Alexandria Na-

tional and gained the support of a white Captain named JCG Lee. The men demanded that they be buried with the same honors as their white counterparts, as they served an equally important role in the war.

These USCT soldiers were here on Christmas Day 1865, more than eight months after the surrender of the Confederate Army at Appomattox, when racial violence broke out across Alexandria in what was called the Christmas Riots. In multiple incidents throughout the city, groups of white Alexandrians, many of whom were returning Confederate veterans, attacked African Americans as they celebrated the first Christmas following the Civil War.

While initial reports were much higher, at least one person, an African American man

named John Anderson, was killed. Many others, including several soldiers stationed at Battery Rogers, were injured. The military was called out, and the white perpetrators were arrested and sent to the military prison at the former slave jail of Price, Birch & Co. at 1315 Duke Street – one of the slave dealers located there after Franklin & Armfield.

The U.S. Colored Troops were honored for their contribution to Alexandria and American history on October 28, as the fraternal orders Magnus Temple No. 3 and Magnus Court No. 100 organized and conducted an annual wreath-laying ceremony.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.