

African-Americans Fighting in the Civil War

Originally, African-Americans were not allowed to fight in the army, but that changed after 1863. At that point many African-Americans signed up, and there are records of the fight songs they sang as they marched. Below are the lyrics to the first, second, and last verses of the “First Arkansas Marching Song” sung by the First Arkansas Colored Regiment. It was written by Captain Lindley Miller, and the song goes to the melody of “John Brown’s Body”.

Oh, we’re the bully* soldiers of the “First of Arkansas,” (*in this case, bully = “very good”)
We are fighting for the Union, we are fighting for the law,
We can hit a Rebel further than a white man ever saw,
As we go marching on...

CHORUS:

Glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah,
Glory, glory, hallelujah,
As we go marching on.

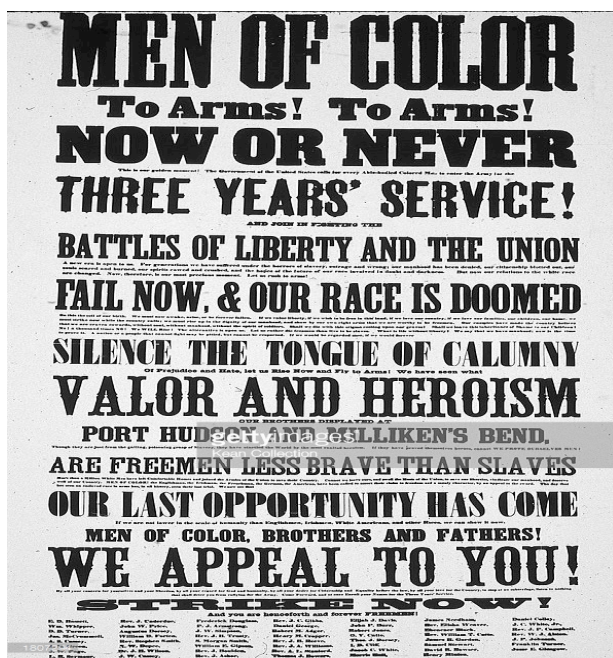
See, there above the center, where the flag is waving bright,
We are going out of slavery; we are bound for freedom’s light;
We mean to show Jeff Davis how the Africans can fight,
As we go marching on.

CHORUS

Then fall in*, colored brethren, you’d better do it soon, (*fall in = get in military formation)
Don’t you hear the drum a-beating the Yankee Doodle tune?
We are with you now this morning, we’ll be far away at noon,
As we go marching on.

<http://www.civilwarpoetry.org/union/songs/arkansas.html>

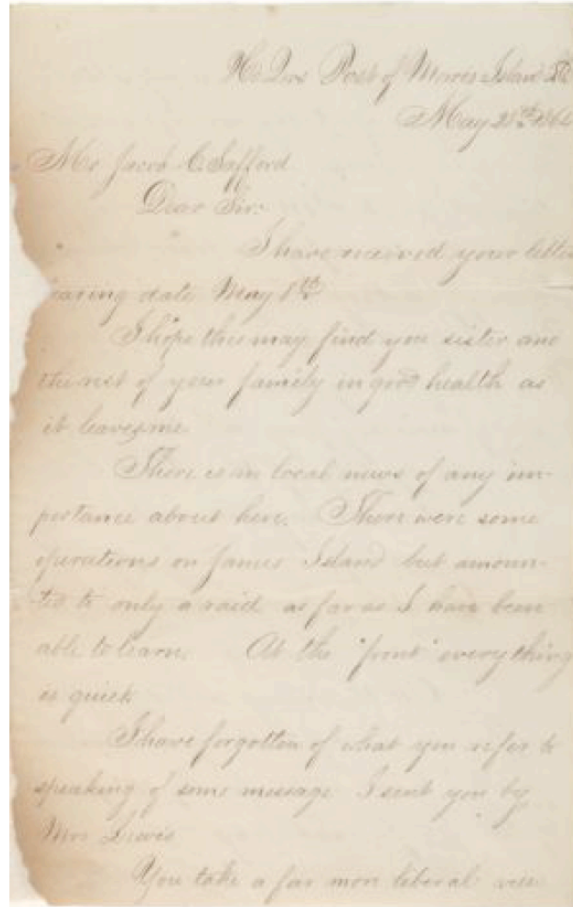
In order to encourage African-Americans to sign up to fight in the war, recruitment posters were placed around many cities. This one is from 1863, and it hung in Pennsylvania.



A Spotlight on a Primary Source by Francis Fletcher

Francis H. Fletcher, a 22-year-old clerk from Salem, Massachusetts, enlisted as a private in Company A of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment on February 13, 1863. One year after the regiment left Boston with great fanfare, Fletcher wrote to his friend Jacob C. Safford regarding the discrimination and hardships black soldiers encountered when they were denied the same pay as white soldiers.

The 54th Massachusetts is famous for steadfastly refusing the government pay of \$7 per month instead of the \$13 per month paid to white soldiers. Abolitionists and black leaders opposed the inequality in pay. After many delays, Congress finally passed a bill to equalize pay for black Union soldiers on June 15, 1864. In September 1864 the men of the 54th Massachusetts were retroactively paid in full for their eighteen months of service. Written two weeks before the passage of the congressional bill, Fletcher's letter expresses his resentment clearly and eloquently:



You take a far more liberal view of things than you could in my situation. Just one year ago to day our regt was received in Boston with almost an ovation, and at 5 P. M. it will be one year since we were safely on board transport clear of Battery Wharf and bound to this Department: in that one year no man of our regiment has received a cent of monthly pay all through the glaring perfidy of the U.S. Gov't.

I cannot any more condemn nor recite our wrongs, but console myself that One who is able has said vengeance is mine and I will repay.

All the misery and degradation suffered in our regiment by its members' families is not atoned for by the passage of the bill for equal pay.