



Black Soldiers of New York State

A P R O U D L E G A C Y

Anthony F. Gero

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A Proud Legacy

Anthony F. Gero


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Cover image: postcard of African-American soldiers taken in New York City, ca. 1918–19, in the Anthony F. Gero collection; courtesy of Anthony F. Gero.

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Preface

In *A Distant Mirror*, historian Barbara Tuchman quotes Voltaire, who said, “History never repeats itself, man always does.” Such a case can be made when New Yorkers forget the role of their black citizens in the military from 1750 to 1950. Why has this happened so many times, when the documented records of these past events indicate the significant and proud role of New Yorkers of African descent? For example, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, black New Yorkers served, whether it was in the militia in the French and Indian War, or among the units raised for the American Revolutionary War, or in the ranks of New York’s forces engaged in the War of 1812. Why, after each of these conflicts did succeeding generations forget, or were allowed to forget, the contributions of New York’s black soldiers?

During the Civil War, the record of New Yorkers in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and the 20th, 26th, and 31st United States Colored Troops, along with the intrepid Harriet Tubman who served as military scout and nurse, proved their gallantry. As Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson of the 33rd Regiment, U.S.C.T. said: “Till the blacks were armed, there was no guaranty of their freedom. It was their demeanor under arms that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men.”¹ In 1863 the

famous abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, who lived and wrote in Rochester, New York, expressed his views on black New Yorkers then joining the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. At recruitment centers in Buffalo, Rochester, Oswego, Syracuse, Auburn, Elmira, and other sites in New York, volunteers enlisted for the Civil War. With their enrollment came hope, for as Douglass said, "Let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S.; let him get an eagle on his buttons and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."²

After this tragic war, had not the official records shown that black New Yorkers helped save the Union? Why had their demeanor under arms been forgotten after the war in New York State? Additionally, why was a colored line maintained in the Empire State's military forces from the end of that war until World War I that excluded New Yorkers of African heritage? In New York State's National Guard, from 1866 to 1915, no unit of black New Yorkers was allowed to join. Other states, including Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and even Virginia, Georgia, and North Carolina, had segregated black National Guard units, but in the Empire State, efforts failed to see even a segregated company, battalion, or regiment enrolled between 1866 and 1897. Why? New York authorities did not even authorize a black volunteer unit for the Spanish-American War in 1898. Other states, several among those just mentioned did, but why had New York State failed to do so?

When the twentieth century arrived, as Winston Churchill said, with its "blood red dawn," a great war in Europe threatened America. Black New Yorkers were prepared to take up arms in defense of their nation, but why did they have to prove their worth again to join? Only in 1916, through the efforts of prominent black and white individuals, did New York State finally sanction the 15th Regiment of New York's National Guard. When the federal

government created the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), the 15th Regiment, which had been federalized, was redesignated as the 369th United States Infantry and was assigned to an African-American division, the 93rd. When the 92nd Division was also established as an African-American formation, the 367th Infantry was allocated in the division's table of organization. In the 367th ranks were many black New Yorkers. The combat records of the 367th and 369th were honorable, which was remarkable since, in many cases, these soldiers faced two enemies: the enemy overseas and racism in the AEF and at home, in New York.

Once these black veterans came back to the States, their service record was downplayed and revised to fit patterns of segregation, so very prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the African-American community's high hopes of gaining equality through supporting the war effort, a racial backlash took hold. Although the 369th Regiment was retained in the state's National Guard and black New Yorkers were allowed to soldier on, such activities occurred only in the New York City area. Other regions, which could have supported black National Guard organizations, saw none formed and a new color line was maintained in the Empire State's National Guard. When World War II finally burst upon America in December 1941 black New Yorkers went into the federal armed forces. Since the evil of fascism cut across all social strata in New York State, New York's black sons and daughters answered the call to duty. As they went off to Europe or the Pacific, the New York Guard (NYG), a home defense force, was reconstituted in 1940. In that force, by 1942 a segregated 15th Regiment, NYG was raised in the New York City area. Why were NYG units of African-Americans not raised in Buffalo, or Rochester, or Syracuse as well?

A hint of what happened in New York State's military forces from 1750 to 1950 can be found in Richard Dalfume's *Desegregation of the United States Armed Forces* (1969). The author writes on page 1, "Throughout American history the black American viewed his

military service in the nation's conflicts as proof of his loyalty and as a brief for his claim to full citizenship. White Americans appear to have realized this, and they continually sought to restrict or downgrade the black soldier's military service." From the evidence in New York State's history, this national trend was also the pattern in New York for more than two hundred years.

Yet, as Tobias Smollet said, "Facts are stubborn things," and the facts prove the major contributions of black New Yorkers as soldiers from 1750 to 1950. As a single-volume history, *Black Soldiers of New York State* will set forth those facts, creating a view that is compelling in its scope and breadth. However, *Black Soldiers of New York State* is not meant to be a final study, as many researchers continue to find new evidence about the service of New York's black soldiers before 1950, which may not appear in this present volume. As for any errors in this book, I will take responsibility for them and beg the reader's leniency. I hope that if any have made it through, they are small in nature.

As English essayist Joseph Addison wrote, "What sculpture is to a block of marble, education is to the soul." The purpose of *Black Soldiers of New York State* is to educate and from that, each can judge whether the second half of Addison's statement is true.

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Chapter 1

The Missing Pages, 1750 to 1815

In 1919 Laura E. Wilkes, a teacher in the public schools of Washington, DC, wrote *Missing Pages in American History: Revealing The Services Of Negroes In The Early Wars In The United States Of America, 1641–1815*.¹ In her foreword, Wilkes states:

A patient research, extending over a period of six years, has given the author the courage to send out this volume. It has also convinced her that the Negroes of America have done their bit in every war and taken no small part in every military movement made for the salvation of this country from the time of the earliest settlement. The facts found herein are taken from colonial records, state papers, assembly journals, histories of slavery, and old time histories of various colonies, and of the republic. The reader can easily verify this statement by using the bibliography at the end of the work.

While it is impossible to gather all of the truths concerning this matter, it is doubtless true, that much more, than is here chronicled, will be available to the student of this particular department of history, if he shall have leisure and funds to dig deeper into half-forgotten traditions of old towns and villages. That these pages may prove a stimulant for further research, by others, their

writer ardently desires and she earnestly hopes the book will eventually be read collaterally, with the histories of the United States, by every one who can be inspired by its information.

What an inspiration Wilkes' book could have been, but sadly for the general public, the work was mainly forgotten, except to inquisitive historians and scholars. Her call for African-American soldiers to be "collaterally" included among the general histories of the United States did not happen, as events after 1919 proved.

In that flow of history before World War I, I have decided to begin *Black Soldiers of New York State* at an arbitrary point, in the mid-eighteenth century with the French and Indian War.² As Wilkes indicated, records reveal that the New York militia was integrated. Upon my foray into the New York Provincial Muster Rolls, the designations "Free Negro," "Negro," or "Mulatto" appears by some names.³ For the years 1758, 1760, 1761, and 1762, the lists show such men on the rolls.⁴ For instance, in 1758 the militia of Queens County, West Chester County, Orange County, and Suffolk County have men labeled as "Free Negro," or "Negro" or "Mulatto" in various companies. As an example, Scudder Samson, "a free Negro," of Suffolk County, was listed on the rolls for 18 April, 1758, while in West Chester County in that year, "Jeffery Garret . . . b Westchester . . . Labourer, Capt. Israel Underhill . . . Negro" was registered.⁵

Although the total of Free Negroes, Negroes, and Mulattos for the entire New York provincial militia was approximately eleven to fourteen men for each year between 1758 and 1762, some individuals' names appeared more than once. For example, a man designated as "Kellis, Molato (sic): Age 18, b Suffolk, Lab.," from a Captain Strong's company of Suffolk County is listed as having passed muster in April 1759 and again in April 1760.⁶ Whether he was a free man is open to debate, but even though the total number of men of African descent is not sizable for the entire militia, New York's provincial force was integrated between 1758 and 1762.



A reconstruction of an African-American militiaman, Colonial New York, circa 1755 to 1760 by Eric Manders. (*Original sketch in the Anthony Gero Collection*)

There are indications that the “New York Battalions” or, as they were sometimes referred to in contemporary eighteenth-century accounts, “Regiments,” which numbered one through three, may have had scattered African-Americans in them. Raised between 1758 and 1762, and uniformed in 1758 in plain green coats, these battalions were a vital part of the colony’s forces.⁷ Other provinces, like South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, used freedmen and slaves in their militia between 1755 and 1762.⁸ Due to manpower needs, even the French and Spanish employed Free Negroes and mulattos in their colonial forces.⁹ As a result, New York, in a hesitant and small way, was following an accepted military practice in North America, but this

does not mean that large-scale integration was generally accepted during these colonial times.

Wilkes states, "Black militiamen were seen also at this period at Fort Williams, a stockade on the road to Oswego, New York. This place was at the southwestern end of Lake George and was built in 1735."¹⁰ Whether these black militiamen were from New York or neighboring colonies is unclear as research continues on them.

African-Americans appear to have served in the British Army in North America, but the question is in what capacity and in what numbers.¹¹ There are hints that Roger's Rangers, a famous colonial unit, may have had an African-American or two in their various companies.¹²

Researchers will undoubtedly over the next decades discover even more information on African-American soldiers. Furthermore, in the colonial and Revolutionary War naval services and merchant marine from 1755 through 1783, black sailors served onboard ships. Since their role is outside the scope of this book, the reader can consult other sources on black sailors.¹³

Documents indicate that, although small in total numbers, colonial New York had elements of an integrated militia system during the French and Indian War. When one considers the global empire building that the European powers were engaged in from 1750 to the end of 1764, the participation of black soldiers in the Americas should be noted not as a matter of political correctness, but as historical fact.

As the rewards of victory can often spell future disaster, British authorities made decisions and policies in the late 1760s and early 1770s, which helped fan the rebellious nature of colonial Americans. By 1775, war with Great Britain had become unavoidable. Sides had been chosen; and, as result of subsequent events in and around Boston, and with the issuance of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the colonies had erupted in armed rebellion. The separation of Britain's thirteen colonies could only be accomplished or resisted, after