Black soldiers served as “sable arm” of Union Army
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Appearing in a March 1865 issue of Harper’s Weekly, this image shows the “colored” 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment marching through the burned-out Confederate city of Charleston, S.C. Thirteen African-American soldiers from Mclean County served in the 55th. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, and commemorating this momentous event in American history lends special resonance to February and Black History Month.

Nearly 180,000 African Americans served in the Union Army, or about 10 percent of all Northern troops. Some 40,000 of these “sable sons” in blue died in uniform, and this remarkable record of service played no small role in ensuring that the monstrous evil of slavery would not survive the collapse of the Confederacy.

In McLean County, at least 39 African Americans enlisted in the Union Army. Twenty-six served in the 29th Regiment Infantry U.S. Colored Troops, and 13 others enlisted in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, one of that state’s “colored” units. Thirteen of the 39, or exactly one-third, never made it home.

What’s remarkable about several of these men is that they proudly and publicly scorned the generally subservient role expected of black troops. In December 1863, The Pantagraph ran a lengthy letter from John Abbott of the 55th Massachusetts. Dated November 10 from Folly Island, South Carolina, Abbott complained of “mean partiality” when it came to the treatment black regiments received at the hands of Union brass.
A common complaint was that colored soldiers shouldered an undue share what was called “fatigue duty,” which included clearing roads and digging latrines. Abbott, a 22-year-old stable hand from Bloomington, pointed to disparities in both pay and responsibilities. “The gallant 55th has the praise of being the best regiment that has ever been in this department,” he wrote, “and yet [Union commanders] don’t feel disposed to give us what is the most essential to us as a people and a race—and that is, equality with the white man.”

The 55th (see accompanying image) participated in William T. Sherman’s Atlanta, GA, campaign and the subsequent March to the Sea. On November 30, the regiment suffered more than 100 casualties in five awful minutes during the Battle of Honey Hill, SC.

The 29th, the other black regiment with Bloomington men, organized in Quincy, IL, in the spring of 1864. After being dispatched to the Eastern Theater, the 29th saw more than its share of hard campaigning, most notably during the sieges of Petersburg and Richmond, VA.

The regiment took heavy losses on July 30, 1864, during Battle of the Crater at Petersburg. In order to establish a breach in Gen. Robert E. Lee’s defensive works, Pennsylvania soldiers dug a tunnel under the Confederate breastworks and then filled the “mine” with explosives. Disastrously, the explosion created a massive crater into which the Union troops, black and white, poured into only to realize this made them little more than fish in a barrel, with Confederates raining fire from above.

During this disastrous Union defeat, the 29th attacked the Confederate works to the right of the crater. Eleven officers and 113 enlisted men from the regiment were killed, wounded or captured, with the dead including Chicagoan John A. Bross, the 29th’s white colonel.

Bloomingtonian William McCoslin, who was a barber before the war, described the assault in a letter to his wife published in late August in The Pantagraph “I hope you will not be uneasy about me for I am safe and sound, and feel as though I will go through all right,” he wrote. “Give my respects to all my friends, tell them that the colored soldiers can fight and have the honor of being brave.”

In early November 1865, The Pantagraph published another letter by McCoslin, this one written September 14 from Ringgold Barracks, TX, on the Rio Grand River. That spring, the men of the 29th had participated in the Appomattox, VA, campaign before finding themselves, at war’s end, in Texas.

McCoslin, though proud of his regiment’s role in quelling the “slaveocratic rebellion,” said colored troops shouldered an inequitable share of the most disagreeable assignments. While many white regiments had been mustered out and the soldiers welcomed home, the 29th was marooned in an “unhealthy country,” with disease threatening to finish off those fortunate to survive the twin killers of Confederate fire and disease.
“Colored soldiers—volunteer soldiers—men of free birth and high aspirations responded to their country’s call to see the day when justice, according to merit, and not prejudice according to color, would be their reward,” he wrote. “Oh my wounded country!”

The 29th mustered out November 6, 1865, six months after the end of the war. McCoslin returned to Bloomington, where he died 10 short years later.

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