

1863 U.S. COLORED TROOPS MEDAL

WHAT'S ITS STORY ?



This article is an appeal for help. It is being written with the hope of enlisting the aid of other Civil War historians in solving the mystery which surrounds a medal that was made in 1863 for soldiers in the 8th Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops. My research suggests that this is the first medal in American history to memorialize men of color, and specifically men of color serving in the United States military. The only other medal struck during the Civil War which acknowledges African American soldiers was the Butler Medal of Honor which was made in 1864. Both of these medals were privately minted and never sanctioned by the Federal Government.

This medal includes the inscriptions HONOR IS THE REWARD OF LOYALTY on the obverse and LIBERTY AND UNION on the reverse. It should give one pause to consider that these lofty ideals were being associated at this time in history with African American soldiers. The U.S. Colored Troops had just been established on May 22, 1863, following President Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, on January 1, 1863. At this time, even in the North, there was widespread belief in the fundamental inferiority of African Americans and there existed great skepticism as to whether they possessed the competency required to perform the duties of soldiers in the United States Army. It is worth noting that prior to the military medals discussed in this article, the only *medallic* works made explicitly for Black men were identification badges.

These slave hire or freed man's badges, as they are known today, served the purpose of making it easier for persons in authority to better identify, regulate, monitor, and control the movement and activities of Black men within the slave holding social hierarchy of the South. This is why the importance of the language and the intent behind this medal as well as General Butler's medal cannot be overstated. Black men were for the first time in American history being honored in medallic art. Moreover, both of these medals serve to commemorate a singular, though short-lived window of time in African American history in which hope and the promise of a brighter future seemed possible.

I have been working for over a year to learn more about the history of this medal, and unfortunately, I know little more about it now than I did when I began my research. The only thing I can say with reasonable certainty is that it was made by Robert Lovett Jr., a die sinker living in Philadelphia during the same period of time that the 8th Regiment, United States Colored Troops were in basic training at Camp William Penn which was located just on the outskirts of the city. I attribute this work to Robert Lovett Jr., because he used the same “HONOR IS THE REWARD OF LOYALTY” obverse on several other medals including an 1861 soldiers identification disc, the M&S-15A.



Lovett's M&S-15A Obverse

What still remains to be discovered is who may have sponsored or commissioned the medal, and when and how they were awarded to, or purchased by the soldiers themselves. Was it a white officer responsible for leading the Black troops who conceived of this medal, or possibly a member of the Supervisory Committee, a Philadelphia-based organization which promoted the recruitment of African American soldiers? Could a wealthy abolitionist have been behind the medal or was it Robert Lovett Jr. himself who saw it as a potentially lucrative business opportunity? Whoever designed this medal had the foresight to leave a blank space after the abbreviation CO. This allowed for the letters designating all ten Companies in the Regiment to be individually hand stamped as needed, thereby maximizing the usefulness of a single die.

There is one additional interesting piece to this story which is that just two years prior to making this medal for the U. S. Colored Troops, Lovett made the infamous Confederate cent. After fashioning a coin supporting the Confederate cause, and pressing about a dozen examples, he realized the significant danger he faced of being charged with treason by the Federal Government, and wisely concealed any knowledge of his handiwork until many years after the war. However, it is interesting to consider that had his cent begun circulating in the South in 1861, it could have been in the pockets of Confederate soldiers who were fighting to preserve the institution of slavery and against whom the 8th Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops, some of whom may have been wearing his medal, were doing battle.

It is important to keep in mind that medals are symbols that they have the potential to wield significant power. They have the capacity to take large, complex issues and distill them down to a size that can be held in the palm of your hand, or as in this case, be worn around your neck. It is not difficult to imagine how a medal such as this could have empowered and helped in the transformation of a former enslaved person into a United States soldier trained to fight and willing to die to free his people.

It is my hope that readers can appreciate the significance of this medal and possibly bring their expertise to bear in helping reveal more of its story. My intention, with your help, is to establish its rightful place in African American history.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts and any new information you can provide concerning this important medal.

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