

Fighting for Freedom: Black Soldiers from Illinois in the Civil War: *How did African American soldiers from Illinois fight for freedom and redefine citizenship during the Civil War?*

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Suggested Grade Level Range: 9-12

Connections to U.S. History Curriculum

This lesson connects Illinois to the national struggle over slavery, emancipation, and the meaning of citizenship during the Civil War. Through the lens of the 29th United States Colored Infantry students will examine how African American soldiers fought not only for the Union but for their place in American democracy. By analyzing rosters, letters, and veterans' reflections, students gain insight into the lived experience and lasting impact of Illinois Black soldiers during and after the war.

Local Context

The 29th United States Colored Infantry (USCT) was formed in Illinois and became one of the most active Black regiments in the Union Army. These soldiers trained in Quincy and Chicago before fighting in major campaigns such as the Siege of Petersburg and the Battle of the Crater. Their service and sacrifice challenged racial hierarchies and helped define the course of Reconstruction. Illinois communities contributed to the recruitment of Black soldiers. Their legacy endures through letters, rosters, and archival materials.

Student Learning Objectives

- *I can analyze primary sources to understand the motivations and experiences of Illinois Black soldiers during the Civil War*
- *I can evaluate the role of Illinois in shaping national Civil War policies and military service*
- *I can connect the service of the 29th USCT to broader struggles for civil rights and citizenship*

Standards Addressed

- SS.H.2.9-12: Analyze change and continuity in historical eras
- SS.H.3.9-12: Evaluate historical sources for perspective, limitations, and accuracy
- SS.CV.4.9-12: Analyze how individuals and groups can use civic engagement to influence policies
- SS.H.7.9-12: Evaluate how individuals and groups have worked to expand liberty and equality in American society

Materials Used

Sources for Supporting Question 1	Sources for Supporting Question 2
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Source A: Company "A" 29th Regiment U.S. Colored Infantry Source B: 29th US Colored Infantry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Source A: American Civil War Documents, Manuscripts, Letters and Diaries Source B: 29th US Colored Infantry
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Procedure

Anticipatory Set/ Staging the Compelling Question

- Display a photo or recruitment poster of a uniformed Black Illinois soldier from the *CARLI* or *Slaves to Soldiers* archive
- Discussion Prompts:
 - What do you notice about this image? Who might this person be?
 - What risks did African Americans face by joining the military in 1864?
 - Why might Illinois have played a key role in organizing Black regiments?
- Introduce the lesson's compelling question: *How did African American soldiers from Illinois fight for freedom and redefine citizenship during the Civil War?*

Supporting Question/Activity 1: Who were the soldiers of the 29th USCT, and what motivated them to serve?

- Reading/Analyzing Sources:** Brief service profiles and regimental history from the *IllinoisGenWeb* roster and *Slaves to Soldiers* site. Use a soldier profile organizer to summarize age, enlistment location, battles served, and motivations
- Performance Task:** Create a digital or poster tribute card for one soldier in the 29th USCT highlighting their contributions and why they fought

Supporting Question/Activity 2: What do the letters of Illinois Civil War soldiers reveal about their experiences and hopes?

- Reading/Analyzing Sources:** Excerpts from letters found in the *Chicago Public Library Civil War Manuscripts Collection*. Source annotation and empathy writing: what emotions and messages are in these letters?
- Performance Task:** Write a response to a letter from a Black Illinois soldier, reflecting on their hopes for freedom and equality

Assessment Options

Construct an argumentative essay or visual presentation addressing: *How did Illinois African American soldiers shape the course and legacy of the Civil War?* Use at least one primary source to support your argument.

Informed Action

Students will curate a virtual exhibit or *StoryMap* entry honoring the 29th USCT and Illinois Black veterans. The exhibit will include images, quotes, and geographic context. Students can present it to the class.