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Civil War Recruitment Posters: Historical Overviews

Student Background

After the start of the Civil War in April 1861, men in the North joined the military in large numbers because of patriotism, they believed in the cause they were fighting for. They also believed that it would be a short fight. After a year of war, many realized it would not be over quickly. The military stopped getting people signing up and after many people died, the Union Army really needed men to fight. So in 1862 the government tried to recruit men to the military through recruitment posters. The posters listed how much money men could get for signing up, what the government would do for their families if they were killed in battle, and tried to appeal to people's senses of duty, community, and patriotism. Each poster targeted specific groups of people, sometimes Irish, other times Bostonians, and also tried to enlist African Americans to segregated units. The 54th Massachusetts Regiment was the first all Black unit in the north. Before the 54th, the Union Army had already begun enlisting Black men to serve in regiments in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Kansas. Participation in the Union Army was not easy for African American men. They faced violence, discrimination, bad working conditions, low pay, broken promises, and most significantly, the possibility of being captured by the Confederacy and enslaved.

Teacher Background

The firing on Fort Sumter in April of 1861 began a long and bloody battle over the future of the United States. On both sides, men joined the cause either through patriotism or conscription. In the North, support for the war was mixed. Some disagreed with Lincoln's aims while others wanted him to do more to end slavery and free enslaved African Americans. Despite the sometimes polarized opinions, there was overwhelming support for the cause initially in April of 1861. Northern men clamored to join as many believed it would be a short war. However as the war waged and the death toll rose, fewer men volunteered for the cause. By 1862, recruiters tried to woo white men to the ranks of the Union Army through posters appealing to their sense of duty and honor, stoking their egos, promising monetary incentives, and guaranteeing the support of their families should they die in battle. For example, in 1862, a broadside titled "[The Glorious 9th!](#)" aimed at Irishmen assured enlistees that "the nation provides also a handsome pension for you if disabled, and for your wives and little ones if you fall at the post of duty. What employer, let us ask, does the like?" Unfortunately, by 1863, the National Conscription Act would create immense tension between the upper class and white poor and working class white men that would negate the efforts of recruiters. For the price of \$300, wealthy men could buy their way out of military service leaving the poor and working class white men to be forced to

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fight. The violent anti-draft riots that followed would target not just military offices, but Black communities as well.

African Americans and other men of color also served in the Union Army, but their reasons for serving and experiences would be vastly different than their white counterparts. In total, 215,000 Black soldiers, 50 Chinese men (under the “white” classification as there was no racial classification for them in the 1860s), and 3,503 Native Americans fought in the Union Army. About 3/5th of the African Americans who served in the military were formerly enslaved. Men from the Black community were eager to join the Union army as a means to fight back against slavery, but they faced significant hostility. Racism, individual and systemic, led to deep resistance at the prospect of Black and white units. And by 1862, recruitment efforts had stalled Union wide, anti-draft riots raged, and the military was in desperate need of men to fill the ranks. This led the Union Army to create all Black units such as the [54th Massachusetts Regiment](#) commanded by Robert Gould Shaw. The 54th was the first all Black unit raised in the North and it capitalized on the passage of the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) at the end of 1862 to recruit newly freed Black men. In taking a closer look at this [Enrollment Roll of Company A of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment in 1863](#), it is clear that men came from all over the east coast, not just Massachusetts, to join the newly formed all Black units. Men from New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and as far as North Carolina, enlisted in the 54th.

Black men who joined the Union Army did so at great risk. They fought not only in battle, but discrimination at the hands of the Union Army. They were regularly underpaid, lacked supplies and medical care, and denied promotions and medals for their service. [Recruitment posters](#) regularly promised \$13/month for service, the same as for white soldiers. But in actuality, Black soldiers were regularly paid \$10/month (or less) and charged for their clothing while their white counterparts were given an additional allowance for their needs. The Massachusetts 54th and its sister company the 55th regularly protested the unequal pay. Refusing to fall in for inspection, disobeying orders, and writing to Black newspapers in the North detailing the treatment, led to court-martials and even executions. In addition to unequal pay and accommodations, African American units typically performed the least desirable jobs such as constructing buildings, digging trenches, serving on docks, and driving wagons. These humiliating and exhausting jobs were often accompanied by harsh punishments for perceived slights to white officers. Most significantly, Black soldiers risked their very lives to fight for the Union. Should they be captured by the Confederate Army, they would have been sold into slavery or executed on the spot.

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Sources:

- [Background Essay on Why They Fought](#) (American Social History Project)
- [“A Poor Man’s Fight,” The Civil War’s Common Soldier](#) (NPS)
- [Black Soldiers in the U.S. Military During the Civil War](#) (National Archives)
- [Historical Context: Black Soldiers in the Civil War](#) (Gilder Lehrman)
- [“Recruitment of Black Soldiers,” The Civil War’s Black Soldiers](#) (NPS)
- [Chinese Americans in the Civil War](#) (American Battlefield Trust)
- [“Civil War,” Why We Serve: Native Americans in the United States Armed Forces](#) (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian)
- [“The Slave Experience: Education, Arts, and Culture,” Slavery and the Making of America](#) (Thirteen/WNET New York, PBS)
- [How the Men of 'Glory' Stood Up to the US Government](#) (Kevin Levin, *The Atlantic*)