

## The Experiences of Black Soldiers During the Civil War: A Microhistorical Case Study of the Demus Family

Tora Ueland  
*West Virginia University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/wvuhistoricalreview>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ueland, Tora () "The Experiences of Black Soldiers During the Civil War: A Microhistorical Case Study of the Demus Family," *West Virginia University Historical Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/wvuhistoricalreview/vol2/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in West Virginia University Historical Review by an authorized editor of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact [ian.harmon@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:ian.harmon@mail.wvu.edu).

## ***The Experiences of Black Soldiers During the Civil War: A Microhistorical Case Study of the Demus Family***

TORA UELAND\*

As with most researchable source material, the voices of minorities and marginalized groups are often unavailable, nonexistent, or heavily obscured by the voices of their more privileged counterparts. The Civil War, for instance, is studied through a predominantly white lens, despite the importance of African American soldiers, civilians, and enslaved individuals enveloped in this conflict. This paper aims to analyze the African American perspective on the Civil War (1861-1865) and early antebellum period through the words of these individuals and the experiences of David Demus, an infantryman in the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment, and his family. Utilizing correspondence, letters, military and pension records, and individual black testimonials, the following is an attempt to more fully understand life on both the battlefield and home front for African Americans during an era plagued by war, slavery, and systematic racism, as well as how these individuals ultimately contributed to the evolution of societal ideals and behaviors within the scope of race, still pertinent today.

On July 17, 1862, after facing well over a year of bitter combat losses to the Confederate Army, Union President Abraham Lincoln signed Congress's Second Confiscation and Militia Acts.<sup>1</sup> The passage of these acts not only emphasized how urgently enervated and desperate the preexisting Union forces were, but would solidify Lincoln's switch from the rejection of black soldiers joining Union forces in fear of losing the support of border states to allowing and, eventually, fully supporting the inclusion of black troops.<sup>2</sup> While the act itself was not a conscriptive call to arms, it authorized Lincoln "to employ as many persons of African descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of this rebellion. . . in such manner as he may judge best for the public welfare" as well as inspired blacks and "Southern contraband individuals" to join the fight for unity and freedom.<sup>3</sup> Serving as one of the first all-black regiments, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw set a precedent and an inspiration for minority participation during the war. As noted by James Henry Gooding, a free black man living in New Bedford, Massachusetts, "Does it not behoove every black man to consider. . . whether he cannot be one of the glorious 54th? . . . There is more dignity in carrying a musket in defense of liberty and right than there is in shaving a man's face, or waiting on somebody's table."<sup>4</sup> Despite the bravery and strength millions of black soldiers and their families had shown during this period, the voices of these individuals are often unheard or obscured by white men's voices:

Additionally, it also depended on whether there was an audience that was willing to both listen and document the lives of USCT (United States Colored Troops)

\*Tora Ueland is a senior from Salem, Massachusetts. She is currently pursuing her BA in history with minors in forensic science and English. Her research interests include the Civil War and the history of criminal behavior.

<sup>1</sup>United States Congress, "An Act to Amend the Act Calling Forth the Militia to Execute the Laws of the Union, Suppress Insurrections, and Repel Invasions," in *Thirty-Seventh Congress, Session II, Chapter 201* (Washington, DC: July 17, 1862), 597-600, <https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/african-americans-and-civil-war/militia-act>.

<sup>2</sup>"Black Civil War Soldiers," History.com, Updated January 25, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/black-civil-war-soldiers>.

<sup>3</sup>"Black Civil War Soldiers," History.com.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Glenn David Brasher, "Creating 'The Glorious 54th,'" *New York Times*, April 11, 2013, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/creating-the-glorious-54th/>.

veterans and/or their kin. However, it does not mean that their lived experiences are non-existent. It also does not suggest that the families and communities connected to their soldiers are lost.<sup>5</sup>

Evidently, black individuals during the Civil War faced innumerable impediments on the home front and even within their own ranks. To further investigate these impediments and experiences, one must consult the words of the individuals themselves through correspondence and oral histories, and, in particular, notes historian Holly Pinheiro, “when discussing the various aspects of military service—enlistment, training, combat, disabilities, pay, military disobedience, veteranhood, and other issues—their families are critical to understanding the Civil War and its lasting impact.”<sup>6</sup> Though these sources are difficult to locate, and often even more difficult to fully comprehend, one such individual, David Demus, a private in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, provides a wealth of familial correspondence, letters, records, and relatives with which a relatively thorough baseline can be built for the experiences of black people and soldiers during the war.

Demus and his family were one of many families that made up the large portion of black Americans who inhabited Franklin County, Pennsylvania, which hovers just above the Mason-Dixon line. He and many other black men seized the opportunity to join the 54th in 1863, leaving behind their families.<sup>7</sup> However, by 1862, Confederate forces had advanced into Pennsylvania and begun raiding southern counties for supplies as well as approximately 1,000 free blacks as human contraband—sent to the deep South to be enslaved.<sup>8</sup> With painstakingly slow letter communications, individuals such as David Demus and his wife, Mary Jane, could only hope that the other had not perished in battle or been murdered, assaulted, or kidnapped and taken into slavery. Luckily for the Demus family, the Confederate raid did not harm or kidnap any members of the family. The relief and hopelessness are noted in a letter from Demus to his wife. “i had heard that the rebels Was in the but it please me very much to hear that I Was not so for i just now how the people is Scared about home but i am sorry that i ain’t there for i have saw so many that a rebel is no more then one of our one men.”<sup>9</sup> Through this emotional and physical insecurity also came economic insecurity, relocation, and gender-role subversion, which both black and white families were faced with. The written experiences of the Demus family demonstrate the exacerbation of already tumultuous conditions for families during the Civil War when the subjects were black.

Born in approximately 1838 in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, David Demus worked as a farm laborer until age twenty-five, when he volunteered to enlist into the Union Army on May 6, 1863. Demus was subsequently assigned the role of a private in the Massachusetts 54th Infantry, Company K.<sup>10</sup> Throughout his service, Demus kept in consistent contact with his wife, Mary Jane Demus—formerly Mary Jane Christy—as well as with his extended family and enlisted

<sup>5</sup>Holly Pinheiro Jr., “Black Families Unending Fight for Equality: Teaching Civil War Pension Records,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* (February 16, 2021), <https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/2021/02/black-families-unending-fight-for-equality-teaching-civil-war-pension-records/>.

<sup>6</sup>Pinheiro, “Black Families Unending Fight.”

<sup>7</sup>Edward Ayers, William G. Thomas III, and Anne Sarah Rubin, “Black and on the Border,” University of Nebraska—Lincoln, Digital Commons, 2007, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/46/>.

<sup>8</sup>Frank Reeves, “Confederates’ ‘Slave Hunt’ in North a Military Disgrace,” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, June 30, 2013, <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/state/2013/06/30/Confederates-slave-hunt-in-North-a-military-disgrace/stories/201306300221>.

<sup>9</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, July 27, 1864, in “Demus and Christy Family Letters: The War Years,” *The Valley of the Shadow*, University of Virginia Library, <https://valley.lib.virginia.edu/VoS/personalpapers/documents/franklin/p2demusletters.html>.

<sup>10</sup>“David Demus,” US Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861-1865, Ancestry.com; “David Demus (abt. 1845-aft. 1870),” WikiTree, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Demus-8>.

brothers-in-law, through a series of correspondence letters.<sup>11</sup> These letters detail the experiences and struggles of the Demus-Christy family, both on the front line and home front. The issues addressed in these letters, though personal, encompass more universal issues faced by African Americans at this time. Beyond supporting racial and personal sentiments of pride, the 54th Massachusetts provided African American men with the opportunity to prove themselves worthy of equality and worthy of being fought for, subsequently dismantling preexisting paternalistic, “white savior” ideologies and the belief that free and enslaved blacks were incapable and needed the white man to sustain them. Furthermore, the allowance of their participation in the war allowed these men to first-handedly fight to protect their families from slavery, Confederate violence, and to be able to sustain the family and safeguard property with military compensation. Enlistment, then, became a compilation of coveted opportunities and status, proving the black man’s capabilities and allowing for property maintenance and the protection of one’s dependents, thus achieving the epitome of masculinity and fulfilling gender roles that defined male behavior and responsibilities in the mid-19th century that had previously only been feasible to white men.<sup>12</sup> In essence, black men and their families, such as Demus and his own family, recognized military participation, particularly in the 54th, as the catalyst for change and for white recognition of worth and masculinity.

Though the 54th Infantry was an all-black regiment, these men were brigaded with and trained alongside white regiments, placing the two races in close contact with one another. Both blacks and whites underwent the same combat training and endured the harsh New England weather conditions detailed by Mary Jane’s brother, Jacob:

we was just on drill when they come and they was two of the boys was made go and get their knacksack and they had to wear them to punish them for looking around while they was in ranks when we are in ranks we are not allowed to look around or spit or to raise our hand we also got our arms this day they are springfield rifles which we have they are allowed to kill a great disants. We don’t like the climate at all for it is very cold out here now we have to wear our overcoats all day it that cold but i think when we go down south it will be warm.<sup>13</sup>

The two races essentially performed the same tasks at the same level of danger, although it should be noted that black soldiers were often additionally forced to perform the more remedial and undesirable tasks, as delineated within the aforementioned Militia Acts, which stated that African American men could be enlisted “for the purpose of constructing intrenchments, or performing camp service or any other labor.”<sup>14</sup> Despite this, black and white soldiers were compensated unequally, an issue also sanctioned within these acts and not addressed until 1864, when pay was finally equalized by Congress after perpetual black complaints. This disparity in pay between black soldiers and their white peers quickly became a point of contention once blacks were allowed to enlist. White soldiers had higher pay, advantageous access to materials and supplies, better food and equipment, and access to superior medical treatment.<sup>15</sup> “Black soldiers were initially paid \$10 per month from which \$3 was automatically deducted for clothing, resulting

<sup>11</sup>“David Demus,” United States Census, 1860, via WikiTree.

<sup>12</sup>“Home, Sweet Home: Gender in the Antebellum Household,” Civil War Era NC, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://cwnc.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/exhibits/show/protect/1/men>.

<sup>13</sup>Jacob Christy to Mary Jane Demus, 1864.

<sup>14</sup>United States Congress, “Act to Amend.”

<sup>15</sup>Steven Mintz, “Historical Context: Black Soldiers in the Civil War,” Gilder Lehrman Institute of History, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-black-soldiers-civil-war>.

in a net pay of \$7. In contrast, white soldiers received \$13 per month from which no clothing allowance was drawn.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, payments that were intended for black soldiers were often consistently delayed. Colonel Robert Gould Shaw acknowledged this looming issue of payment inequality among his ranks in a letter to Governor Andrew, noting:

You have probably seen the order from Washington which cuts down the pay for black troops from \$13 to \$10. Of course if this affects Massachusetts regiments, it will be a great piece of injustice to them, as they were enlisted on the express understanding that they were to be on precisely the same footing as all other Massachusetts troops.<sup>17</sup>

In an 1863 letter, Jacob Christy, Mary Jane’s brother, addresses the effect of this pay issue on black soldier’s morale and productivity. “sofar We haveant receive no money yet. . . we all like soldieren verry well but we dont like the thing of duing without money so long we dont work so hard now any more.”<sup>18</sup> Black soldiers, such as Demus, not only found themselves disheartened and conned by this pay discrepancy, but continually failing to uphold the coveted masculinity roles they had hoped to accomplish with enlistment, perpetually sending home empty promises of payments. Such is evident in an 1863 letter from Demus to his wife, which states, “ i Can get my Discharge in a short time but the Captain say that they Won’t pay us thirteen Dollars a month and he say that they Will disband the 54th and 55th and send them home and then try and [unclear: intes] us [unclear: meney] as he Can for 7 Dollars a month.”<sup>19</sup> Furloughs were also often consistently delayed, a prospect referenced in a separate series of 1863 letters from Demus to his wife wherein he references the consistent delay of his leave from early January to the end of July.<sup>20</sup> Mary Jane subsequently expressed discontent at the empty promises as well as monetary concerns and informs Demus that, in order to supplement this missing income, she herself must abandon her role as a housewife to provide for the family, an evident, yet necessary, subversion of gender roles. Mary Jane noted the mass exodus of neighbors from the area not only to escape Confederate raids, but also to find employment and employers who were not too damaged by the war-torn economy to maintain their residences. Financially struggling and with no consistent pay, Mary Jane relocated to a Mr. Patterson’s home, a white employer who could not only provide compensation for work done, but consistent shelter and supplies:

i am living at Mr. patterson i come home when you wrote to me you was come home then you didn’t come i went back again i am going to stay a month and little better then i am come home then. . . if you dont come home i will [unclear: har] out this summer for ever things are so dear i cant stay at home for i must earn mi [unclear: clos] so many people going a way with<sup>21</sup>

It should be noted, however, that in cases like this “free labor” was still heavily rooted in subservience. Therefore, the news of his wife working in the field, and more specifically under

<sup>16</sup>Elsie Freeman, Wynell Burroughs Schamel, and Jean West, “The Fight for Equal Rights: A Recruiting Poster for Black Soldiers in the Civil War,” *Social Education* 56, 2 (February 1992): 118-120, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Luis Fenollosa Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865* (Boston: Boston Book Company, 1891).

<sup>18</sup>Jacob Christy to Mary Jane Demus, November 24, 1863.

<sup>19</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, October 17, 1863; November 1863; January 19, 1864; February 4, 1864; March 4, 1864; and June 15, 1864.

<sup>20</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, October 17, 1863; November 1863; January 19, 1864; February 4, 1864; March 4, 1864, and June 15, 1864.

<sup>21</sup>Mary Jane Demus to David Demus, February 4, 1864.

a white man, was distressing for Demus and other enlisted black men in similar situations for several reasons. One, the subservience-based labor heavily mirrored Southern slavery practices, an institution that Demus and other black soldiers had pledged their lives to dismantle. Two, this concept reiterated the paternalistic and “white savior” thematic elements of the war that these men devoted themselves to prove untrue. Finally, perhaps most personally, the effort and work done by these enlisted men did not, in fact, satiate the white-dominated male gender roles that they had gone off to war to prove themselves capable of—supporting one’s dependents, maintaining property, and fulfilling the pillars of 19th-century virtuousness—therefore emasculating themselves as individuals. Instead, women such as Mary Jane had to rely on other men outside of their own husbands for support. Demus expressed his discontent more superficially, scolding Mary Jane for engaging in field work, an area he deemed “man’s work.” He states “i doant thig that you ot to go out in the feald to husk Corn or dow eney such Wark. . . i doant Want to hear of you going in the feald to eney more and you nead mind Whot you her all the tock that his son Can tock Wont Hirt you.”<sup>22</sup> Demus readdresses his dismay at the prospect of his wife having to support herself in a later letter, saying, “i am sorry to think how you have to get along i never thought that you Would have to Work so hard to get along.”<sup>23</sup> Better wages, treatment, and access to food and supplies only improved with higher ranks for black soldiers, though this was evidently an unattainable goal. Black soldiers had been ineligible for officer ranks, and promotions within their own regiments proved to be more symbolic rather than functional positions.

On July 18, 1863, David Demus was wounded in action during the battle for Fort Wager in South Carolina.<sup>24</sup> During this battle, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry volunteered to lead the brigade’s attack on the Confederate beach fort and subsequently sustained the heaviest losses of all involved regiments with a total of 281 casualties. Of those casualties, fifty-four were killed or fatally wounded, and another forty-eight soldiers were missing and never accounted for.<sup>25</sup> Despite the high human cost, the fort was never successfully captured by the Union. According to Demus in a letter dated eight days after the battle, “i am in the hosply i Was in the battle Was sot in the head But i am Abel to go a boat a gane.”<sup>26</sup> Though Demus survived his injuries, he still faced poor medical treatment, and it is likely that his prolonged injury eventually contributed to his death sometime after 1870.<sup>27</sup> War records denote that Demus’s head injury was the result of a bullet fragment lodging itself “over the posterior part of the Parietal bone fracturing his skull.”<sup>28</sup> On September 4, 1863, Demus detailed in a letter how doctors confirmed his “skull [was] broke” and would never heal, instead simply instructing him to try to “take care of himself.”<sup>29</sup> Over a month later, on October 18, Demus updated his wife on his head injury, stating that there was something inside the gash in his skull, which he discovered while washing up: “Was Wasing mi head and i felt soming in the hole and i put mi hand up in the hole and i pold out a peace of mi *Cule* and it has got sor a gane but i thing it Will get Well a gane.” In one instance, Demus even writes of his intentions to find a piece of metal to try and cap the hole with, “Why i Can get a piece

<sup>22</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, November 1863.

<sup>23</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, March 24, 1864.

<sup>24</sup>“David Demus,” WikiTree.

<sup>25</sup>Brian C. Pohanka, “Fort Wagner and the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry,” American Battlefield Trust, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/fort-wagner-and-54th-massachusetts-volunteer-infantry>.

<sup>26</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, July 26, 1863.

<sup>27</sup>“Demus and Christy Family Letters,” University of Virginia Library; “David Demus,” United States Census, 1870, via WikiTree.

<sup>28</sup>John D. Hoptak, “South Central Pennsylvanians in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry,” *From the Fields of Gettysburg*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/gett/blogs/south-central-pennsylvanians-in-the-54th-massachusetts-volunteer-infantry.htm>.

<sup>29</sup>David Demus to Elizabeth Christy, September 4, 1863.

of silver put on the hole Why i think that it Will get Well.”<sup>30</sup> Though this injury was evidently devastating, it served as Demus’s opportunity to elevate his military status. In August of 1864, Demus was deemed unfit for combat due to his cranial injury, however, his term of enlistment was far from over. Rather than send the wounded man home, Demus was still of relative use and needed to be relocated to utilize his services elsewhere. As a result, he began serving a more permanent position as the chief commissary clerk.<sup>31</sup> A letter from David Demus to his wife in March of 1864 demonstrates notable improvements in pay frequency, food and supplies, and treatment during this switch from combat to an officer’s assistant:

Could but i am happy to say that i ain’t With the regiment now i am in Jacksonville  
Waiting on an offer and all i have to Do is to blacking his boots in the morning and  
Clean his sword in getting along very Will and i must tell i had the [unclear: masel]  
but i soon got Well again but i ain’t quite as fat as i Was but i soon Will get fat again  
and When i fatten up again i Will send my likeness to you.<sup>32</sup>

In an August letter to his wife, Demus again noted the improvement in clothing and food rations he was provided.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted, however, that the work done under this officer proved to be remedial and somewhat humiliating considering the catalyst for improvement in his and other black soldiers’ living and financial conditions was working under a white soldier. This situation mirrored Mary Jane’s aforementioned ironic position of subservience to a white man while fighting for black independence, creating a paradoxical fight for rights and black independence that, within both the household and battlefield, could only be ameliorated with white dependence. Though this irony was not lost within many of the men’s minds, working closely under a white officer was often the best position available to a black soldier and the only opportunity for advancement, and thus had to be stomached.

As noted within Demus’s letters, the Civil War was host to innumerable casualties for both black and white soldiers, who often faced permanent mutilation, disfigurement, and an omission of necessary long-term care. On the battlefield, black and white men were of equal merit, facing exposure to equal dangers and violence. Throughout the war, “an estimated 476,000 soldiers were wounded by bullets, artillery shrapnel, or sabers and bayonets” and an additional 60,000 amputations were performed to treat said wounds.<sup>34</sup> In an 1864 letter, Demus details this violence of the battlefield and the bravery of the enlisted while describing the death of one of his wife’s relatives, Bill: “you Want to know all about bill i Can tell you that he Was killed on the field the first time he Was shot Was in the arm and we told him to go to the rear but he Would not go and the he Was shot in the brest and Was kill Ded.”<sup>35</sup> Men, regardless of color, faced butchering from overwhelmed medical staff attempting to be efficient, exposing their patients to unsanitary tools, insufficient aftercare, and almost never any form of anesthetic. Furthermore, the Civil War is considered the last major war waged without knowledge of the germ theory of disease, meaning conditions for all enlisted men were unsanitary and riddled with disease. With a deficient diet, overexhaustion, and more patent threats to be contended with, diseases and infection spread like wildfire: “Pneumonia, typhoid, diarrhea/dysentery, and malaria were the predominant illnesses. Altogether, two-thirds of the approximately 660,000 deaths of soldiers

<sup>30</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, October 17, 1863.

<sup>31</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, August 18, 1864.

<sup>32</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, March 4, 1864.

<sup>33</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane Demus, August 24, 1864.

<sup>34</sup>Paige G. Backus, “Amputations and the Civil War,” American Battlefield Trust, October 19, 2020, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/amputations-and-civil-war>.

<sup>35</sup>David Demus to Mary Jane, March 4, 1864.



were caused by uncontrolled infectious diseases.”<sup>36</sup> In that sense, there was no difference between white regiments and black soldiers such as Demus and his family who served in the “invalid Corps.” Both black and white soldiers were facing suffering through extensive bodily harm and fighting through disease and combat to protect their dependents on the home front. While disease and combat threats served as the great equalizer, paying no mind to their victims’ races, discernible inconsistencies in medical treatment between black and white units were obvious: “illnesses took a much heavier proportionate toll on the USCT than they did on white volunteer units.”<sup>37</sup> These deaths can be attributed to a variety of issues, all pertaining to racist ideologies within the military system. First, most black units were most commonly issued campgrounds or positions in the most unfavorable areas, such as swamplands, as it was a commonly held idea that all black soldiers were “immune” to all “tropical illnesses”—a racist and blatantly untrue assertion. Furthermore, these camps were subject to neglect and ignorance of health dangers, allowing the already unsanitary conditions to worsen exponentially:

[As a result] nine times as many black troops died of disease as on the battlefield. Over 29,000 lost their lives from illness, with pneumonia, dysentery, typhoid fever, and malaria taking the heaviest tolls on the black ranks. . . . A black heavy artillery regiment lost over eight hundred men to illness, and one infantry regiment, in service less than one year, suffered 524 deaths, 50 percent of its strength.<sup>38</sup>

According to a study on Civil War enlistee illness deaths conducted by the College of Physicians in Philadelphia, black soldiers died at nearly double the rate of white soldiers, with a 5 percent illness mortality rate as opposed to the white 2.9 percent. Furthermore, scurvy was five times more prevalent among black units than white, smallpox seven times more, lung diseases and bronchitis between 2 and 5 percent higher, and black units suffered a higher prevalence of diarrhea and dysentery.<sup>39</sup> Black soldiers often also faced appalling treatment from their white commanders that subjected them to health issues: “most were employed in menial assignments and kept in rear-echelon, fatigue jobs. They were punished by whipping or by being tied by their thumbs.”<sup>40</sup> The prejudice against black soldiers was systematic not only within the ranks themselves, but also within the medical system. Most white doctors and volunteer physicians refused to serve black regiments, and because the amount of qualified black surgeons and doctors was so miniscule, an entire black regiment often only had access to one or, if lucky, two medical staff members. Oftentimes, however, soldiers in black regiments defaulted to treating their peers themselves.<sup>41</sup> In the case of black medical professionals being employed, they too faced discrimination and unequal benefits. Susan King Taylor, a black nurse who devoted herself to the treatment of both black and white soldiers during the war, was “debarred from having [herself] placed on the rolls of pensioners. . . as a Nurse” through an unspecified “technicality” after thirty-seven years of applying for post-war benefits.<sup>42</sup> The racial bias of the medical system, mistreatment, and negligence heavily affected black soldiers even beyond the war’s conclusion in 1865. In regards

<sup>36</sup>Jeffrey S. Sartin, “Infectious Diseases During the Civil War: The Triumph of the ‘Third Army,’” *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 16, no. 4 (April 1993): 580-584, <https://doi.org/10.1093/clind/16.4.580>.

<sup>37</sup>Joseph Glatthaar, “Medical Care,” in *The Civil War’s Black Soldiers* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2007), [https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/civil\\_war\\_series/2/sec17.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/civil_war_series/2/sec17.htm).

<sup>38</sup>Glatthaar, “Medical Care.”

<sup>39</sup>Ilene Raymond Rush, “How the Sacrifices of Black Civil War Troops Advanced Medicine,” BunkHistory, March 21, 2018, <https://www.bunkhistory.org/resources/2192>.

<sup>40</sup>Mintz, “Historical Context.”

<sup>41</sup>Glatthaar, “Medical Care.”

<sup>42</sup>Colonel C. T. Trowbridge to Susan King-Taylor, April 7, 1902, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/bindingwounds/images/taylorOB556.png>.



to post-war life expectancies, only 29 percent of black soldiers who served during the War lived to 1900, as opposed to the 45 percent of white Civil War veterans who lived to 1900.<sup>43</sup>

On June 4, 1865, approximately two months after the official surrender of the Confederacy, David Demus was finally discharged from the Union Army. Still contending with his devastating head injury, Demus applied for a war-wound pension. After analyzing Demus's medical records, the Pension Office did find evidence that Demus's injury had been sustained during his term of service, more specifically during the assault on Fort Wagner in the summer of 1863, and that he had been treated by war medics. Demus was subsequently approved for a war-wound pension, although he was deemed "unfit for the Veterans' Reserve Corps because men of color are not allowed in it."<sup>44</sup> In this context, Demus proved to be somewhat of an outlier among other black soldiers who had been wounded during the war. Despite the Union victory, the post-war era was reflective of the mistreatment and inequality of the war years, as evidenced in the pension records of black veterans. In regards to medical pensions such as that received by Demus, black soldiers who often were treated unofficially or improperly during the war had a much more difficult time in providing documentation that the medical issues they suffered from stemmed from injuries sustained during the war. Unlike Demus, those injuries were often undocumented and, therefore, provided pensioners with "reasonable doubt" that a wound was not sustained directly from the war and was, therefore, "not their problem." During the immediate post-war Reconstruction period, for instance, only 22 percent of black veteran applicants received pension approvals for wounds sustained during the war. Black applicants received 23 percent pension approvals for illnesses and long-term health conditions from the war and 19 percent pension approvals for issues outside of these two categories. Under those same categories, white veteran applicants had an 83 percent approval rate for wound pensions, 74 percent for illness pensions, and 73 percent for issues outside of wounds and illnesses.<sup>45</sup> This inequality in pension approval rates for war veterans was again discouraging for participating black families. From the more direct perspective of veterans, individuals who had risked their lives and fought for their autonomy and families were still facing systematic discrimination from the very institution in which they sought relief. Furthermore, many of these wounded veterans were no longer functional or well enough to continue to find work. This left women to do the work to support families and their wounded, emasculated spouses, or allowed for complete financial ruin, calling back and dismantling one of the initial points of contention for war entry: gender roles and the ability to be a virtuous man capable of supporting one's family regardless of being black or white. Though there were most definitely white soldiers who were denied war-wound pensions, the denials were disproportionately high for black veterans, thus affecting them more.

In addition to black veterans and black servicepeople, such as Susan King Taylor, many families of deceased black soldiers faced discrimination when applying for post-war pensions. Because David had survived the war and received a war pension, Mary Jane herself did not apply for a pension. Even after David's death "sometime after 1870," Mary Jane did not choose to apply for a widow's pension, likely under the pretense that she as a single, black woman would be refused or placed under intense observation and oversight. Instead, Mary Jane remarried another veteran of the 54th Massachusetts, Wesley Krunkelton—also of K Company, with whom she would remain married for the remainder of her life.<sup>46</sup> Many black widows, however, were not

<sup>43</sup>Sven E. Wilson, "Prejudice and Policy: Racial Discrimination in the Union Army Disability Pension System, 1865-1906," *AMJ Public Health* 100, no. S1 (April 1, 2010): 56-65, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.172759>.

<sup>44</sup>Hoptak, "South Central Pennsylvanians."

<sup>45</sup>Wilson, "Prejudice and Policy."

<sup>46</sup>"Demus and Christy Family Letters," University of Virginia Library.

so fortunate. Patience Buck, spouse to Civil War veteran George Buck, applied for a pension after her husband died in 1871 from long-standing medical issues that stemmed from a war injury. The injury stemmed from a head wound sustained during the siege on Fort Wagner. A bullet fragment had been lodged into his brain and permanently damaged it. Following the injury, Buck suffered from seizures and mental incapacities and was noted by one of his friends to have gone “completely insane.” While Buck survived the war, the head injury led to a drowning at his workplace, convincing Patience to apply. Though a group of Buck’s fellow veterans attested to this injury and the circumstances behind it, the pension application was denied in 1883 under claims that the death was solely work-related and unrelated to any war injuries that may have been sustained by Buck. Patience then reapplied in 1890 and was approved for an eight-dollar pension. When Patience reapplied and was granted this pension, however, the Bureau of Pensions scrutinized every aspect of her life in an attempt to prove her ineligible. Rumors were fabricated of Patience running a “lewd house” of illicit prostitution. Patience was then removed from the pension payroll, labeled a prostitute, and publicly shamed.<sup>47</sup> Instances such as this contributed to a much lower frequency of black pension applications compared to white.<sup>48</sup>

For black soldiers and their families in the Civil War, participation was far deeper than abolishing slavery, although this was a highly potent element. Participation in the war served as a statement of equality and of validity. Black men, in particular, were affected by the ideals of republicanism and male virtue established by the mid-19th century. Republicanism itself, an ideology that was popularized during the early 19th century, addressed manhood and the societal goals and ideals of man. It emphasized self-autonomy primarily through landownership and self-sufficiency. The war allowed African Americans the opportunity to prove that they too could uphold the pillars of manhood: property ownership, masculine strength, and the ability to support one’s family. The war and the ability to fight to protect their own rights and autonomy opened the metaphorical door into a previously white-dominated masculinity standard and seemed the perfect opportunity to further prove that the black man “was no slacker” and was capable and deserving of equal rights and liberties. Unfortunately, for many participants and their families, the war did not deliver on many of these coveted ideals. Though equal on the battlefield, black soldiers found themselves at a steep social and hierarchical disadvantage within the ranks. Despite proving their worth through remedial labor, black soldiers still faced systematic racism even within the Union, with inequalities in supplies, compensation, and medical and social treatments. Often black soldiers found themselves delivering empty promises to their families and feeling the defeat of an inability to deliver on those male-gendered virtues. Though these men and their families devoted themselves to fighting for black liberties both on the home front and battlefield, they often found themselves in a melancholic paradox, fighting for black independence by being forced to be dependent on whites. While the experiences of every black individual cannot be all-encompassing, the experiences of the Demus family are symbolic of many of these thematic and physical impediments of black families during the period. Fears for each other’s lives, the horrors of war, racism, the deflation of hopes, and the disappointments in promises upheld by enlistment are all concepts prevalent in the lives of Civil War veterans, particularly those who happened to be black. The Demus family and the detailing of personal expressions of each of these concepts create a foundation of study for black soldiers and their families during the war, despite the lack of unbiased resources on the topic and the general obscuring of those black voices by white men and the “white savior” trope that, even today, pollutes the study on the conflict.

<sup>47</sup>Pinheiro, “Black Families Unending Fight.”

<sup>48</sup>Pinheiro.

In total, 186,000 black soldiers, such as Demus, served in the Union Army and another 29,000 in the Navy, accounting for nearly 10 percent of all Union forces during the later half of the war. The dedication and ferocity with which these men fought, propelled by their thirst for change, justified their role as, what Lincoln would accredit them as, individuals responsible for “turning the tide of the war.” Yet, of those who served, only twenty-four black soldiers received the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery in battle.<sup>49</sup> Black soldiers and families during the Civil War, however, evidently showcased bravery not only on the battlefield, but also on the home front, in the face of discrimination and inequality, against illness and injustice. Black soldiers had to fight enemies on the battlefield as well as within their own military, all for lower pay, less honor, and insufficient supplies. Though the war failed to deliver on many of the hopes black participants had harbored, the bravery, strength, and sacrifices of black individuals, such as the Demus family, set into motion the transformation of what it meant to be black in America, and began the dismantling of racism and oppression of black individuals, a movement that set the precedent for equality activists for generations to follow.

<sup>49</sup>Mintz, “Historical Context.”

## REFERENCES

- Ancestry.com. "David Demus." US Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861-1865.
- Ayers, Edward, William G. Thomas III, and Anne Sarah Rubin. "Black and on the Border." University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Digital Commons, 2007. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/history/facpub/46/>.
- Backus, Paige G. "Amputations and the Civil War." American Battlefield Trust, October 19, 2020. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/amputations-and-civil-war>.
- Brasher, Glenn David. "Creating 'The Glorious 54th,'" *New York Times*, April 11, 2013. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/creating-the-glorious-54th/>.
- Civil War Era NC. "Home, Sweet Home: Gender in the Antebellum Household." Accessed May 2, 2021. <https://cwnc.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/exhibits/show/protect/1/men>.
- Constitutional Rights Foundation. "Black Troops in Union Blue." Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/black-troops-in-union-blue>.
- Emilio, Luis Fenollosa. *A Brave Black Regiment: The History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1865*. Boston: Boston Book Company, 1891.
- Freeman, Elsie, Wynell Burroughs Schamel, and Jean West. "The Fight for Equal Rights: A Recruiting Poster for Black Soldiers in the Civil War." *Social Education* 56, 2 (February 1992): 118-120. <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>.
- Glatthaar, Joseph. "Medical Care." In *The Civil War's Black Soldiers*. Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2007. [https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/civil\\_war\\_series/2/sec17.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/civil_war_series/2/sec17.htm).
- History.com. "Black Civil War Soldiers." Updated January 25, 2021. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/black-civil-war-soldiers>.
- Hoptak, John D. "South Central Pennsylvanians in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry." *From the Fields of Gettysburg*, July 15, 2020. <https://www.nps.gov/gett/blogs/south-central-pennsylvanians-in-the-54th-massachusetts-volunteer-infantry.htm>.
- Mintz, Steven. "Historical Context: Black Soldiers in the Civil War." Gilder Lehrman Institute of History. Accessed March 14, 2021. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-black-soldiers-civil-war>.
- Pinheiro, Holly A., Jr. "Black Families' Unending Fight for Equality: Teaching Civil War Pension Records." *Journal of the Civil War Era* (February 16, 2021). <https://www.journalofthecivilwarera.org/2021/02/black-families-unending-fight-for-equality-teaching-civil-war-pension-records/>.
- Pohanka, Brian C. "Fort Wagner and the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry." American Battlefield Trust. Accessed February 14, 2021. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/fort-wagner-and-54th-massachusetts-volunteer-infantry>.
- Reeves, Frank. "Confederates' 'Slave Hunt' in North a Military Disgrace." *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, June 30, 2013. <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/state/2013/06/30/Confederates-slave-hunt-in-North-a-military-disgrace/stories/201306300221>.
- Rush, Ilene Raymond. "How the Sacrifices of Black Civil War Troops Advanced Medicine." BunkHistory, March 21, 2018. <https://www.bunkhistory.org/resources/2192>.
- Sartin, Jeffrey S. "Infectious Diseases During the Civil War: The Triumph of the 'Third Army.'" *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 16, no. 4 (April 1993): 580-584. <https://doi.org/10.1093/clind/16.4.580>.
- Trowbridge, C. T. Colonel C. T. Trowbridge to Susan King Taylor. April 7, 1902. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/bindingwounds/images/taylorOB556.png>.

United States Census, 1860. "David Demus." Via WikiTree.

United States Census, 1870. "David Demus." Via WikiTree.

United States Congress. "An Act to Amend the Act Calling Forth the Militia to Execute the Laws of the Union, Suppress Insurrections, and Repel Invasions." In *Thirty-Seventh Congress, Session II, Chapter 201*, 597-600. Washington, DC: July 17, 1862. <https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/african-americans-and-civil-war/militia-act>.

University of Virginia Library. "Demus and Christy Family Letters: The War Years." *The Valley of the Shadow*. <https://valley.lib.virginia.edu/VoS/personalpapers/documents/franklin/p2demusletters.html>.

WikiTree. "David Demus (abt. 1845-aft. 1870)." <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Demus-8>.

Wilson, Sven E. "Prejudice and Policy: Racial Discrimination in the Union Army Disability Pension System, 1865-1906." *AMJ Public Health* 100, no. S1 (April 1, 2010): 56-65. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.172759>.