

**RUTHERFORD COUNTY'S
AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS
DURING THE CIVIL WAR:
THE 13th and 17th REGIMENTS, USCT**



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A HISTORY of the 13th INFANTRY REGIMENT UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS (USCT)

In the summer of 1863, when the first Federal regiment of black soldiers was formed at Murfreesboro, it was known as the 2nd U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment. Following an army-wide reorganization of the “colored” troops, the unit’s name was changed to the 13th Regiment, United States Colored Troops (USCT). The creation of this unit had begun first in Middle Tennessee in July by enrolling men who were either currently serving as or had been laborers at other military posts such as Nashville, Clarksville, or Gallatin.

Hundreds of men answered the call to arms. The former “contrabands” came in all colors, ages, and sizes. Nearly all had been slaves and many still wore the ragged clothes of the plantation. Only the best men were selected from all of those who applied, and drill and other military duties for the new recruits began immediately. Success did not come easily; it took time, patience, and hard work to turn field hands into soldiers. Nevertheless, as a result of intense training and incessant drill, the men progressed well and were prepared for action.

Soon after being presented with a handsome flag made by their mothers, wives, and sweethearts, several companies were transported to Nashville as the nucleus of the 13th U. S. Colored Infantry Regiment, which continued recruiting until the middle of November 1863. The new regiment’s field officers included Col. John A. Hottenstein, Lt. Col. Theodore Trauernicht, and Maj. William Innes.

Late in the summer of 1863, Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans notified Andrew Johnson, the military governor of Tennessee, that he (Johnson) would be responsible for the completion of the Nashville & Northwestern Railroad. This important 78-mile long supply line would connect Nashville to the huge supply depot at Johnsonville on the Tennessee River. As part of the preparations, Gen. Rosecrans assigned the nascent 13th U.S. Colored Regiment to this duty. The companies that were already organized set out to work on the railroad

immediately. The troops were ordered to make frequent scouts and any men found along the way were recruited for the army if they so wished.

In mid-October, Lt. Col. Trauernicht wrote to Adj. Gen. George L. Stearns at Nashville, informing him that a detachment of the regiment was stationed on the railroad line thirty miles west of Nashville at the advance post of troops in that area. The officer was concerned that he lacked enough men to act as both guards and laborers, and urged that the organization of the regiment be completed immediately, requesting, "Give me a full regiment, and we can do much good in this direction. As we are, I fear we can only be an expense to the government."

A month later the 13th was at full strength, furnishing an average of 500 men per day as construction workers. The regiment finally was relieved of this fatigue duty on May 10, 1864, the day the line was completed. The soldiers continued to man the blockhouses that guarded bridges, trestles, and other installations along the path of railroad until the end of November 1864. During this time period, a detachment of the regiment was encamped at Johnsonville, scouting and erecting fortifications. When Maj. Gen. Nathan B. Forrest's cavalry attacked the post in early November, the soldiers from the 13th Regiment stood their ground under fire. Armed with Enfield rifles, the well-trained black sharpshooters performed their duty well and held their position on the river bank.

On November 30, the entire regiment was ordered to withdraw from its Waverly headquarters and other positions along the Nashville & Northwestern Railroad and report to Nashville to meet the threat posed by Lt. Gen. John B. Hood's Confederate army. On December 7 it was placed, along with the 12th and 100th USCT regiments, in the Second Colored Brigade under Col. Charles R. Thompson. After throwing up rifle pits along their section of the line, the 13th continuously skirmished with their Confederate counterparts. When the battle opened on the morning of December 15, the 13th and the rest of the brigade

charged and overwhelmed the enemy works in their front and then dug in under continual artillery fire awaiting further orders for the rest of the day.

The next morning, Col. Thompson's brigade joined in a diversionary assault on the strong defenses of Overton Hill. In an attempt to turn the Confederate right, the mass of Federal soldiers moved steadily across a muddy plowed field to attack the heavily fortified position. Advancing unsupported in tight formation through withering musket and canister fire, the black troops were mowed down until not a man stood in front of the enemy's breastworks. Five members of the color guard were shot down while trying to plant their banner on the Confederate parapet. As the firing slowed, an Alabama infantry officer jumped over the defensive barrier and retrieved the regimental colors of the 13th, inscribed with the words, "Presented by the Colored Ladies of Murfreesboro."

The 13th Regiment had been in the second wave of that assault, but when the front lines faltered, the men pushed forward so resolutely that some soldiers mounted and even entered the Confederate parapet before they were slain. Nevertheless, the ferocity of the regiment's attack caused the defenders to weaken their left in order to reinforce their right. This made the task of the Union forces attacking the Confederate left much easier, and after a brief struggle, the left flank collapsed and the rout was on. Brigade commander Thompson later reported, "These troops were here for the first time under such fire as veterans dread, and yet, side by side with the veterans of Stone's River, Missionary Ridge, and Atlanta, they assaulted probably the strongest works on the entire line, and though not successful, they vied with the old warriors in bravery, tenacity, and deeds of noble daring."

The 13th Regiment went into action with 556 men and 20 officers. Lieutenants John M. Woodruff, George Taylor, L. L. Parks, and James A. Isom, and 51 men were killed; four officers and 161 men fell wounded; and one soldier was reported missing for total casualties of 221. This was a loss of nearly 40 per cent of those

entire war. The fighting on Overton Hill had claimed about one-third of the Federal casualties suffered during both days of fighting. Afterwards, division commander James B. Steedman affirmed that color had made no difference in the quality of the troops' performance.

With the battle over and Gen. Hood's army rapidly retreating toward the Tennessee River, the regiment marched to Murfreesboro with the rest of the command and boarded the trains for northern Alabama on December 22. After compelling the Confederates to leave Decatur, the Federal forces captured Hood's pontoon train, hundreds of prisoners, and a number of supply wagons. The 13th Regiment started back to Nashville on January 7, 1865, but when it reached Scottsboro, Alabama, the next day, it was called back to take part in the pursuit of Brig. Gen. Hylan B. Lyon's cavalry. After Gen. Lyon escaped across the Tennessee River the regiment returned to Nashville, arriving on January 15, 1865. The 13th stayed in Nashville for about two weeks, and then reoccupied its former posts on the railroad.

In the beginning of May 1865, all Confederate soldiers in the Department of Western Kentucky under the command of Col. J.Q. Chenoweth surrendered to Col. Hottenstein and the 13th Regiment at Paris, Tennessee. On July 7, the 13th was relieved from duty in Middle Tennessee and ordered to proceed to St. Louis, Missouri, and report on arrival to Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman for further orders. The 13th Regiment was mustered out on January 10, 1866. During the course of its service the regiment lost four officers and 86 enlisted men killed and mortally wounded by the enemy, and 265 enlisted men by disease, for a total of 355. When given the chance, the black soldiers had fought, and fought well.

A HISTORY of the 17th INFANTRY REGIMENT UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS (USCT)

The 17th Regiment, United States Colored Troops (USCT) was organized in Middle Tennessee soon after the battle of Chickamauga in September 1863. Recruiting agent James T. Ayers had accompanied Federal cavalry expeditions into northern Alabama and enlisted more than 300 former field hands along the railroad line from Bridgeport to Decatur. These men were transported to Murfreesboro and formed the nucleus of this regiment. By the end of the year, several hundred free black recruits from Ohio had been assigned to the unit. On December 31, 1863, the 17th was stationed at Murfreesboro, with its full complement of soldiers. The regiment's field officers included Col. William R. Shafter, Lt. Col. Charles H. Pickering, and Maj. Joseph E. Tupper.

In April 1864, the regiment reported to Chief Quartermaster James L. Donaldson for duty at Nashville, although several companies were still garrisoned at other posts on detached service. Most of the men of the regiment remained at or near the capital guarding government property for the rest of their enlistment, except for one short period following the Battle of Nashville. On June 15, Quartermaster Donaldson complained to Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman that he had heard that both the 15th and 17th Regiments had been transferred to Bowling Green, Kentucky, by Adj. Gen. Lorenzo Thomas and asked that the order be revoked because he could not spare them. No reply to his request was found, but the next time the regiment sent in reports, which was in August 1864, it was still posted at Nashville, where Brig. Gen. John F. Miller was Commandant.

On July 27 the first grand review of the USCT took place in Nashville, with four regiments, including the 17th, taking part. Brig. Gen. Augustus L. Chetlain, commander of all the black soldiers in Tennessee, expressed his satisfaction with the appearance and performance of the troops.

When Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas reported to Sherman regarding the forces available in his district in October 1864, the soldiers of the 17th Regiment were deployed as guards for the commissary depots in the Nashville area. Three of the companies watched over government sawmills in Gallatin and two others protected wood yards at Federal landings on the Cumberland River. All of the detachments were brought in to defend Nashville by early December.

In preparation for the attack on Lt. Gen. John B. Hood's besieging army in December, 1864, the 17th U.S. Colored Infantry was assigned to Col. Thomas J. Morgan's First Colored Brigade. On the foggy morning of December 15, the 14th USCT Regiment formed as a skirmish line in front of the brigade, with the 17th and 44th USCT regiments in line of battle behind. During the assault, when the resistance grew too heavy for the skirmishers to overcome, the 17th pushed through and carried the first line of Confederate rifle pits, and continued forward until it reached the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad at Rains' Cut. Here the brigade was completely surprised when it stumbled upon a hidden Confederate lunette and was compelled to withdraw with heavy losses in the face of close-range artillery and musket fire.

The following day, at Overton Hill, the 17th was in echelon behind Lt. Col. Charles H. Grosvenor's Brigade, and supported the assault on the fortifications there. After the battle, Col. Shafter reported, "The conduct of all my officers was all that I desire; and from the fact that it was the first time the men had ever been under fire, I think they, too, did well." In the two days action the regiment lost three officers, 14 men killed and three officers, 64 men wounded. Many of the wounded died soon afterwards.

With the Confederate army in full retreat, the 17th Regiment marched to Murfreesboro and moved with Maj. Gen. Steedman's division to Tuscumbia, Alabama, where it joined other Federal forces in a fruitless attempt to run down and capture Brig. Gen. Hylan B. Lyon's Confederate cavalry. Although Quartermaster Donaldson complained about Gen. Steedman taking the 17th

Regiment south, his superiors informed him that the assignment was so important that the troops could not be returned until the mission was completed.

On January 1, 1865, Steedman was directed to send back to Nashville all the troops that were stationed there before the movement to Alabama began. After recovering somewhat from the rigors of the campaign, for the next three months the companies of the regiment were detailed to guard freight trains leaving and returning to the post of Nashville. In May the 17th remained on duty protecting quartermaster's property in and around the capital. The regiment was mustered out on April 25, 1866.

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BATTLE OF NASHVILLE

USCT Regiments Overcome Confederates at Overton Hill on December 16, 1864