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## **Black Virginians in Blue: Black Union Soldiers and Sailors from Albemarle County, Virginia**

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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## Description

The *Black Virginians in Blue* digital project uncovers the stories of Black men from Albemarle County, Virginia, who served in the Union military during the Civil War. The dataset contains 911 named individuals: 251 soldiers, 6 sailors, and all of their known wives and children. It records a wide range of information, including date of birth, occupation, residence, date of enlistment, regiment, rank, and date and place of death. The dataset's creators drew much of this information from federal service and pension records housed at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. They mined muster rolls and other wartime documents to piece together the details of these men's military service, and they recorded names, occupations, enlistment statuses, and causes of death exactly as they appeared in these documents. The pension records, in turn, provided invaluable information about these men's wives, families, and postwar careers.

The dataset--and the *Black Virginians in Blue* website built around it--contribute to a rich and growing field of scholarship. The National Bureau of Economic Research's *Union Army Data--USCT* project provides a detailed "life-cycle" analysis of more than 15,000 Black Union soldiers.<sup>1</sup> The Zooniverse *African American Civil War Soldiers* project, meanwhile, transcribes the military records of every Black regiment.<sup>2</sup> *Black Virginians in Blue* is much narrower in scope, focusing on 257 men from a single county. It uses these local stories, however, to examine national themes, shedding light on Black soldiers' lives, social networks, and military experiences. The project demonstrates the dispersive impacts of slavery and the hardships of military service. It also underscores African Americans' determination to claim their freedom, serve their country, and demand justice and equality in the wake of war.

As historian Elizabeth R. Varon observes, this project "challenge[s] us to rethink our concepts of 'local history.'" The Union army made few incursions into Albemarle County and it operated no recruiting stations in the area.<sup>3</sup> None of the 257 men enlisted in Albemarle County, and only 14 volunteered within Virginia's borders. Instead, they enlisted in at least 23 states, including Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont. Some fled Albemarle County in the 1840s and 1850s and carved out lives in the antebellum North. Many others, however, were forced to leave their homes when their owners sold them or moved away. In 1852, for example, planter John Coles Carter migrated to Missouri, bringing more than 100 enslaved laborers with him. During the Civil War, at least 20 of Carter's slaves escaped from bondage and joined the Union army.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars typically classify USCT (United States Colored Troops) soldiers by the state in which they enlisted. By this measure, most Black soldiers came from Louisiana (24,502), Kentucky (23,703), and Tennessee (20,133), and only 5,723 came from Virginia. As Varon explains, however, these USCT regiments "reflect an antebellum diaspora driven by the domestic slave

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<sup>1</sup> "Union Army Data - USCT," National Bureau of Economic Research, available from <https://www.nber.org/research/data/union-army-data-usct>.

<sup>2</sup> "African American Civil War Soldiers," Zooniverse, available from <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/usct/african-american-civil-war-soldiers>.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, "From Carter's Mountain to Morganza Bend: A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part III)," 25 January 2017, *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/72>.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, "From Carter's Mountain to Morganza Bend: A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part I)," 11 January 2017, *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/25>.

trade and involuntary migration, and the wartime diaspora of slaves to Union lines." Virginia was central to the interstate slave trade, sending thousands of enslaved men, women, and children southward each year. It also witnessed a massive outmigration of slaveholders, as men like John Coles Carter moved westward in search of richer soil. Then, in the tumult of war, thousands of Black Virginians fled to Union lines, and some began carving out new lives in northern states before deciding to enlist. Albemarle native Frank Lee, for example, escaped to Massachusetts in 1862, and two years later, he enlisted in the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry Regiment. These trends dispersed Black Virginians across the country, complicating our conception of USCT enlistment. Although fewer than 6,000 Black men enlisted in Virginia, the state was the starting point for hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Black soldiers' journeys.<sup>5</sup>

These 257 Black Virginians in Blue are part of a larger story of African American military service. Army officials began recruiting Black men in New Orleans and coastal South Carolina in 1862, and the final Emancipation Proclamation reaffirmed this policy on January 1, 1863. By the war's end, roughly 179,000 Black men had served in USCT regiments, and another 18,000 had enlisted in the Union navy. Albemarle's Black soldiers enlisted in more than eighty different infantry, cavalry, and artillery regiments. They served in both the western and eastern theaters of the war between 1862 and 1867, when the Union army discharged the last of its Black regiments. Many USCT regiments remained behind the front lines—building fortifications, repairing roads and levees, and guarding supply lines. Even so, these Black Virginians took part in many important battles and campaigns, including Port Hudson, Petersburg, Nashville, Fort Fisher, Honey Hill, and Appomattox.<sup>6</sup>

The project demonstrates the hardships that many USCT soldiers endured. At least 72 of Albemarle's Black soldiers died during the war—a mortality rate of 28.7%. This was far higher than the army's overall death rate, which was 18.5% for Black soldiers and about 13.5% for white soldiers.<sup>7</sup> Only five Black Virginians in Blue died from combat wounds, and another succumbed to a fatal accident. The other 66 died from diseases, including dysentery, pneumonia, smallpox, and typhus.<sup>8</sup> Black soldiers often received inadequate food, shelter, and clothing, and they initially earned less money than their white counterparts. Army officials, furthermore, often stationed Black regiments in areas prone to disease, such as the Mississippi River Valley.<sup>9</sup>

Twenty-two of Albemarle's Black soldiers, for example, served in the 65<sup>th</sup> USCT Infantry, which lost more men to disease than any other Union regiment. The men trained at Benton Barracks in St. Louis, a filthy and overcrowded camp notorious for its high mortality rates. The army then sent them to the mosquito-infested swamps of Louisiana. As historian Margaret Humphreys explains, the area became a "mass graveyard for Black troops." The regiment endured a "persistent level of disabling disease," and at times only 200 soldiers were healthy enough for

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, "From Carter's Mountain to Morganza Bend: A U.S.C.T. Odyssey (Part II)," 18 January 2017, *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/71>.

<sup>6</sup> William B. Kurtz, "Black Virginians in Blue: The Untold Stories of Albemarle County's US Colored Troops," *Magazine of Albemarle Charlottesville History* 78 (2020), 42-44.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Humphreys, *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the American Civil War* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Anderson, "Quite Unhealthy': Deadly Diseases Among Albemarle-born Black Soldiers," 19 April 2017, *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/93>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew F. Lang, *In the Wake of War: Military Occupation, Emancipation, and Civil War America* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 149.

active duty.<sup>10</sup> The 65<sup>th</sup> USCT never witnessed combat, but it lost nearly half of its men to disease—including 10 of the 22 men from Albemarle County.<sup>11</sup> As Humphreys observes, the regiment's mortality rates "may have been extreme but only by matter of degree," as their "experience was echoed throughout the ranks of black troops."<sup>12</sup>

Despite facing enormous obstacles and staggering mortality rates, Black men continued to enlist in the Union army. Military service provided economic opportunity, promising monthly pay and occasional enlistment bounties. It also allowed former slaves to assert their freedom, affirm their manhood, and fight for racial equality. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass explained, the "opportunity is given us to be men. With one courageous resolution we may blot out the hand-writing of ages against us." Once a Black man had "an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder," no power on earth could "deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States."<sup>13</sup>

The list of occupations in the dataset hints at stories told in greater depth on the *Black Virginians in Blue* website. James T. S. Taylor, for example, was a laborer, a cobbler, a politician, and a champion of racial justice. During the Civil War, he served as a correspondent for one of the country's leading Black newspapers. Black soldiers, he observed in early 1864, were "extremely anxious for a fight," eager to prove that they would "not disgrace...ourselves, or our country's flag in the day of battle."<sup>14</sup> They were fighting, he explained, to ensure a "lasting peace" and to bring "liberty and freedom to the oppressed of our native land."<sup>15</sup> Taylor demanded "equal privileges" for Black soldiers during the war, and he became a Radical Republican during Reconstruction. He won a seat in Virginia's 1867 constitutional convention, where he championed civil rights and declared the right to vote the "palladium of American liberty."<sup>16</sup>

Taylor was not alone in this struggle for equal rights. After the war, sailor Alexander Caine joined Philadelphia's Citizens' Republican Club, an elite Black political organization.<sup>17</sup> Frank Lee, whose cavalry regiment was among the first to ride through Richmond in April 1865, settled in Ohio and became a champion of civil rights. In 1898, he founded the Brotherhood of African Descent to protest the bloody coup in Wilmington, North Carolina. Lee hoped to "bring about united political action" and form a "national organization of colored citizens."<sup>18</sup> Minister Jesse Sumner Cowles, meanwhile, used the pulpit to protest racial injustice. In 1887, when a New Jersey mayor excluded African Americans from the town's beaches and boardwalks, Cowles fiercely condemned the policy. Three years later, he spoke at an equal rights convention, which denounced racial discrimination and demanded civil rights and suffrage.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Humphreys, *Intensely Human*, 12, 116.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, "Quite Unhealthy," *Black Virginians in Blue*.

<sup>12</sup> Humphreys, *Intensely Human*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *The Liberator*, 24 July 1863.

<sup>14</sup> *Anglo-African*, 1 January 1864 and 16 March 1864.

<sup>15</sup> *Anglo-African*, 18 May 1864.

<sup>16</sup> *Staunton Spectator*, 24 December 1867.

<sup>17</sup> "Alexander Caine (USS St. Louis)," *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/70>.

<sup>18</sup> "Frank Lee (5<sup>th</sup> MA Colored CAV)," *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/233>.

<sup>19</sup> "Jesse Sumner Cowles (29<sup>th</sup> CT Infantry)," *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/98>.

By the late 1800s, southern states had begun codifying segregation and denying African Americans the rights of citizenship. Southern civic leaders built Confederate monuments to reassert white supremacy and glorify the “Lost Cause.”<sup>20</sup> In response, men like Taylor, Caine, Lee, and Cowles fought for justice and worked to keep the memory of their military service alive. At least six Black Virginians in Blue joined the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans’ organization that provided a “unified space for remembrance and political activism.”<sup>21</sup> Frank Lee made this connection clear in a poignant plea for action. As African Americans struggled against segregation, Lee enjoined them to “Learn from the deeds of valor of the men of ’61 and ’65...Through our lives and characters, each in his proper place can be a monument to truth.”<sup>22</sup>

This project provides researchers with invaluable insight into the lives of Virginia’s Black Union soldiers and sailors. The dataset and website shed light on the domestic slave trade, slave flight, Black enlistment, the hardships of USCT service, Black political and economic achievement, and networks of kinship and community. It contributes to a rich scholarly conversation and invites future researchers to delve even deeper into the ways Black men and women experienced and helped shape the Civil War Era.

## Dates of Data Collection

2016-2021

## Dataset Languages

English

## Geographic Coverage

Albemarle County, Virginia  
United States of America

## Temporal Coverage

1800-1940

## Document Types

Census  
Military Service Record  
Newspaper

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, “UVA and the History of Race: The Lost Cause Through Judge Duke’s Eyes,” 4 September 2019, *UVA Today*.

<sup>21</sup> Casey Bowler, “Black Virginians in Blue (Part 3): After the Civil War,” 10 January 2020, *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/102>.

<sup>22</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 5 June 1915.

## Sources

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<https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>.

Ancestry.com

Fold3.com

Newspapers.com

## Methodology

William B. Kurtz, the Nau Center's former managing director, began compiling the *Black Virginians in Blue* dataset in 2016. Initially, he drew upon free digital resources, searching the National Park Service's database of Civil War sailors and the St. Louis County Library's list of Missouri USCT soldiers for anyone born in Albemarle County. He also scoured Ancestry.com's database of USCT service records, which contained records from 55 of the Union army's 175 Black regiments. He then travelled to the National Archives in Washington, DC, to comb through the descriptive books for another 80 regiments. Undergraduate researchers Amelia Gilmer and Sarah Anderson completed the initial review by paging through thousands of digitized USCT service records on Fold3.com. As the project gained publicity, local historians reached out and provided information on several additional soldiers.

After searching the Civil War pension indexes on Ancestry.com and Fold3.com, Nau Center researchers identified 134 relevant pension applications. They travelled to the National Archives in D.C. and the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri, to review the files, which contain invaluable information on the soldiers' lives, families, and Civil War service. They tracked down vital records and census returns and searched historical newspapers and Works Progress Administration slave narratives to further flesh out these men's stories. They entered this information into a relational database designed by UVA's Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH). Dataset creator William B. Kurtz chose the fields with care and intention. Some—such as birth place and birth date—simply recorded the soldiers' vital statistics and established their Albemarle County origins. Other fields—including enlistment place, enlistment status (free or enslaved), occupation, spouse, and cause of death—provided glimpses into the human experiences behind the data.

This database forms the core of the *Black Virginians in Blue* website, which contains biographies of all 257 soldiers and sailors as well as their spouses. The website also includes photographs, dozens of primary sources, several contextual essays, and two interactive digital maps charting the places where each man enlisted and mustered out of the military. Nau Center researchers have also developed high school lesson plans to make it easier for teachers to use the material in their classrooms. Through these essays, images, maps, and lesson plans, *Black Virginians in Blue* strives to reach both academic historians and the broader public. It sheds light on hundreds of poignant local stories, and it contributes to scholarly conversations about the

domestic slave trade, Black kinship networks, USCT military service, postwar politics, and Civil War memory.<sup>23</sup>

## Date of Publication

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## Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ADNESN>

*Black Virginians in Blue* Website <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/>

Linked Data Representation: *Enslaved.org* [Summary Visualization](#)

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<sup>23</sup> William B. Kurtz, "A Word on Methods: Recovering the Stories of Black Virginians in the Union Army and Navy (updated)," 3 January 2017, *Black Virginians in Blue*, available from <http://community.village.virginia.edu/usct/node/94>.