

PHILADELPHIA'S FREE MILITARY SCHOOL

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ONE of the most important problems confronting the Federal government in relation to Negro soldiers during the Civil War was that of providing trained commissioned officers to lead the colored troops in the field. Although Negro non-commissioned officers were in perfectly good taste in the regiments of colored troops, the cautious Negro policy of the Union government did not permit it to consider the Negro as the proper candidate for a commission in the Army.

The Pennsylvania Free Negro in offering his service to the Union Army felt that his officers should be chosen from his own race. As early as March, 1863, a William Adair of Pittsburgh had asked the Secretary of War: "Can the colored men here raise a regiment and have their own company officers?"¹ The War Department hedged in deciding the issue. The summer of 1863 found Lee's army advancing. Pennsylvania was invaded by the rebel forces and a call went out from the governor to the residents of the state to defend their firesides. Harrisburg received colored men who answered the call, but one company refused, by unanimous vote, to be mustered in with white officers.² Major General D. N. Couch at the state capital requested directions from the Adjutant General's Office in Washington. Couch was under the impression that the Negro companies recruited for six months' service during the emergency were to have white officers. "It would certainly make them more efficient," he observed in his communication to the Adjutant General, Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas.³ Two days later, on July 4, Thomas, now in Harrisburg, forwarded a note to Secretary Stanton which indicated that he was at a complete loss to know what to do about the matter. By this time another company of Negroes had requested its own offi-

¹ *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 3, Volume III, page 72; referred to hereafter as *Official Records*, abbreviated, *O. R.*

² *O. R.*, Ser. 1, vol. XXVII, pt. 1, p. 496.

³ *Ibid.*

cers.⁴ Neither Thomas nor Couch knew if Stanton had authorized "black officers," but Thomas voiced a joint opinion when he wrote ". . . I have been opposed to it, and I find General Couch also objects."⁵ Despite a request in the same communication for a decision to cover the immediate situation and similar cases in the free states, the policy remained unsettled.⁶ This was evidenced the next month when a prominent Negro leader obtained an appointment with the Secretary of War.

Frederick Douglass visited Stanton in August, 1863. During the thirty-minute interview, Douglass brought up the subject of the existing inequalities faced by the colored man in the service of his country, and particularly noted the distinctions in commissioned ranks. Stanton replied that he was ready to grant commissions to any Negro soldiers distinguishing themselves in the field.⁷

To say that there were no Negro officers in the service of the Union Army is inaccurate.⁸ On February 3, 1863, Governor Andrew of Massachusetts wrote to Stanton that inasmuch as Congress did not expressly prohibit colored officers, he requested permission to appoint a few competent Negroes to the positions of assistant surgeons and chaplains.⁹ No doubt his request was granted, for the 54th Massachusetts later boasted of a colored chaplain, and by the end of the war Massachusetts had ten Negroes serving as commissioned officers with its colored regiments.¹⁰ But the commissioning of Negroes as officers was the exception rather than the rule. Kansas counted three; there were several among the colored troops recruited in Louisiana; and in all, only approximately seventy-five Negroes were granted commissions during the conflict.¹¹ This was a small percentage considering that a total of 7,122 officers served with the colored regiments.¹²

A low opinion of the untried Negro as a fighting man was voiced by many military leaders during the earlier stages of Negro recruiting and was a contributing factor in the careful selection of

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 525.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Frederick Douglass to George L. Stearns, Aug. 12, 1863, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁸ J. G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, p. 505. "Negro soldiers were always under white officers."

⁹ *O. R.*, Ser. 3, vol. III, p. 36.

¹⁰ C. G. Woodson, *The Negro In Our History*, p. 374.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *O. R.*, Ser. 3, vol. V, p. 662.

white officers to lead colored troops. It was Major General Benjamin F. Butler, later a stout defender of the Negro's fighting abilities, who said that "Negroes are gregarious in flight. . . ." ¹³ Colonel Higginson, a friend of the Negro, was quoted in a report by the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, submitted on June 30, 1863, as saying: "If they lose their officers the effect will be worse upon them than upon white troops; not because they are timid, but because they are less accustomed to entire self-reliance." ¹⁴

Prejudice and disdain played deterrent roles in the problem of obtaining whites to command Negroes. General Hunter, in approaching some white officers with the proposition that they transfer to Negro regiments, was greeted with the reply: "What! Command niggers?" ¹⁵ and it was not outside the experience of a few men, after accepting posts in colored commands, to be treated sometimes with contempt by their fellow officers. ¹⁶

The Confederacy made ominous threats against officers of Negro regiments whose misfortune it was to be taken prisoner. In the eyes of the Southern government these men were guilty of inciting servile insurrection and the death penalty could be invoked against them. There is no evidence that the threat was ever carried out, but the Confederate Congress placed a law providing for it on their statute books in April, 1862, and prospective officer candidates knew that the law existed. ¹⁷

These intangible barriers to the recruiting and training of leaders for the Negro soldier seemed to be counterbalanced by opportunities for promotion when transferring to a colored regiment, if one already had a commission, or by the possibility of gaining a commission if one were in the ranks of the Union Army or a civilian with a penchant for command. When a number of soldiers were recruited from the Ninety-fifth Illinois Volunteers, in 1863, for commissions in Negro regiments, even a certain Sergeant Onley Andrus momentarily forgot his deep dislike for the Negro and weighed the advantages of becoming an officer. ¹⁸

¹³ *O. R.*, Ser. 3, vol. III, p. 439.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ B. I. Wiley, *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865*, p. 311.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

¹⁸ F. A. Shannon (Ed.), "Civil War Letters of Sergeant Onley Andrus," *Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences*, vol. XXVIII, No. 4, 1947, pp. 16, 39-40.

On the other hand there were men who sympathized with the Negro and felt it their duty to serve with colored troops. Massachusetts took the lead in the North in the early recruiting of Negro regiments. Among the officers who answered the call to command the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth were two Philadelphia Quakers: Lt. Col. N. P. Hallowell and Major E. N. Hallowell. This regiment counted nearly three hundred Pennsylvania Negroes in its ranks.¹⁹ It was E. N. Hallowell who commanded the left wing of the Fifty-fourth during the night attack on Fort Wagner. The assault was repulsed and the Fifty-fourth suffered grievous casualties. Hallowell was hit three times and was carried to safety by his men. An editorial in *The Press* called the repulse at Wagner a moral victory for the Negro troops and commended the splendid action of Color Sergeant Carney, who planted his flag on the enemy's parapet and when forced to retreat, though wounded, crawled back to his own lines still clutching the colors. In the opinion of this paper, at any rate, the Fifty-fourth had proven itself in the field and the editorial therefore concluded with a plea for more white officers "to lead these gallant men."²⁰

An early step taken by the War Department regarding officers for colored troops was evidenced by General Orders No. 6, of January 14, 1863, to Major General Gillmore in the Department of the South. These orders authorized Gillmore to appoint a board for the purpose of examining white candidates who desired to lead the companies and regiments of colored troops raised in that department. After the candidates had passed the requirements set up by the board, the appointments made by the general were declared provisional. All names and recommendations were forwarded to Washington, whereupon the provisional appointments to commissions were made official through Presidential action.²¹

This system was continued in part by the Union government throughout most of the war. It was not until March 17, 1865, that all officer appointments were made wholly by the War Department on the advice of the Examining Board which had been functioning in Washington under Major Silas M. Casey.²² Four days later an

¹⁹ *The Press*, May 4, 1863.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Aug. 5, 1863.

²¹ *Rebellion Record*, vol. VIII, p. 336.

²² *O. R.*, Ser. 3, vol. V, p. 661.

order from the Secretary of War halted all appointments of officers for colored troops.²³

In general, officers for Negro regiments were chosen more carefully than those for the white troops. Nearly all of the Negroes were United States Colored Troops. There was little state pride at stake in the appointment of their officers and a wide selection was possible. Then, too, many officer candidates were given better training in preparation for their commands.²⁴ In this latter capacity the Free Military School in Philadelphia successfully functioned.

Candidates appearing before the Examining Board in Washington presented a problem to the general in charge. Most of the men recommended by their Departmental Commanders, through the chain of command, had had battle experience. Major General Silas Casey, Board Chairman, observed in September, 1863, that unfortunately nearly fifty per cent of the men examined by the Board were rejected because of their lack of knowledge in tactics and the details of army regulations. A few weeks' close study of such material would have qualified them.²⁵ Thus, valuable time was lost in the search for competent officers for these new troops and it was in recognizing this need for the education of men who desired commands in the colored regiments that the Free Military School for Applicants for the Command of Colored Troops was established.²⁶

The school, suggested by the Examining Board, was founded by the Philadelphia Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments and was inaugurated as a part of its training and recruiting program.²⁷ It became the task of the eleven-man executive committee of the larger Supervisory Committee to review and recommend all applicants for commissions in colored regiments who had been admitted to the Free Military School, who had successfully completed the course and were ready to appear before the Examining Board in Washington.²⁸

²³ *Ibid.*, vol. IV, pp. 1247-1248.

²⁴ F. A. Shannon, "The Federal Government and the Negro Soldier," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. XI, Oct. 1926, p. 578.

²⁵ Thomas Webster to Edwin M. Stanton, April 22, 1864, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Free Military School* (Pamphlet, second ed. 1864), Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna. (Referred to hereafter as *F. M. S.*) (pamphlet).

²⁸ By-Laws of the Supervisory Committee, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

Compared with the early recruiting of colored troops in Pennsylvania, the school began at a late date. The Third, Sixth and Eighth Infantry Regiments of United States Colored Troops had completed training at Camp William Penn on the fringe of Montgomery County at Cheltenham Hill. The Twenty-second Regiment was nearly filled to capacity when, on December 29, 1863, the doors of the school at 1210 Chestnut Street were opened to the first thirty applicants.²⁹ *The Press*, noting the opening of the institution, commented that there was room for thirty more applicants.³⁰ *The Public Ledger* advertised the school in its columns from December 29, 1863, to January 2, 1864, inviting young men who were "physically sound" with at least a common school education to address their letters of application containing character references to Thomas Webster, Chairmen of the Supervisory Committee; Cadwalader Biddle, Secretary; or R. R. Corson, General Agent. Privates and non-commissioned officers of the Union forces were especially urged to apply.³¹ The *Ledger* item furnished brief information relative to the school, noting that there would be three sessions, two during the day and one at night. The institution would operate on a six-day week and the applicants, when accepted, would have the opportunity for practical experience in commanding the troops in training at Camp William Penn. Those who desired more specific information could obtain a pamphlet on request at the Headquarters of Supervisory Committee, 1210 Chestnut Street, or through the newspaper in which the advertisement appeared.³²

The procedure for new applicants was as follows: After the applicant's letter and references had been received and satisfactorily reviewed by the executive committee, a certificate of permission to enter the Free Military School was issued. If the applicants were serving in the army this certificate enabled them to secure a blank issued by the War Department granting a thirty-day furlough in order to attend the Free Military School.³³ The

²⁹ *The Press*, Dec. 30, 1863; *F. M. S.* (pamphlet) states that classes began Dec. 26, 1863. The Free Military Register, Record of Admissions, indicates that the first students registered Dec. 28, 1863.

³⁰ *The Press*, Dec. 30, 1863.

³¹ *Public Ledger*, Dec. 29 to Jan. 2, 1863.

³² *Ibid.*; unidentified newspaper clipping, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³³ Samples of Certificates of Admission and War Department Furlough Blank, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

furloughs which were granted for officer candidate training were officially declared in War Department Order No. 125.³⁴

The Supervisory Committee made a point of explaining to prospective applicants that the men rejected by the Examining Board in Washington were not turned down because the examination was too severe or because only those with college degrees or with experience as officers had any chance of succeeding. These misconceptions had caused officer volunteering to reach a low ebb. A few weeks' study under competent instructors in charge of the Preceptor of the Free Military School, Colonel John H. Taggart, would be sufficient to enable a man to take the examination in Washington with excellent possibilities of success.³⁵

How many prospective candidates leafed through the first prospectus or the second edition of the black and gold pamphlet on the Free Military School it is impossible to tell. The readers were urged, in bold type, to pass on the pamphlets to others after having read the information. Eight thousand copies of the first edition were exhausted in a short time and a second edition was printed early in the spring of 1864.

In the light of modern officer's training developed during World War II, it is interesting to observe that students attending the Free Military School had to provide their own living expenses. Students could board at respectable houses for as little as three dollars and fifty cents a week. Five dollars a week was judged the maximum rate a man would be asked to pay.³⁶ In this sense the Free Military School was not "free," but the cost of maintaining the institution was borne by the Supervisory Committee and necessities such as maps and books were provided by the school for the students' use while in attendance. These supplies had to be returned when the course was completed.³⁷ In short, there was no per diem allowance, subsistence nor mileage vouchers for students of the school. All personal expenses, including the cost of transportation to Philadelphia, board, rent or local carfare had to be paid by the applicants.

Classes were scheduled for three sessions: two day-time and one evening session six days per week, except Saturday evening

³⁴ *F. M. S.* (pamphlet), Barker Collection, H. S. P.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* (Rules of the School in effect on and after Mar. 1, 1864.)

and Sunday. The morning session began at nine and ended at ten thirty. Promptly at ten forty-five the several battalions marched to the parade ground on Locust Street, west of the Academy of Music, where they drilled until noon. The drill usually closed with a dress parade and the students were dismissed after the reading of the General Orders. At two in the afternoon the routine began again. An hour and a half in the classroom studying tactics and army regulations, drill until five, dress parade and dismissal comprised the afternoon schedule. In the evening classes in mathematics were conducted. Students were compelled to attend one session daily. All excuses for absences had to be presented to the director in writing. Any student absent three successive days without authorization was dropped from the rolls. The usual regulations for military schools were in effect. Military courtesy was demanded of the trainees while on the premises of the school, drill ground or Camp William Penn. Class discipline was rigid. Talking or inattention in class could result in dismissal. Visitors were not permitted in the classrooms. If the preceptor or instructor did not feel that a student showed marked improvement within ten days, the student was discharged from the institution. Resignations were permitted, but not if one were in danger of being dropped. Emergency leave for not more than twenty days could be obtained. A surgeon was maintained to administer the physical examination prior to the admission of the applicants and to care for the sick and injured.³⁸

Candidates were given a physical examination before their final acceptance at the school and were also required to take examinations in military science and army regulations. Test standings in these latter examinations resulted in the applicants being placed in one of four classes in session at the school. As they progressed they were promoted from one to the other. The lowest class or Fourth Class was called the School of the Soldier, the Third Class, the School of the Company, the Second Class, the School of the Battalion and, finally, the First Class which studied General Casey's third volume of *Tactics or Evolutions of the Brigade*.³⁹ The time spent in this academic training varied with the individual, but seemed to average two weeks in length.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *F. M. S.* (pamphlet), Barker Collection, Historical Soc. of Penna.

⁴⁰ Free Military School Register, Record of Admissions, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

The Committee made every effort to secure early examination appointments in Washington for the students completing their academic training. While the men waited for their orders to appear before the Board they were given practical experience in commanding troops at Camp William Penn. The candidate's commissioned rank depended upon his individual achievements in the examination at Washington as well as on recommendations from Philadelphia. Applicants who failed the examination could not be re-examined for a commission in the Negro regiments.⁴¹

Some of the candidates who matriculated at the school before going before the Board had been officers in other regiments. For example, a Major Samuel J. Moffatt of New Jersey had been with the Seventy-sixth Pennsylvania and had sixteen general engagements to his credit before enrolling in the school.⁴² Ages and civilian occupations varied. The youngest candidate gave his age as seventeen, the eldest admitted to forty-six. Many of the men were non-commissioned officers, others were privates or civilians. Plasterers, dentists, farmers, students and butchers mingled with each other.⁴³ Some men listed as civilians undoubtedly had seen active service as three-month, six-month or three-year men.⁴⁴ But whether from well-to-do families⁴⁵ or poor, officers, soldiers and civilians came from many parts of the Union to be enrolled in the official Record of Admissions⁴⁶ and attended classes in the unimposing three-story row house at 1210 Chestnut Street.⁴⁷ Not all completed their training or passed the examination at Washington, but successes outnumbered failures and in the spring of 1864 the average daily attendance totaled one hundred and ninety-four.⁴⁸ Applications for admissions were received at the rate of one hundred and seventy per week by April, 1864. Many of these were rejected, of course, but the Committee could point proudly to the records and show that twenty-four to thirty students were sent

⁴¹ *F. M. S.* (pamphlet), Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁴² Free Military School Register, Record of Admissions, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *F. M. S.* (pamphlet), Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁴⁵ Thomas Webster to Edwin M. Stanton, April 22, 1864, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna., "A large proportion of these men are of liberal education, culture and excellent social position."

⁴⁶ Free Military School Register, Record of Admissions, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna., indicates total registration of 1,031 men.

⁴⁷ *F. M. S.* (pamphlet), Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

before the Examining Board in Washington every week. Webster, in writing to Stanton, noted that the number of failures was exceedingly low; only five in one hundred and fifty.⁴⁹ *The Public Ledger* published notices from time to time indicating the success of the candidates appearing before General Casey's Board and on March 14, 1864, said, "All the students of the school who have been sent to Washington, thus far, have passed a successful examination."⁵⁰ On July 11, the same paper called attention to the fact that three hundred and seventy-nine had passed and only twenty-nine had been rejected.⁵¹

Throughout that summer and fall listings appeared in the *Ledger* naming the newly appointed officers and their respective ranks.⁵²

Thomas Webster and the Supervisory Committee had at heart the interests of colored troops not only from Pennsylvania, but from every department in which they were raised. Their efforts to provide these regiments with well trained officers should be sufficient evidence for such a statement. A sore point with these Pennsylvania committeemen was that commanders of departments and "others" had the power to appoint officers for colored troops recruited in their departments. When this occurred the Committee felt the troops were not as well officered as they might have been. Webster suggested that all officers for colored regiments be compelled to take the examination before the Board in Washington.⁵³ As already pointed out, this suggestion was ignored by the War Department and the system was not made uniform until four days before the order was issued which halted the commissioning of officers for colored troops. In urging a uniform policy, the Supervisory Committee and its chairman, Thomas Webster, were undoubtedly correct, but the exigencies of war and the large number of Southern Negroes recruited for the Union forces in areas many miles from Washington demanded immediate officer personnel and helped to make a standard appointing policy untenable.

The Free Military School also endeavored to raise the caliber

⁴⁹ Thomas Webster to Edwin M. Stanton, April 22, 1864, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁵⁰ *Public Ledger*, March 14, 1864.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, July 11, 1864.

⁵² *Ibid.*, July 18, 25; Aug. 2, 15, 22, 29; Sept. 12, 19; Oct. 17, 31; Nov. 7, of 1864.

⁵³ Thomas Webster to Edwin M. Stanton, April 22, 1864, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

of the Negro non-commissioned officer by providing classes for "intelligent, educated men of color" from Maryland, inviting them to attend the Philadelphia School before accepting posts in the Maryland regiments which contained so large a percentage of illiterate Negroes. Twenty-one had enrolled for instruction by March 31, 1864.⁵⁴

In pursuing the objective of better officers for Negro regiments, the Supervisory Committee spent approximately nine thousand dollars.⁵⁵ It had enrolled one thousand thirty-one men and the vast majority of those who had been sent before the Board successfully passed their examinations. The War Department was grateful for the part played by the Free Military School and requested its continuation even after the Committee dissolved itself.⁵⁶ Among others, Colonel Bowman, in charge of the Department of Wilmington, extended his appreciation to the group of Philadelphians who helped make this school possible and asked that they maintain the institution.⁵⁷ But with the dissolution of the Supervisory Committee, the Free Military School, along with the project of regimental recruiting, passed out of existence in Philadelphia as the year 1864 drew to a close.

⁵⁴ *F. M. S.* (pamphlet), Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁵⁵ Treasurer's Report on Dissolution of Committee, Barker Collection, (Expenditure on this item totaled \$8,989.88).

⁵⁶ Edwin M. Stanton to Thomas Webster, Dec. 16, 1864, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; Colonel Bowman to Thomas Webster, Dec. 1, 1864, Barker Collection, Historical Society of Penna.