CAMP WILLIAM PENN AND THE BLACK SOLDIER*

Camp William Penn, located eight miles north of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was like no other military installation during the Civil War. Expressly designed for black volunteers, the facility trained eleven regiments of former slaves and freedmen from its inception in June 1863 until the last regiment departed in May 1865. Nearly 400 white officers and 10,940 enlisted blacks learned the basic art of soldiering within its confines. This successful project resulted primarily from the efforts of a responsive federal government and a committee of white Philadelphians who were instrumental in the camp’s formation and continued existence. Camp William Penn is thus a notable example of civilian-military cooperation in the raising of black regiments during the Civil War.1

Camp William Penn became a facet of a federal program concerned with black soldiers that slowly evolved in the first two years of the war. Abraham Lincoln’s administration, faced with political exigencies, remained vague and non-committal on the question of arming former slaves and freedmen throughout the first year of conflict. However, military officers in 1862 initiated efforts that eventually altered Lincoln’s policy. David Hunter, commander of the Department of the South, enlisted nearly 150 blacks in early April 1862 at Hilton Head, South Carolina. Following early successes Hunter’s program faltered; and on 10 August the general ended it, after failing to secure the administration’s support.2

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While Hunter’s scheme was progressing, the United States Congress incorporated such an idea into federal law. Section 2 of the Militia Act of 17 July 1862 enabled the president to receive blacks into military service. This law helped to spur the government and other officers to recruit blacks. Rufus Saxton, who succeeded Hunter, received orders in late August to enlist 5,000 blacks, and on 7 November 1862 the First South Carolina Volunteers were mustered into service. In Louisiana, Benjamin Butler went ahead and by September formed the First Regiment Louisiana Native Guards, composed of freedmen. Senator James Lane, an amateur soldier, also began a campaign to enlist blacks in Kansas. Ordered by Secretary of war Edwin Stanton to cease such activities on 23 August, Lane persisted and, by the end of October, had raised two regiments. Clearly, the question of arming blacks had largely resolved itself as these activities in the field continued. To coordinate these diverse programs by army officers and Northern states, the War Department eventually established the Bureau for Colored Troops on 22 May 1863.3

The recruiting of black soldiers by Northern state governments also proceeded slowly. Massachusetts, with the firm support of Governor John A. Andrew, organized the first black regiment in a Northern state. By late May 1863 the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers departed for the battle front. A short time later the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Volunteers departed for the battle front. A short time later the Fifty-fifth regiment was organized. The ranks of these two regiments were filled with blacks from several Northern states.4

The recruitment by Massachusetts of blacks from other states provoked action in Pennsylvania. Nearly every company of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts contained blacks from the Keystone state. A Philadelphia newspaper in June 1863 claimed that 1,500 blacks from the state had already enlisted in Massachusetts.5 A Philadelphian, Norwood Penrose Hallowell, became colonel of the Fifty-fifth. This exodus of black volunteers from Pennsylvania was understandable, for the administration of Governor Andrew G. Curtin had


5. Philadelphia Inquirer, 26 June 1863.
previously spurned offers of black troops. Shortly after the firing on Fort Sumter, three companies of blacks from Philadelphia volunteered for service but were refused by the state authorities. Of course, at that time no Northern state would accept black soldiers. Another company from Philadelphia traveled to Harrisburg during the Confederate invasion of June 1863 to offer its services in the crisis, only to be returned promptly to Philadelphia. Though Pennsylvania proceeded more slowly than Massachusetts, nevertheless by the spring of 1863 efforts were being initiated in Philadelphia.\(^6\)

A group of white citizens of Philadelphia—a city of “strong, widespread anti-Negro sentiment”?—met on 23 March 1863 to organize a committee to recruit for black regiments. Colonel William Frismuth, a former cavalry officer, was selected as chairman. “All appeared very enthusiastic in the new understanding,” a newspaper correspondent reported.\(^8\) Five thousand circulars were ordered to be distributed to blacks and several letters from wealthy blacks offering $60,000 to finance the drive were read. Frismuth asserted that he had assurances of support from Lincoln, Stanton, and Curtin. In order to secure this support in official orders, James Logan was delegated to go to Washington. The meeting adjourned on the optimistic note that an entire brigade could be formed in ninety days. “As this enterprise is a new and novel one,” a newspaperman concluded, “much interest will no doubt be taken in it by our citizens.”\(^9\)

That same evening a large number of blacks gathered at the Colored Institute on Lombard Street to meet members of the committee. The blacks claimed that four companies were already drilling, and fifteen other companies, each of ninety-six men, were offered to Colonel Frismuth. The chairman, along with other members, spoke to the gathering, encouraging the blacks to enlist.\(^10\)

Two days later the committee met again to discuss the news from Logan in Washington. The delegate reported that he met with Governor Curtin who was visiting the city, and the latter stated that immediate authority would be forthcoming to form a brigade of 5,500 men. This telegram aroused “considerable enthusiasm” among

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 26 March 1863.
the members. The circulars for the blacks were also received, and plans for their distribution were formulated. Some members proposed that all recruiting of Pennsylvania blacks by other states be halted by the state government. The committee adjourned, agreeing to reconvene upon the return of Logan. 11

Logan arrived in Philadelphia the next day, and the committee met that afternoon. Logan reported that he had spoken to both Curtin and Stanton, who personally assured the delegate that authority would be granted. The members approved a motion to thank the Governor formally. Logan also reported that he spoke with a Mr. Holmes, a black from the interior of the state, who claimed that many of his people were willing to enlist. After Colonel Frismuth related an encounter with a Massachusetts recruiter at the Colored Institute, the committee moved to ask the Pennsylvania legislature to prevent the outside recruiting of its blacks. The next day the committee reconvened to draw up a petition to be broadcast across the state seeking the support of white Pennsylvanians. 12

At this point, however, the proceedings of this committee were no longer reported in the newspapers. What caused this is not altogether apparent. Its failure to receive the promised authority from the War Department certainly was of vital importance. There is no evidence in the Official Records that Stanton granted such authority to the committee. Stanton finally conferred the department's official blessing in June 1863 on the Supervising Committee for Recruiting Colored Troops, the organization which created and governed Camp William Penn. Whether the members of this early committee formed the Supervising Committee cannot be ascertained, because the newspapers do not list the members of the early committee. In all probability some of these public-minded citizens joined the latter organization. 13

The granting of authorization to the Supervising Committee to raise black regiments coincided with the Federal government's establishment of a Bureau of Colored Troops. With this official endorsement to coordinate the raising of black regiments, the War Department actively sought volunteers. No person or group of persons could recruit blacks without specific authorization from the

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 27, 28 March 1863.
13. A careful reading of both the Philadelphia Inquirer and Public Ledger and O.R., Series III, Volumes 3 and 4 failed to provide further material on the committee. The assumptions of this paragraph were based on this lack of documented evidence.
War Department. The Bureau appointed federal recruiters and authorized the creation of recruiting stations and depots.\textsuperscript{14}

Major George L. Stearns, recruiter for the eastern and middle states, opened headquarters at the Continental Hotel in Philadelphia in early June. Provided with a $5,000 recruiting fund, Stearns actively sought black volunteers and citizen support.\textsuperscript{15}

Prior to Stearns' arrival, a group of Philadelphians, designated as the Citizen's Bounty Fund Committee, petitioned Secretary Stanton to recruit black troops. Stanton telegraphed on 17 June that "proper orders have been issued for raising the troops. The views of the department will be explained to you by Major Stearns."\textsuperscript{16} The committee met in the evening of 19 June at the Sansom Street Hall, and it was moved that a Supervising Committee for Recruiting Colored Troops be formed. Twenty-seven men joined the committee with Thomas Webster as chairman. Sub-committees of Finance, Auditing, and Visiting were created. The Visiting sub-committee was constituted to keep minutes and to visit the training camp that would be erected, devising means of helping the black soldiers. The civilian organization which would administer Camp William Penn had been officially established.\textsuperscript{17}

Three days later the committee received its official orders. "I am instructed by the Secretary of War," the telegram read, "to inform you that you are hereby authorized as the representative of your associate petitioners to raise in Philadelphia, or the eastern part of Pennsylvania, three regiments of infantry, to be composed of colored men, to be mustered into the service of the United States for three years or during the war."\textsuperscript{18} The orders then listed certain specifics—no bounties would be paid; troops would receive ten dollars a month, three of which will be in clothing (white soldiers received thirteen dollars); an officer would be detailed to muster them into service; and finally, one regiment would be recruited at a time. The next to last paragraph of the directive stated: "The troops raised under the foregoing instructions will rendezvous at Camp William Penn, Chelten Hills, near Philadelphia, where they will be received

15. Ibid., pp. 361, 374; Montgomery, "A Union Officer's Recollections Of The Negro As A Soldier," p. 156; Philadelphia Inquirer, 22 June 1863.
and subsisted as soon as they are enlisted, and an officer will be assigned to duty at that post to take command of them on their arrival and make the necessary requisitions for supplies." 19

On 26 June 1863 Camp William Penn opened. Who selected the site is uncertain, for the record is mute. Someone probably suggested the location to the War Department, because it is highly unlikely that it knew of the availability of the site. Thomas Webster remarked in the 19 June meeting that the camp would be established in Philadelphia. 20 Perhaps he or another committee member in a previous letter to Stanton had mentioned the place and its name. Perhaps, too, Major Stearns was told of such an area by a Philadelphian and forwarded the information. One thing is certain—the order authorizing the formation of the black regiments provided the first official designation for Camp William Penn.

Whoever selected the site chose wisely. Eight miles north of Philadelphia and beyond the city limits, the training site was located near "Roadside," the home of abolitionists James and Lucretia Mott in the modern community of LaMott. The camp encompassed an elevated piece of land commanding a splendid view of the cultivated, rolling countryside with nearby streams supplying the necessary water. In addition to the physical advantages, the camp rested only a half mile from Chelten Hills and the depot of the North Pennsylvania Railroad, thereby facilitating travel between the city and the installation. One historian, on the other hand, stated that the camp was located to keep the black recruits out of Philadelphia. Considering the pervasiveness of anti-black feeling in Philadelphia during the war, this was plausible. 21 However, the availability of the land, the physical attributes, and its strategic location near a railroad probably governed its selection. 22

When the camp officially opened on 26 June the response by blacks was immediate. That day Colonel Louis Wagner, a former officer in the Eighty-eighth Pennsylvania Volunteers and recently appointed commander of the training site, mustered in the first company from Philadelphia. Designated as the Third Regiment of U. S. Colored Troops, the volunteers paraded with fife and drum

19. Ibid., p. 405.
in the streets during a "pitiless storm." Three days later a second company entered the army. Blacks throughout the Commonwealth and adjoining states hurried to enlist. In Pennsylvania, they came from the cities of Scranton and Norristown and the counties of Schuylkill, Huntingdon, and Bedford. Two recruits walked from Lancaster. On the evening of 3 July, ninety-six blacks arrived from Buffalo, New York. By 24 July the ranks of the first regiment were filled and recruiting for a second regiment was undertaken.  

During these initial weeks of enthusiastic volunteering, black citizens in Philadelphia lent their support. Mass meetings of blacks had been held in the days prior to the establishment of Camp William Penn. These activities reached a climax on the evening of 6 July at the National Hall, where a large gathering met to encourage black recruiting. A band, playing "national airs," preceded the addresses of distinguished speakers. Congressman William D. Kelly spoke, the first time an elected politician addressed a group of black Philadelphians. On the platform with Kelly was Frederick Douglass, who spoke at length and concluded by saying: "Young men of Philadelphia, you are without excuse. The hour has arrived, and your place is in the Union Army. Remember that the musket—the United States musket with its bayonet of steel—is better than all mere parchment guarantees of liberty." The meeting ended by resolving to raise a full regiment of 800 men from Philadelphia in ten days.  

The Third Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops, meanwhile, by their conduct and willingness, justified the enthusiasm of Philadelphia's citizens. "Subordination," a newspaper reporter remarked, "has been a marked characteristic of the colored troops." Recruiting for the regiment ceased before the end of July as the ranks were filled. However, the roster was incomplete, owing to the care of the federal government in selecting white officers. Scores of officers applied, but many were rejected. By the first week of August all the officers were chosen—veterans from twenty different Federal regiments.  

25. Philadelphia Inquirer, 24 June, 7 July 1863; Philadelphia Public Ledger, 7 July 1863.  
27. Ibid., 30 July, 5, 14, August 1863.
The physical layout of the camp took shape at this time. Shelter tents for the recruits and wall tents for officers were neatly arranged along intersecting company streets. A headquarters tent accommodated Colonel Wagner and his staff. A large flag pole, secured by a recruit, was erected on 15 July, the event being celebrated with a parade on the parade ground situated behind the camp area. The rules governing the camp paralleled regulations in white installations. 28

The training received by the novice volunteers also correlated with standard military practice. Individual companies drilled separately for two hours in the morning while afternoon drills involved maneuvers on a regimental level. Marching in columns, deploying for battle, wheeling left and right, charging in front or on the flanks, firing in volleys, and forming hollow squares all were executed and practiced in accordance with typical Civil War military teaching. The program was intensive, directed by Colonel Wagner, his staff, and the regimental officers. 29

Most of the eleven regiments organized and trained at the camp for only two months. Military requirements at the front permitted only this brief period of rudimentary soldiering. The Third Regiment, for example, departed the camp on 13 August, forty-nine days after its first member had been sworn in, sailing south on steamers for Charleston, South Carolina. As a regiment's ranks were filled and training begun, another regiment mustered in recruits. This practice continued throughout the camp's existence. Usually only two regiments shared the camp's facilities at the same time, each in a different state of organization and training. 30

The problems concomitant with any military installation during the Civil War also plagued Camp William Penn. Desertion by the recruits persisted as the most serious problem in the camp. Numbers of men deserted, either leaving army life entirely or reenlisting at another location to collect a bounty. One unfortunate deserter from the camp traveled to Delaware, enlisted as a substitute, collected his money, and, much to his chagrin and surprise, found himself returned to William Penn for training, his bounty money still in his pocket. His punishment probably consisted of being placed on barrel heads at the entrance to the camp, the usual method discomforting these absconders. No method proved effective. If a Civil

28. Ibid., 20 July 1863.
29. Ibid.
War soldier wanted to desert, he simply walked away, relatively certain that he would not be caught.\textsuperscript{31}

Colonel Wagner's attempts to prevent desertion caused, on one occasion, a tragic and nearly explosive incident. One section of the camp's boundary had been selected as a favorite point of exit by the deserters. On the evening of 10 August, Private Charles A. Ridley, a recently enlisted member of the Sixth Regiment, patrolled that sector. Private Ridley's first night on guard duty had been quiet until a small group of white neighbors approached the fence. Returning from a swim, two men and several boys halted at the fence. Private Ridley ordered them to move on. Everyone started to walk away except William Fox, who claimed he had "a perfect right to remain there."\textsuperscript{32} Fox's brother-in-law urged him to leave, but he refused. Ridley, nervous and unprepared for such a confrontation, twice called for the Corporal of the Guard. A group of soldiers, drawing water from a nearby stream, asked what was wrong. Ridley shouted that some white men refused to leave. Someone in the group yelled "shoot them." Ridley aimed his rifle, saying, "Are you going to leave? If you don't I'll shoot you." Fox replied: "I guess you won't."\textsuperscript{33}

The minie ball struck Fox in the right wrist and coursed downward into his abdomen. With the firing, officers hurried to the site. The post surgeon, Dr. J. F. Holt, examined Fox and decided to move him to a nearby house. The stubborn gardener died an hour later, leaving a wife and four children to mourn.\textsuperscript{34}

The fatal shooting caused an immediate furor among the white populace. The local coroner asked Colonel Wagner to surrender Ridley, but Wagner refused until ordered to do so by the War Department. Ridley told Wagner that he thought Fox was trying to crawl over the fence. Philadelphia newspapers, however, gave the incident much attention. One described the deceased as a man who "bore an excellent character for mildness, honesty and sobriety."\textsuperscript{35} Another asserted that "the shooting, as it now appears, was wholly unjustifiable. There was no attempt to get within the ground, nor was any thing done to call for interference on the part of the sentry."\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{itemize}
  \item 31. Philadelphia \textit{Inquirer}, 31 August, 2 September 1863.
  \item 32. Ibid., 10 August 1863.
  \item 34. Philadelphia \textit{Inquirer}, 10 August 1863.
  \item 35. Ibid., 11 August 1863.
  \item 36. Philadelphia \textit{Public Ledger}, 10 August 1863.
\end{itemize}
Wagner nevertheless refused to deliver Ridley to the county officials. Eventually the excitability subsided, the shooting of a white man by a black forgotten. Charles Ridley was mustered out of the service with his company on 20 September 1865.37

Incidents attendant to such a military camp periodically arose. However, none equalled the shooting of William Fox. Complaints over the poor quality of bread, border state slaveowners demanding runaway slaves, soldiers involved in drunken brawls, and personal attacks in Philadelphia required attention from both Colonel Wagner and the Supervising Committee. The committee particularly endeavored to insure that the black soldiers were well cared for and reasonably protected. The result overall was an ably commanded, generally orderly training camp. The camp’s white neighbors and numerous citizens of Philadelphia generously supported this effort.38

“The stay at Camp William Penn was a very bright spot in my army experience,” an officer remembered. “We were just in the suburbs of Philadelphia and went into the city often. Situated among thoroughly enthusiastic Union people, our service with the colored men made us heroes to our good Quaker friends.”39 This comment aptly described the reaction of numerous white people to the camp. “The camp is visited daily by large numbers of citizens,” a newspaper reported. “It presents a neat and orderly appearance, which will at once attract the attention of any one who may visit it.”40 One group of visitors even provided a large tent to be used as a school for the recruits, with members of a religious society teaching the classes.41

The most popular events, producing large crowds of visitors, were troop reviews and flag presentations. On 18 July the Third Regiment paraded for local people and then listened to an address by Frederick Douglass. The Sixth Regiment drilled for another group of visitors on 11 September, forming squares, charging with bayonets, and loading and firing. Thirteen days later a grand review of the Sixth was held for Major General George Cadwalader, Colonel Wagner’s superior officer. Many people attended the review. The trains to the

38. Philadelphia Inquirer, 21, 22 August, 19 November 1863; Taylor, Philadelphia In the Civil War, p. 189; Montgomery, “A Union Officer’s Recollections Of The Negro As A Soldier,” p. 189.
40. Philadelphia Inquirer, 2 September 1863.
41. Ibid.
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Camp were badly crowded and the road jammed with vehicles. The regiment paraded in a hollow near the railroad station, allowing the throng of people to sit on the hillsides. "The soldiers," a reporter commented, "presented a very neat appearance. The manner in which they went through the evolutions of the drill created quite a sensation. Their marching around the brow of the hills and forming into divisions, was a splendid sight." These displays of the military art entertained the visitors until the camp closed.

Flag presentations to the regiments provided opportunities for the citizens to honor the black troops. At least five regiments received flags from generous supporters. The banners were generally highly ornate and colorful. The flag of the Thirty-second Regiment, presented by the Quaker residents of Chelten Hills, was silk with an oil portrait of John Brown on one side. The portrayal of a freedman escaping his chains and seizing a musket and uniform adorned the flag of the Twenty-fifth Regiment; the scene painted by a black from Philadelphia. These ceremonies usually consisted of the formal presentation, speeches, a parade, and refreshments. One of the last public events at the camp was a flag presentation.

Secretary of War Stanton on 22 September 1863 named Camp William Penn a general training site for blacks from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. The progress of the camp had satisfied Stanton, and he ordered material for barracks and other buildings. Within three months, barracks, officers’ quarters, mess halls, guard houses, and a chapel replaced the shelter and wall tents. On 8 December the Eighth Regiment moved into the new barracks. Nine of the eleven regiments would utilize the wooden structures.

Life at the camp generally pleased most of the officers and recruits. One officer described it as "happy times." Christmas day 1863, for example, "went 'merry as a marriage bell,' big dinner, sham battle, etc., etc.," Lieutenant Oliver Willcox Norton wrote to his

42. Ibid., 25 September 1863.
43. Ibid., 20 July, 12, 16, 25 September 1863.
sister. Relations between the white officers and black soldiers were excellent. The recruits willingly submitted to the rigorous training and the military discipline. Punishments, when meted out, mainly caused embarrassment and discomfort for the culprits. Colonel Wagner and his staff directed the camp ably and efficiently, providing many soldiers and officers with memories of months pleasantly enjoyed.

On 2 May 1865, with the war ended, the Twenty-fourth Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops marched out of the camp, the last regiment to leave. Camp William Penn had functioned for slightly over twenty-two months. "The regiments that went from this camp were among the best in the army," wrote George Washington Williams. "Their officers had been carefully selected and specially trained in a military school under competent teachers, and the troops themselves were noted for intelligence, proficiency, and pluck." These regiments acquired fine combat records at Bermuda Hundred, Fort Fisher, Chaffin's Farm, Dutch Gap, Fort Wagner, Petersburg, and in other lesser engagements.

Camp William Penn, therefore, proved to be a highly successful undertaking. The Supervising Committee for Recruiting Colored Troops deserved much of the credit for this. These public-spirited citizens raised ample funds from businesses and private donors, established a school to train officers, carefully supervised activities pertaining to the camp and, above all, diligently protected the welfare of the black soldiers. Though the camp was dismantled after the last regiment departed and no physical markings survived, its existence serves as an early landmark to the entrance of blacks into the United States Army.

49. Williams, Negro Troops, p. 120.
50. Taylor, Philadelphia In the Civil War, pp. 190-194.
51. Frederick M. Binder, "Philadelphia's Free Military School," Pennsylvania History, 17 (October, 1950):282-291; in Williams, Negro Troops, pp. 119-120, the committee reported that it had secured $33,388 to support the first four regiments.