

AFRICAN CANADIANS IN UNION BLUE

ENLISTING FOR THE CAUSE IN THE CIVIL WAR

RICHARD M. REID



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INTRODUCTION

ON 18 MARCH 1863, Samuel J. Robinson enlisted in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. He was one of the earliest recruits in the first black regiment raised in a Northern state during the Civil War. Born in Toronto in 1841, Robinson was working as a printer in Rochester, New York, by 1863.¹ He was promoted to first sergeant within two months of his enlistment and transferred to the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts to help organize that regiment. On 24 June, he was made the regimental sergeant major, and by the end of the year he had become the quartermaster sergeant.² Five years after the war, Robinson was back in Rochester, working as a labourer and living with his wife, Mary, an American citizen.³ In the year after Robinson volunteered, Joel Monroe, a thirty-four-year-old farmer, left his home in Oro Township, Simcoe County, Canada West, and joined the Twenty-ninth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, a black regiment being raised in that state.⁴ A contributing factor in his decision to enlist may have been the recent death of his wife and child. Monroe survived the war and lived for a number of years in New Haven, where he remarried. However, for unknown reasons he left New Haven and his wife and returned to his province of birth, where he died at his brother's house in April 1890.⁵ Shortly after Monroe volunteered, William Jones, a young labourer from Saint John, New Brunswick, signed a contract in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with Thomas Boyd, agreeing to serve as Boyd's substitute in the army.⁶ Jones served in the

Third United States Colored Troops until he was mustered out in October 1865. He then returned to the Maritimes, and in 1871 he was living in Amherst, Nova Scotia, with his wife, Amelia.⁷ Although these three men, and many others like them, were born and raised in British North America, their actions indicate that they conceived of their world as being broader than just their province. They lived in communities with complex social, economic, and intellectual ties that transcended national borders. At the same time, place mattered for many of these individuals, and “home” exerted a strong centripetal force. Their actions, and what they revealed about both the Civil War and the communities from which they came, form the core of this book.

The more that I learned about the black volunteers from British North America, the more I was convinced that their story was both interesting and historically significant. Understanding why these men voluntarily left their homes and fought in a “foreign” war at great risk to themselves gave me new insights into a range of Canadian and American issues. The men’s willingness to sacrifice so very much, coupled with the knowledge that black Union soldiers faced greater risks in combat than their white counterparts, gave me a sense of how strongly the message of the Emancipation Proclamation resonated in the black communities outside the United States. Moreover, where, when, and how the men enlisted, how well they served in the military, and their decisions once the war ended gave me a fuller understanding of the complex nature of the black military experience in general. Because the numbers of volunteers who came from the various British colonies provide a rough measurement of the strength of the colonies’ transnational ties, Canadian historians should find this a useful starting place for future research. Of course, the problem for any researcher is that few volunteers left personal records in the form of letters, diaries, or memoirs to explain their decision to enlist. Or if they did, much was not preserved, because the records were undervalued in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result, scholars are obliged to infer their motives from their behaviour and to utilize other sources to flesh out their stories, as will be discussed in Chapter 2. The paucity of sources and the associated methodological problems may partially explain why little has been written about these men. This is unfortunate because their commitment to the struggle against slavery deserves to be known.

By the time the war ended, nearly 2,500 young black men from all across British North America had followed Robinson, Monroe, and Jones to become part of the Northern war effort. Most served in the infantry, cavalry,

and artillery regiments of the Union army, but hundreds of others helped man vessels in the Union navy, blockading the Southern coast or searching for Confederate privateers on the high seas. These men clearly believed that they had a stake in the outcome of the bloody struggle convulsing the United States. For both black British North Americans and African Americans who lived in the British colonies, President Lincoln's Final Emancipation Proclamation of 1 January 1863 and his authorization of the use of black soldiers as an official part of the Union army symbolized the start of a dramatic if uncertain new era, one that was important to all black North Americans. Of course, these momentous changes had an uneven impact. For African Americans, especially black Southerners, emancipation ushered in a transformative phase in which old social relationships were destroyed and new hopes were raised that a more equitable set of racial associations had begun. Persons who were chattel slaves in 1861 were free Americans by the end of 1865. For black Northerners, the destruction of slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment's entrenchment of black citizenship rights opened the door for fuller citizenship than they had ever enjoyed before. Indeed, Eric Foner argues that "the decade following the Civil War witnessed astonishing advances in the political, civil, and social rights of Northern blacks."⁸

Those changes would benefit African Canadians as well. Emancipation and more equitable treatment of African Americans in the Northern states during Reconstruction inevitably expanded the world of the black residents in the newly formed Dominion of Canada and generated new social and economic opportunities for them. This process was inevitable, given the geographic and intellectual borderland in which they lived.⁹ Even before the war, many black British North Americans had strong transnational ties, both physically and psychologically, to black communities in the Northern states, but prior to 1861 few were willing to move permanently to the United States.¹⁰ Nevertheless, like Robinson, Monroe, and Jones, many blacks born in the British North American colonies believed that the war concerned them in important ways. The young men who acted on this belief and went south to fight changed both themselves and their communities. In the post-war era, the world of most black North Americans had been dramatically altered, and young black men from British North America had been part of that transformation. The destruction of slavery and the repeal of the most discriminatory laws in the Northern states ended the desire of some African Americans to leave the United States. Few Americans, black or white, migrated north after 1867, when the United Province of Canada (consisting of

the administrative districts of Canada West and Canada East), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia united to form the Dominion of Canada.¹¹ At the same time, the new opportunities in the United States for black residents, including the right to become an American citizen, led an increased number of African Canadians to relocate and begin a new life south of the border. In keeping with what would be a long Canadian tradition, however, these changes would have an asymmetrical impact on the various provinces.

Historians have long been aware of African Americans' movement into the British North American colonies, including fugitives fleeing slavery and free-born blacks who were disgusted with the discriminatory laws of many Northern states. Both Sharon A. Roger Hepburn and Harvey Amani Whitfield capture much of the tension, aspirations, and motivation of these borderland migrants in the decades leading up to the Civil War.¹² Even when settled in the British colonies, many African Americans experienced, in the words of Gustavo Cano, a sense of "being here and there at the same time."¹³ They maintained strong ties to black communities in the United States, connections reinforced by clergy and educators, and many of them decided to return home during or after the Civil War. Fewer historians, however, have examined the transnational ties of the British North American-born black residents, especially in the years before 1861. Nevertheless, a permeable border allowed ideas and people to flow in both directions. The young black men from British North America, especially those born in the British colonies, provide a prism through which to examine both the cross-border ties and the changing nature of black involvement in the war.

As a result, one way of assessing whether black British North Americans saw the Civil War as important to their lives is to determine how many enlisted in the Union military. A small number of recruits would suggest that they were largely uninvolved and perhaps uninterested in the war, whereas a significant number would imply the existence of strong cross-border ties and would open a new area for exploration. Thus, the first goal of this study was to estimate, as accurately as possible, the number of black British North American-born soldiers and sailors who fought in the war.¹⁴ Assessing their numbers and determining their place of residence made it possible not only to analyze their contribution to the Union war effort but also to get a sense of the engagement and transnational values of the various provincial black communities. At the very least, the information raises questions regarding whether the actions of volunteers reflected the values and ideas of their elders and neighbours. Such an analysis should also allow a more nuanced

understanding of the diversity and behaviour of the black communities in British North America during the Civil War era. In addition, the actions of the soldiers provide a lens to examine the changing nature of the Union's biracial military struggle and the international response to the implicit message of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The behaviour of these young black men adds a corrective to some of the popular misconceptions regarding the war. All too often foreign-born recruits were depicted as mercenaries who joined solely for the bounty money or as dupes who were manipulated and exploited by officials in a conflict in which they themselves had little stake. Certainly, many Northern contemporaries distrusted the commitment of the foreigners who entered the army, whereas Southerners then and later portrayed the Union army as being full of foreign soldiers of fortune.¹⁵ Subscribing to this attitude, Union officials at the time associated desertion with cities, large bounties, and foreigners. They reported as "probable" that a close examination would reveal "that desertion is a crime of foreign rather than native birth."¹⁶ Historians no longer believe that foreign-born soldiers were disproportionately represented in the Union army and have increasingly depicted these recruits as having as many, if different, ideological reasons for entering the war as their native-born comrades.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, much of the literature on the foreign-born soldiers in the Union army that discusses motivation, military service, or the degree of subsequent societal assimilation has concentrated on the Irish and German recruits who made up the bulk of the soldiers born outside the United States.¹⁸ Much less has been written about the "invisible" recruits, either white or black, who came from British North America, although their reasons for volunteering were equally complex, and they faced as many decisions when the war was over. These men also represented the foreign element in the Union military. Although the black recruits from British North America were limited in number, their study nonetheless enables an understanding of the social changes that flowed out of the black military experience.

This book is organized in a way that will hopefully allow readers to better understand the varied backgrounds of the black volunteers from British North America as well as the changing nature of their participation in the war effort. Although the black communities in the five British colonies had much in common, their size and social makeup differed as did their ties to black communities in the United States. Chapter I examines their nature and

evolution on the eve of the Civil War as a precondition to understanding the involvement of recruits during the war. Chapter 2 measures the strength of the black response outside the United States by establishing how many black British North American–born volunteers joined in the war effort. This chapter also discusses some of the methodological challenges facing researchers who wish to re-create the lives of those who left few personal records. Hundreds of black Union sailors referred to a British North American colony as their place of birth, and they are the subject of Chapter 3. An examination of their experiences shows not only that the war afloat was very different from that on land but also that their motivations and expectations differed strongly from those of black soldiers.

The men who joined the army, more than eight hundred of whom listed their place of birth as British North America, make up the largest group of volunteers studied in this book, and their experience takes up two chapters. The first of these, Chapter 4, looks at the Lincoln administration's 1863 decision to allow black regiments in the Union army and the positive response of black recruits throughout that year. The official acceptance of black soldiers and the repeated assurances during the first months of recruiting that they would be treated in the same manner as white soldiers implied a new role for them in society and promised an affirmation of their manhood. Nevertheless, in this liminal stage, a series of factors soon constrained the number of recruits who came forward. The early reports of the Union army's discriminatory policies, best exemplified by the War Department's decision to pay black soldiers half of what their white counterparts received, plus the threats from the Confederate Congress and military officials that captured black soldiers would not be treated as legitimate prisoners of war, deterred many potential new recruits. Most of the men who joined in 1863 had understood that they would face far greater risks and harsher work conditions than their white comrades, but they had not expected to be treated as second-class soldiers. When this occurred, many became angry and bitter, believing that they had been deceived by Union recruiters.

In the second half of 1864 and early 1865, the numbers of black British North American recruits increased, reflecting a renewed belief that the army would deal equitably with them. At the same time, their methods and reasons for joining may have changed, a topic that is the focus of Chapter 5. Many men, highly motivated but drawn from a working-class background, took advantage of the money being offered as bounties for volunteers or as payments for substitutes. The records reveal that a volunteer who was careful

and informed about where and when he enlisted could earn hundreds of dollars upon recruitment, although not all men were careful or informed.

Chapter 6 looks at the careers of five doctors, all of whom practised or were educated in Canada West. They were among the most cosmopolitan of the men studied, and much more than the enlisted men, they tested the limits of change that American society would accept. During the war, four of them offered their medical services to the Union army and spent most of their time working in the Washington area hospitals and camps for black refugees. In very different ways, all five doctors were searching for their “place” in society, both professionally and socially. Although establishing professional stature in the United States would prove more difficult than in Canada, only one doctor chose to return to a medical practice in Ontario.

The final chapter explores the post-war lives of the veterans and their families, and tries to capture the diversity of their experiences. When the war ended, most black veterans re-entered civilian life, and many simply disappeared from the existing records. Nevertheless, the post-war world had been significantly altered for all black residents of North America. Broad demographic shifts and individual histories together give some indication as to how the black communities responded to the new opportunities and challenges of post-war North America.

Although much of this book concentrates on the war and its impact, an important theme is the movement and historical agency of the various black communities across British North America as they adjusted to the changes triggered by the war. The men who are the primary subject of this book were not mere pawns, manipulated by external forces. Rather, they were independent beings who made complex decisions in difficult situations. Many of their choices regarding when, where, and how they would serve, though constrained, were closely tied to the multifaceted dynamics of being black in nineteenth-century North America. Most of their decisions were influenced by the restrictions placed on blacks in a largely white and hostile society. And yet part of their mobility and their search for a better social and economic life for themselves and their families would resonate with other socio-ethnic groups in North America. North Americans were highly mobile, and few restrictions stopped them from crossing borders in the nineteenth century. For Canadians, it is worth remembering that John Kenneth Galbraith once wrote that to “The Scotch” of southwestern Ontario, among whom he grew up in the 1920s, Canadian identity was worth five dollars a week. When the wage difference between Detroit and home exceeded

that level, he observed, people simply picked up and moved south. They preferred being Canadian, but they didn't prefer it that much. Galbraith himself left for good during the 1930s. The young black men who are the focus of this book showed at least as much agency in carving out their own lives during and after the war.