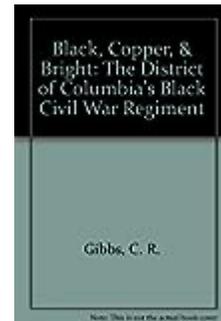


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

C. R. Gibbs. *Black, Copper, and Bright: The District of Columbia's Black Civil War Regiment.* Silver Spring, MD: Three Dimensional Publishing, 2002. 280 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-877835-81-0.



Reviewed by Christine Cohn (American University)

Published on H-DC (April, 2006)

C. R. Gibbs has written an interesting and valuable addition to Washington, D.C.'s history with an account of The First Regiment of United States Colored Troops (the 1st USCT), which was the first black regiment to be formally mustered into federal service during the Civil War. *Black, Copper, & Bright: The District of Columbia's Black Civil War Regiment* is not intended to be a full history of the battles and marches of the 1st USCT; instead, it seeks to recognize the men who used their personal freedom to advance collective goals. Gibbs traces the efforts of these African-American men to serve the Union, fight for freedom for the enslaved, and to achieve civil rights for all blacks. Gibbs's goal is to add a missing chapter to the history of the nation's capital, which he does quite nicely.

The First Regiment was formed by two white chaplains, J. D. Turner and W. G. Raymond, and led by the Reverend Henry McNeal Turner, famed pastor of the Israel Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill. The regiment participated in numerous pivotal battles including the Battle of Wilson Wharf, Virginia, the June 1864 battle at Petersburg, Virginia, and the capture and guarding of Portsmouth, Virginia. It also participated in General William Tecumseh Sherman's march through North Carolina and Virginia.

C. R. Gibbs divides his book into four sections: the

formation of the First Regiment and its military history; a close examination of the Reverend Henry McNeal Turner; a study of Sergeant Charles Henry Brown and his ancestors; and, finally, the victorious homecoming of the First Regiment, its veterans' participation in suffrage campaigns in the District, and its legacy.

The book begins with a helpful overview of the origins of black regiments, including the Massachusetts 54th and 55th, in which many District residents served. Despite severe black codes in the District and neighboring Maryland and Virginia and a 1792 law prohibiting black recruits, free black men and escaped male slaves had been eager to serve since the start of the Civil War. Following the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863, J. D. Turner and W. G. Raymond lobbied President Lincoln to form a black regiment from the District. Anxious to participate in the war and supportive of black men's attempts to fight, these persistent white men had little experience commanding troops but were armed with numerous and effusive recommendations. Their efforts were valiant and sincere, if not fully philanthropic—commanding a black regiment offered white officers an opportunity to advance quickly in the service. Lincoln approved their request and granted his support. By May 1863, the two men had posted notices and begun recruiting for the first "Colored Regiment in the District

of Columbia.”

Gibbs describes the origins, formation, outfitting, and training of the First Regiment along with the support and opposition the troops received. Soldiers were recruited from hospitals and prisons and scores of contrabands were enlisted. By the summer of 1863, enough men were assembled to allow the regiment to move to Camp Greene on Analostan Island (now Theodore Roosevelt Island). The second chapter discusses the regiment’s journey through military, political, and social battles until the regiment was mustered out in September 1865. Gibbs not only describes the regiment’s major battles but illuminates issues such as unequal pay, inadequate or absent medical care, morale, violence and safety on and off the battlefield, and public opinion toward the troops throughout the South.

The chapter on the life of the Reverend Henry McNeal Turner is descriptive and engaging. Gibbs gives readers an appreciation of life for free blacks in the antebellum South as well as a window into the District’s black society during the Civil War. Once assigned to the District, Turner began assisting enslaved members of his congregation. After 1862, Turner and his church greatly increased their activities to meet the housing, education, employment, and religious needs of the self-emancipated slaves who were pouring into the city. Turner’s actions during the war and support of his troops exemplified the role of many Civil War chaplains. Gibbs concludes with a discussion of the struggle for black suffrage in the District after the war ended. Many of the regiment’s veterans, including Turner, participated in this monumental effort.

Although *Black, Copper & Bright* presents little in-depth analysis of the racial or political environment of the period, the reader does gain an understanding of the

atmosphere surrounding the brave men of the First Regiment. Gibbs not only adds to the general history of the District but also to the history of slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War in the District. He gives a wonderful account of the District’s Emancipation Proclamation on April 16, 1862. Using quotes from slaves and excerpts from black city newspapers, he provides a vivid account of the joy slaves felt when they heard the news. This is a valuable addition to the scholarship on emancipation in the District. However, a lack of citations is troubling. For example, Gibbs informs readers that Mary Todd Lincoln contributed two hundred dollars to the Contraband Relief Association, yet he fails to provide sources for this story (p. 18). A greater problem is the book’s confusing structure, which can cause the reader to stop and reread in order to identify the speaker or author of a quote. Much of this problem could have been resolved by better editing.

Nevertheless, *Black, Copper & Bright* is a valuable contribution to many subjects, not just the history of Washington, D.C. Gibbs notes that his work is only the first step in uncovering the full history of each First Regiment soldier, which would be welcome news to historians and genealogists alike. There are wonderful photographs, including the only known photo of the First Regiment in formation. Reproduced images of primary documents greatly enhance the content, and Gibbs makes extensive use of military records and black newspapers. Most important, he has created a comprehensive roster of the First Regiment that will serve researchers well. Aside from a historical accounting of the First Regiment, this genealogical resource may be the book’s most valuable part. *Black, Copper & Bright*, along with the companion website (<http://www.3dpublishing.com/bcb/>), should be read and referenced by all who are studying Civil War military or black history in the District.

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