

Black Arkansans in the Military Until Desegregation

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COMMON SEARCH TERMS

- colored troops
- negro troops
- colored infantry
- colored regiment
- colored volunteer
- colored soldier
- colored Immunes
- negro soldier
- colored soldiers called
- colored camp
- negro register
- colored register
- negro war savings
- war colored
- negro war
- negro officer
- negro camp

The first all-Black military units in Arkansas were formed in 1863 during the Civil War. Though Black Arkansans were allowed to join the military, they were typically given inferior jobs and segregated from white troops. Black troops were expected to perform at the same level as white troops while facing unfair and unequal treatment. Despite this inequality, Black divisions were an important part of the U.S. military until its desegregation after World War II.

The U.S. government authorized the first Black troops during the Civil War. The federal government allowed Black men to serve in the Union army after the War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops in 1863. In Arkansas, the draw to military service stemmed from a declaration by Union General Samuel R. Curtis. When Curtis crossed into Arkansas, he stated that any enslaved people forced to work against the Union army would have their freedom if they escaped from the Confederates and joined the Union side. Many enslaved people took this offer, and the Union army accumulated a following of formerly enslaved people as they moved toward Helena. The eastern part of Arkansas became a focal point of freedom, with numerous slave refugee, or “contraband,” camps forming in the area. Many men in these camps joined the Union army and overall, more than 5,500 formerly enslaved Arkansans enlisted in the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT).



During the Civil War, Black troops were led by white officers and initially paid half as much as white soldiers. In 1864 their pay was adjusted so that Black soldiers earned as much as white soldiers. Black troops were commended on their fighting skills by officers and fellow soldiers, and the Confederate army was convinced they were formidable troops. Black soldiers had every reason to be formidable opponents as they fought to end slavery and save their lives, since the Confederate Congress proclaimed they would execute any Black Union soldier they captured. Fortunately, the Union side won the Civil War and slavery was abolished. By the end of the war, Black Arkansas regiments had fought in 29 battles and skirmishes. After the war, the USCT were disbanded.

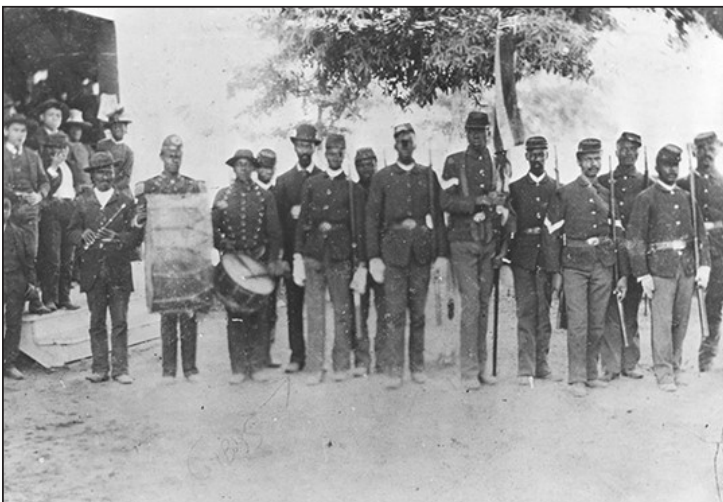
In 1866, the year after the Civil War, Congress authorized the creation of new Black regiments to serve in the Army. These soldiers had the distinction of being the first Black regiments formed during peacetime in the regular U.S. Army. The Army searched for Black troops to enlist from select states in the central U.S., including Arkansas. One of the new regiments that looked to enlist Black Arkansans was the 10th Cavalry Regiment. These new regiments enlisted many of the soldiers who had served in the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War. The Black regiments formed in the 1860s went on to serve in several wars, nationally

Top: Black Arkansans during World War I. Courtesy of Michael B Dougan via Encyclopedia of Arkansas.

and internationally, including the Indian Wars, Spanish-American War, and Philippine-American War.

From their inception, the Black Army regiments fought in the Indian Wars across the Southwest U.S. and Great Plains region until the early 1890s. As settlers moved into Native American lands in the West, conflicts persisted between the groups and the U.S. Army, including the Black regiments, fought in many battles to further colonists' westward expansion. In the 1870s, the 10th Cavalry earned the nickname "Buffalo Soldiers," which is said to have originated from Native Americans referring to the Black soldiers as buffalos due to their appearance. Though originally referring to the 10th Cavalry, this nickname was later used for all the Black regiments created in 1866. The Buffalo Soldiers served in many capacities in the West, and in addition to combat, they helped develop the infrastructure of the country by assisting with road building and escorting the U.S. mail. Buffalo Soldiers were involved in close to 200 major and minor engagements across the U.S, where dozens of Black soldiers earned medals of honor. In the late 1890s, after the Indian Wars, Buffalo Soldiers were sent to fight in international conflicts for the first time.

In the late 1800s, Cubans were fighting for independence from Spanish rule. After hearing reports of the fighting, American newspapers published numerous articles about the conflict, with many endorsing U.S. involvement to push out Spanish control and help Cuba gain independence. During this time, some Americans mistakenly believed Black soldiers would be better suited to fighting in the Caribbean due to a natural immunity to tropical diseases and being accustomed to the hot climate. The U.S. Army formed regiments they thought would be immune to tropical diseases, either because the soldiers had already had yellow fever or were thought to be naturally immune because they were Black. These regiments became known as "Immunes," and included several all-Black regiments, though officially they were identified as part of the U.S. Volunteer Infantry. The United States eventually intervened in 1898 to help Cubans fight against Spain, beginning the Spanish-American War. Regiments from the Buffalo Soldiers and Immunes were sent to fight in Cuba. Arkansas newspapers reported that Black Arkansans were eager to sign up to serve, but the Arkansas military would not let Black men enlist. However, midway way through the war the federal government authorized additional Black regiments and requested three Black regiments specifically from Arkansas. At that time, the Arkansas military raised the three Black troops and appointed white officers to lead them. Some newspapers argued that Black troops should have Black officers, but it was not until World War I that Arkansas would appoint Black officers. No further Black regiments were requested from Arkansas and the Spanish-American War ended within the year.



LEFT: "Aaron Harvey , shown here with his snare drum, enlisted in the Fifty-seventh U. S Colored Infantry at Helena (Phillips County) in 1863. The regiment spent most of its service at Arkansas Post (Arkansas County) and Little Rock (Pulaski County). This color guard photo was likely taken in Little Rock in 1866." Courtesy of the UA Little Rock Center for Arkansas History and Culture via the Encyclopedia of Arkansas. RIGHT: Right: "African-American soldiers in Little Rock (Pulaski County), as drawn by noted Civil War artist Alfred Rudolf Waud for the May 19, 1866, Harper's Weekly." Courtesy of Civil War Drawing Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division via Encyclopedia of Arkansas.

The Spanish-American War led to the Philippine-American War the next year. At the end of the Spanish-American War, Spain signed over control of the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam to the U.S. The Philippine-American War began when the Philippine people rejected U.S. control, and the U.S. sent soldiers to the Philippines to stop their war for independence. Though the American Immune regiments had shown no special immunity to diseases during the Spanish-American War, they were nevertheless thought to be well suited to fighting in the tropics. Again, during the Philippine-American War several Black Immune regiments and the Buffalo Soldiers were sent to fight on tropical islands. However, this war was more controversial for Black soldiers. Unlike the last war, U.S. soldiers were fighting to prevent independence, and Black soldiers empathized with the poor treatment of the native Filipinos and their fight for freedom. This led to many Black U.S. soldiers deserting the campaign, with some even defecting to the Filipino side and fighting alongside the revolutionaries. The U.S. declared the Philippine-American War over in 1902, with the U.S. retaining control of the Philippines, though some Philippine revolutionaries continued to fight into 1906.

When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, the federal government instituted conscripted service and required all men to register for military service. This finally opened the Arkansas military to Black men. Previously only a select few Black Arkansans were accepted into military service, and typically only after the federal government specifically requested they be enlisted. Black men were eager to sign up to fight for their country and democracy, with over 100,000 Black Arkansans registering. Newspapers reported with astonishment that so many Black men were willing to join the war effort and editors wrote articles praising the men aiding their country.

Segregation continued during World War I, so Arkansas newspapers printed separate lists for the white and Black men who were called to report for military service. Prospective soldiers traveled in segregated train cars to report to Camp Pike in North Little Rock. Once there, Black soldiers were housed separately from white soldiers and received inferior treatment, accommodations, and job

RELEVANT EDUCATION AND LESSON PLANS

Arkansas State Archives: World War I Lesson Plan:
<https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/lesson-plans/7/>

Central Arkansas Library System: Race Relations in Arkansas: Secession & the Civil War Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/124/rec/3>

Central Arkansas Library System: Arkansas in the Civil War: Using Informational Texts Lesson Plan: <https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/150/rec/18>

Central Arkansas Library System: Race Relations in Arkansas: Reconstruction Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/21/rec/4>

Central Arkansas Library System: Battle or Massacre: You Decide Engagement at Poison Spring Lesson Plan: <https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/72/rec/11>

Central Arkansas Library System: The Red River Campaign (a.k.a. The Camden Expedition) Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/80/rec/12>

Central Arkansas Library System: Emancipation Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/101/rec/14>

Library of Congress: African American Women Authors of the Civil War Era Resource Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/african-american-women-civil-war/introduction>

Library of Congress: African American Women in the Military and at War Research Guide:
<https://guides.loc.gov/african-american-women-military>

positions. In Texas, segregation led to a riot involving over a hundred Black soldiers in Houston due to racial tensions in the area. After hearing about this event, Camp Pike attempted to avoid race riots at their camp by providing entertainment and recreation for Black soldiers. Despite these efforts, in 1918 there was an incident when one of the Black soldiers reportedly refused to follow orders from a white soldier. This resulted in an altercation and the Black soldiers involved were arrested and sentenced to the stockade and disciplinary work. Fortunately for the Arkansas military, this was the only major racial disturbance in an Arkansas military camp during World War I.

For the first time in the Arkansas military, Black men serving in World War I were able to hold specialized positions and become officers. Select Black soldiers received specialized military training at Branch Normal College (now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff). For officer training, Black soldiers were sent to Iowa, where twelve Black Arkansans graduated from officer training. Douglas Robinson was the first Black Arkansan promoted to an officer position. Segregation was still in effect for Black officers, so they were only allowed to lead Black troops. Eventually most of the Black troops in Arkansas were headed by Black officers.

In addition to military service to help the war effort, citizens were urged to invest in war bonds and savings stamps. Newspapers advertised these monetary campaigns in Arkansas, which included events held by Black churches and Black fraternal organizations, encouraging people to invest their money with the government. Black Arkansans contributed thousands of dollars to help their country and their soldiers.

However, not everyone was eager to join the war effort. New laws passed by Congress in 1917 and 1918 made it illegal to be disloyal to the United States, which included speaking against the U.S. government and military or assisting a foreign country in working against the United States. There were reports of Black men failing to report for military duty, not doing enough to support the war effort, and even accusations of spreading German propaganda. These accusations, whether true or not, led to arrests and jailtime or fines for Black Arkansans.

By the end of World War I in 1918, around a quarter of Arkansas's soldiers were Black. Black soldiers returning to Arkansas might have hoped for peace and better treatment after putting their lives at risk for their country and democracy, but they were largely disappointed. Returning soldiers found troubled times at home, with an increase in racial tensions and violence. There were reports of Black veterans being attacked, sometimes for so little an "offense" as talking to a white person. These post-war troubles led to anti-Black violence in Arkansas, the worst of which occurred in Elaine just a year after the end of World War I (See Race Riots Topic Guide and Elaine Massacre Topic Guide). Despite the hope that American soldiers were building a better world, racism and segregation continued in Arkansas long after the war. It would not be until after World War II that segregation in the military would end. And not until 1964 was segregation in all aspects outlawed, 99 years after the first Black Arkansans were authorized to fight for the Union to end slavery in Arkansas.



Officers of U.S. Army's 366th Infantry Regiment on their way home after World War I. On the right is Captain E. White of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Courtesy of the National Archives.



Tuskegee Airmen 332nd Fighter Group Pilots in Italy during World War II in 1934. The Tuskegee Airmen were part of the segregated Black Army Corps who trained at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Standing in the middle is combat pilot Woodrow Wilson Crockett from Little Rock, Arkansas, he was one of four Arkansans who was trained at Tuskegee and served overseas during the war. Crockett later served in the Korean War as well. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

SOME SIGNIFICANT DATES

- 1861 American Civil War begins as Confederates attack Union soldiers in South Carolina.
- 1863 U.S. War Department establishes Bureau of Colored Troops to recruit soldiers for all-Black regiments, known as the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT).
- 1865 Civil War ends when Confederates surrender. By the end of the war, Black Arkansas troops had fought in 29 battles and skirmishes. The USCT were disbanded after the war.
- 1866 First peacetime Black regiments formed in the regular U.S. Army, including the 10th Cavalry, who were later referred to as the "Buffalo Soldiers." Black Arkansans were canvassed for enlistment in these regiments, particularly those who had served in the USCT.
- 1867 Buffalo Soldiers begin serving in the Indian Wars in the Southwestern U.S. and Great Plains, lasting into the early 1890s, during which time the "Buffalo Soldiers" earned their nickname from the Native Americans.
- 1898 Spanish-American War begins as the U.S. assists the Cubans fighting for independence from Spain. The war ends with Spain giving ownership of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam to the U.S.
- 1899 Philippine-American War begins after the U.S. assumes control of the Philippines from Spain after the Spanish-American War, and the Filipino people try to gain their independence from the U.S. Many Black soldiers were sympathetic to the Filipino cause, causing some U.S. soldiers to leave the campaign, with several defecting to the Philippine army.
- 1902 Philippine-American War ends after the U.S. captures the Philippine President and declares a U.S. victory, though some Philippine revolutionaries continued fighting into 1906.
- 1914 World War I begins after Austria invades Serbia.
- 1917 U.S. enters World War I after Germany sinks American ships. Federal government requires all men to register for military service, including Black men. Congress passes the Espionage Act, prohibiting interference with military operations, including supporting enemies of the United States during a war.
- 1918 Congress passes the Sedition Act, extending the Espionage Act to cover the prohibition of negative speech and print about the U.S. government, military, or the war effort. Germany surrenders to the Allies, ending World War I. At the end of the war, around a quarter of the soldiers from Arkansas were Black.
- 1939 World War II begins after Germany invades Poland.
- 1941 Japan attacks the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii, causing the U.S. to declare war on Japan and join the Allied side in World War II.
- 1945 World War II ends after Germany and Japan surrender.
- 1946 U.S. grants independence to the Philippines.
- 1948 President Truman signs executive order ending segregation in the military and requiring equality of treatment and opportunity for everyone in the armed forces, regardless of race, color, religion, or national origin.
- 1951 Last of the Buffalo Soldier units are disbanded and integrated into other Army regiments.
- 1964 Civil Rights Act passed by Congress outlawing discrimination and segregation based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.

SELECT ARTICLES FROM CHRONICLING AMERICA

- "Negro Riot at Helena" *Des Arc Citizen* August 18, 1866, Image 3, Column 2
- "Colored Soldiers Fitted for Service in Cuba" *The Mena Star* March 9, 1898, Image 1, Column 5
- "If the colored race..." *Semi=Weekly Graphic* May 28, 1898, Image 4, Column 1
- "Colored Troops" *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic* May 29, 1898, Image 1, Column 3-5
- "Colored Troops" *Semi=Weekly Graphic* June 1, 1898, Image 2, Column 1-2
- "'The Democrat' had hoped to see..." *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic* June 17, 1898, Image 2, Column 1
- "A Chance For Colored Men" *The Forrest City Times* June 17, 1898, Image 1, Column 1
- "The Colored Immunes" *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic* July 11, 1898, Image 1, Column 3
- "Two Negro Regiments" *Semi=Weekly Graphic* September 13, 1899, Image 4, Column 2
- "Does Not Question Loyalty of Negroes" *The Prescott Daily News*, April 23, 1917, Image 1, Column 3
- "Outline of Registration Every Male Citizen 21 to 30 Must Fill Out on Day Set" *The Sentinel=Record* May 17, 1917, Image 1, Column 5-6
- "State Registration Complete" *The Little River News* June 9, 1917, Image 2, Column 4
- "Negro Soldiers in the Service" *The Weekly Soliphone* June 21, 1917, Image 7, Column 5
- "Has Camp Pike a Negro Question? Yes and No" *The Courier-Index* October 19, 1917, Image 11, Column 1-5
- "False Report is Corrected" *Newport Daily Independent* April 8, 1918, Image 1, Column 4
- "German Propaganda About Negro Troops" *The Sentinel=Record* June 22, 1918, Image 2, Column 3
- "Proud of Colored Troops" *The Monticellonian* November 8, 1918, Image 6, Column 3
- "The Colored Soldiers" *The Brinkley Argus* January 3, 1919, Image 2, Column 3
- "Couldn't Kill Comedy in Negro Troops" *The Courier-Index* January 17, 1919, Image 3, Column 1-3
- "Loyalty Of Negroes Is Still Unshakened" *Arkansas State Press* March 27, 1942, Image 1, Column 7
- "The Negro Answers The Call!" *Arkansas State Press* July 24, 1942, Image 7, full page
- "A Story Of A War Worker In D.C. Photographically Told" *Arkansas State Press* January 22, 1943, Image 7, full page
- "A Negro Unit In Italy Downs 2 Planes; Takes Prisoners" *Arkansas State Press* December 31, 1943, Image 1, Column 6-7
- "Our Boys In – ACTION" *Arkansas State Press* May 12, 1944, Image 7, full page
- "Couldn't Kill Comedy in Negro Troops" *The Courier-Index* January 17, 1919, Page 3, Column 1-3

Find more of our topic guides at <https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/newspapers/>.

Further information about this topic can be found in the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, courtesy of the Central Arkansas Library System at <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>.

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