

Freedom by the Sword: The U. S. Colored Troops, 1862–1867

Donald R. Shaffer
Upper Iowa University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2012 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Shaffer, Donald R. "Freedom by the Sword: The U. S. Colored Troops, 1862–1867." *The Annals of Iowa* 71 (2012), 181-183.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1627>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Unfortunately, Lause ends *Price's Lost Campaign* in mid-stride. The decision to use the word *invasion* in the subtitle is significant: Lause argues forcefully that the campaign was no raid, but that the intent was to "liberate" Missouri from Federal rule (2). That editorial decision influences the rest of the book, because Lause abruptly ends the study when the Confederates turned away from Jefferson City in early October 1864. His rationale is that when the Army of Missouri veered west from Jefferson City, it ceased to be an invasion and turned into a raid. From a military terminology standpoint, that is correct. However, this account may leave the reader unsatisfied because Lause ignores the fighting around Westport on October 21–23, 1864, as well as the pursuit after that battle—including the Battle of Mine Creek on October 25. The Battle at Westport was the biggest battle of the Civil War in the trans-Mississippi, and the fight at Mine Creek was one of the largest cavalry battles of the war. The omission of those two clashes will therefore be a disappointment to readers who expect the study to examine the entire campaign.

Beyond this truncated account of the struggle, the lack of good maps is the book's most significant shortcoming. Such maps are almost essential for readers to comprehend the swirl of events taking place throughout the campaign.

Despite these weaknesses, *Price's Lost Campaign* is a significant addition to the historiography of the Civil War in the trans-Mississippi. The author strips away much of the myth surrounding Price's invasion with in-depth research and analysis. We can hope that Lause will follow up with a second volume examining the rest of the campaign in similar detail. If a showman is supposed to leave his audience wanting more, then Lause has succeeded admirably.

Freedom by the Sword: The U.S. Colored Troops, 1862–1867, by William A. Dobak. Army Historical Series. Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2011. xvi, 553 pp. Tables, maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$58.00 cloth, \$38.00 paper.

Reviewer Donald R. Shaffer teaches exclusively online for Upper Iowa University and other institutions. He is the author of *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (2004) and (with Elizabeth Regosin) *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files* (2008).

Freedom by the Sword, by William A. Dobak, brings yet another perspective to the service of African Americans in the U.S. Civil War, Once a marginal topic, black Union soldiers have been the subject of

many studies in recent decades, so Dobak's book enters a crowded field. The author writes that his purpose is to "tell the story of how the Union Army's black regiments came into being, what they accomplished when they took the field, and how their conduct affected the course of the war and the subsequent occupation of the defeated South" (xiv).

In other words, *Freedom by the Sword* is a traditional narrative history of the black Union regiments in the Civil War, mostly based on federal archival sources and the published volumes of the *Official Records*. After a chapter dealing with the evolution of the Lincoln administration's policy toward emancipation and the initial recruitment of black men into the Union army, Dobak organizes most of the rest of the book geographically, examining the history of African American military service in particular regions from the initial efforts to recruit black men there to their discharge from the army.

Of particular interest is chapter 8, which deals with the black regiments in the trans-Mississippi West. Among the units discussed is the First Iowa Colored Infantry, later the 60th U.S. Colored Infantry. Recruited mainly from among Missouri slaves, the regiment helped Iowa meet its federal recruitment quota. In that regard, Dobak laudably shares a trenchant quote from Iowa's Civil War governor, Samuel J. Kirkwood, demonstrating how racist and coldly cynical even an anti-slavery Republican could regard black military service in the Civil War (234). Dobak also provides a short but adequate account of the military experience of the regiment, which spent most of its existence garrisoning Helena, Arkansas, and had only one brief skirmish with Confederate forces during a reconnaissance-in-force outside the city.

While praiseworthy in its effort to provide a comprehensive history of African American service in the Union army, even at a lengthy 500+ pages, *Freedom by the Sword* nonetheless often manages to treat its subject shallowly. Part of the problem is the comprehensive approach itself. By trying to deal with so many aspects of the subject matter, the effort overall suffers as too much is dealt with too little. Dobak should have been more selective, as some aspects of the black military experience in the Civil War are clearly more important than others. He also should have analyzed more of his wealth of documentation instead of letting the sources speak for themselves, which creates a problem as most of the documents he uses were produced by Union officers and other whites. Dobak does try to bring black soldiers into his narrative, but they tend to be men like James Monroe Trotter and Christian Fleetwood who achieved prominence during the war. Consequently, the mass of African Americans who served in the Union army tend to get lost at times in the book, when, as the Freedmen and Southern So-

ciety Project at the University of Maryland has shown, the voices of many ordinary black soldiers can be found in federal sources. So *Freedom by the Sword* is a good book, but with further revision and editorial work it could have been even better.

The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic, by Barbara A. Gannon. Civil War America. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xiv, 282 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Sarah J. Purcell is associate professor of history at Grinnell College. She is working on a book tentatively titled *Spectacle of Grief: The Politics of Mourning and the U.S. Civil War*.

In her new book on the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) as an interracial institution, Barbara A. Gannon directly takes on previous scholarship on the GAR and, indeed, some of the broader scholarship on the memory of the Civil War. Gannon argues that other historians, especially Stuart McConnell in his 1992 book *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865–1900*, have overemphasized the racism and segregation in the GAR. Far more important than racism in the GAR, she argues, was its interracial makeup and the integration of many posts.

Gannon asks as her central question, “What was the Grand Army of the Republic, and why did it welcome African Americans at a time when so many American institutions excluded them” (2)? In part one of the book she sketches how African Americans participated in the GAR and its female auxiliaries, taking part in all of the important GAR rituals, holding offices, and contributing to the ways GAR oratory and ceremonies shaped the public memory of Civil War veterans. In part two, Gannon turns her attention more fully to the interracial aspects of the GAR by explaining regional patterns of post-by-post segregation or integration. In part three she examines how white veterans recognized black veterans as sharing their sacrifice during the war and how they built a sense of “comradeship” based on a notion of common suffering. In part four she coins the term *the Won Cause* to describe the dual emphasis on union and freedom in GAR memories of the meaning of the war. After a short epilogue that traces the last days of the GAR in the twentieth century, Gannon includes two extremely helpful appendixes that list the African American and integrated GAR posts by state.

Gannon’s greatest success in this meticulously researched if unevenly argued book is to uncover the extent of African American participation and integration in the GAR. She shows how, remarkably,