

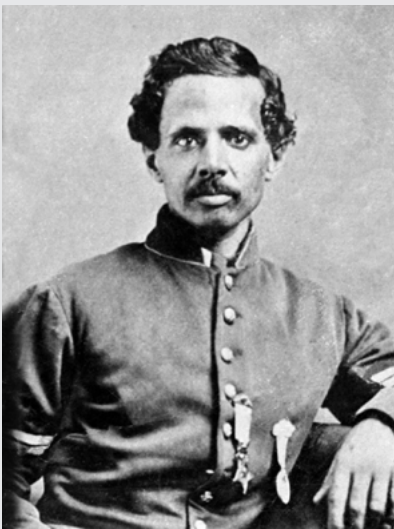
## THE BLACK BRIGADE OF CINCINNATI

### WHAT WAS THE BLACK BRIGADE OF CINCINNATI?

The Black Brigade of Cincinnati was a military unit of African American soldiers organized in 1862 during the Civil War when the city of Cincinnati, Ohio was in danger of being seized by Confederate forces. The Black Brigade became the first organized African American group employed for military duty in the Civil War.

### POWHTAN BEATY

Powhtan Beaty (1837-1916) was a member of the Black Brigade of Cincinnati who went on to serve in the 27th Volunteer Infantry (reconstituted as the 5th United States Colored Troops). He served with distinction, earning the Medal of Honor.



*Black Brigade flag, exhibited at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in 2012*

### A TROUBLED BEGINNING

Notably, elements of **bigotry** and **racism** were at work in the very formation of the unit.

When Confederate General John Hunt Morgan laid plans to attack Cincinnati in August of 1862, the Black community of Cincinnati met to organize a home guard and offer their help to defend the city. However, their offer was rejected by city authorities—the Black residents were forbidden to hold any further meetings and were told that it was not their war to fight. But Union General Lew Wallace, the military commander responsible for Cincinnati, felt differently. He hoped to enlist Black men to help construct defense fortifications in northern Kentucky.

Before Gen. Wallace formed a plan to employ these men for this project, the Mayor George Hatch ordered Cincinnati police to forcibly round up Black men in the city on September 2, 1862. Approximately 400 Black men were abducted from their homes or workplaces, many treated roughly and taken without explanation. They were marched at **bayonet** point across the Ohio River into Kentucky to work as laborers, camp cooks, or servants.

## FORCED LABORERS TO VOLUNTEERS

Gen. Wallace was alarmed by reports of ongoing harsh treatment of the men so he asked Judge William Martin Dickson to step in. Dickson allowed the approximately 400 men who had been seized to return to their homes and families in Cincinnati. He asked them to prepare for continued service the next day. On the following morning of September 5th, approximately 700 African American men voluntarily reported for duty.

*“You have finished the work assigned to you upon the fortifications for the defense of the city... you have labored cheerfully and effectively. Go to your homes with the consciousness of having performed your duty... and bearing with you the gratitude and respect of all honorable men.”*

- Judge William Martin Dickson, 1896

The men were organized into military lines and named themselves the Black Brigade. The unit marched towards the Ohio River under the National flag, loaded onto pontoons and commenced the work of digging rifle pits, clearing trees, and building forts and roads. Only in the second week did the men begin to receive pay for their service. Their effort to defend the city cost one Black Brigade member his life when a falling tree struck Joseph Johns on September 17th. They continued their work until September 20th when the threat to Cincinnati had passed. Before the Black Brigade was disbanded, they presented Judge Dickson with an engraved sword as symbol of their esteem.

### PATTERNS OF FORCE AND VIOLENCE

If the black community had initially offered to help, why did authorities use force to conscript them later? Like many cities, Cincinnati has a legacy of race issues that began as early as 1829 when Irish immigrants destroyed African American **wards** and communities over competition for jobs. The use of force upon the Black community had become common practice by residents and city authorities alike. The fear of capture by Confederate forces prompted city authorities to continue this pattern of behavior.

### IMPACT AND LEGACY

At the time of these events, Cincinnati was a significant river port city and the sixth largest city in the nation—holding it was important to the Union's success. If the Black Brigade had never formed and Confederate forces had successfully seized the city, the Civil War may have had a different outcome.

## WILLIAM MARTIN DICKSON

William Martin Dickson (1827-1889) was born in Lexington, Indiana. After graduating from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio and admitted to the Kentucky bar in 1848, he studied law at Harvard University. After Harvard Law School, he settled in Cincinnati and made a living as a teacher, tutor, and reporter for the Cincinnati Times. In 1852 he married Annie Marie Parker, a first cousin of First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln.

Six months after his marriage, he was elected prosecuting attorney of the Cincinnati police court. He resigned in 1854 to form a law partnership with Alphonso Taft and Thomas Marshall Key. At the age of 31, he was appointed judge of the Common Pleas Court. He became a key political figure and had associations with Abraham Lincoln and Salmon P. Chase. He is also considered a contributor in the framing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Through his later years, he maintained a keen interest in issues like black suffrage and civil service reform.



## IMPACT AND LEGACY (CONT.)

A strong argument can also be made that the Black Brigade had a remarkable influence on policies related to military service for African Americans. For example, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed only four months later. Although it did not end slavery in the nation, the proclamation transformed the character of the war. It expanded the fight for freedom and announced that black men would be accepted to serve the Union Army and Navy. By the end of the Civil War, approximately 200,000 black soldiers and sailors had fought for the Union.

## VOCABULARY

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**Bayonet:** a sharpened, knife-like piece of steel that fit over the barrel of a rifle

**Bigotry:** intolerant devotion to one's own prejudices

**Racism:** a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and that a particular race is superior to another

**Suffrage:** the right to vote in political elections

**Wards:** a division or district of a city or town

## WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

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1) **Approximately how many additional men joined the brigade when asked to volunteer?**

- A. 300
- B. 400
- C. 100

2) **How would describe the initial treatment of members of the Black Brigade of Cincinnati?**

- A. generous and kind
- B. fair and appropriate
- C. harsh and unnecessary

3) **What did the Black Brigade of Cincinnati do?**

- A. they confronted Confederate forces in northern Kentucky
- B. they dug rifle pits, cleared trees, and built forts and roads in northern Kentucky
- C. they defended the residents of northern Kentucky from Confederate forces

## CREATE A TIMELINE

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Using the information in this activity book, create a historical timeline of the Black Brigade of Cincinnati highlighting dates, terms, figures and events in a chronological order. Feel free to be as creative as possible.

## WRITE A THANK-YOU LETTER

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Joseph Johns was the only member of the Black Brigade of Cincinnati to die in the line of duty. Write a thank-you letter to his family for his service and contribution in defending the city of Cincinnati.

## WRITE AN ESSAY

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The Black Brigade Monument in Smale Riverfront Park was commemorated in 2012. If possible, plan a visit to the monument. Then write a one page essay on the significance of this Cincinnati Civil War story and how it has challenged and inspired you. Feel free to share your thank you letter or essay with us—we'd love to see it!

If you are unable to visit the monument in person, you learn more here:

<http://www.mysmaleriverfrontpark.org/black-brigade.htm>



*Commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Cincinnati's Black Brigade at Smale Riverfront Park, September 2012*

## SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Want to learn more about the story of the Black Brigade? Here are some resources to explore:

### **Black Soldiers in the U.S. Military During the Civil War**

<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>

### **The Black Brigade**

<http://library.cincymuseum.org/aag/history/blackbrigade.html>

### **The Emancipation Proclamation**

<https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation>