

Remarks at the Dedication of a Reproduction of the Black Brigade Flag

August 19, 2006, James A. Ramage Civil War Museum

by James A. Ramage

Thank you for coming to our first anniversary celebration. Thank you Daughters of Union Veterans for the Abraham Lincoln portrait. Thank you Cincinnati Civil War Round Table for funding our new outdoor interpretive signs. Thank you Jeannine Kreinbrink and Bob Clements, other members of the Museum Board, Mayor Gene Weaver, Larry Klein, Tim Maloney and everyone on the staff of the City of Fort Wright. Thank you museum volunteers and re-enactors.

I am honored to participate in the dedication of our new reproduction of the flag of the Black Brigade of Cincinnati. This is the first time it has flown in Northern Kentucky in 144 years.

The flag waved first on the morning of September 5, 1862, when the Black Brigade proudly marched through the streets of Cincinnati. Their band played and crowds on the sidewalks cheered and women waved handkerchiefs. People cheered them in Newport, and when they arrived at their camp near Battery Shaler, home guards welcomed them with cheers.

This flag was meaningful to the men of the Black Brigade because it recognized their status as one of the first volunteer African American organizations to support the Union war effort and it symbolized recognition of the Black Brigade as men who deserved to be treated with dignity and respect.

In that September of the great crisis of homeland security caused by the Confederate invasion of Kentucky, Union General Lew Wallace ordered all adult males

to report to their voting places to be enrolled as militia or laborers. One African American humbly asked a policeman if this included blacks. The policeman answered that since blacks were not citizens, they were excluded and should keep quiet.

But later that day, policemen began arresting every black man they could find. Their homes were searched and they were taken from their work in hotels and barbershops and on the levee. Not allowed to say "goodbye" to their families or grab their hats, they were herded like animals at bayonet-point to a mule pen on Plum Street and taken across the river to the area of Fort Mitchell to work on the fortifications. They became separated as men from home guard units grabbed them and took them away as cooks and orderlies.

When word of this treatment reached General Wallace, he ordered Judge William Dickson to come to Kenton County, gather the men, bring them home, and organize them as a work brigade with official status. "Let them be treated like men and not as if they were being driven from the city," Dickson said.

Two days after their arrest, Dickson and his staff gathered them and marched them back to Cincinnati. At his headquarters at Sixth and Broadway, he told them they could go home. He said that he had authority to organize a Black Brigade for fatigue duty, and if they volunteered they would be kept in a distinct body and treated with respect.

I don't know who had the idea of using the word "Black" for Black Brigade. Frederick Douglass used it during the Civil War, but the more common appropriate and respectable terms for African American were "colored" and "Negro." With the name "Black Brigade" they were ahead of their time.

Dickson said that whoever wanted to volunteer should meet at the same intersection, at 5:00 o'clock the next morning. When he dismissed them, there were about 400. The next morning over 700 reported for duty.

They enrolled, and as they stood in ranks on the street, Captain James Lupton presented the flag. He said the work would be severe, and the flag was a symbol of protection. "Men of the Black Brigade," he declared, "rally around it! . . . Slavery will soon die. . . There will then be, through all the coming ages, in very truth, a land of the free--one country, one flag, one destiny."

The Black Brigade worked faithfully, and in his report Colonel Dickson said they always did more than was required of them, "receiving again and again the commendation of the Engineers in charge, to the effect that they were the most efficient working men in the service. . . They labored cheerfully and joyfully. They made miles of military roads, miles of rifle pits; felled hundreds of acres of the largest and loftiest forest trees; built forts and magazines."

After the Confederates withdrew and construction was completed for the time, on Saturday afternoon, September 20, they were formed in line to march home, to be welcomed as heroes by crowds on the streets of Cincinnati. People shouted "God bless you!" as they passed.

But at their camp in Campbell County, as they stood in ranks, one of their members, Marshall P. H. Jones, stepped forward to present Colonel Dickson a ceremonial sword.

In part, Jones said: "Sir, I have been selected by the members of the Black Brigade to thank you--deeply thank you--for the very great interest you have taken in our

welfare, for your exertions and final success in collecting all of the different working parties into one brigade, for the kindness you have manifested to us in these trying times. We deeply thank you; our mothers thank you; our sweethearts thank you; our children will rise up, thank you, and call you blessed."

Jones thanked Captain Lupton and others and said to Colonel Dickson: "Therefore as a small expression of the high esteem the members of the Black Brigade entertain for you, they all, each and every one, present you this sword, the emblem of protection, knowing that, whenever it is drawn, it will be drawn in favor of freedom. And should you be called on, under other circumstances, to demand the services of the Black Brigade, you will find that they will rally around your standard in the defense of our country."

Members of the Black Brigade were grateful that they had been treated equal to white laborers in terms of salary. For the first week of work on the fortifications there was no payment; for the second week, white and black laborers received \$1.00 per day; and for the third week they were all paid \$1.50 per day. One of the donors who provided funds for these wages was prominent Cincinnati banker William Hooper, for whom Battery Hooper was named. Each member of the Black Brigade gladly donated part of his earnings for the purchase of Dickson's sword.

When the Union Army began recruiting African Americans, some of the members of the Black Brigade went to Boston and enlisted in the famous 54th Massachusetts Infantry. Their participation in the assault on Battery Wagner in South Carolina helped dispel the belief that seems ridiculous today, the assumption that African Americans could not or would not fight as soldiers.

Over 180,000 enlisted in the Union Army and as with the Black Brigade, it was a liberating experience. "Once let a black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S.," wrote Frederick Douglass urging blacks to volunteer, "and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States."

One of the men who marched under the Black Brigade flag later enlisted in the 5th U.S. Colored Troops and participated in another Civil War battle famous for demonstrating that blacks could fight. In the Battle of Chaffin's Farm in Virginia on September 29, 1864, this soldier won the highest award for military gallantry, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

He was born in Richmond, Virginia and his parents gave him the great name of "Powhatan," Powhatan Beaty. He was named "Powhatan" for Powhatan County in Virginia, the county where John Mosby was born. Powhatan was a heroic and historic name, from Chief Powhatan, Chief of the Algonquin Indians when Jamestown was settled.

All over the nation, in every generation since the Civil War, African American families have made it a point of family pride to remember their ancestors who served in the Black Brigade or in the Union Army and Navy. Powhatan Beaty's descendents are justly proud of him. He is buried in Union Baptist Church Cemetery in Cincinnati along with many other African American Civil War veterans.

About ten miles south of Richmond, during the Battle of Chaffin's Farm, in the assault on New Market Heights, a strong defensive position like Battery Hooper, all of Beaty's company officers were wounded. "Our men were falling by scores," reported his commander, Colonel Alonzo G. Draper. The men could have withdrawn at that point

with honor. But instead, as First Sergeant of Company G, Beaty took command and gallantly led the company to victory. They helped capture New Market Heights.

I will close with a quotation from the commendation order by Beaty's commanding general, Benjamin Franklin Butler. For a long time Butler had been wishing for an opportunity to prove that African Americans could fight. Now, under his command, with the approval of General Ulysses S. Grant, he had given them that opportunity.

"In the charge on the enemy's works by the colored division," Butler wrote, "better men were never better led, better officers never led better men. With hardly an exception officers of colored troops have justified the care with which they have been selected. A few more such gallant charges and to command colored troops will be the post of honor in the American armies. The colored soldiers by coolness, steadiness, and determined courage and dash have silenced every cavil of the doubters of their soldierly capacity, and drawn tokens of admiration from their enemies; have brought their late masters even to the consideration of the question whether they will not employ as soldiers the hitherto despised race. Be it so; this war is ended when a musket is in the hands of every ablebodied negro who wishes to use one."

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