



Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy

Steven J. Ramold

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As many as one in six Union navy sailors was African American, many of them former slaves. This richly detailed history shows that the free blacks and "contraband" slaves who joined the U.S. Navy during the Civil War were essential to Northern victories at sea. Through their role in preserving the Union, they helped to win recognition for African Americans as full citizens.

African Americans joined the U.S. Navy from the first days of the war and soon demonstrated to a skeptical Northern population that they would fight for their freedom. Faced with the hazards of battle, African American sailors performed with great heroism, and several earned the nation's highest military tribute, the Medal of Honor. Their service in the navy paved the way for their wider employment in the U.S. Army.

Despite the lack of official records on the subject, Ramold has combed through mountains of memoirs, court documents, pension reports, and other sources to discover the true magnitude of African Americans' contribution to the naval effort. The book presents a vivid description of the lives of these sailors from enlistment to discharge, telling the story as much as possible in the words of the sailors themselves. A dozen rare photographs illustrate the range of African American service.

Ramold demonstrates that the navy, from necessity and from tradition, treated African Americans in its ranks far more equitably than did the army or any other public institution in antebellum America. Decades later, black sailors would be consigned to work in the mess hall, but in the Civil War era they fought side by side with white sailors, were treated equally in courts-martial, and received the same pay and benefits. *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens* allows us to rediscover these largely forgotten heroes, whose story can now take its rightful place in the history of the war and in the struggle of slaves and free blacks to become citizens.

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