

U.S.C.T. BURIALS IN THE NATIONAL CEMETERY



Recruitment poster shows soldiers of the 25th Infantry Regiment, USCT, at Camp William Penn. Library Company of Philadelphia.

U.S. Colored Troops

Beginning in March 1863, the federal government began actively recruiting black men for the Union Army. A few months later, the War Department created the Bureau of United States Colored Troops (USCT). USCT regiments fought in Civil War battles and engagements from Virginia to Texas. Approximately 200,000 black soldiers and sailors served, roughly 10 percent of all Union troops. Twenty-five of these men received the Medal of Honor—the nation’s highest military honor.

After the Battle of New Market Heights (Virginia), Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler reported,

The colored soldiers by coolness, steadiness, and determined courage and dash have silenced every cavil of the doubters of their soldierly capacity...

Training Camps

The Union Army established eight camps in northern states to train black regiments. Camp William Penn—located 8 miles north of Philadelphia in what is now Cheltenham Township—was the first and largest of these federal training camps. It opened in June 1863 under the command of Col. Louis Wagner, an abolitionist and veteran of early Civil War battles. Wagner remained its only commander.



Camp William Penn, c. 1864-1865. Camp William Penn Museum.

Before the camp closed on August 14, 1865, it produced eleven regiments of 10,940 soldiers and 400 white officers. In Philadelphia, a school opened to screen and train white officers to lead the new United States Colored Troops. Black officers were not appointed until the end of the war.

Regiments that trained at Camp William Penn distinguished themselves in action throughout the conflict. They were among the first to enter the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, in 1865, and were present at the Confederate surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.

Death and Burial

During the Civil War, approximately two soldiers died of disease for each one who died of battle wounds. Common ailments included dysentery, rheumatism, typhoid fever, and pneumonia. In theory, black troops received the same medical care as white, but USCT regiments were frequently understaffed and undersupplied in medicines and hospitals, resulting in a higher mortality rate.

Black soldiers and sailors who died in the Philadelphia area during the war were originally buried in Lebanon Cemetery, one of the city’s black-owned burial grounds. The remains of more than 300 USCT were moved to Section C of the newly created Philadelphia National Cemetery in 1885.



Veterans of the USCT who died after the war were often buried in Section G. About half of all USCT graves in the cemetery are for soldiers who trained at Camp William Penn.

Pvt. William Beckett served in Co. D, 25th USCT; he died at the Camp William Penn “Pest Hospital” of “typhoid pneumonia” on Feb. 27, 1864 (above). Former Pvt. Thornton Churcher (alias Thomas White) was married and living in Philadelphia when he died of heart disease at the age of 41 (left).

Produced in 2017 in cooperation with Camp William Penn Museum, 3rd Regiment USCT Reenactors, College of Physicians of Philadelphia, and Ed McLaughlin.