

Perspectives

A Belated Tale of Unsung Valor

by W. Todd Groce, Ph.D.

ON OCTOBER 6, 2010 AS PART OF THE CIVIL WAR 150 Historical Marker Project the Georgia Historical Society, the Georgia Department of Economic Development, and the Georgia Battlefields Association dedicated a historical marker in Dalton telling a little known but important story of the war in Georgia. The keynote speaker was former UN ambassador, Atlanta mayor, and Martin Luther King lieutenant Andrew Young.

It was a beautiful fall day as the nearly 500 who attended the event gathered on the side of a hill where the U. S. Army had built a fort to protect the Western and Atlantic Railroad, General Sherman's supply line during the Atlanta campaign. In early 1864, Sherman had been reinforced with a number of newly formed black regiments, but he had a low opinion of their fighting quality. So as he advanced on Atlanta with the main army, the general left his black soldiers behind to guard the rail line.

Two regiments, the 14th and 44th United States Colored Troops, were posted as a part of the garrison at Dalton. Most of the enlisted men were from the area, former slaves who joined up to defeat the Confederacy and secure their freedom. Their chance finally came on August 15, 1864, when they repelled a Confederate cavalry raid to cut the railroad near Dalton.

Two months later, on October 13, the entire Confederate Army of Tennessee showed up near the town. Faced with overwhelming numbers and with the massacre at Fort Pillow fresh in his memory, the garrison commander, Colonel Lewis Johnson of the 44th USCT, decided to surrender. The white officers were paroled and released. But in accordance with Confederate policy, the black enlisted men were not treated as soldiers. They were sold back into slavery.

As the only instances of black troops fighting in Georgia during the war, these little known episodes are important. During the next four years the nation will not only commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War but also the 150th anniversary of emancipation. Along with the preservation of the United States, emancipation was the most important outcome of the war.

The black men who fought at Dalton were instrumental in that result. It took the pen of Abraham Lincoln and the bayonets of the soldiers, white and black, of the Army of the United States to destroy slavery. The men of the 14th and 44th USCT struck a blow against human bondage that was as necessary as Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

It's good to know that of the almost one-thousand Civil War historical markers in Georgia describing intricate battlefield maneuvers and extolling the virtues of Confederate heroes, there will now be at least one to tell the tale of how former slaves became soldiers of the Republic, doing their part to preserve our nation and end slavery. Nearly 150 years after their stand on the hill outside of Dalton, these men are finally getting the credit they have always deserved. *G*

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