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# SECTION VI

## “The Half Has Never Been Told:” Brooklyn’s Civil War (1861-1865)

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### Lesson 19

### Black Brooklynites in the Union Army

**Grade Level:** Elementary School

**Objectives:**

Students will

- Understand the role of black soldiers during in the Civil War.
- Design a commemorative mural featuring Brooklynite Peter Vogelsang and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment.

**Time:** One 50-minute class period

**Materials:**

- Worksheet 1: The Emancipation Proclamation
- Worksheet 2: Peter Vogelsang and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment

**Background:**

Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and James Pennington emphasized that African-American soldiers were central to securing a victory for the Union Army, despite the fact that they were initially banned from serving. Racist assumptions about their capabilities meant that the Lincoln administration refused to consider them for military service. However, the Emancipation Proclamation which took effect on January 1, 1863, changed military policy, allowing the Union Army to recruit black troops.

Scores of ordinary black men demonstrated their courage while being subject to difficult conditions including ongoing discrimination, segregated ranks, lesser wages, and lack of promotion. Black soldiers protested for improved military conditions and continued to fight in the Civil War. They did so in order to demand freedom and citizenship, therefore transforming the United States into a nation that valued political and legal equality for its multiracial society.

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# COLORED CITIZENS, TO ARMS!

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**\$375 IN CASH,**

And \$10 additional paid to any Recruit who comes, or any one bringing a Recruit to the Headquarters of the

**20th Regiment, U. S. Colored Troops,**

**FOR NEW YORK STATE,**

**350 FOURTH ST., NEAR BROADWAY.**

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FRANCIS & LOUREL, Stationers and Steam Printers, 45 Maiden Lane, New York.

*Colored Citizens, to Arms!* Francis & Loutrel.  
M1975.387.1. Brooklyn Historical Society.

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“There was never a better opportunity that is not offered to the colored men of the United States to strike for liberty and country; never a better time to take their stand as men than the present moment.”

—*Liberator*, May 22, 1863

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# LESSON PROCEDURES

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1. Ask the class if anyone has heard of the Emancipation Proclamation, and if so, have a volunteer (or volunteers) provide a brief description.

2. Distribute **Worksheet 1: The Emancipation Proclamation**. Read the following passage aloud:

*On the first day of January, in the year of our Lord 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforth, and forever free.*

3. Ask the following questions:

- When did the Emancipation Proclamation take effect?
- Who gained their freedom as a result of the proclamation?
- Who was not freed as a result of the proclamation?

4. Draw students' attention to the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. Technically, it did not free anyone. Slavery had already been abolished in the northern states. It did not free enslaved people in the border states that had not seceded from the Union, including Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware. It did not really free the enslaved people in the Confederate states either, as those states refused to obey what Abraham Lincoln said. However, as a result of the Proclamation, many enslaved people fled from the South to areas controlled by the Union army.

5. Remind students that blacks were initially banned from serving in the Union Army as many northern whites felt that blacks were not smart, skilled, or brave enough for military service. Explain that the Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln in January 1863, declared all enslaved people in rebel states forever free and allowed blacks to join the Union Army. Read the following quote from Frederick Douglass aloud to students and ask them to interpret it:  
*Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship.*

6. Distribute **Worksheet 2: Peter Vogelsang and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment**. After students read the information, ask the following questions:

- Why was it important that black Americans were actively participating in the Union Army? How might the outcome of the war been different if black soldiers were barred from fighting?
- What impact, if any, do you think their sacrifice and bravery had on the recognition of blacks as full citizens?
- Do you think the bravery shown by Peter Vogelsang and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment will help blacks gain recognition as full citizens?

7. Have students design a commemorative mural, depicting how the 54th Massachusetts Regiment moved blacks closer towards equality and full citizenship. Students can either draw or design their murals online using digital tools such as [www.prezi.com](http://www.prezi.com) or [www.glogster.com](http://www.glogster.com).

## Linking Past and Present

- Have students research examples of different forms of discrimination in the military, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Ask students to reflect on how discrimination in the military compares with discrimination in the wider society. Why do people join the military despite its history of discrimination?
- Ask students if they are aware that there were black regiments and/or black soldiers fighting in the Civil War. If not, why not? Why are these soldiers' stories less known? How does that relate to our understanding of today's armed forces?