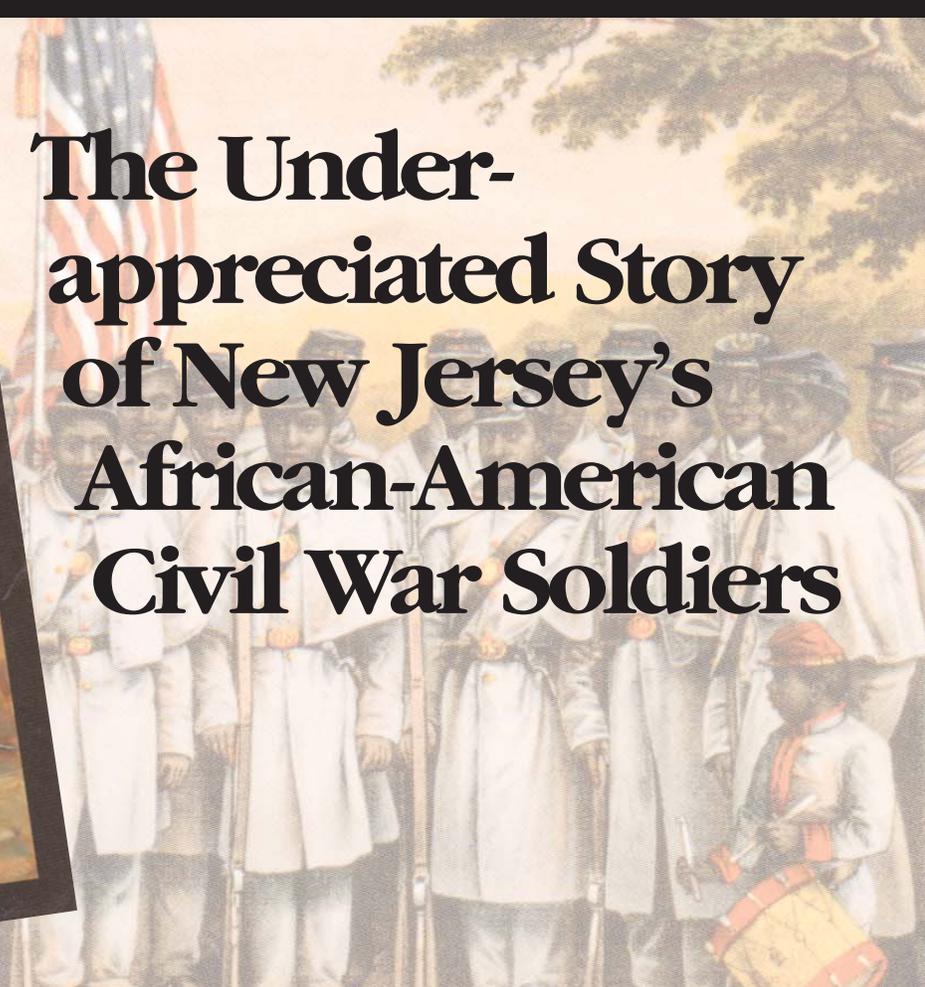


## The Under-appreciated Story of New Jersey's African-American Civil War Soldiers



### BOOK RATING SYSTEM

★ Poorly written, bad scholarship / factual errors.

★★ Factually correct but poorly written.

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well written.

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship writing style and / or graphics / typography.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email [gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com](mailto:gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com)

### “Freedom to All” New Jersey's African-American Civil War Soldiers

Joseph G. Bilby

2011: Longstreet House, Hightstown, NJ

ISBN: 978-0-944413-77-7

Hardcover, 165 pages black and white

★★★★★

Reviewed by Gordon Bond

In the false palliative that is Facebook, someone asked the question in a poll what people believed was the cause of the American Civil War. In some respects, that's a loaded question. The quick answer—perhaps the “politically correct” answer—is, of course, slavery. To say otherwise

potentially opens one up to charges of racism, particularly when one reads the racially-charged comments some posted. As most historians understand, however, the Civil War was the bloody culmination of a number of various factors. Rare is history ever neatly a matter of simple cause-and-effect—which is what makes it so fascinating.

Regardless of in what proportions one wants to divvy up the responsibility for the conflict, of course, the question of slavery's expansion—and its ultimate legitimacy as part of our sociopolitical and economic

identity—remains a critical part of understanding it. Certainly, the question of what role, if any, “the Negro” ought to play in that struggle was on the minds of some at the time. True, the Union fought (at least in part) to end slavery, but that did not automatically equate with a belief in the equality of the black man with the white. Could a black man be trusted with a gun? Could a group of them be trained to act as true soldiers? If the white folks were indeed fighting and dying to free the black folks, shouldn’t they bear some of the burdens on the battlefield?

The role that New Jersey’s African-Americans did in fact come to play in the Civil War is the subject of a new book by Joseph G. Bilby. Bilby has come to make a name for himself as an historian of New Jersey’s military history and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War has offered him ample opportunity. Since no battles were fought on New Jersey soil, it’s easy to marginalize the Garden State. Considering there are but a few in-depth books on the white soldiers from New Jersey, it is perhaps not surprising their black brothers-in-arms received even less attention. Yet 3,271 New Jersey African-Americans joined the Union troops, serving with honor and distinction. Bilby seeks to provide them at long last the chance to have their stories told.

As Bilby points out, the notion of black men taking up arms in common cause next to white men is not necessarily new. Indeed, there is a rich heritage of black soldiers in the American

Posters like these - along with the promise of a cash bounty - lured African-American recruits to the Union’s Colored Regiments.

Revolution (and before), despite the concurrent existence of slavery. New Jersey’s colonial history encompasses the example Shrewsbury slave Titus, who earned a name for himself, albeit fighting for the Loyalist. It wasn’t that either side necessarily saw such men as equals, as much as resources to be exploited in the exigencies of war. A black man with a musket—no matter how inferior you might believe him—could still kill your enemy if you wooed him to your cause. Freedom from bondage was, most certainly, an enticing carrot to dangle before would-be black soldiers and the British certainly made use of it to lure not only

men off (from their perspectives) rebel farms to fight, but also to supply intelligence. This wasn’t all that different from how the British competed with the French for the guerilla fighting skills of the Native Americans—adding the “Indian” in French and Indian War.

In including this background, Bilby sets the stage for the Civil War, and presents some interesting parallels. The fact that African-Americans served just as ably as white men in a cause of freedom would be held up as example of why the paradigms of slavery and inequality were so silly. As early as 1778, New Jersey’s Governor, William

**COLOR'D  
MEN  
WANTED!**

**Bounty, \$602.  
Cash down, 350.**

**Besides State, and United States pay, &c.**

---

Recruits will be mustered into Colored Regiments.

APPLY TO

**JAMES S. HENRY;**  
At Recruiting Office, Second & Bridge Ave.  
Camden, Dec. 23d, 1863.

GURTZ, BOOK AND BUSINESS PRINTER, CAMDEN FIBERIX OFFICE, 413 FEDERAL ST.

Livingston, was urging the State Legislature to free the slaves within its borders, arguing that slavery was a logical anathema to what they were supposedly fighting for. It would go nowhere, but at least he didn't suffer the fate of an abolitionist NJ preacher Jacob Green, who had his Presbyterian church wrecked by an anti-abolitionist mob. Change would come to New Jersey incrementally—a gradual emancipation act in 1804 and in 1846 the conversion of the remaining slaves into “apprentices for life.” The arguments against slavery as a concept were easy enough. Seeing blacks as equals, however, would be more difficult for many whites to swallow. New Jerseyans cared less about abolition than not giving the South an excuse to leave the union—hence the often-cited fact that Lincoln lost *both* times in New Jersey when running for President.

The economic as well as racist forces that blunted any honest dealing with the issue at the end of the Revolution still prevailed in the America of the mid-1800s. The Civil War provided another opportunity for the black community to rise to an occasion of national need and prove themselves as good as anyone else. Whether that nation would get the message, of course, wasn't clear. Regardless, it was yet again the exigencies of war that permitted them to fight and die in the hope the nation would somehow this time “get it.” States were handed federal manpower quotas for the war and allowing black men to fight was as good a

way as any to make the numbers. Plus, whites who didn't like the notion of military life were only too happy to be allowed to get a black man to go take his place as a “substitute.” Bilby cites a particularly exploitative example from the previous Revolution where a slave, Samuel Sutphen, substituted for his Somerset County master, Caspar Berger, in the militia. While Sutphen served with heroic honor—even having his praises sung by white officers for capturing a prisoner—as a slave and a substitute, he was denied his pension until 1836.

In any event, while there was some resistance to the idea of enlisting black men in New Jersey, the Militia Act of 1862 gave Lincoln the authority to include them over the objections.

Exactly how many African-Americans New Jersey contributed to the effort is something of a technicality. Some men were indeed born here. Others at least lived here at the time of their enlistments. Before acceptance of black enlistment by New Jersey's government, some went and enlisted in the units raised in neighboring states. But for pretty much all of them, their journeys began by being mustered in at Fort William Penn in Philadelphia. There was no integration of troops, of course. Though under white officers, they were segregated into United States Colored Troops, United States Colored Infantry, United States Colored Cavalry, United States Colored Light Artillery and United States Colored Heavy Artillery—always the added term “Colored.”

It isn't always clear what motivated these men. In some cases, it was probably the promise of a bounty—though it was a struggle to get the same money for black enlistments as white. In others, there was a genuine desire to see the scourge of slavery excised from the nation once and for all. Bilby recounts how William Watson, a sergeant in the 25th wrote home how he had no intention of returning “until every slave in the South is set free.”

In a perfect world, these men would have nothing more to prove than any other soldier. But, as black men in a world where their kind was looked down upon, many understood that they indeed had a chance to prove the worth of their race. And they did. Bilby quotes many white officers and observers who, even begrudgingly, had to give the black soldiers credit for bravery every bit as equal as their white brethren.

Still, the paternalism of the times asserted itself, even in the face of such example. As the war was winding down, many colored regiments found themselves sent down to Texas, to the border with Mexico. It's a little-remembered chapter in American history, but France's Napoleon III had invaded Mexico and installed a puppet government, perhaps eyeing a fractured America distracted by civil war. It wasn't the choicest of assignments and it was mostly a show of force against any foreign ambitions as well as to sit on the Confederate Texans. Boring though it might have been, Bilby mentions how literate black

soldiers took the down time to teach their fellows to read and write. Many a black soldier came home to New Jersey better educated for it.

Bilby spends the second half of the book with short descriptions of the units raised with large numbers of New Jersey soldiers and their exploits. Their stories are compelling and even harrowing. They give New Jerseyans an idea of the service and sacrifice their ancestors made.

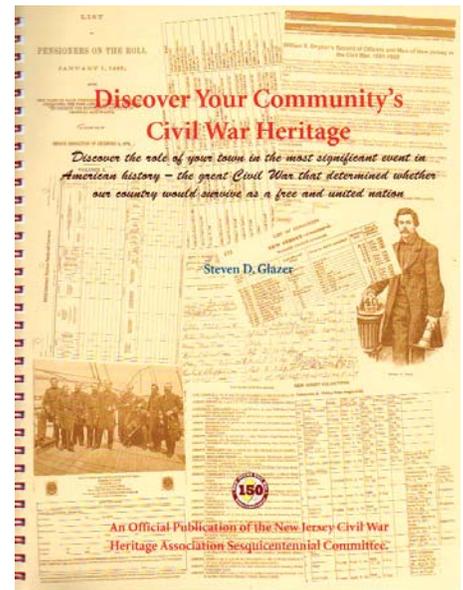
The Epilogue bookends the Civil War period with the legacy of their service. Black veterans returned to a mixed reception. Some Grand Army of the Republic organizations welcomed them as brothers-in-arms. Others reflected the segregationist attitudes that remained despite what had just happened. But their Civil War service at least provided a fresh rallying cry in the efforts to overturn racist attitudes in New Jersey and elsewhere. Bilby specifically highlighted the 1887 speech by Rev. James Francis Robinson of the Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Asbury Park, where he railed against the town father's assertions that equal rights for something as simple as walking on the boardwalk was "an impossibility." He pointed to the service of the colored troops and declared, "We helped save the Union." Black New Jerseyans would remain in military service throughout the wars and peacetime to come. Desegregation of the U.S. military was finally achieved in 1948—two years after First Sergeant George Ashby from Burlington,

New Jersey, died at age 102 as the last surviving veteran on the Civil War.

If I had to criticize "Freedom to All," it would have to be on two scores that do not reflect on the scholarship. The typography is a bit dull and the chapter heads could have been handled better (as someone with 20 years professional experience in the graphics world, I notice that stuff!). There are also a couple typos that, while they don't materially hurt the text, are a tad sloppy.

That aside...Joseph Bilby has done an excellent job of pulling together a neglected part of both American and New Jersey history. His research disproves some often-repeated assumptions that black units were given inferior weapons or supplies. There is also a list of over 1,300 burials in New Jersey cemeteries of African-American Civil War veterans that will prove a valuable resource for historians interested in finding links to this history in their own backyards. By placing these stories within the broader context of what came before and after, "Freedom to All" gives the subject a depth through the complexities of political, social and racial attitudes.

Reading "Freedom to All" made me both proud of the contribution of my State's people and also ashamed that that story has gone so long under-appreciated. Joseph Bilby has done a service to not only historians with this work, but to the memories of all from the Garden State who serve.



### Discover Your Community's Civil War Heritage

Steven D. Glazer

2010: New Jersey Civil War Heritage

Association, Wood-Ridge, NJ

ISBN: 978-0-944413-76-0

Softcover, Comb-bound, 52 pages black and white

★★★★

Reviewed by Gordon Bond

I've just finished up a second term as President of my local astronomy club. When I began, two years ago, among my first "official acts" was to attend the funeral of one of our longtime members, Hank Adams. One of my last, unfortunately, was a second funeral, this time for Dr. Lewis Thomas. Hank had been a talented astrophotographer and imager. Dr. Lew forgot more about physics than most people ever know if the first place. Why I bring this up is that both men, aside from their astronomical interests, were veterans. Hank had been in the Army during World War II and captured, spending time in a German P.O.W. camp. Dr. Lew had landed at Normandy on D-Day. When I knew them, they were old men with little to hint at the

vitality that helped get them through some of the hardest experiences of their generation.

Often, we only learn too late that someone we knew had a personal, eye-witness connection to major events in history. The same thing, actually, can be said for whole communities. We can drive by an old house a hundred times and not know something important happened there or some historic figure lived there. In my own town of Union, how many drive unknowingly by sites where, during the American Revolution, artillery battles were waged and men fought for their lives as part of the Battles of Connecticut Farms and Springfield. It is easy, perhaps, to connect with the Revolution in New Jersey—there's a reason we're known as the "Crossroads of the Revolution," after all. Stuff happened *here*. By contrast, the Civil War can seem a bit more removed. Visiting battlefields requires a good tank of gas or two at the nearest. So it's easy to forget just how much we in the Garden State were—like other northern states—involved with the conflict. The New Jersey Civil War Heritage Association is out to change that. Where Joseph Bilby's "Freedom to All" (reviewed above) gives voice to an underappreciated aspect of New Jerseyans' roles, "Discover Your Community's Civil War Heritage" urges the reader to go discover that history for themselves.

The subtitle is descriptive, if ambitious: "Discover the role of your town in the most significant event in American history — the great Civil War that determined

whether our country would survive as a free and united nation." The author, Steven D. Glazer, was inspired to create the book when he started his own odyssey to identify the Civil War veterans in his hometown of Cranford—he discovered about eighty, including many of men who founded the municipality some six years after the war's end. Some citizens held connections to Abraham Lincoln—including one who foiled a first assassination plot and two present that awful night at Ford's Theater. If he could find this stuff out, he reasoned, anyone with the interest could do the same in their town—if they had the right tools.

"Discover..." is essentially a guidebook to the resources available to amateur historians and genealogists. These are divided into categories. Included under "Preliminary Identification" for initially finding individuals, Glazer details the use of the 1890 Federal Census Records. Now, some experienced researchers will recognize that the 1890 records were largely destroyed by fire in 1921—but there is a Veterans Schedule that survived and was used to count the Union veterans and their families. Those for other years are also discussed, including the 1883 List of Federal Pensioners. In discussing the *New York Times* online archives, Glazer draws from experience in warning how the imperfections of OCR scanning can lead to problems—in his case, for example, finding that "Cranford" had been interpreted as "Cranpord" resulting in it not showing up in a search!

Several online as well as archive resources for old newspapers are given as well as resources at the New Jersey State Archives, Google Books and local tax records.

Under "Verification" comes Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System records, William S. Stryker's well-known New Jersey records, the American Civil War Research Database, Pension Index Cards and Our Brothers Gone Before burial guides. Numerous website links and search tips fall under "Building The Biography." This is followed by 18 appendices of mostly samples of what records, request forms and even search terms look like. No doubt about it, you will hit the ground running with your research because you will have a solid idea of what to expect! For people who have never done this kind of research before, there is plenty of the basics to get you started. For the experienced researcher, there will still be information you may have been unaware of if you haven't done Civil War work before. Glazer demonstrates just how much fun all this can be by sprinkling some of his findings from Cranford throughout.

In some respects, this Sesquicentennial is like the Bicentennial in 1976—there will be a spike of interest in history for a while where people will rediscover the past that's right in their backyards. Certainly, with the internet in particular, the amateur researcher has access to far more information than thirty-five years ago. Glazer's book will make that past all the more accessible.





In this periodic series, GSL will ask ten questions of New Jersey's history writers about their interests and how they practice their craft. In this issue:

## Joseph G. Bilby

**Name:** Joseph Bilby

**Home:** Wall Township, NJ

**Where were you born?** I was born in Newark, New Jersey

**Age:** 67

**Education:** BA & MA, Seton Hall University

**Profession(s):** I retired as Supervising Investigator, NJ Department of Labor. I am currently part time Assistant Curator at National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey and free lance writer and lecturer.

**Books you've written or co-authored:**

*Three Rousing Cheers: A History of the 15th New Jersey Infantry from Flemington to Appomattox*, Longstreet House, 1992.

*Forgotten Warriors: New Jersey's African-American Civil War Soldiers*, Longstreet House, 1993.

*Remember Fontenoy: The 69th New York and the Irish Brigade In the Civil War*, Longstreet House, 1995.

Subsequently published in soft cover as

*The Irish Brigade in the Civil War* by Combined Publishing and then Da Capo in 2001. Also available on Kindle.

*My Sons Were Faithful and They Fought: The Irish Brigade At Antietam* (co-edited and written with Steven O'Neill), Longstreet House, 1997.

*Remember You Are Jerseymen: A Military History of New Jersey's Troops in the Civil War* (with William C. Goble), Longstreet House, 1998

*Civil War Firearms*, Combined Publishing, 1997. Subsequently published in soft cover by Da Capo in 2005.

*A Revolution in Arms: A History of the First Repeating Rifles*, Westholme Publishing, 2005

*Small Arms at Gettysburg*, Westholme Publishing, 2007.

*Sea Girt: A Brief History*, The History Press, 2008

*Asbury Park: A Brief History* (with Harry Ziegler), The History Press, 2009.

*New Jersey Goes To War* (editor and contributor), New Jersey Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee/Longstreet House, 2010.

*Monmouth Courthouse: The Battle that Made the American Army*, (with Katherine Bilby Jenkins), Westholme Publishing, 2010.

*Freedom to All: New Jersey's African American Civil War Soldiers*, Longstreet House, 2010.

**Ten Questions:**

**1. Who or what inspired your interest in history?**

When I grew up in Newark, in the 1950s, almost everyone's father was a WWII veteran, and I just got interested in first, the recent past, which included the war and then, when I learned that my grandfather had been a railroad engineer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the DL&W railroad and that my other grandfather had emigrated from Ireland and was involved in raising money for the Irish revolution that occurred after WWI, it sort of just flowed from there.

Reading John Cunningham's stories in the *Newark News* and Henry Charlton Beck's New Jersey folklore tales in the *Star Ledger* inspired me as well. To me, history is stories about people.

## **2. If you could go back in time and witness any one historic event, what would it be?**

I never thought about that before. I suppose the battle of Gettysburg – from a safe distance.

## **3. What is your favorite period or aspect of New Jersey's history?**

The era from the Civil War to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century has become my favorite. There are lots of colorful characters, great stories, and military, social and political history of significance not only to New Jersey, but the nation.

## **5. What's your favorite historic site in New Jersey?**

Monmouth Battlefield State Park, because it was preserved in pretty good condition and saved from development, an unusual thing in NJ history. I also just love the Pinelands and all the little-known byways and places, like the Carranza Memorial down there. I've been visiting the Pines since I was in high school.

## **6. How would you describe what it means to be from New Jersey and how do you think our collective history influenced that sense of identity?**

I have, on one side, deep roots in the state – back to 1780. On the other side my grandparents moved here from NYC in the 1920s, but I have always lived here, and I love the ethnic diversity and great food and cultural mix. This has been a diverse place from the very start of the modern era, with Dutch, Swedes, Finns, Native-

Americans and African Americans all in the mix by 1664. Nineteenth century immigration expanded on that base. Ethnically, I am Irish and English, but I grew up in a city where I learned bits and pieces of Italian, Spanish and Yiddish – not always the best words, perhaps, but it was fun – and I got to eat great Italian food and bagels and pastrami. The true Newark Italian hot dog, encased in half a pizza bread, is the king of "fast food." In those days you could get to NYC for a 35 cent bus ride, and my friends and I did. To be able to see the capital of the world a mere nine miles away from home was a wonderful experience. I got much of my education from the great old Newark Library, and haunted its stacks from an early age.

## **7. Who is your favorite history author (not limited to NJ history)?**

Which work(s)? That's hard to say. I like a lot of them. People like John Cunningham inspired me as a kid, and Marc Mappen, with his books of stories, does the kind of work I really love today – and I really enjoy Thomas Fleming's work as well. David Hackett Fischer's book *Washington's Crossing* is a masterpiece of writing on New Jersey and the Revolution through 1777. Another big favorite of mine is Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World*, about New Netherland.

## **8. Where do you find the ideas for your books/articles?**

I find ideas all around me. I find them in reading old New Jersey books and newspapers, in my work at the National Guard Museum, driving around New Jersey, and in conversations with friends and people I meet. My first interest was military history, and having served as an army officer helped me with that, but I am also interested in

social history, and how political, social and military history intertwine with each other.

## **9. What is the writing process like for you?**

I read a lot of sources, let them percolate, then just sit down and write. Even if what I am writing is not so great, I go on with it before I take a break. I want to get the basic form of the story down. I know that I can go back and fix what is wrong the following day, and that makes for confidence. A lot of people try to write something, and it is not just right, and they give up. They should not. Once I have something down I continue looking for new material on it, usually primary sources, and work them into the mix. What I thought first about the story sometimes changes with the process.

## **10. What book projects do you have upcoming?**

I just finished editing and writing stories for *New Jersey's Civil War Odyssey*, an anthology of New Jersey Civil War related tales, for the New Jersey Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee. It will be published in May by Longstreet House. We cover stories from the 1850s through to the state's Civil War Centennial Committee in 1961. We have accounts of battles, politics, Jersey myth-busting, veterans' affairs by a number of contributors, including me, and even three original poems by a New Jersey teacher and poet, Scott Summers, all dealing with the war and its effect on New Jerseyans. I am also writing a military history of New Jersey, from the Lenape, the Dutch and the Swedes to the present day, for Westholme Publishing. 

### **WANT TO HELP REVIEW?**

Are you well-read and qualified to review books about New Jersey history? Contact: Gordon@GardenStateLegacy.com