

Opinion: Remembering Virginia's 'Forgotten 14'

Opinion by A. Donald McEachin

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U.S. history is plagued with untold stories of forgotten heroes. Approximately 180,000 African Americans served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Known as United States Colored Troops (USCT), they were essential to Union victory, yet Americans remain largely unaware of their role during the war. There were more than 5,500 African American men who enlisted in my home state of Virginia, and thousands more were native Virginians who enlisted at locations outside the Old Dominion. Most Virginia USCTs were previously enslaved and had escaped by crossing Union lines in Tidewater and Northern Virginia, areas occupied by the Union Army for most of the war.

Despite their contributions to Virginia and our nation's historical trajectory, their stories are largely missing from our history books. It is past time to give proper commemoration to the USCTs. Their stories, suppressed during the Jim Crow era, need to be told and made more widely known.

In January 2020, the Richmond City Council unanimously approved construction on the state capital's famous Monument Avenue of a new monument honoring 14 African American Medal of Honor recipients, known as the "Forgotten 14," for their role in the [Battle of New Market Heights](#). That battle was an important Union victory over the Confederate forces defending Richmond and helped advance Union troops farther south. Today, unfortunately, the challenges of the past year and a half, including the coronavirus pandemic, the death of George Floyd, the removal of most of Richmond's Confederate monuments and the uncertain future of Monument Avenue, have sidelined this effort.

At the same time, another effort to honor the Forgotten 14, along with the other USCTs who fought at the Battle of New Market Heights, has gained momentum. The [Battle of New Market Heights Memorial and Educational Association](#) is moving forward to construct a monument to those soldiers and their White officers at the battlefield. In addition, the American Battlefield Trust recently released [a new video](#) about the battle featuring retired Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Ron Coleman.

On Sept. 29, 1864, at the Battle of New Market Heights, which took place a short distance south of today's Richmond International Airport, USCTs from the [Army of the James](#) won an important victory where two previous attempts had failed. Celebrated at the time, the victory contributed to President Abraham Lincoln's reelection and was featured on the front page of the [New York Herald](#) on Sept. 30, 1864. Among the many brave soldiers was [Powhatan Beaty](#), an African American sergeant, who played an integral role in the Union's ultimate victory.

Beaty was a [first sergeant](#) in Company G, 5th United States Colored Infantry (USCI). His regiment was among a [division](#) of Black troops assigned to attack the center of the Confederate defenses at New Market Heights. The defenses consisted of two lines of abatis and a line of earthworks manned by Brig. Gen. [John Gregg's Texas Brigade](#). Two separate failed attacks — involving the 4th and 6th USCI and the 5th, 36th and 38th USCI regiments — resulted in severe casualties.

During the Civil War, very few African Americans were commissioned officers, so the vast majority of the USCT officer corps was White. At the battle of New Market Heights, Confederates strategically targeted the USCT officers, killing and wounding many of them. In many cases, it fell to African American sergeants and corporals to assume command and rally the Black troops to victory. With no officers remaining, Beaty took command of the company and led another charge toward the Confederate lines. This attack proved successful in driving the Confederates from their fortified position; however, Company G's losses were great. By the end of the battle, more than half of the Black division had been killed, wounded or captured. Maj. Gen. [Benjamin Butler](#) recognized Beaty's battlefield heroism, and seven months later, on April 6, 1865, Beaty received the Medal of Honor.

On Sept. 30, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee supervised counterattacks to retake the hard-earned ground. When that failed, Lee was forced to divert troops from Petersburg to shore up the Richmond lines. A few months later, when Petersburg fell, Lee abandoned Richmond and, within a few days, [surrendered at Appomattox](#).

Beaty's story of heroism is just one of the many untold accounts of the brave USCTs who served alongside Union troops to fight for freedom. As with so many others, his story remains widely unknown; however, now is the time to tell his story and the stories of so many brave USCTs like him. After more than 130 years, Virginia has removed the statue of Lee from Monument Avenue in Richmond. This decision, which was long overdue, represents progress and allows us the opportunity to honor those who represent America's values and diversity — individuals who are truly deserving of our veneration.

The long period of silence about African American valor during the Civil War needs to end, and the heroic achievements of the USCT must be honored. I urge the Richmond City Council to continue its efforts to honor the Forgotten 14 on Monument Avenue and encourage all Americans to learn more about the USCTs. I applaud the work of the Battle of New Market Heights Memorial and Education Association for fighting to enshrine USCTs valor and shine a light on their service. We must continue our efforts to ensure the stories of the Forgotten 14 are told and honor their courageous sacrifice.

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