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AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE CIVIL WAR

In 1860 Ohio had almost 2.4 million people and 2% of these were African-Americans. In Cleveland and other areas of the former Western Reserve, African-Americans enjoyed more economic opportunities and community freedom than almost any area of the nation, but discrimination remained.

At the start of the Civil War Ohio enjoyed a prosperous industrial based economy, and Cleveland and the rest of the Western Reserve directly contributed to the success of the economy during the war years. Ohio's transportation networks allowed for quick transports of supplies, foodstuffs, and soldiers across the Union, but, unfortunately for African-Americans in Northeast Ohio, the booming Ohio economy did not lead to upward mobility for most. Irish and German immigrants took many new jobs and women often joined the workforce to take the places of the men on the front. This new economy left many African-Americans in the same situation as before the war.

Politically, the Western Reserve in Ohio remained largely loyal to antislavery sentiments, but there were large areas of pacifists in northeast Ohio as well. Pacifist sentiment stemmed largely from religious sentiment, and Quakers and Moravians, who often worked on the Underground Railroad, were often pacifist. There were other antiwar Ohioans as well, but they were motivated by politics, not religion. Many conservative Ohioans were against the Civil War because of the issue of states' rights. These individuals also felt that emancipation of slaves would create economic and social chaos.

African-American Troops

Northern African-Americans volunteered by the thousands when President Lincoln called for volunteers in 1860, but every Northern state refused African-American volunteers. Whites cited many reasons for the exclusion of African-Americans, including the white government would be defended by white men, that black soldiers would violate the accepted mode of warfare, they would be shocking to the senses of humanity, they would create scenes of desolate savage warfare, and black troops would belittle the cause and sacrifice of white soldiers.

African-Americans such as lawyer and educator John Mercer Langston of Oberlin lobbied against these racist claims and policies and repeatedly demanded the right to fight for their country. These African-American leaders, and other staunch abolitionists in the North, created the dialogue about African-American allegiance to and citizenship in the United States. These people wanted African-Americans to be an instrument in their own freedom, and they organized letter writing campaigns, editorials, and mass meetings to protest Union Army policy. Cleveland African-Americans offered two regiments to guard prisoners, but were rejected by the governor both times.

This policy continued until Massachusetts created the first African-American regiment in 1862. African-Americans from across the country, including hundreds of Ohio African-Americans, flocked to Massachusetts to join the 54th regiment. In 1863 Governor David Tod authorized African-Americans to form their own volunteer units with white officers. The two major black units

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from Ohio were the Fifth Regiment United States Colored Infantry and the Twenty-seventh United States Colored Infantry. Many from Summit County and the region served in these units. Despite receiving half the pay of their white counterparts and enduring other forms of discrimination, over 5,000 Ohio African-Americans had served in state and federal units.

After the Civil War the Army opened itself up to African-American troops and many segregated regiments served in the South during Reconstruction as occupying troops and later in the wars of the West against the remaining Native Americans. The latter troops were nicknamed “buffalo soldiers” by the Native Americans.

The 14th and 15th Amendments

After the Civil War racial politics became a party divider as both major parties fought for support in elections. The issues of black suffrage and civil rights were hot topics because of the effect they could have on Ohio's economy and society. The Democratic party, made up of conservative farmers and Irish and German immigrants, felt that black suffrage and civil rights would cause an influx of migrants into the state which would supposedly cause a decline in society and in the economy. The Republican party often ignored the issue altogether, and when it was brought up, party leaders held creative views on the “black problem”. Ohio's Republican governor, who was a staunch antislavery advocate from the Western Reserve, felt that African-Americans could not live with white Americans because racism was so inherent and strong in society; instead they should live in their own contiguous territory in the West, but still be dependent on the Union. These points of view made it difficult for passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments, but they both did pass, albeit along party lines. This prompted great celebration among black Ohioans.

Sources

Websites

Ohio Memory: <http://www.ohiomemory.org/>

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Books

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