Right to Serve, Right to Lead: Lives and Legacies of the USCT
August 29, 2016 - December 18, 2017
Special Collections Reading Room
Musselman Library | Gettysburg College

An exhibit following the evolution of African-American participation in the Civil War that shows how sacrifice redefined the war’s purpose and created an illustrious military tradition.

This exhibit draws from both the private collection of Angelo Scarlato and the collections of the Adams County Historical Society. We are very grateful for their generosity.
When I was five years old, my family began taking me to historic sites. I was particularly attracted to those relating to the Civil War, Gettysburg in particular drew us back. As a boy accompanying my father on long walks with the park rangers, I got used to walking, to heat, and to investigating history.

Beginning my First Year Seminar, “The Long Shadow of the Civil War,” I was more interested in literature than history, but the class changed me. I started to see the study of history as a basis for philosophical inquiry. History allows you to apply any discipline or investigative method across the length and breadth of time. It seemed like a great way to answer questions, so I stuck with it.

I studied the United States Colored Troops (USCT) in the classroom, but what really drew me to the topic came from outside. While working at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia, I became aware of Storer College, an institution founded shortly after the war to educate local USCT veterans, freedmen and their families, tens of thousands of whom had fled to the huge Union depot during the war. Storer was also a “normal” school, training teachers of all races to take education into the South. In Harpers Ferry, the reasons why the USCT fought – safety, community, opportunity, education – coalesced. I found the interconnectedness astounding.

Then I took “The Great War.” Writing about the black Americans who served in the First World War, I became aware of the terrible abuses and insults they had suffered, even as the 369th Infantry Regiment (the Harlem Hellfighters) became the most decorated and most militarily successful US regiment of the war. Their struggle to gain the right of officership, and then (unsuccessfully) to keep it after the war, factored heavily into the exhibit.

In developing the exhibit, I sought to
• arrange objects in a lived-in, contextual way. They progress chronologically, telling the story as if it were breaking news, and are intended to inform the visitor of the time in which the USCT lived. I hope each one helps to recreate the emotional tenor of its moment.
• avoid generalizations by not portraying these men or their families as victims – or heroes. They are both and neither. The USCT’s history encompasses the gamut of experience from the very negative to the very positive, and everything between. In selecting items and information I tried to honor them, while making it clear that their legacy is still being written.
• highlight the most important, influential parts of the USCT story, above all showing its evolution through the war years when whites and blacks struggled to define what a black soldier was. Who would he fight for, for what reasons, and in what capacity? What is a democracy supposed to look like, and to whom should it be open?
• celebrate the role of black agency in shaping the war’s outcome. Self-emancipation forced the question of how the federal government would legally consider blacks during and after the war. Courage and sacrifice at Fort Wagner led the Northern public to consider the black soldier, his rights as a potential citizen, and his vision for the post-war. Initiative and quick thinking at Chaffin’s farm not only won 15 Medals of Honor for black soldiers, but demonstrated that blacks could lead men in combat – and lead them well.