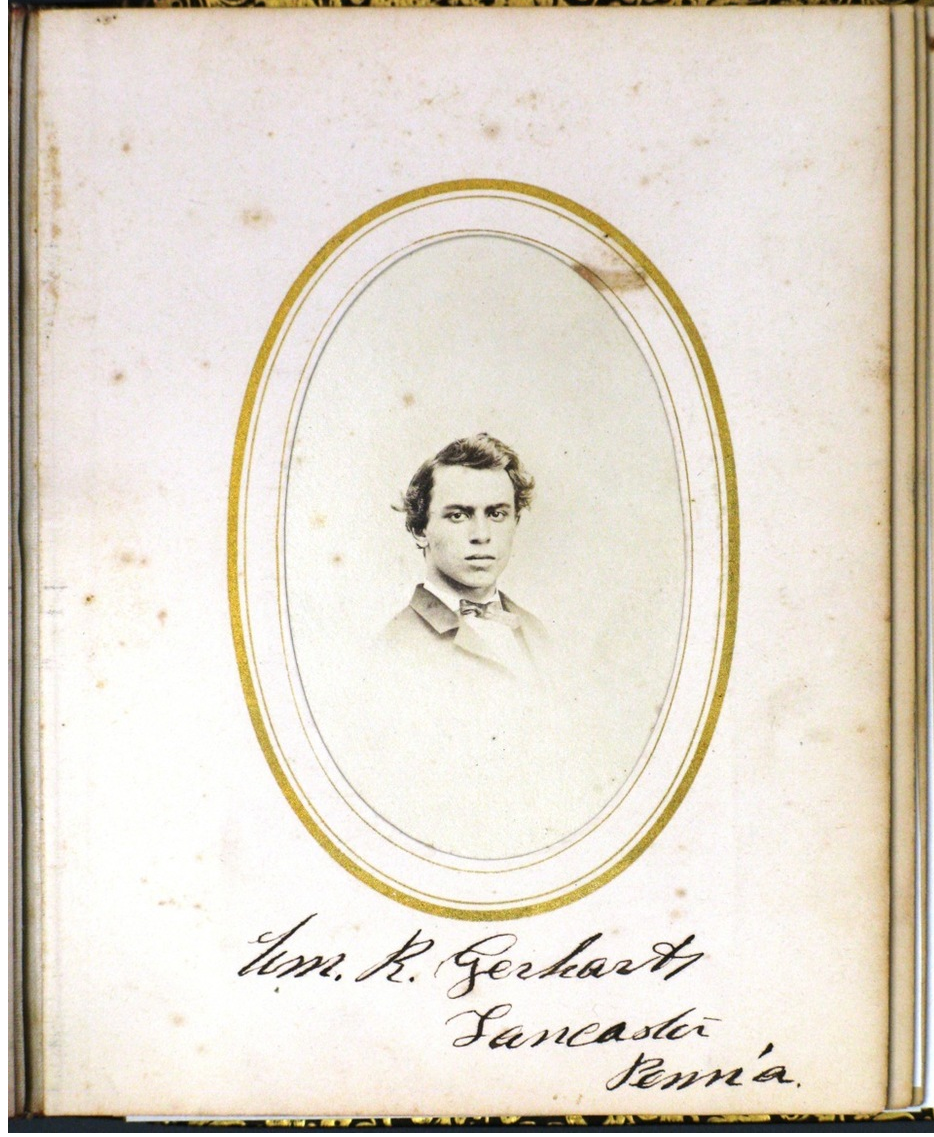




## The Last Civil War Volunteers

Russell K. Brown, Ph.D., September 11, 2020

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Col. William R. Gerhart, regimental commander of the USCI 1866–1867 | courtesy of the author

The 125th United States Colored Infantry Regiment (USCI) was an African-American unit of the Union Army during the American Civil War era. A part of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), the regiment was not formed until after the end of hostilities and saw no combat during the Civil War. The 125th was organized at Louisville, Kentucky, between February 12 and June 2, 1865. Successive regimental commanders were Col. Charles D. Armstrong (1865-1866) and Col. William R. Gerhart (1866-1867).

The regiment's personnel performed garrison and guard duty at Louisville and several points in the north-central states until they were transferred to New Mexico Territory in 1866. Approximately 26 officers and 610 men were present early in April 1866, with two officers and 102 men absent. After traveling by steamboat from Cairo, Illinois, to Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, they marched overland to New Mexico along the Santa Fe Trail, arriving at their destination in August 1866. Some of the men mutinied at St. Louis when they heard of their destination, and a few deserted. The purpose of sending black soldiers to New Mexico was to replace white volunteer troops who were leaving the service after the Civil War. Military units were needed to protect settlers and travelers in the Rio Grande River region from bandits and possible Indian attacks, and USCT units were assigned this duty until regular army troops became available. At least three companies of the 57th Infantry Regiment, USCT, were also stationed in New Mexico and southern Colorado.

Once in New Mexico, the companies of the 125th USCI were assigned to various forts across the territory. One detachment of the regiment founded a new post, Fort Bayard, New Mexico, on August 21, 1866. Two companies were assigned as far south as Fort Bliss, Texas. The troops remained on duty in the desert territory until October 1867, when they were sent to Fort Riley, Kansas, for mustering out. The regiment was disbanded and paid off at Louisville on December 20, 1867. The 125th was the last Civil War volunteer unit, white or black, mustered out of service. A few of the men and one officer continued service in the Regular Army after 1867. Lt. Frank U. Robinson was a cavalry officer until he retired as a brigadier general in 1905.

The 125th USCI suffered only one known fatality in Indian fighting, but other men died while in service. In November 1866, Lt. Col. Alexander Duncan reported from Fort Selden, New Mexico, that seven or eight soldiers of his post, presumably including members of his regiment, already had been killed in the nearby town of Leasburg, where they probably went for entertainment. In letters to his girlfriend in the East, Lt. James H. "Harry" Storey of the 125th USCI at Fort Selden noted on one occasion that the soldiers went "on a spree day before yesterday and had not recovered from the effects today," and again "some of the fellows ... are bound to have a time tonight."



Reinterment in 2009 | courtesy of the author

Previously, in October 1866, Lt. John Warner and Lt. Fred Hazlehurst of the 125th had shot and killed each other at Fort Selden in a fight over Hazlehurst's attentions to Warner's wife. "A few yards march with muffled drums, three volleys over the graves, and that was the end of two men who might have lived for years to come, but for the perfidy of one woman," wrote Lt. Storey. Captain William L. Seran thought that one was "the victim of illicit love," the other died "defending his honor."

Another fatality of the 125th USCI, Private Thomas Smith of Company A, received media attention in 2009 when his remains were reburied at the Santa Fe National Cemetery at Santa Fe, New Mexico, along with the remains of two other African-American soldiers of the post-Civil War era. Smith had died in 1866 at age 23 of complications of either typhoid fever or cholera at Fort Craig, New Mexico, and was buried there. When Fort Craig was abandoned as a military installation in the 1800s, many burials from the post cemetery were exhumed and reburied elsewhere. In 2008 it came to light that some 20 bodies had been looted from the old Fort Craig cemetery and one mummified set of remains was on display in a private home. An investigation led to the recovery of Smith's skull in a brown paper bag and some other remains; in addition, approximately 60 more bodies were exhumed from Fort Craig to prevent further looting. Research by forensic scientists resulted in the identification of three of the remains, Private Smith among them. The research also led to the discovery of the rest of Smith's body.

In June 2009, some 60 sets of unidentified remains were reinterred at Santa Fe National Cemetery. On July 28, 2009, the three identified remains were reburied with the others at the Santa Fe cemetery. The elaborate ceremony with full military honors was conducted by the Arizona Buffalo Soldiers Association, officials of the Departments of the Interior and Veterans Affairs, and prominent retired African-American military personnel. July 28 is the annual National Buffalo Soldiers Day.



Capt. William L. Seran | courtesy of the author



Robert B. Anderson | courtesy of the author

The last known survivor of the 125th USCI was Capt. William L. Seran, who died in Los Angeles in 1936 at the age of 98 years and 11 months. The last known African-American survivor was private Robert Ball Anderson, who enlisted as a 21-year-old runaway slave in 1865. Following his military service, Anderson settled in Nebraska where by 1910 he was the richest black man in the state. He died in an auto accident in 1930. In 1997, Anderson's much younger widow Daisy, then 96, was honored at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, as one of three Civil War widows then living. She died a year later.

*This story is a summary version of the author's article of the same name that appeared in Army History in Summer 2014.*

*About the author: Russell K. Brown is a retired U.S. Army officer whose specialty is American military history, in which he has a Ph.D. from Columbia Pacific University. He is the author of five books and the editor of two more, and has written dozens of articles and contributions and almost 200 book reviews, most of the latter for the Journal of America's Military Past (JAMP). His biography of Gen. W.H.T. Walker, To The Manner Born, has received a UDC Jefferson Davis Award. Russell has been editor of the journal of the Augusta-Richmond County Historical Society in Georgia for more than 20 years.*



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