

ProLiteracy Policy Update

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Remembering the Literacy Teachers Who Taught for the Union During the Civil War

“Outside of the Fort were many skulls lying about; I have often moved them one side out of the path. The comrades and I would have wondered a bit as to which side of the war the men fought on, some said they were the skulls of our boys; some said they were the enemies; but as there was no definite way to know, it was never decided which could lay claim to them. They were a gruesome sight, those fleshless heads and grinning jaws, but by this time I had become used to worse things and did not feel as I would have earlier in my camp life.”

- Susie King Taylor, 1902 (Lerner, 1972)

Suzie (Baker) King Taylor was born a slave in Savannah, Georgia, in 1848. She was raised by her grandmother who sent her and one of her brothers to the home of a free woman to learn to read and write. As she explained in her 1902 book, “We went every day with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them.” (Lerner, 1972)

During the Civil War, the Union Army initiated the practice of enlisting freed African-Americans. But it was soon apparent that there were problems in using these men as soldiers. Among other problems, it was difficult for officers to communicate with illiterate former slaves. So promotion and advancement in the army was difficult for the African-American soldiers.

Many of them blamed this situation on their lack of education. In response to these needs, many officers initiated programs of education for the former slaves.

One officer, Colonel Thomas W. Higginson of the 33rd U. S. Colored Troops, appointed the chaplain as the regimental teacher. Higginson reportedly saw men at night gathered around a campfire, “spelling slow monosyllables out of a primer, a feat which always commands all ears,” and he observed that, “Their love of the spelling book is perfectly inexhaustible, they stumbling on by themselves, or the blind leading the blind, with the same pathetic patience which they carry into everything. The chaplain is getting up a schoolhouse, where he will soon teach them as regularly as he can. But the alphabet must always be a very incidental business in a camp.” (Cornish, 1952)

One of the people whom the chaplain engaged in teaching soldiers of the 33rd to read and write was Suzie King Taylor. (Blassingame, 1965) She went with the regiment to Florida where she reported, “I learned to handle a musket very well while in the regiment and could shoot straight and often hit the target. I assisted in cleaning the guns and used to fire them off, to see if the cartridges were dry, before cleaning and re-loading, each day. I thought this was great fun.” (Lerner, 1972)

According to Taylor, “I taught a great many of the comrades in Company E to read and write when they were off duty, nearly all were anxious to learn. My husband taught some also when it

was convenient for him. I was very happy to know my efforts were successful in camp also very grateful for the appreciation of my services. I gave my services willingly for four years and three months without receiving a dollar.” (Lerner, 1972)

Throughout the Civil War, thousands of teachers, some modestly paid and many volunteers, worked often under very arduous conditions, such as described above by Suzie King Taylor, to educate the newly freed slaves who came to fight for the preservation of the United States of America. In just the Union Army's Department of the Gulf (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Texas) by 1864 there were 95 schools with 9,571 children and 2,000 adults being taught by 162 teachers. By the war's end it was estimated some 20,000 African-American troops had been taught to read “intelligently.” (Blassingame, 1965)

No one knows how many adult literacy teachers gave their lives in the course of their service to the education of those soldiers, both blacks and whites, fighting for the preservation of the Union, during the Civil War.

But this Memorial Day we should remember their service to those they taught to read and write, many of whom we can be certain did give their lives for our nation in the war that took more lives than all the wars from the Revolutionary War through the Vietnam War combined.

In all these wars, the literacy teachers were also there. Perhaps, contrary to what the progressive Colonel Higginson thought, the alphabet should not be considered just “an incidental business in a camp.” It may, instead, be central to victory in wars. It may just be true that “the pen is mightier than the sword.”

On May 30th let us remember the thousands of literacy teachers who have taught hundreds of thousands of troops, the fallen and those who survived their wars, how to wield the mightiest sword of victory—the alphabet!

References

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International Consultant in Adult Education