UCF Veterans Legacy Program

Abram Lancaster (c. 1836-1904)

https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/biographies/sanc/BA-0-193-F.html

Abram Lancaster, also known as William Lancaster, was born around 1836 in St. Augustine, FL. He worked as an engineer before he entered the US Army. As an African American, Lancaster served a segregated military unit. At first, the US government did not want African Americans to serve, because slavery had not been abolished, however, on January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by president Abraham Lincoln, ended slavery. At this time, the Union Army began to recruit black soldiers.

When he was 26, Lancaster enlisted with the South Carolina Volunteer Infantry in Saint Augustine, Florida on January 12, 1863. As a Private, he traveled to South Carolina with his regiment, or group of soldiers, and served with them for three years. During that time, Lancaster was promoted to Corporal, and his regiment captured the Confederate city of Jacksonville, Florida.

Despite emancipation, the Union Army did not treat African American soldiers as equals to white soldiers. Though Lancaster began his service receiving the same pay as white soldiers (thirteen dollars a month), this was slowly reduced between 1863 and 1864. First, it dropped to ten dollars, and then the Army cut it again to just seven dollars. Not until June 1864, did the US Congress pass a bill to return black soldiers' pay to the same level as their white comrades.

On February 8, 1864, the Army redesignated the First South Carolina Volunteer Infantry as the Thirty-third US Colored Infantry. Later in that year, the Army promoted Lancaster to Sergeant, but then in 1865, the Army demoted him back to Private. We do not have any records that tell us why this happened. Despite these changes, Lancaster and his regiment helped to capture the Confederate fortress at Battery Gregg, SC, and then fought in the Battle of Honey Hill, SC. They served in Savannah, GA and Charleston, SC as well.

Lancaster got sick and was treated in a hospital in Savannah, GA. He recovered, and his military service ended on January 31, 1866. He returned to St. Augustine after the war, where he worked in the port and as a carpenter. He also married his wife, Hester.

He died on July 20, 1904 and was buried in the St. Augustine National Cemetery, near Lincolnville, the historically African American part of St. Augustine. He is memorialized on the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington D.C. Lancaster fought for an important cause during a time when it was not easy to be a black soldier. His bravery and dedication made a difference.

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