

# The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, John David (2022) "The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.3.12

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss3/12>

## Review

**Smith, John David**

**Summer 2022**

**Pinheiro, Holly A., Jr.** *The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice*. University of Georgia Press, 2022. PAPERBACK. \$26.95 ISBN 9780820361963 pp. 225

*The Families' Civil War: Black Soldiers and the Fight for Racial Justice* by Furman University's Holly A. Pinheiro is a well-researched, cogently written, and original longitudinal social history of a sampling of freeborn African American families in Philadelphia from 1850 until the 1920s. The author draws upon detailed archival research of 185 men who served in the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry, the 6<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry, and the 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry. These comprised the first three regiments of eleven from Pennsylvania that joined the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) after 1863. Pinheiro focuses mainly, however, on the hardships experienced by the soldiers' working-class or working-poor families over time. The universe of Pinheiro's study thus encompasses the lives of approximately one thousand African Americans, including the multigenerational family members related to the troops back home and their descendants.

Federal military and pension records, the U.S. Census, and the *Weekly Anglo-African* and *Christian Recorder* provide a documentary window into the deleterious long-term impact the war had on Black Philadelphians' already generally precarious lives. Their encounters with the pervasive White racism of their day influenced Black families across generations—affecting their often dire financial problems, their housing, and their health. Pinheiro refers to these challenges as “The War After the War.” He makes clear that his study transcends the experiences of the men of the USCT. “Ultimately,” he explains, “USCT soldiers are only the beginning point to truly understanding the complexity of northern African American families” during the long nineteenth century (147).

Pinheiro organizes his book intelligently, first providing chapters on African American families in the antebellum North and the recruitment and mobilization of the regiments raised in Philadelphia. Later chapters treat the dangers, exigencies, and indignities of military life, including combat, fatigue duty, disease, and ongoing frustrations with the bureaucratic U.S.

pension system. In “Familial Hardships during the Civil War” Pinheiro underscores the emotional, financial and other difficulties that the soldiers’ families confronted on the home front. They longed for the rare furloughs awarded their men in arms and suffered when news of the deaths of their husbands, lovers, and sons reached them from the distant South. Twenty-eight men, or 15 percent, of Pinheiro’s small sample died while serving in the Union Army, including from combat wounds. Wives in common-law marriages found themselves ineligible to receive pensions for husbands lost while in the service. “The Bureau of Pensions believed that a legal marriage could impose domesticity on wives and enforced white Christian ideals of civility on African Americans, men and women alike” (84).

Pinheiro devotes his foremost attention to the Black veterans and their families during the Reconstruction era. While the government increasingly focused on reunification and national expansion, “Philadelphian USCT veterans and their families fought every day to stay intact, just as they had during the war, against various forms of racial discrimination” (88). Many suffered from underemployment (“occupational racism” [93]), others from wartime emotional, physical, and psychological disabilities. Widows and their minor children struggled acquiring dependent pensions. While some USCT veterans in Philadelphia secured remunerative careers as barbers servicing White persons, far more grappled with not only finding regular wage-earning employment, but putting food on the table and securing accommodations. Many, unable to afford housing, resided with fictive kin or received charity.

Although limited by the size of available data, Pinheiro admirably brings to light the “long-term negative consequences on the economies, familial dynamics, and relationships of USCT veterans” (145-46). *The Families’ Civil War* is a welcome addition to scholarship on the USCT, family history, and Philadelphia.

*John David Smith is the Charles H. Stone Distinguished Professor of American History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His books include Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era (editor, 2002), Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops (2013), and Soldiering for Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops (with Bob Luke, 2014).*