By 1863, Lincoln had firmly dedicated the Civil War as a fight for the extension of freedom to 4 million slaves through his Emancipation Proclamation. Besides granting freedom to slaves held in the rebelling states, the Emancipation Proclamation also provided for the recruiting of black soldiers for the war effort.

Former slaves and freemen alike stepped forward to spread freedom to their oppressed brothers in the South. States, like Massachusetts, recruited African-Americans from across the country into their ranks. Men of Franklin County joined the 54th Massachusetts, made famous by their charge on Battery Wagner outside Charleston in 1863.

The United States Colored Troops were units organized by the Federal Government of solely black soldiers. These forces served many functions during the war, including helping the Federal Army gather and distribute supplies, garrisoning defensive forts and in battle.

Men from Chambersburg, part of the USCT, fought in the Battle of the Crater in 1864 outside Petersburg, Virginia. These troops were specially trained to spearhead that assault on the rebel line after other Pennsylvanians exploded a mine under the Confederate entrenchments. The men were not allowed the honor of leading the assault, however, due to the racism of their superior officers. As a result, untrained white soldiers were used to head the attack. These men charged into the crater, instead of around its edge and the advantage of surprise caused by the explosion was lost.

Chambersburg’s Mount Vernon Cemetery has over a dozen USCT Soldiers buried there today.

QUESTIONS:

What document allowed African Americans to join the army and fight for freedom?

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Would YOU have joined the army in 1863? Why or why not?

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