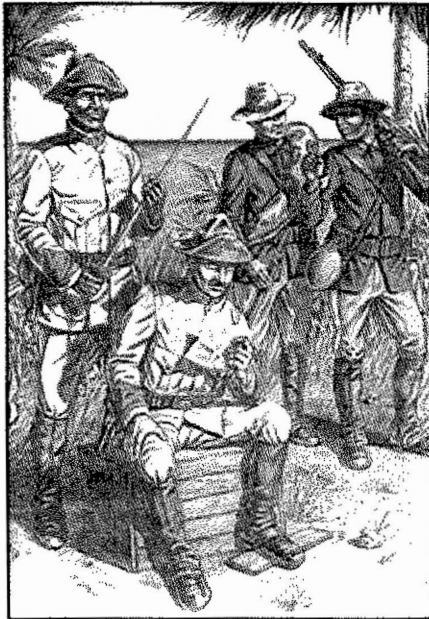


Lt. Col. Gourdin was their mentor, role model and, to some, a father. In February 1950, Gourdin was promoted to colonel and assigned to state headquarters. There is a park in Roxbury named in his honor.

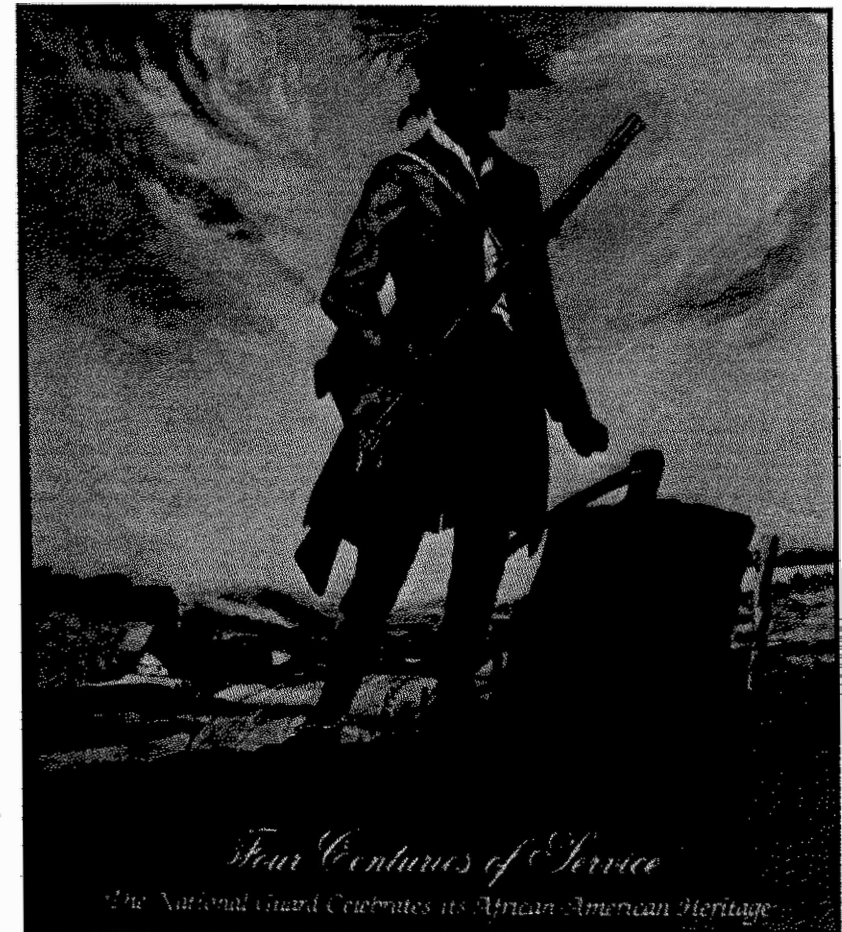
In September 1950, the 272d was mobilized for service in the Korean War. Commanded by Lt. Col. Karl Russell, the battalion reported to Camp Edwards and began firing their 155mm self-propelled howitzers with great anticipation of combat service. Transferred to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, the Massachusetts Guardsmen were treated as second-class Soldiers and restricted to the use of one service club even though the Army was ordered to integrate its units and facilities.

In August 1951, most of the African American officers were ostensibly relieved because they were not qualified field artillerymen. Boston's African American newspaper covered the story with the headline "Railroaded." The morale of the 272d plummeted and, for the first time in its 88-year history, white officers took command. To avoid additional bad press, the Army rushed the 272d to Germany where the battalion was integrated.

While this was a sad end to a proud Black unit, a few African Americans continued to enlist in the integrated Massachusetts Army and Air National Guard. Largely a white organization, there was little attempt to attract and enlist African Americans until the 1970s when Guard leaders finally realized that they had to open the Guard to all.



African American Soldiers and Airmen have served proudly since then and have risen to all levels of leadership. Brig. Gen. Joseph C. Carter, the Massachusetts Guard's first African American general, was appointed the 41st Adjutant General of Massachusetts with concurrent promotion to major general in September 2007. This was a logical historical progression in Massachusetts National Guard history. Pvt. Pearce and all African American Massachusetts Guardsmen that have served through the centuries would have been proud.



Five Centuries of Service: African Americans in the Massachusetts National Guard

By Leonid Kondratiuk, Director, Historical Services Office

African Americans have a long and proud history of service in the Massachusetts National Guard. Despite colonial laws that officially restricted them, Black militiamen served alongside with their fellow militiamen and defended their towns from Indian attacks. African American militiamen fought at Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill and they en-

listed for service in the Massachusetts regiments of the Continental Army in June 1775. Militia company commanders ignored the law and enrolled their African American neighbors into local units. Even Gen. George Washington realized that he could not fight and win the Revolutionary War without Black Soldiers.



Lt. Col Edward Gourdin and the officers of the 272d Field Artillery Battalion at Camp Edwards in 1949.

The first African American to serve in the Massachusetts Militia was Pvt. Abraham Pearse who was mustered into the Plymouth militia company in 1643. He was followed by others who drilled monthly and stood guard at night. Pvt. Prince Estabrook was one of the Lexington militiamen who confronted the British force intent to capture colonial arms in Concord. Estabrook was wounded in the fighting making him one of the first Americans to shed blood in the fight for independence. Minuteman Peter Salem of Framingham took part in the Lexington campaign and, at the Battle of Bunker Hill, he was reported to have fired the shot that killed Maj. John Pitcairn, the British field commander at Lexington. Salem went on to serve on active duty in the Continental Army for five years.

Why did they fight for American independence when some were slaves, were discriminated against or made to feel unwelcome? They were Americans! Despite their record in the war, Federal and state militia acts excluded Blacks from serving in the militia.

Lewis Gaul of Boston organized an African American military unit in 1855 with the hope that one day he and his unit would be allowed to serve in the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia. It was not until 1862, when Massachusetts Governor John Andrew petitioned the War Department, that Congress changed the militia law to allow African Americans to serve in the militia and on active duty in state volunteer regiments.

It is well known that the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was one of the first African American regiments to organize and fight in the Civil War. It

is less well known that the first African American militia unit to organize was the 1st Separate Company in Boston in September 1863 commanded by Capt. Lewis Gaul. The organization of the 54th Regiment and the 1st Company was significant because, from then on, African Americans served continuously in the U.S. Army and the National Guard.

According to records in the Massachusetts National Guard Museum in Worcester, veterans of the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments enlisted in Company A in Boston and Company B in New Bedford of the 2d Infantry Battalion commanded by Maj. Gaul. These African American Guardsmen were a great source of pride in the Black community.

In July 1898, Company I. (the former Company A), 6th Massachusetts Infantry, deployed to Puerto Rico to seize the island from Spain. Company I. was mobilized again in April 1917 for service in World War I. The company was assigned to a new regiment, the 372d, composed of Black Guardsmen from five states and the District of Columbia. While white southern officers did not want Black combat units, the French Army did. The 372d was welcomed with open arms by its French division commander and was later awarded the French Army's equivalent of the Presidential Unit Citation, the Croix de Guerre.

Cpl. Clifton Merrimon of Cambridge, a Massachusetts Guardsman serving in Company I., was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry in action on September 27, 1918 when he single-handedly destroyed a German

machine gun that had stopped his unit. Cpl. Merrimon reorganized his platoon, took command as the senior leader, and continued the attack. The main post office in Cambridge is named the Merrimon Post Office in his honor.

After World War I, Company I. was expanded as the 3d Battalion. 372d Infantry. It was a great honor for a young African American to serve in the unit. In 1925 Edward O. Gourdin, a young Harvard graduate and son of a Florida sharecropper, enlisted in Company K shortly after his admission to Harvard Law School. At the 1924 Olympics, he was awarded a silver medal for the broad jump. He received a direct commission later in 1925 which launched him to a distinguished career as a Soldier, scholar, and the first African American judge in Massachusetts. During World War II, he was promoted to the rank of colonel and took command of the 372d Infantry.

Col. Gourdin was responsible for training over 10,000 African American infantrymen who fought in the war. Gourdin and the 372d deployed to Hawaii in May 1945 with the hope of a combat assignment which did not come.

After World War II, the National Guard Bureau allotted the 272d Armored Field Artillery Battalion to Massachusetts as an African American unit in a still-segregated National Guard and U.S. Army. Col. Gourdin voluntarily accepted a reduction in rank to Lt. Col. in order to command the 272d. Young African Americans from Boston and Cambridge too young to serve in World War II enlisted to serve under one of Boston's leading Black citizens.