

The 2011 National Black History Theme: *African Americans and the Civil War*

In 1861, as the United States stood at the brink of Civil War, people of African descent, both enslaved and free persons, waited with a watchful eye. They understood that a war between the North and the South might bring about jubilee—the destruction of slavery and universal freedom. When the Confederacy fired upon Fort Sumter and war ensued, President Abraham Lincoln maintained that the paramount cause was to preserve the Union, not end slavery. Frederick Douglass, the most prominent black leader, opined that regardless of intentions, the war would bring an end to slavery, America’s “peculiar institution.”

Over the course of the war, the four million people of African descent in the United States proved Douglass right. Free and enslaved blacks rallied around the Union flag in the cause of freedom. From the cotton and tobacco fields of the South to the small towns and big cities of the North, nearly 200,000 joined the Grand Army of the Republic and took up arms to destroy the Confederacy. They served as recruiters, soldiers, nurses, and spies, and endured unequal treatment, massacres, and riots as they pursued their quest for freedom and equality. Their record of service speaks for itself, and Americans have never fully realized how their efforts saved the Union.

In honor of the efforts of people of African descent to destroy slavery and inaugurate universal freedom in the United States, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History has selected “African Americans and the Civil War” as the 2011 National Black History Theme. We urge all Americans to study and reflect on the value of their contributions to the nation.



**African American Civil War Memorial
Washington, DC**