

## STUDENTS SHINE LIGHT ON STORY OF 'MR. LINCOLN'S SOLDIERS'

Westerly Sun, The (RI)-August 12, 2012

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Special to The Sun

Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

Elisha Hunt Rhodes, then a lieutenant of the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, was favorably impressed by the men of the United States Colored Troops as they attacked fortifications near the Confederate capital of Richmond in the battle of Deep Bottom, Va. Composed of African-American soldiers commanded by white officers, the USCT would eventually number some 186,000 men and 39,000 ultimately died for the Union, from famous battles like Fort Wagner, S.C. and Petersburg, Va., to lesser known confrontations in Olustee, Fla. and Fort Smith, Ark.

"A division of colored soldiers charged over the same ground, but were driven back," said Rhodes, who began the war as a private and ended as the colonel of the 2nd R.I. Infantry. "I have not been much in favor of colored soldiers, but yesterday's work convinced me that they will fight. So hurrah for the colored troops."

Rhodes' moment of illumination was not unusual for Union soldiers. Racism was endemic both North and South, and while the South fought primarily to maintain the institution of slavery, northerners fought for many other reasons. Even Lincoln was concerned with maintaining the Union and came to abolition slowly. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation following the battle of Antietam in September of 1862 resulted in near mutiny in many Union regiments.

"We did not enlist to fight for the Negro," Pvt. Chauncey Welton of the 103rd Ohio Infantry declared at the time, "and I can tell you that we never shall!"

A group of students from Providence has produced a Living History performance to enlighten Rhode Islanders of today about the changing attitudes towards slavery and African-Americans during the Civil War.

"Mr. Lincoln's Soldiers" was presented at Roger Williams Park by the 14th Rhode Island Program on Thursdays through Saturdays from July 5 through Aug. 11. Produced, directed and presented by the students, the program featured the story of African-Americans in the Civil War using the words of the time from Frederick Douglass, Elisha Hunt Rhodes, members of the all-black 54th Mass. Regiment and white soldiers like Pvt. Welton. Period music and drilling demonstrations by the 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery completed the program.

Fortunately, the attitude of white soldiers changed as they fought side by side with the colored troops. African-Americans earned 25 Medals of Honor in the war, including Thomas R. Hawkins of the 6th USCT, who won his from a battle where Rhodes looked on at Deep Bottom, Va.

For members of the 14th R.I. Heavy Artillery, it's important that people today are aware of the legacy of black soldiers in the Civil War.

"I feel obligated to be involved," said Brandon Enos, a corporal in the unit. "Even though African-Americans went through so much hardship to end racism and fight for equal rights, it's still happening today."

The 14th Rhode Island Program is part of the Career Institute in History and Preservation at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center in Providence. Composed of low-income and minority high school students, the 14th Rhode Island program prepares young men and women for college and careers in history and preservation through coursework, internships and re-enacting Rhode Islands' sole colored unit, the 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery.

The program is dealing with a loss of funding. Tax deductible donations can be sent to Living History, 20 Moore Street, Providence, R.I. 02907.

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