CHAPTER FIVE

The Afterlife of Race

After white medical staff had their fill of observing, assessing, measuring, probing, disarticulating, and anatomizing the bodies of African American soldiers and civilians who came to the army’s medical practitioners for care and healing, they treated the human remains of the Black war dead without dignity or respect. Some were sent to segregated cemeteries, at best. Others were sent to unmarked or mass graves, and some to anonymous medical waste pits. For African Americans, wartime death was often met with continued acts of discrimination and injustice. Many whites viewed the bodies of Black soldiers and civilians as both more exploitable than those of whites and less deserving of the dignified burial that white soldiers and their survivors hoped for. The wartime culture of “A Good Death” pursued by so many white Unionists was distantly removed from the experiences and possibilities that followed the passing and postmortem exploitation of Black soldiers and civilians, who had offered their lives (or whose lives were taken) in a war to end slavery.1

The war’s abundance of death came to soldiers and civilians, white and African American, but Black soldiers (and likely Black civilians) died at a far greater rate than did whites. Although it is the dramatic number of fallen soldiers on Civil War battlefields that drew the attention of the nation and most modern scholars today, we should remember that the majority of wartime mortality occurred ingloriously in camps and in hospitals from disease. Not only did disease take the life of most soldiers who died during the war, but also notably a much higher proportion of Black than white soldiers. Of the estimated 37,000 Black soldiers who died during the war, 30,000 died from disease in hospitals and camps. Black troops were almost ten times as likely to die from disease as from combat; among white troops, death from disease was only twice as likely as death from combat injuries.2 Once sick, Black troops died about five times more frequently than white troops. Black soldiers were more likely to die than whites from diarrheal diseases, pneumonia, scurvy, tuberculosis, smallpox, and malaria.3 In other words, the mortality “rate” among the United States Colored Troops in the Civil War was 35 percent greater than that among other troops.4 This unprecedented mortality (although not the racial disparity), led historian Drew Gilpin Faust to
describe the Civil War as creating a new national relationship to death.\textsuperscript{5} For African Americans—those who died and those who survived to mourn—wartime death extended the impact of slavery as well as state racism in significant ways, as this chapter will reveal.

Additionally, African Americans were disproportionately numbered among the unknown dead. More than 40 percent of all military war dead were never identified, but among African American soldiers that proportion grew to 66 percent.\textsuperscript{6} Some of that difference might be accounted for by the Confederate practice of killing Black prisoners or refusing to allow the Union army to retrieve and bury its dead after battles had concluded. However, considering that the great majority of Black deaths occurred in Union hospitals and in camps rather than in battle, it would seem that the circumstances of Black soldiers’ deaths were \textit{more likely} to allow their proper identification. The commanding officer of the 62nd U.S.C.I., in his farewell speech to the regiment at the conclusion of their service, noted that “Death held high carnival day after day for months. The four hundred graves—many of them nameless”—were witness to that fact.\textsuperscript{7} But why were so many nameless? How and why so many died unnamed and unacknowledged demands explanation.

The chaos of war—especially on the battlefield—often forced the Union army to ignore its own regulations dictating ritual honoring and burial of the dead and instead to dispose of human remains in improvised ways. White soldiers were also left in unmarked and mass graves or never buried at all. However, for Black soldiers and civilians, white scientific and medical investigations further diminished the extent and meaning of their wartime sacrifice, adding a final degradation to the wartime indignities visited on them.\textsuperscript{8} As Black bodies were removed from camps, from segregated hospitals and hospital wards, from where they collapsed and died while at work on fortifications or in streets and alleyways, they were often allotted a segregated and inferior resting place. In undercounting the extent and aftermath of Black mortality and by failing to expose the legacy of racist mortuary practices, historians have underestimated the extent to which racism shaped and permeated the institutions of war and death.

Certainly, we can point to instances of dignified and notable burial practices claimed for some African American servicemen. Captain Andre Cailloux of the First Louisiana Native Guard was buried with full military and Catholic honors in New Orleans, witnessed by thousands of city residents who turned out to honor their native son.\textsuperscript{9} For many uncounted African Americans, however, wartime burial occurred without ceremony,
in improvised and anonymous burial grounds. Even worse, particularly for comrades, their kin and friends, wartime burial practices could not ensure that the integrity of the corpse was preserved. This was sometimes the result of wartime conditions, but it was also the result of decisions by military surgeons and hospital workers to dissect, anatomize, and reduce soldiers’ remains to medical specimens. At contraband hospitals across the South, Black civilians met similar fates in death.

Whites’ wartime pursuit of embodied race in living and recently deceased Black soldiers and civilians revealed their unwillingness and perhaps incapacity to recognize the full personhood of people of African descent. Using the bodies of Black soldiers for dissection and anatomization, often in search of biological justifications for social hierarchies and race-based privileges, turned people into objects—objects that had no claim on funeral rites, a military burial, notification of next of kin, or official registration. Even those whose remains were not exploited by medical investigators faced inequities. The medical and military context in which death occurred was steeped in racist practices that preceded the war, as well as the wartime context noted here. The story of the war dead, as historians have long emphasized, was central to the experience, meaning, and memory of the war, for soldiers and noncombatants alike. Historians have far to go toward understanding how the disparaging treatment of Black war dead shaped the meaning of the war for whites and for African Americans.

Death outside the Reach of War

Outside the reach of the war, African Americans met the death of loved ones as their status (enslaved or free), spiritual practices, cultural expectations, and resources demanded or allowed. On May 1, 1862, anyone who happened to be at the Arch Street Wharf in Philadelphia would have witnessed the large funeral procession for Mrs. Elizabeth A. Schureman, wife of an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) pastor. Before the procession, Mrs. Schureman’s remains had been laid out “beautifully and appropriately” by Mrs. Sarah Williams, a Philadelphia shroudress. Her body had been carried on a bier from her home to the wharf, in a procession that included the brothers and sisters of her fraternal order, her congregation’s officiants, her church women’s society members, her family, and friends. The procession departed Philadelphia for Burlington, New Jersey, where they entered the AME church. There, the choir sang, the congregants offered hymns, and the pastor spoke from the book of Revelation. After the benediction, her
remains were escorted to the cemetery, where her pastor and the male and female officers of her fraternal society performed final rituals. It was, by report, the largest funeral ever witnessed in Burlington.11

Elizabeth Schureman’s funeral rites were those of an elite member of her community, enmeshed in the religious, fraternal, and business life of her social circle. It was, in many respects, a privileged passage and not typical of what the mostly working-class, military-aged Black men and their families in the North would have encountered or experienced. The example of Schureman’s rites points to the layered meanings of a dignified death for the deceased, their family, and their community. It highlights the important social context of death and funeral rituals. However wealthy or poor, African Americans in the North would have hoped and expected that on their death (during peacetime), a family member or a close friend would bathe their body, place it on a cooling board, drape it in a shroud or dress, in a new or at least clean suit of clothes, and that friends would join the family in sitting up with the corpse while sharing food, hymns, and stories. A friend or a local carpenter would build a coffin, and the next day—if possible—the deceased would be carried to their church for a funeral service and then taken by wagon or pallbearers to a cemetery for final burial rites. At the very least, one hoped for close attendance to the body by loved ones and a dignified (and undisturbed) burial, even if in a potter’s field.12

Prior to the Civil War, the nineteenth-century politics of race had material consequences—dictating, for example, which burial grounds were open to African Americans. In the context of segregation (whites frequently excluding African Americans from public, denominational, or municipal cemeteries, or relegating them to inferior sections), Northern African American congregations and communities established their own burial grounds and celebrated the successful founding of Black cemeteries. The Black press covered these as especially noteworthy events. In reporting on the establishment of a Black cemetery in Cincinnati, a reporter in Frederick Douglass’s paper, The North Star, described it as a “splendid acquisition,” “a most useful institution,” equivalent to the importance of public halls and meeting places to the Black community.13 Similarly, the dedication of Olive Cemetery in Philadelphia was attended by over 400 local African Americans, who understood it to be “an extraordinary occasion . . . calculated to do us imperishable honor—for, amongst all civilized communities, an interest is always manifested for the proper sepulture of the dead.”14 From the pages of the Christian Recorder, the organ of the AME church, congregations that purchased cemetery lots announced the achievement as a great blessing.15 The
Recorder asserted that these developments placed Black citizens on an equal footing with whites, but more importantly ensured dignity and respect in death.16

When “resurrectionists” targeted Black burial grounds (as they frequently did), Black communities expressed outrage and trauma. In both the North and the South, Black Americans, free and enslaved, often experienced insult to the burial places of their friends and family. Grave robbers, in their endless pursuit of cadavers for anatomy instruction and practice, had a long history of violating and commodifying African Americans in death. Resurrectionists profited handily by exhuming and selling fresh corpses to medical schools and museums, and they haunted Northern Black cemeteries and slave cemeteries in the South to obtain “fresh” bodies for medical schools. African Americans in the North and South petitioned local authorities for protection of Black burial grounds against resurrectionists to no avail.17

Historians Daina Ramey Berry and Stephen Kenny have revealed the antebellum traffic in the corpses of enslaved people to be modeled on the slave trade itself, one that solicited and supplied both the dying and the deceased to Southern and Northern medical professionals, collectors, and museums. The violation and stolen dignity associated with exhuming human remains and commodifying the corpses enlarged the scope and impact of racism to include the bodies of the dead as well as those who mourned them.18 On the eve of the Civil War, white supremacy was often manifested in denying a dignified death and burial to African Americans, exemplifying the profound disregard with which so many white Americans viewed the personhood of Black people, alive and dead.

This was especially the case in the antebellum South, where death was not only a commonplace feature of the torture and exploitation of the enslaved but also a promise for final liberation. In the enslaved communities of the 1850s, community-based death rituals were constrained by the demands of slave owners on the time, mobility, and cultural practices of the enslaved. Funerals were widely regarded by slave owners as events too easily adapted to organizing resistance and rebellion, which prompted white surveillance and efforts to prevent or curtail them. During the years and generations of American slavery, legislatures and municipalities strove to police and repress the funerals and burial ceremonies of enslaved communities—documented as early as 1680 in Virginia.19 Enslaved and free Blacks in Richmond protested a law passed in the aftermath of the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion that prohibited religious assemblies because it prevented them from conducting
dignified burial services. Whites often followed the execution of enslaved participants in rebellions by refusing a proper burial for human remains, intended as a further punishment and as a warning to the community of enslaved people. Other executed rebels had their remains mutilated.

Some former slaves reported hasty burials, sometimes in crude coffins, sometimes in no more than the clothes in which people died. The brusque and dishonoring treatment of the enslaved dead typically meant that if there were funeral services offered, they occurred days, weeks, even months later. Historian David Roediger has pointed to evidence, in both slave narratives and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews, that enslaved people deeply resented the callous disregard of slave owners for the dignified funerals and burials of the enslaved. Enslaved people defied their owners’ disregard and pursued their own rituals around death. Some survivors of slavery described tender rituals of bathing the deceased, dressing the corpse in either a suit of clothes (men) or a clean winding sheet (women), and carefully tending the deceased until a well-fit coffin was built. The deceased would then be carried to the burial site, and a church service would be held the next Sunday. Drumming and singing were key in some enslaved communities; ring shouts accompanied burial rites in others. One former slave recalled the “big time” that occurred at a service, where survivors witnessed to the life of the deceased. Most who had experienced slavery, however, reported long delays before services were held for the deceased, a delay imposed by the endless work demands of slavery. Yet funeral rites were also part of the geography of resistance among the enslaved, especially in the plantation regions of the South: vitally important, deeply sacred, and, when possible, hidden from white observation.

Burial practices and burial grounds among enslaved communities varied widely, but Lynn Rainville’s important study of African American cemeteries in Virginia explains that the frequent use of uninscribed fieldstones as markers likely reflected the context of proscribed illiteracy, inaccessible resources, and reliance on oral history to identify gravesites, and practices that emphasized family rather than individual burial sites. Yet she also found a tremendous variety of inscribed markers and decorative practices at burial sites. The burial places that free and enslaved Black Southerners used were always vulnerable to the authority and power of whites. In a typical example, white municipal authorities deemed a Black burial ground in Augusta, Georgia, less important than the expansion of a city wharf. Part of the campus of the University of Richmond was built over a burial ground of enslaved
Rites Worth Fighting For

Black Civil War troops brought their own ideas about and experiences with death to their wartime service. They also understood that their access to the honor of a military burial, the same ritual that white soldiers received in death, was worth fighting for and one of the ways in which the war accelerated their claims to racial equality and citizenship rights. Historian J. T. Roane reminds us that historically, burial grounds, like plantation provision grounds, were sites of Black insurgency, challenging white social control both during and after slavery. As such, they were also sites of white assault. What historian Vincent Brown names as “mortuary politics”—the power struggles reflected and revealed in contested treatments of the dead—were also clearly evident in the disposal of Black bodies by white military and medical men during the war.

Some white commanders fully embraced equitable burial rites as one of the earned privileges of Black military service. A “regular military burial” was described by Thomas W. Higginson, commander of Black troops, including a military escort bearing a flag-draped coffin to an appropriate burial place “and three volleys fired over the grave.” Colonel Samuel Armstrong described the funeral of another Black soldier, formerly a slave: his coffin was draped in the U.S. flag, the procession included a dirge-playing brass band and a group of comrades who bore arms reversed, and the rite was attended by three commissioned officers. In coastal South Carolina, Black and white soldiers under the command of Major General Rufus R. Saxton were buried together in the Soldiers Cemetery near Beaufort. Saxton, military governor over the South Carolina coastal islands, instituted what Corporal James Henry Gooding of the 54th Massachusetts proudly described as a “very important and humane arrangement” that the brave soldier who died from disease or wound must be “decently buried.” Citing orders from the provost marshal’s office (pertaining to the death of white soldiers), Saxton required that each corpse be provided with a “good, substantial” coffin, clean garments, and a white-painted board to identify his name, regiment, and age. Furthermore, Gooding noted, “The relatives and friends of the deceased are to receive an official notice of the facts, detailing the manner of death, or sickness before death, and every item so far as known of the conduct of the
deceased in the field.” This, he noted, was an improvement on the “old order of things,” with no report of what those previous practices had been. Gooding, an advocate for Black enlistment, may have appreciated that detailing the formerly egregious practices of burying Black soldiers in segregated burial spots or in unmarked graves would not endear Northern Blacks to military service.

Some army chaplains were dedicated to providing honorable services and burial for the Black soldiers with whom they served; the fourteen African Americans among the 133 chaplains who served during the war were among them. Chaplain James Peet, stationed at Vicksburg with his regiment (the 50th U.S.C.I.), in September 1864 noted, “The burial of the dead is properly attended with Religious Services and Military Escort.” At Knight Hospital in New Haven, Chaplain James Crane reported accompanying to the grave and performing services for Black soldiers who died in the hospital, services that included an “address in each case.” Chauncey Leonard, assigned to L’Ouverture Hospital in Alexandria that served Black soldiers and civilians, reported committing Black soldiers to the grave with “appropriate religious services.” Many more may have acted similarly; the extant record, however, is very thin.

When Private John Cooley died in May 1864, his coffin received an escort to the cemetery and a graveside service led by the Reverend Albert Gladwin (a Black Baptist minister and the government-appointed superintendent of contrabands at Alexandria). However, Gladwin made no mention of the war or of the Black soldiers defending the nation, and he included no military honors. This was one of several indignities that prompted Black soldiers to protest. In December 1864, 443 Black soldiers in L’Ouverture Hospital petitioned Major Edwin Bentley, director over the area’s hospitals, to end Gladwin’s practice of burying Black soldiers with Alexandria’s civilian refugees from slavery. For the last year, the “soldiers burying ground” (now Arlington National Cemetery) had been undergoing major improvements, but the burial ground for the refugees from slavery was essentially a potter’s field where the bodies were “packed away,” three or four to a grave. The soldiers were furious: “We . . . [feel] deeply interested in a matter of so great importance.”

As American citizens, we have a right to fight for the protection of her flag, that right is granted, and we are now sharing equally the dangers and hardships in this mighty contest, and should shair [sic] the same privileges and rights of burial in every way with our fellow soldiers.
who only differ from us in color. To crush this rebellion, and establish civil, religious & political freedom for our children, is the height of our ambition. To this end we suffer, for this we fight, yea and mingle our blood with yours, to wash away a stain so black, and destroy a Plot so destructive to the interest and property of this nation, as soldiers in the U.S. Army.

They demanded “our bodies may find a resting place in the ground designated for the brave defenders of our countries flag.” Their carefully written petition did not express any disdain for burial with Black civilians but rather directly protested the army’s refusal to recognize them as soldiers, due to a soldier’s honor. Relief workers Harriet Jacobs and Julia Wilbur joined in the protests and outcry, and by the end of the month the quartermaster general’s orders finally instructed that Black soldiers had earned the right to burial in the military cemetery along with white soldiers.

Military racism continued to shape burial practices throughout and after the war. In March 1864, at Helena, Arkansas, the commander of the 56th U.S.C.I. noted that since “the dead of this Regiment having not been buried according to army regulations the following order will be observed — A commissioned officer will be required to be present at any funeral connected with their respective companies and see that the graves are dug at least four feet deep and that the noncommissioned officers are properly instructed in the duties and forms connected with military funerals.” In July 1865, white abolitionist, journalist, and author James Redpath wrote to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and reported the burial of Black soldiers and civilians in the Charleston area in a potters’ field. In Tennessee, their interment occurred in “sloppy and slimy ground at the bottom of a hill,” away from white Union and Confederate burials. In Savannah, he reported, the commanding officer refused to bury Black and white soldiers in the same cemetery, despite protests from one of the chaplains assigned there. At Camp William Penn, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, the men of the 32nd U.S.C.I. protested the mistreatment of a fallen comrade, when, in the spring of 1864, the regimental surgeon failed to attend to a soldier whose remains were left, unburied, in the warm barracks.

The Right to Know and to Mourn

There was no official procedure in place to notify families of a soldier’s death during the war. Newspapers often printed casualty lists from battles, but they
commonly included inaccurate or incomplete information. The *Christian Recorder* occasionally received and published reports of the dead from Black regiments. Comrades or sympathetic commanding officers or chaplains sometimes took it on themselves to notify survivors with reassuring notes about how a soldier had met his end. On the eve of battle, the soldiers who served in the 28th U.S.C.I. asked their (Black) chaplain Garland H. White to notify their loved ones if they were killed and to report they had died like men. They wanted the honor of their sacrifice recognized and acknowledged.

For Black families, information about a loved soldier’s death was often hard to come by. The many letters of inquiry sent by worried family members and survivors to the army for information about whether a loved soldier was living, injured, or dead tells us how difficult it was to access accurate and timely information. The efforts of the U.S. Sanitary Commission (USSC) and the Christian Commission to assist families who sought confirmation of the status of their loved ones helped some. But the majority of Black soldiers were enlisted in the slave South and were formerly enslaved; it would have been exceedingly difficult to get word to loved ones, many of them illiterate and still held as slaves. In addition, hundreds of thousands of women, children, and the elderly accompanied men when they fled slavery for Union lines with the intent to enlist. Those family members would have faced uncertain destinations and destinies as refugees from slavery. Complicating the likelihood of kin notification was the fact that regimental records of death sometimes noted not the names of survivors but the names of the slave owners who had claimed the soldiers as their property—Unionist slave owners who were entitled to compensation for the loss of their human property during the war. When the widows of fallen Black soldiers applied for veteran’s pension benefits, they were required to provide evidence of their husband’s death, and we therefore might expect their applications to include some insight into how families learned of the death of a loved one or how their regiment acknowledged the death. The USSC’s Army and Navy Claim Agency, established in 1864 to assist soldiers, their widows, and surviving family members apply for back pay, bounty, and pension benefits, registered a large number of pension applications that failed because the widows and survivors could not provide proof of death. The pension records confirm that the widows and survivors of African American soldiers were infrequently provided with official notice, let alone thoughtful correspondence, relaying the death of their loved ones. In a
sample of 240 pension applications from the widows of Black soldiers, only twenty-five of the widows had anything besides the official service record that documented their husband’s death and burial.53 Widows appear to have only rarely received comforting words initiated by regimental chaplains, commanding officers (company captains or regimental commanders), or USSC or Christian Commission agents; only three of the 240 applications included this kind of communication (none from commission agents). Another three commanders responded only when prompted by a widow’s inquiry about the details of her husband’s death. In eleven of those pension applications, the widow included informal testimony she had received from friends and comrades. They described attending or assisting in their comrade’s burial. Some of these also witnessed their comrade’s death, noting that they held his hand as he died, or had administered his last dose of medicine, or had been assigned to nursing duty, which included preparing his body for burial and assisting with the burial detail.

Only four of 240 applications included testimony by comrades describing a funeral service. Willis Johnston’s commanding officer reported that he was buried “by a platoon of his company in as respectable a way and place as circumstances would permit. All of his near friends were with him and know the spot he was buried,” he reported. Elijah Cannon’s commanding officer reported he was “present at his funeral and can assure you that he was buried as a soldier and a patriot should be, with all the honors of war and with appropriate religious service.” Jane Tobia Purnell received word that her son was buried in the shade of a large elm tree and that “a very large number of the boys testified their respects to the memory of your son by accompanying him to the grave.” These communications were comforting but apparently all too rare for the families of African American war dead.54

Many of the white war dead had families who worked to bring fallen soldiers’ bodies home. For Black families, this was far less likely, even among those in the North. They rarely received timely notification and they lacked the resources to pay for the significant embalming and shipping costs involved with reclaiming their dear ones.55 Augustus Wells, of the 28th U.S.C.I., probably died in the post hospital at Brownsville, Texas, but his grieving mother, Martha Wells, sought assurance and the opportunity to bring his body home to West Virginia for reburial. Writing to the commander at Brownsville, she explained that she was unsure if the reported death actually referred to her son, having heard from comrades that he was still alive. She urged that a careful search of the records as to the deceased’s color, age, height, and other characteristics (which she assumed
the army kept careful and accurate records of) could yield an affirmative identification and “gratify a poor distressed mother.” She would write to the hospital director if necessary. If an affirmative identification could be made, she explained,

I will go to texas & Bring him Home: . . . and let me know if I can get him[.] please let me know the distance to Texas and what it would cost[.] now dear Sir I hope you will not consider me putting you too much trouble in making these inquiries about my son when you consider that I am a fond mother and now a distressed mother being in doubts about the death of my son[.] as I have said there may be one of the same name in the same Regiment who has died at that time[,] if so you can soon find out and let me know. the Doctor of the Hospital I suppose can give full information[.] I will be under many obligations for any further information from you and this will relieve a fond but distressed mothers mind[.] please let me know if he died with a wound or natural sickness.56

Although Mrs. Wells was unsuccessful in her effort to bring her son’s body home, there were apparently a few, rare, exceptions. Sergeant John Bird of the 55th Massachusetts died in January 1864, and his Black Masonic brothers honored his last wish—to be sent home for burial—by paying for his body’s return home to Michigan for burial with Masonic honors.57 When Sergeant Major Robert Bridges Forten of the 43rd U.S.C.T., son of Philadelphia’s wealthiest and most prominent Black couple, James and Charlotte Forten, died in Maryland, his remains were shipped home to Philadelphia. He was the first African American to receive the full honors of a military funeral in the city—although 11,000 Black soldiers passed through Camp William Penn and nearly 1,000 of them died there.58

Whose Death Counts?

Early in the war, the War Department recognized the importance of careful and accurate death records. The unexpected number of battlefield deaths at Antietam, and the slow and haphazard process of burials, put tremendous external and internal pressure on the army to establish clear procedures and regulations for registering and burying the dead.59 The chaos that met the disposal of the dead at Antietam appalled the public, and the army could not hope to sustain success at enlistment if families and likely enlistees believed
their mortal sacrifice would go unnamed and unacknowledged. In addition, strategic planning required the War Department to have up-to-date and accurate records of manpower and human resources.

Nonetheless, the wartime registration and regulation of death was unsystematic, and battlefield chaos was not always to blame. The assignment of responsibilities—for moving bodies from the battlefield, hospital or camp to a burial site; for securing coffins, conducting rites, and preparing graves; for informing next of kin; for the registration of the dead and marking of burial sites—all relied on old, new, and piecemeal regulations and orders. The unanticipated scale of war causalities stressed all efforts to regularize this process. On September 11, 1861, General Orders No. 75 assigned to the Quartermaster Department the responsibility for ensuring an accurate “mortaluary record” by issuing the necessary forms for registering those who died in hospitals and camps and providing materials for grave markers (but not burial locations). In the spring of 1862, those orders were extended to battlefield deaths, stipulating that remains of the dead be interred. At the urging of the USSC, the War Department adopted new, triplicate reports to be filled out registering each soldier’s death and burial, with copies retained at the hospital, the cemetery, and at the adjutant general’s office at Washington, D.C. This greatly improved the War Department’s record keeping. The Christian Commission also kept records, and printed and distributed identification tags to soldiers, listing family contact information to avoid an anonymous death. Commanding officers in charge of hospitals and posts bore the ultimate authority for the execution and retention of the requisite forms. Yet the names of Black soldiers, who succumbed to wounds, or infectious disease, or workplace injuries, were far too often lost, misplaced, or forgotten. The names of the members of the 56th Massachusetts Infantry (African Descent) who succumbed to cholera and were buried on Quarantine Island (near St. Louis) were recorded, but when their remains were reinterred at nearby Jefferson National Cemetery, they were placed in a mass grave without markers or a record of their names. At what became Virginia’s City Point National Cemetery, 29 percent of white soldiers’ burials were unknown, compared to 75 percent of Black soldiers’ burials.

In April 1863, general orders dictated the procedures for burial at the battlefield: marking off suitable locations for burial, interment, marking graves with wooden headboards and registering the interments, conducted by fatigue parties. As historian Drew Gilpin Faust has noted, the Union Army had “no regular burial details, no graves registration units, and until
1864 no comprehensive ambulance service. The scale of battlefield as well as hospital causalities required improvised responses rather than well-organized rituals and procedures.

The volunteers of the Sanitary and the Christian Commission also became involved in recording deaths and assisting survivors in locating and recovering fallen soldiers. In an elaborate but highly effective “hospital directory” system, the USSC both compiled information on hospital patients and pursued family inquiries about the status of individual soldiers through their network of agents and associates in Union hospitals. Through USSC agents in the North, wives and kin sought information about a soldier’s death. Word might reach a family of a death, or a battlefield wound, or a hospital admittance, but without detailed information (hospital, chaplain, surgeon, cause). Others heard about specific regiments being involved in deadly actions (Petersburg, Olustee, etc.) and wrote to know if their kin had survived. Although the system was designed in 1862 prior to Black enlistment, and therefore with white soldiers and their families in mind, some agents assisted Black family members in their search for information. Both commissions also assisted families who could afford it in locating and shipping bodies home for burial, in conveying descriptions of the soldier’s death, and in forwarding the effects of the dead. They widely publicized these efforts, to increase white public support and successful wartime fundraising. The Union army reported its battlefield success and failures in Northern newspapers and frequently noted the number of fallen enemy they took the time to inter before leaving a battlefield, as if to claim their civilized conduct in war—and affirming the social significance of a decent burial.

Unrecorded burials and a failure to provide funeral rites and a recognized burial place shaped the experience of Black soldiering. Despite military and civilian efforts to enumerate the dead, a large proportion of Black soldiers went to their death without a record made. Some reasons for a high proportion of unknown war dead affected white and Black war dead similarly. The vast majority of gravesite headboards quickly deteriorated under the weather and other environmental conditions, and this was all the more the case in some places, like the Atlanta burial grounds, where fifteen hundred headboards had paper cards attached with identifying information—cards that were entirely obliterated before the war was over. In addition, some of the Black soldiers buried at Quarantine Island (across from Benton Barracks) were lost to flooding.
At St. Louis, where several Black regiments were organized, mustered in, and hospitalized, the recorded number of soldier deaths tell us that their burials went unmarked and unregistered. A U.S. Sanitary Commission relief agent writing to USSC headquarters described the great mortality associated with the initial organization of the 62nd, 65th, and 67th USCT at St. Louis. By the winter of 1863/64, with a year and a half of war to go, 1310 newly enlisted soldiers in these regiments had died—more than the total number of burial sites in the St. Louis area registered for fallen Black troops at the end of the war.75

Surgeon Ira Russell, noted in chapter four for conducting an estimated 800 autopsies and dissections on Black soldiers and refugees from slavery, failed to register the death of more than half of the soldiers whom he autopsied, dissected, and anatomized (in a sample of ninety-one named autopsies, only 48 percent of their deaths were properly recorded in military service records).76 Many were anonymously disposed of. Commanding officers of men stationed or hospitalized under Russell’s care at Benton Barracks complained of Russell’s failure to register the names of the deceased.77 Yet Russell, for all his concern with the discriminatory mistreatment of Black soldiers, failed to secure a proper burial for the Black men he autopsied and anatomized.78 He kept meticulous records of their names, companies and regiments as he and his subordinate surgeons tracked the postmortem examinations they carried out; but there is no record that the human remains they handled were transferred to registered graves at city cemeteries or the neighboring Jefferson National Cemetery. Incomplete mortuary records for the adjoining national cemetery list many Black soldiers, unknown, buried in numbered graves, but certainly not the number we would expect to see at a depot through which so many Black soldiers traveled.79 Of the nineteen white soldiers Russell autopsied, however, all but three were properly identified and buried.80

It is possible, in the case of the human remains generated by Russell’s dissections, that many were not buried in cemeteries but rather were consigned to medical waste pits. Waste pits would have been necessarily a part of wartime hospital complexes like that at St. Louis, and they rarely appear on maps or sketches, including those of Benton Barracks.81 They certainly were never designated in death registers as “burial” places for soldiers. But the greater likelihood that Black, rather than white, soldiers were subjected to dissection and anatomization suggests this as one of the many reasons why Black soldiers who died at Benton Barracks cannot be traced to marked burial sites.82
Burial Places: Soldiers

When it came to the mortality of Black soldiers, the considerable military bureaucracy that focused on an accurate record and registration of death and the location of internment, often failed. Across the national cemetery system, a disproportionate number of African American troops are among the “unknown,” interred in unmarked and mass graves, despite orders from the War Department instructing both the Quartermaster Department and hospital and regimental surgeons to see to properly marked and recorded burials. Records of hospitals at Baltimore; City Point, Virginia; Camp Nelson, Kentucky; and Nashville also reveal apparent disregard for standard burial registration practices when it came to the remains of Black soldiers, anatomized or not.83

Where the army was much more successful, however, was in ensuring that the remains of Black soldiers who were interred (or after the war, reinterred), were buried in segregated sections of cemeteries. Early in the war, private undertakers were often engaged to remove and bury the dead, often in local, civilian cemeteries.84 By the time African Americans were permitted to enlist, the War Department had adapted to the demands of the war and established military rules and procedures for interring the dead. Fourteen Union military cemeteries had been established by the end of 1862, and more would follow before the end of the war.85 The national cemetery system that resulted maintained the practices of segregation that shaped every feature of military life and death during the Civil War.86 Both the maps and plans for new cemeteries and the extant records of interments document segregation both within and between cemeteries. Arlington National Cemetery is perhaps the best known, segregated from its beginning.87 Lebanon Cemetery outside Philadelphia was established for Black soldiers only; as of 1875, Woodlands, Glenwood, Odd Fellows, Bristol, Mechanics, Chester, Lafayette, and Mount Moriah—the other Philadelphia cemeteries—admitted only white soldiers for burial. Whitehall held one Black soldier of sixty total.88 In Nashville, the record of Union burials in 1864 and 1865 indicated the careful segregation of burial sites.89 At Jefferson National Cemetery, African Americans were buried in a separate section, and as was typical, adjacent to Confederate prisoners of war—widely regarded by Union veterans and their families as the least favorable location in any national cemetery.90

Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs, when queried after the war about the reasons for past and continued segregation in national cemeteries like Arlington, was both duplicitous and evasive, refusing to concede that
segregation was practiced for the benefit of whites, rather than African Americans.⁹¹ According to historian Micki McElya, when the massive post-war reburial program concluded in 1871, 30,000 of 300,000 Union soldiers reinterred in national cemeteries were Black, and all buried in segregated sections.⁹² Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, even today some representatives currently associated with the national cemeteries assert they were “never segregated.”⁹³ Yet we know that even record keeping was segregated. The Quartermaster General’s office used printed forms to keep track of deaths, interments and reinternments, and at least as late as 1875, those printed forms listed white and Black soldiers separately.⁹⁴ In their design, construction, and function, these military cemeteries—eventually national cemeteries—reinforced the segregation and exclusion of Black America from the Union’s national vision.⁹⁵

Civilian Burials and Burying Grounds

Deep in the winter of 1864, a mother and refugee from slavery approached a white captain at his office in the Quartermaster Department in Washington, D.C.⁹⁶ Her baby had died, and she asked for help in securing a decent burial. The white officer in turn sent a note to the quartermaster in charge of burials in the city. The captain noted that she “represented herself” as contraband but also noted that she was “not in our employ”—that is, not one of the hundreds then employed by the quartermaster office to labor on defense works, or wharfs, or streets, or in hospitals. He seemed ambivalent about her eligibility for assistance but referred the case to his commanding officer and included the address where the mother and child resided. In this and more than 1,600 similar requests that survive in the archives today, local quartermasters’ depots took up what they probably understood to be a significant public health concern and arranged for the dead to be picked up by ambulance or hearse, provided a coffin, and interred. As tens of thousands of refugees from slavery made their way to Washington, a new wave of misery hit that already burdened population as disease, hardship, and the lingering consequences of slavery’s deep violence took their lives by the thousands. The April 1862 abolition of slavery in the capitol increased the pull of the city to refugees. The accounting of their deaths was scattered and incomplete. In February 1863, one official estimated that twelve to fifteen refugees from slavery died each day; in December of that year, the estimate was twenty-five per week. By contrast, for one six-month period in 1864, fourteen white paupers died who were buried by the city.⁹⁷
Importantly, the mothers, fathers, godparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, spouses, and friends who showed up at quartermasters’ depots (or at a military hospital, at the East Capital Street Barracks, at the city’s police station, or after the war at a Freedman’s Bureau office) refused to allow their loved ones to be reduced to an abstract count of the dead. Their requests might have been made in desperation, or because they believed the federal government had extended its protective arm over them, or because they believed that in laboring on behalf of the Union war effort they were entitled to the most basic decencies of life and death. Through their actions, these survivors of the brutality of slavery and wartime emancipation testified to the significance of a decent final resting place for their loved ones. The bodies of the deceased mattered. They were beloved, even in death. To the extent that they could, their survivors rejected the commodification and objectification that so many of the enslaved had experienced at the hands of their owners and that the Black war dead experienced at the hands of some white Unionists.

These requests, filed as “Unknown Contraband Negroes Also Known” in the quartermaster records, tell us a number of important things. Many of the dead needing burial were not, in fact, “unknown.” Hundreds of requests were the result of a spouse or family member or friend appealing to the quartermaster office for help in securing a decent burial for their loved ones. Their requests frequently included the age of the deceased, the name of the deceased and their survivors, the location from which they had come to secure safety in Washington, and the cause of death. In many instances where no name of the deceased was recorded, the age was, and this suggests that someone who knew and cared about the deceased had a hand in making the request, and the clerk simply did not bother noting their name. Disturbingly, some refugee families without resources or shelter were forced to simply leave their loved ones’ remains on the street to be collected and interred by the army while other refugees were left in the streets and alleyways by white employers. Some appear to have simply died, exposed, where they walked or lay. Others died on the job from injury.98

In response to the requests, coffins were dispatched (some requests specified the length of the coffin required).99 Very rarely, requests indicated the time set for funeral rituals so that the coffin could be provided in a timely manner. But often the request for removal referred to an “unknown contraband.” Many of the requests were for infants and children (and children’s ages were most consistently reported); some were for the elderly. Most rare were indications of where the deceased would be interred. One of those
exceptions occurred with the report of the death of 104-year-old Esther Young, who succumbed to smallpox and was buried by the quartermaster at Black-owned Harmony Cemetery. After the war, the quartermaster reported that his department had conducted 20,727 burials, 5,726 of them African Americans.

The requests also tell us that different officers varied in their response to the requests. Some—notably, African American physicians who worked in Washington-area military hospitals, such as Anderson Ruffin Abbott, Alexander T. Augusta, William B. Powell Jr., Charles Purvis, John Rapier Jr., and Alpheus W. Tucker—offered detailed notes, including names, ages, and cause of death. Others—from Kalorama Hospital (for smallpox patients) in particular—made the briefest of requests, often omitting names and cause of death but carefully indicating the length of the coffin needed. Notably, the requests that were made at hospitals were not always about patients. Survivors appear to have approached whichever office or institution was closest to their residence when making their requests, and sometimes that was a hospital. Finally, nomenclature also varied. Many of the white officers continued describing the deceased as “contraband” in the years after the war, and one contract surgeon referred even to infants and children as “freedmen.”

The quartermaster office in Washington, D.C., was the heaviest employer of refugees from slavery; by 1863, they not only were organizing refugee labor, but they had also been charged with responsibility for the removal and burial of refugees who died in the city and neighboring northern Virginia—whether the deceased labored for the Union army or not. City authorities provided interment for white paupers, but passed the cost and responsibility for removing and interring deceased refugees to the army, which during the course of the war brought hundreds if not thousands of Black men, women, and children from Fort Monroe, New Berne, North Carolina, and other points in the eastern theater of war, to Washington, where the labor of the able-bodied was urgently needed.

These refugees, along with thousands more who made their own way to the city, became critical laborers. They worked as stevedores, teamsters, laundresses, and servants; they built and maintained the ring of defense works that protected the city; they loaded and unloaded the Commissary Department cargo carried by the many ships plying the Potomac River; they maintained the streets and avenues that permitted both commercial and military traffic; they also “policed” the city—that is, shoveled up and carted away animal carcasses, night soil, manure, and other offal that private
citizens, businesses, and the army tossed out onto the street. They also became a third of the hospital workforce. Yielding to the advice of Chief Quartermaster Elias Greene, the War Department agreed that the laborers should be taxed from their wages for the support of unemployed refugees. These funds, argued Greene, went toward sheltering, feeding, and clothing the refugees—but they also went toward the cost of removing and interring the formerly enslaved people who died in the city.

The occurrence of death among Black refugees in the city met the illogical and contradictory impulses of racism. In all of the hospitals of the city—especially in what became Freedmen’s Hospital and Alexandria’s L’Ouverture Hospital (which served Black soldiers and civilians)—deceased Black patients were considered exploitable resources on which white medical workers practiced their dissection and anatomical skills. As noted in chapter 3, this was not necessarily in pursuit of identifying anatomical racial characteristics but rather because white medical practitioners did not approach the Black war dead as they did whites. No medical investigators set up shop in a hospital serving white soldiers or civilians to conduct hundreds or thousands of dissections—the white public would not have tolerated it. Race mattered in how the dead were treated. Race mattered so much that the racially demarcated responsibilities for Washington’s civilian burials led to a standoff when authorities could not determine the race of the deceased. Neighbors were forced to bear the odor and threat of infection when the race of a woman’s corpse, a smallpox victim, could not be firmly identified and therefore was left for several days.

With the exception of the contraband camp at Mason’s Island, none of the requests that made their way to the quartermaster office came from the city’s contraband camps—they apparently had their own means of burying the dead because we know refugees themselves were employed as gravediggers by the army and assigned to hospitals and contraband camps. The camps had their own procedures, however crude, for gathering the dead in anticipation of removal and interment. Harriet Jacobs, in a letter written for publication in the Liberator, described the room at Duff Green’s Row reserved for the dead, a small room on the ground floor: “This room was covered with lime. Here I would learn how many deaths had occurred in the last twenty-four hours. Men, women and children lie here together, without a shadow of those rites which we give our poorest dead. There they lie, in the filthy rags they wore from the plantation. Nobody seems to give it a thought. It is an every-day occurrence, and the scenes have become familiar. One morning, as I looked in, I saw lying there five children.”
Jacobs’s eyewitness accounts of the mistreatment and exploitation of refugees from slavery draws a through-line from the treatment of the living to the treatment of the dead. Presumably, all of the area contraband camps had similar “dead rooms,” where survivors could bring their deceased family members and friends, to await collection and burial by fellow refugees employed as grave diggers. When any of those camps closed—as Camp Barker did in early 1864—the refugees from slavery faced greater obstacles in their efforts to secure the burial of kin. Relief worker Cornelia Hancock noted that Camp Barker’s closure meant that refugees had “no place to go to get themselves coffins for their friends,” and “sometimes they lay unburied for a week because there is no one to hunt up an order for them.”

Early in the war the bodies of refugees from slavery might have been interred at the city’s potter’s field, on the grounds of the Old Soldiers’ Home, at one of the city’s five Black-owned cemeteries (Columbian Harmony, Payne’s, Mount Olivet, Mount Zion, and Mount Pleasant), or, in Alexandria, at the city’s potter’s field (Penny Hill), or at burial grounds associated with the military hospitals (Claremont, L’Ouverture, and Contraband Hospital). In January 1864, the depot quartermaster at Alexandria took charge of an acre and a half of abandoned land to establish a cemetery near L’Ouverture Hospital. The quartermaster there authorized the employment of gravediggers and provided for a hearse and driver; had extra coffins stored at the hospital; and established routine hours and days when burials, requested by the local superintendent of contraband, could take place. Beginning in July 1864, with the creation of Arlington Cemetery, and its segregated Section 27 (which became known as Contraband Cemetery), more than 3,600 Black civilians would be buried there. Only 20 percent of them were brought from hospitals; 76 percent came from contraband camps and city streets and alleyways. Four percent came from barracks, likely employees laboring for the army. Fifty-eight percent were men, and 42 percent women. Freedman’s Village, established on the Union-confiscated Lee-Custis estate in Arlington, had its own burial ground at Arlington.

Wherever their final resting place, interment meant the deceased were laid in coffins, carried by a hearse or ambulance to a cemetery, and buried in marked graves. This stood in sharp contrast to other wartime locations where refugees from slavery gathered. As relief worker Maria Mann observed at Helena, Arkansas, deceased contraband were buried in pits with dead mules and horses. John Williams, a North Carolina Black soldier at New Berne, wrote to both military and medical authorities to declaim the
practice where Black smallpox victims who died “have a hole dug and put them in without a coffin.” “I think this is a most horrible treatment,” he wrote, and demanded better treatment.  

The uncounted Black war dead—men and women whose remains were exploited, scavenged by white medical practitioners, and discarded in waste pits, mass graves, or the least desirable acreage of burial grounds—became part of the material afterlife of an idea that people of African descent were immutably, biologically, and sociologically fixed in a subordinate relationship to whites. Although American anti-Black racism was firmly rooted in the effort to justify slavery’s extortion of human lives and labor for the benefit of one group over the lives of another, early in the nation’s life the ideology of race had become useful and fundamental to an entire nation, well beyond the borders of a slave-owning South. White Northerners may have fought and won a war against Southern slaveholders, but the modern nation to which they aspired emphatically embraced a scientific and medical empiricism that advanced white authority and depended on the continued subordination and objectification of Black bodies, the living as well as the dead.