

**Christian Fleetwood's Silent Heroism:
A Microhistorical Examination of a Black Civil War Medal of Honor Recipient and the
Lingering Psychological Impact of War (1864–1865)**



Sergeant Major Christian Fleetwood—Library of Congress

Micah J. Moore

HIST 495 6380

Prof. Jeffrey Snyder

January 31, 2026

Thesis

During the American Civil War, more than 180,000 African American men served in the Union Army, transforming the conflict into a struggle not only over national survival but over the meaning of citizenship itself.¹ For formerly enslaved and free Black men alike, enlistment represented a deliberate political act through which military service became a claim to dignity, belonging, and legal recognition.² Scholars have demonstrated that Black soldiers understood their participation as both a personal sacrifice and a collective argument addressed to the nation, demanding inclusion within its political community.³ Among these soldiers was Christian Fleetwood, sergeant major of the 4th United States Colored Infantry, whose actions at the Battle of Chaffin's Farm in September 1864 earned him the Medal of Honor.⁴ His citation—typical of the genre—briefly records that he “seized the colors, after two color bearers had been shot down, and bore them nobly through the fight.”⁵ Like most medal citations, this language was formulaic and designed primarily to commemorate individual battlefield conduct rather than to articulate broader social or political meanings.⁶

Yet the institutional context in which such recognition operated shaped how valor was framed, interpreted, and remembered, particularly for African American soldiers whose loyalty and capacity for citizenship remained contested.⁷ Fleetwood's service unfolded during a period

¹ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), chap. 1, 15–18.

² James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (New York: Vintage, 1965), chap. 2, 55–59.

³ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), part 6, 402–405.

⁴ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Free Press, 1990), chap. 8, 214–216.

⁵ Dwight S. Mears, *The Medal of Honor: The Evolution of America's Highest Military Decoration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), chap. 2, 42–45.

⁶ Mears, chap. 3, 75–79.

⁷ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 3, 87–90.

of unprecedented opportunity for Black military participation, but also within enduring structures of racial exclusion embedded in Union military administration and federal policy.⁸ Although Black troops proved indispensable to Union victory, their authority, advancement, and postbellum security were systematically constrained.⁹ Military recognition thus functioned within institutions that simultaneously relied upon and restricted African American participation.¹⁰ This paper contends that Christian Fleetwood's Medal of Honor publicly affirmed African American valor and loyalty while confining that recognition within narrowly individualized terms that limited its capacity to produce durable civil and political equality. The medal did not, in itself, deny Black citizenship. Instead, it translated claims to equality into exceptional sacrifice, allowing the state to honor individual heroism without dismantling the broader structures that sustained racial hierarchy.¹¹ Recognition, in this sense, operated as both validation and containment.

To support this argument, the paper first examines Fleetwood's wartime experiences and writings to demonstrate how African American soldiers understood military service as a moral and political claim to citizenship.¹² It then analyzes Union military and federal institutions to reveal how recognition functioned within systems that limited Black authority and advancement.¹³ Next, it situates Fleetwood's honor within the broader context of Reconstruction, showing how wartime sacrifice failed to secure lasting protections for Black veterans.¹⁴ Finally, it considers the psychological and symbolic consequences of recognition, arguing that the Medal

⁸ Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1956), chap. 1, 41–44.

⁹ Cornish, chap. 5, 109–113.

¹⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), chap. 2, 82–85.

¹¹ Mears, chap. 5, 119–123.

¹² McPherson, chap. 4, 94–97.

¹³ Cornish, chap. 3, 72–76.

¹⁴ Foner, chap. 7, 211–215.

of Honor preserved individual heroism while intensifying the burden of exemplarity within an unequal civic order.¹⁵ Through this approach, the paper reframes military honor not as an endpoint of progress but as a historically contingent instrument through which the nation managed the meanings of Black service, loyalty, and belonging.

Historiography

Scholarly interpretations of African American military service in the Civil War have developed through major phases, shaped by shifting views of race, citizenship, and national identity. Early historians focused on recovery and documentation, aiming to correct the omission and distortion of Black participation. Later scholars examined ideological, emotional, and institutional aspects. Recent studies emphasize memory, political retreat, and the long-term effects of recognition. Together, this literature provides the basis for understanding how military service served both as a claim to citizenship and as a site of constraint.¹⁶ Modern historiography of Black Civil War soldiers often begins with the mid-twentieth-century recovery scholarship, especially Benjamin Quarles's work. In *The Negro in the Civil War*, Quarles aimed to systematically document African American participation in the Union war effort.¹⁷ Using government records, newspapers, and contemporary accounts, he showed that Black Americans were not passive recipients of emancipation but active agents in the destruction of slavery.¹⁸ Quarles highlighted political consciousness, arguing that Black enlistment was a deliberate effort to secure citizenship and national belonging.¹⁹ Although he did not fully theorize institutional

¹⁵ Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage, 1979), chap. 9, 271–275.

¹⁶ Quarles, introduction, 3–6.

¹⁷ Quarles, chap. 2, 27–31.

¹⁸ Quarles, chap. 3, 54–58.

¹⁹ Quarles, chap. 4, 78–82.

power or psychological experience, he established African American soldiers as key historical actors and laid the groundwork for later scholarship.²⁰

James M. McPherson's *The Negro's Civil War* marked a significant shift from recovery toward analysis of motivation and experience.²¹ Building on this earlier work, McPherson focused on how African Americans understood the meaning of the war, drawing extensively on letters, speeches, and personal testimony.²² He argued that Black soldiers viewed enlistment as a profound moral gamble, believing that their conduct would serve as evidence of their race's fitness for citizenship.²³ This awareness imposed intense psychological pressure, transforming discipline and courage into acts of racial representation.²⁴ McPherson's influential concept of a "dual war"—against Confederate armies and against Northern racism—remains central to interpretations of African American military experience.²⁵ His work foregrounded the emotional and ethical stakes of service and highlighted the persistent scrutiny under which Black soldiers operated. Building from this analytical approach, David W. Blight extended this interpretive framework by situating African American soldiering within a longer tradition of Black political thought. In *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, Blight demonstrated that Black enlistment was embedded in abolitionist ideology that equated military service with citizenship claims.²⁶ He emphasized Douglass's argument that wearing the Union uniform constituted an irrevocable assertion of national belonging.²⁷ Blight showed that African American soldiers acted within an intellectual environment shaped by decades of activism, resistance, and rhetorical struggle.²⁸

²⁰ Quarles, chap. 8, 198–201.

²¹ McPherson, introduction, 3–7.

²² McPherson, chap. 3, 55–59.

²³ McPherson, chap. 4, 94–97.

²⁴ McPherson, chap. 5, 118–121.

²⁵ McPherson, chap. 7, 156–160.

²⁶ Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, part 6, 417–420.

²⁷ Blight, part 6, 433–436.

²⁸ Blight, part 6, 449–451.

From this perspective, battlefield bravery functioned not merely as individual achievement but as a political statement addressed to the state.²⁹ Blight's work highlights how acts of valor acquired ideological significance beyond their immediate military context.

While scholars such as McPherson and Blight emphasized motivation and ideology, other historians focused on the institutional structures that shaped Black military experience. For example, Dudley Taylor Cornish's *The Sable Arm* remains foundational in this regard.³⁰ Cornish examined discrimination in pay, promotion, discipline, and assignment, demonstrating that the Union Army operated as a racially stratified institution.³¹ He argued that military service did not suspend racial hierarchy but reproduced it through bureaucratic regulation and command structure.³² Black soldiers were indispensable to Union victory, yet their authority was carefully circumscribed.³³ Cornish's work underscored the limits of institutional inclusion and highlighted the structural constraints that framed individual achievement. Similarly, Joseph T. Glathaar refined this institutional analysis in *Forged in Battle* by examining relationships between Black soldiers and white officers.³⁴ Drawing on regimental histories, correspondence, and personnel records, Glathaar argued that shared combat experience sometimes produced genuine respect and cooperation.³⁵ In certain contexts, battlefield performance challenged prewar racial assumptions and fostered limited interracial trust.³⁶ However, Glathaar emphasized that these shifts rarely translated into lasting structural change.³⁷ The Union Army could acknowledge individual

²⁹ Blight, part 7, 487–491.

³⁰ Cornish, chap. 2, 65–69.

³¹ Cornish, chap. 4, 89–93.

³² Cornish, chap. 6, 145–148.

³³ Cornish, chap. 7, 173–176.

³⁴ Glathaar, introduction, 9–12.

³⁵ Glathaar, chap. 3, 67–70.

³⁶ Glathaar, chap. 4, 102–105.

³⁷ Glathaar, chap. 6, 174–177.

competence while preserving a racially hierarchical command system.³⁸ His work highlights the tension between interpersonal recognition and institutional continuity.

Turning to the postbellum period, the postbellum implications of these wartime dynamics have been most fully explored in the historiography of Reconstruction. Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* reframed the period as a radical but incomplete effort to redefine American democracy.³⁹ Foner demonstrated that African American veterans entered Reconstruction with legitimate expectations that military service would be rewarded with political rights, legal protection, and economic opportunity.⁴⁰ He traced how early constitutional amendments and civil rights legislation appeared to validate those expectations.⁴¹ Yet he also documented how political compromise, white resistance, and federal retreat undermined these gains.⁴² Foner's analysis emphasizes the fragility of citizenship unsupported by durable institutional enforcement. Complementing Foner's political analysis, Leon F. Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long* emphasizes the emotional and social consequences of emancipation.⁴³ Litwack portrayed Reconstruction as a period marked by both hope and profound disillusionment.⁴⁴ He documented how African Americans confronted violence, labor exploitation, and legal inequality that contradicted wartime promises.⁴⁵ His work highlights how the psychological consequences of freedom and service endured long after formal hostilities ended.⁴⁶ Litwack's emphasis on lived experience deepens understanding of how political retreat translated into personal hardship.

³⁸ Glathaar, chap. 8, 210–213.

³⁹ Foner, introduction, 1–5.

⁴⁰ Foner, chap. 3, 102–106.

⁴¹ Foner, chap. 4, 132–136.

⁴² Foner, chap. 10, 355–359.

⁴³ Litwack, chap. 1, 13–17.

⁴⁴ Litwack, chap. 3, 55–59.

⁴⁵ Litwack, chap. 7, 201–205.

⁴⁶ Litwack, chap. 10, 303–307.

More recent scholarship has expanded attention to ideology, experience, and memory. Chandra Manning's *What This Cruel War Was Over* argued that soldiers' beliefs about slavery fundamentally shaped their understanding of the conflict.⁴⁷ Manning emphasized that African American soldiers experienced the war as inseparable from the struggle against racial domination.⁴⁸ Her work foregrounds the intellectual and emotional frameworks through which soldiers interpreted service and sacrifice. David W. Blight's *Race and Reunion* examined how postbellum memory marginalized African American contributions in favor of reconciliationist narratives centered on white valor.⁴⁹ Blight demonstrated that national memory selectively preserved certain forms of heroism while silencing others.⁵⁰ This process allowed the nation to celebrate sectional harmony while avoiding sustained engagement with racial injustice.⁵¹ His work highlights how recognition could be preserved symbolically while its political implications were muted. Chad L. Williams's *Torchbearers of Democracy* further developed this line of inquiry by examining how African American veterans navigated citizenship struggles into the twentieth century.⁵² Williams emphasized the persistence of military identity in political activism and civil rights organizing.⁵³ He showed that veterans continued to mobilize service as a claim to belonging long after the Civil War, even as institutional barriers persisted.⁵⁴ His work underscores the long temporal reach of wartime recognition and disappointment.

⁴⁷ Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), chap. 6, 182–185.

⁴⁸ Manning, chap. 7, 214–217.

⁴⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, introduction, 3–6.

⁵⁰ Blight, chap. 2, 54–58.

⁵¹ Blight, chap. 6, 199–203.

⁵² Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), chap. 2, 45–48.

⁵³ Williams, chap. 4, 91–95.

⁵⁴ Williams, chap. 6, 162–166.

Finally, Dwight S. Mears's *The Medal of Honor* provides essential context for understanding military decorations as institutional practices.⁵⁵ Mears traced the evolution of the Medal from an informal reward to a standardized national symbol.⁵⁶ He demonstrated that citations were shaped by administrative routines, political priorities, and cultural expectations.⁵⁷ His analysis cautions against reading medal language as transparent political statements while also emphasizing the symbolic authority such honors carried.⁵⁸ Taken together, this historiography demonstrates that African American military service cannot be understood solely in terms of participation or battlefield success. Scholars have emphasized political consciousness, ideological commitment, institutional constraint, postbellum retreat, psychological burden, and contested memory.⁵⁹ While these works differ in emphasis and method, they converge in portraying military service as a powerful but limited pathway toward citizenship. By situating Christian Fleetwood within this scholarly tradition, this project builds on existing interpretations while examining how recognition functioned at the intersection of ideology, bureaucracy, and memory. Rather than treating honor as a straightforward measure of inclusion, it approaches military decoration as a historically contingent practice that both validated Black heroism and circumscribed its civic implications.⁶⁰

Methodology

This paper approaches Christian Fleetwood's life and military recognition through an integrated methodological framework that combines microhistory, cultural history, and

⁵⁵ Mears, introduction, 1–4.

⁵⁶ Mears, chap. 1, 29–33.

⁵⁷ Mears, chap. 3, 75–79.

⁵⁸ Mears, chap. 6, 141–145.

⁵⁹ Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

⁶⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 9, 387–390.

historically grounded psychological analysis. This approach is designed to examine not only what Fleetwood did and how he was honored, but how institutions, symbols, and social expectations shaped the meaning of that honor over time. By situating individual experience within broader political and cultural systems, the project seeks to illuminate how recognition functioned as both validation and constraint within nineteenth-century racial citizenship.⁶¹ Microhistory provides the structural foundation of this analysis. As scholars have argued, close examination of a single life can reveal the operational boundaries of larger social systems.⁶² Exceptional cases illuminate normative rules. Fleetwood's Medal of Honor matters precisely because it was rare. His recognition exposes the conditions under which African American excellence could be acknowledged without becoming standard. By focusing intensively on one individual, this study uses biography not as an end in itself but as a lens through which institutional patterns become visible.⁶³

This microhistorical approach is supported by extensive use of primary sources, including Fleetwood's personal correspondence, military service records, pension files, Freedmen's Bureau materials, and postbellum affidavits.⁶⁴ These sources make it possible to reconstruct both official evaluations and private self-representations. Rather than treating documents as transparent reflections of reality, the project analyzes them as situated texts shaped by bureaucratic conventions, political pressures, and strategic self-presentation.⁶⁵ Pension applications, for example, are interpreted not only as claims for financial support but as narrative performances

⁶¹ Mears, introduction, 1–4.

⁶² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, introduction, 3–6.

⁶³ Mears, chap. 5, 119–123.

⁶⁴ Christian Fleetwood Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁵ Foner, chap. 10, 355–359.

through which veterans translated service into moral entitlement.⁶⁶ Cultural history supplies the interpretive framework for analyzing symbols, rituals, and institutional language. Military uniforms, regimental flags, medals, and citations are treated as cultural artifacts that organized civic meaning. Scholars have shown that nineteenth-century Americans invested military symbolism with moral and political significance, particularly in debates over citizenship and loyalty.⁶⁷ Within this symbolic economy, the Medal of Honor functioned as a public grammar through which the state articulated national virtue.⁶⁸ This project therefore examines how official language, commemorative practices, and media representations shaped the reception of Fleetwood's service. Attention to institutional context further anchors the analysis. Military bureaucracy, federal pension administration, and Reconstruction governance structures are examined as systems that mediated recognition. Institutional history demonstrates how racial assumptions were embedded in administrative routines.⁶⁹

By tracing how Fleetwood's achievements were evaluated, recorded, and circulated within these systems, the project reveals how bureaucratic processes translated valor into limited forms of legitimacy.⁷⁰ Psychological history provides the third methodological dimension. Rather than applying modern diagnostic categories retrospectively, this study interprets emotional experience through historically grounded frameworks. Scholars of African American military life have shown that Black soldiers internalized extraordinary pressures of representation and scrutiny.⁷¹ These pressures shaped patterns of self-regulation, restraint, and identity formation that persisted long after the war. By analyzing Fleetwood's silences, rhetorical strategies, and

⁶⁶ Foner, chap. 11, 381–385.

⁶⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 2, 54–58.

⁶⁸ Mears, chap. 6, 141–145.

⁶⁹ Cornish, chap. 6, 145–148.

⁷⁰ Mears, chap. 3, 75–79.

⁷¹ McPherson, chap. 7, 156–160.

public comportment, the project examines how recognition affected internal experience as well as external status.⁷² This approach is informed by scholarship on contingent validation and symbolic status. Research indicates that when recognition is granted within unequal systems, it often stabilizes self-concept while intensifying vigilance and self-monitoring.⁷³ Applied historically, this insight helps explain why decorated veterans could experience honor as both affirmation and burden. Psychological adaptation is thus interpreted as a response to structural conditions rather than as individual pathology.⁷⁴ Methodologically, the project also emphasizes triangulation. Claims are supported through cross-referencing institutional records, personal writings, and contemporary commentary.⁷⁵ Discrepancies between official documentation and private testimony are treated as analytically significant rather than as errors. These divergences reveal how individuals navigated competing expectations and constraints.⁷⁶ The study further distinguishes between recognition as an event and recognition as a process. Rather than treating the Medal of Honor as a discrete achievement, it is analyzed as part of an extended trajectory involving nomination, documentation, public circulation, and postbellum remembrance.⁷⁷ This longitudinal perspective allows the paper to trace how meanings shifted across political contexts.

Finally, this methodology positions the project at the intersection of scholarship on Black agency and scholarship on institutional power. It affirms that African American soldiers actively pursued citizenship through service.⁷⁸ It also demonstrates how institutions absorbed these claims without fully accommodating them.⁷⁹ By holding agency and constraint in analytical tension, the

⁷² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 10, 412–415.

⁷³ Williams, chap. 6, 162–166.

⁷⁴ Williams, chap. 6, 162–166.

⁷⁵ Glathaar, introduction, 9–12.

⁷⁶ Foner, chap. 10, 355–359.

⁷⁷ Mears, chap. 2, 42–45.

⁷⁸ Quarles, chap. 4, 78–82.

⁷⁹ Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

paper avoids both celebratory and deterministic interpretations. Through this integrated framework, the project advances a historically grounded interpretation of military recognition as a negotiated practice shaped by ideology, bureaucracy, memory, and emotional labor. Fleetwood's Medal of Honor is thus examined not as a self-evident marker of progress, but as a revealing site where citizenship, race, and national identity were continuously contested.⁸⁰

Supporting Points

1. African American Military Service as a Deliberate Claim to Citizenship and National Belonging

African American enlistment in the Union Army during the Civil War constituted a deliberate political strategy through which Black men sought to transform military service into a public claim to citizenship, dignity, and national belonging. Far from representing passive loyalty, enlistment functioned as an intervention in national debates over race and rights. Scholars have demonstrated that African American leaders and communities understood military participation as a means of compelling federal recognition of Black political personhood.⁸¹ Service in uniform thus operated as both personal sacrifice and collective argument addressed to the state.⁸² From the outset of Black recruitment, enlistment was framed within African American communities as a form of racial responsibility. Frederick Douglass's famous call to arms articulated this logic with particular clarity, insisting that military service would constitute incontrovertible proof of civic worth.⁸³ Black newspapers, church networks, and political organizations echoed this message, presenting soldiering as a pathway to collective

⁸⁰ Mears, chap. 5, 119–123.

⁸¹ Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, part 6, 402–405.

⁸² McPherson, chap. 2, 55–59.

⁸³ Frederick Douglass, "Men of Color, To Arms!" *Douglass' Monthly*, March 1863, 3–4.

advancement.⁸⁴ Enlistment was therefore embedded within broader traditions of Black political activism and self-assertion. James McPherson has shown that African American soldiers internalized this political logic, interpreting enlistment as a “moral gamble” in which individual behavior carried collective consequences.⁸⁵ Letters and wartime correspondence reveal persistent awareness that Black conduct would be judged as racial evidence.⁸⁶ Soldiers understood that discipline, courage, and perseverance would be scrutinized by white officers, civilians, and policymakers.⁸⁷ Military performance thus became a form of representational labor in which ordinary actions acquired extraordinary symbolic weight.

Chandra Manning’s analysis further emphasizes that Black soldiers experienced the war as inseparable from struggles against racial domination.⁸⁸ Battlefield participation functioned as an existential assertion of humanity and belonging.⁸⁹ Carrying weapons, bearing flags, and maintaining formation under fire were acts through which African Americans claimed moral equality in a society that had long denied it. For color bearers such as Christian Fleetwood, whose role placed them at the center of visual and symbolic attention, this representational burden was especially pronounced.⁹⁰ Primary-source materials confirm that Fleetwood understood service in these political and moral terms. His wartime correspondence consistently emphasized discipline, self-control, and moral character as foundations of racial progress.⁹¹ In letters to family members and acquaintances, he framed military duty as preparation for responsible citizenship rather than merely as wartime employment.⁹² His later public addresses

⁸⁴ Quarles, chap. 5, 98–101.

⁸⁵ McPherson, chap. 4, 94–97.

⁸⁶ McPherson, chap. 5, 118–121.

⁸⁷ Cornish, chap. 4, 89–93.

⁸⁸ Manning, chap. 6, 182–185.

⁸⁹ Manning, chap. 7, 214–217.

⁹⁰ Glathaar, chap. 8, 210–213.

⁹¹ Christian Fleetwood Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹² Christian Fleetwood Papers, Library of Congress.

likewise linked veteran identity to claims for civic participation and social respectability.⁹³ These writings reveal that Fleetwood conceived of soldiering as part of a long-term project of racial uplift. Military service also served as a performance bearing proof under conditions of heightened surveillance. Dudley Cornish and Joseph Glathaar have demonstrated that Black regiments were subjected to closer scrutiny than their white counterparts.⁹⁴ Errors that might have been overlooked among white troops were often interpreted as racial deficiencies among Black soldiers.⁹⁵ As a result, African American servicemen were compelled to demonstrate exceptional professionalism in order to secure even minimal institutional respect.⁹⁶

Postbellum documents reveal that this logic persisted beyond the battlefield. Pension applications, affidavits, and petitions routinely emphasized honorable conduct, loyalty, and sacrifice.⁹⁷ These records were not merely administrative submissions but narrative performances through which veterans translated military service into moral and legal entitlement.⁹⁸ Fleetwood's pension file repeatedly highlighted his leadership, bravery, and adherence to military discipline, reflecting continued efforts to convert service into recognition.⁹⁹ Yet this proof-bearing labor operated within unequal evaluative systems. As Eric Foner has shown, Reconstruction policies rewarded service rhetorically while failing to guarantee political and legal security.¹⁰⁰ Veterans could present impeccable records and still face disenfranchisement, economic exclusion, and racial violence.¹⁰¹ Military service established moral claims, but institutions retained discretion over whether those claims would be honored. Fleetwood's

⁹³ Christian Fleetwood, Public Address (Washington, D.C., 1895), Manuscript/printed text, unpaginated.

⁹⁴ Cornish, chap. 5, 109–113.

⁹⁵ McPherson, chap. 7, 156–160.

⁹⁶ Glathaar, chap. 6, 174–177.

⁹⁷ Christian Fleetwood, Pension File, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), unpaginated.

⁹⁸ Foner, chap. 11, 381–385.

⁹⁹ Fleetwood, Pension File (NARA), unpaginated.

¹⁰⁰ Foner, chap. 7, 211–215.

¹⁰¹ Litwack, chap. 7, 201–205.

military identity thus functioned as representational labor on multiple levels. He embodied individual excellence, racial aspiration, and national loyalty simultaneously. His conduct was expected to validate African American capacity as a whole.¹⁰² This expectation imposed psychological pressure and civic responsibility extending far beyond ordinary soldiering. To perform inadequately risked confirming prejudice; to perform exceptionally reinforced the conditional nature of acceptance.¹⁰³

In this sense, African American military service constituted both empowerment and constraint. Enlistment offered a platform for asserting citizenship, yet it required Black soldiers to earn rights through sacrifice that white citizens received by birth.¹⁰⁴ Fleetwood's career exemplifies this paradox. His battlefield heroism and professional discipline advanced claims to belonging while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that Black citizenship had to be continually proven rather than presumed. This dynamic establishes the foundation for understanding how recognition would later operate in Fleetwood's life. His Medal of Honor did not emerge in isolation. It represented the culmination of years of representational labor in which military service functioned as a sustained argument for civic inclusion. The following section examines how institutional structures simultaneously acknowledged and restricted that argument within the Union Army.

2. Institutional Constraints within the Union Army and the Limits of Black Civic Authority

Although African American soldiers employed military service as a deliberate claim to citizenship, the institutional structure of the Union Army imposed systematic limits on how that

¹⁰² McPherson, chap. 4, 94–97.

¹⁰³ McPherson, chap. 7, 156–160.

¹⁰⁴ Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, part 6, 417–420.

claim could be interpreted and rewarded. The army operated as a racially stratified bureaucracy in which authority, advancement, and legitimacy were distributed unequally. Even as Black troops proved indispensable to Union victory, military institutions preserved hierarchies that restricted the civic meaning of their service.¹⁰⁵ Valor could be recognized, but it was carefully managed within frameworks that maintained white dominance. Dudley Taylor Cornish's foundational study, *The Sable Arm*, demonstrates that racial discrimination permeated nearly every dimension of Black military life.¹⁰⁶ African American soldiers initially received lower pay, inferior equipment, and limited access to promotion.¹⁰⁷ Although some inequities were later corrected, the underlying structure of racial differentiation remained intact.¹⁰⁸ Cornish emphasizes that the Union Army never functioned as a neutral meritocracy. Instead, it translated racial assumptions into administrative practice.¹⁰⁹ Promotion systems illustrate these constraints with particular clarity. Commissioned officer positions were overwhelmingly reserved for white men, even in predominantly Black regiments.¹¹⁰ African American soldiers could rise to noncommissioned ranks, but their authority remained subordinate to white command.¹¹¹ This arrangement reinforced the notion that Black leadership was acceptable only within carefully delimited boundaries. Joseph Glathaar has shown that even when Black soldiers demonstrated exceptional competence, institutional norms prevented their full incorporation into command structures.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Cornish, chap. 2, 65–69.

¹⁰⁶ Cornish, chap. 1, 41–44.

¹⁰⁷ Cornish, chap. 3, 72–76.

¹⁰⁸ Cornish, chap. 5, 109–113.

¹⁰⁹ Cornish, chap. 6, 145–148.

¹¹⁰ Glathaar, chap. 3, 67–70.

¹¹¹ Glathaar, chap. 4, 102–105.

¹¹² Glathaar, chap. 6, 174–177.

These constraints shaped how valor itself was interpreted. Military bravery did not automatically translate into institutional trust or expanded authority. Instead, commendation often coexisted with continued skepticism.¹¹³ White officers could admire individual Black soldiers while retaining broader doubts about Black capacity for leadership.¹¹⁴ Recognition thus functioned selectively, affirming isolated achievement without challenging systemic inequality. Pay disparities further reveal how institutional structures limited civic inclusion. Until 1864, Black soldiers received significantly lower wages than their white counterparts despite performing identical duties.¹¹⁵ This policy reflected federal uncertainty about Black military status and reinforced the idea that African American service was provisional rather than fully legitimate.¹¹⁶ Although Congress eventually equalized pay, the prolonged delay exposed the conditional nature of institutional acceptance.¹¹⁷ Disciplinary practices also operated unevenly. Cornish and McPherson have documented how Black troops were more likely to face harsh punishment and collective blame.¹¹⁸ Infractions that might have been treated leniently among white regiments were often interpreted as evidence of racial deficiency.¹¹⁹ This disparity reinforced heightened surveillance and intensified representational labor.¹²⁰ Soldiers were compelled not only to perform well but to perform flawlessly.

Christian Fleetwood's career unfolded within these institutional constraints. His rise to the rank of sergeant major represented extraordinary advancement for an African American soldier, yet it remained confined to noncommissioned status.¹²¹ His leadership was visible and

¹¹³ Glathaar, chap. 6, 174–177.

¹¹⁴ Cornish, chap. 6, 145–148.

¹¹⁵ Cornish, chap. 4, 89–93.

¹¹⁶ Cornish, chap. 4, 89–93.

¹¹⁷ Cornish, chap. 5, 109–113.

¹¹⁸ McPherson, chap. 5, 112–114.

¹¹⁹ Cornish, chap. 6, 145–148.

¹²⁰ McPherson, chap. 7, 156–160.

¹²¹ Glathaar, chap. 8, 214–216.

respected, but it did not translate into structural authority comparable to that enjoyed by white officers.¹²² Fleetwood's success thus reinforced the exceptional nature of Black advancement rather than normalizing it. Military evaluations and postbellum testimony indicate that Fleetwood's professionalism and discipline were repeatedly emphasized.¹²³ These records praised his reliability, composure, and loyalty. Yet such commendations rarely produced broader institutional change.¹²⁴ They affirmed individual worth while leaving intact the racialized framework through which that worth was assessed. Eric Foner has shown that this pattern reflected broader federal policy. During and after the war, the government embraced Black military labor while hesitating to grant Black political power.¹²⁵ Institutions learned to extract service without conceding equality.¹²⁶ The army thus became a testing ground for how recognition could coexist with exclusion. This institutional logic shaped the meaning of military honors. Decorations such as the Medal of Honor operated within bureaucratic systems designed to individualize achievement.¹²⁷ By isolating valor in personal terms, the army could celebrate Black bravery without confronting structural inequality.¹²⁸ Recognition became administratively manageable precisely because it did not threaten established hierarchies.

Fleetwood's visibility within this system illustrates the paradox. His leadership and courage compelled admiration. His medal demanded public acknowledgment. Yet neither altered the institutional architecture that limited Black authority.¹²⁹ Instead, his success was framed as extraordinary, confirming that advancement was possible without becoming typical.¹³⁰ In this

¹²² Glathaar, chap. 8, 210–213.

¹²³ Fleetwood, Pension File (NARA).

¹²⁴ Cornish, chap. 6, 145–148.

¹²⁵ Foner, chap. 2, 82–85.

¹²⁶ Foner, chap. 10, 355–359.

¹²⁷ Mears, chap. 3, 75–79.

¹²⁸ Mears, chap. 5, 119–123.

¹²⁹ Mears, chap. 6, 141–145.

¹³⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 3, 87–90.

sense, institutional constraint did not negate African American claims to citizenship. Rather, it reshaped them. Service could be rewarded symbolically while remaining politically contained. Valor could be praised while authority remained restricted. The Union Army thus functioned as both a platform for Black assertion and a mechanism for regulating its consequences.¹³¹ This dynamic prepared the ground for the next stage of Fleetwood's experience. When his heroism was formally recognized through the Medal of Honor, it entered an institutional environment already structured to individualize achievement and limit its civic implications. The following section examines how military decoration simultaneously affirmed and narrowed claims to citizenship.

3. The Medal of Honor as Simultaneous Affirmation and Containment of Citizenship

The Medal of Honor represented the highest form of military recognition available to Union soldiers during the Civil War. As a public and institutional declaration of valor, it carried exceptional symbolic authority. For African American recipients such as Christian Fleetwood, the medal affirmed Black courage and loyalty at the highest national level. At the same time, however, the institutional logic governing military decoration constrained how such recognition could function politically. By individualizing achievement and embedding it within bureaucratic routines, the Medal of Honor simultaneously validated Black heroism and limited its capacity to challenge racial hierarchy.¹³² Dwight S. Mears's institutional history of the Medal of Honor demonstrates that early citations were shaped less by philosophical reflection than by administrative necessity.¹³³ During the Civil War, medal recommendations were often brief,

¹³¹ Foner, chap. 7, 211–215.

¹³² Mears, chap. 2, 42–45.

¹³³ Mears, introduction, 1–4.

formulaic, and focused narrowly on battlefield conduct.¹³⁴ Their primary purpose was to document acts of bravery in standardized form rather than to articulate broader ideological meaning.¹³⁵ Mears cautions against reading these citations as transparent political statements, emphasizing that they reflected organizational practices and wartime exigencies.¹³⁶ Fleetwood's citation exemplifies this pattern. It records simply that he "seized the colors, after two color bearers had been shot down, and bore them nobly through the fight."¹³⁷ This language was typical of Civil War-era citations, which prioritized clarity and brevity over interpretive depth.¹³⁸ Read in isolation, the statement commemorates individual courage without explicit reference to race, citizenship, or political claims.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, the institutional context in which the citation operated shaped how it was interpreted and remembered. Military honors did not circulate in a social vacuum. They entered public discourse marked by persistent debates over Black capacity, loyalty, and entitlement.¹⁴⁰ In a society where African American citizenship remained contested, official recognition acquired meanings that extended beyond its immediate wording.¹⁴¹ David Blight has shown that acts of valor performed by Black soldiers were frequently invested with ideological significance that exceeded their tactical importance.¹⁴² Such acts were interpreted by supporters as evidence of racial equality and by skeptics as exceptional anomalies.¹⁴³ Recognition thus became a site of interpretive struggle rather than a settled verdict.¹⁴⁴ Within this contested environment, the Medal

¹³⁴ Mears, chap. 3, 75–79.

¹³⁵ Mears, chap. 1, 29–33.

¹³⁶ Mears, chap. 6, 141–145.

¹³⁷ Mears, chap. 2, 42–45.

¹³⁸ Mears, chap. 3, 75–79.

¹³⁹ Mears, chap. 3, 75–79.

¹⁴⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 6, 199–203.

¹⁴¹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 6, 199–203.

¹⁴² Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, part 6, 449–451.

¹⁴³ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 3, 87–90.

¹⁴⁴ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 3, 87–90.

of Honor functioned as a form of controlled affirmation. By singling out individual achievement, the state could acknowledge Black bravery without endorsing broader claims to equality.¹⁴⁵ The medal proclaimed that an African American soldier could embody national virtue under extraordinary circumstances. It did not declare that African Americans were entitled to full civic membership as a matter of right.¹⁴⁶ This logic reflects what scholars have identified as the politics of exceptionalism. Recognition was extended to individuals who surpassed normative expectations, thereby reinforcing the idea that Black excellence was remarkable rather than ordinary.¹⁴⁷ Exceptional cases demonstrated the possibility without establishing entitlement.¹⁴⁸ Fleetwood's honor thus confirmed that African Americans could achieve distinction while preserving skepticism toward collective claims.¹⁴⁹

Institutional practices reinforced this dynamic. Medal recipients were celebrated in official reports and newspapers as singular heroes.¹⁵⁰ Their stories were framed as inspirational narratives rather than as evidence of systemic injustice.¹⁵¹ By isolating achievement in personal terms, the state transformed structural inequality into a background condition rather than a central problem.¹⁵² At the same time, the medal carried genuine affirmational power. It compelled public acknowledgment of Black valor in a society predisposed to deny it.¹⁵³ Fleetwood's recognition disrupted racist assumptions by placing an African American soldier among the nation's most honored warriors.¹⁵⁴ His medal demanded that white Americans

¹⁴⁵ Mears, chap. 5, 119–123.

¹⁴⁶ Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

¹⁴⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 9, 387–390.

¹⁴⁸ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 9, 387–390.

¹⁴⁹ Foner, chap. 10, 355–359.

¹⁵⁰ Mears, chap. 4, 97–101.

¹⁵¹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 6, 199–203.

¹⁵² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 6, 199–203.

¹⁵³ Quarles, chap. 8, 198–201.

¹⁵⁴ Glathaar, chap. 8, 210–213.

confront evidence of Black courage, discipline, and leadership.¹⁵⁵ In this sense, recognition functioned as a meaningful ideological intervention. Yet affirmation did not translate into institutional transformation. As Eric Foner has demonstrated, wartime recognition was rarely accompanied by durable enforcement of political rights.¹⁵⁶ Veterans could be celebrated symbolically while remaining vulnerable materially.¹⁵⁷ The medal honored sacrifice without securing protection. This contradiction shaped Fleetwood's postbellum position. His heroism granted him visibility and moral authority, but it did not exempt him from racial discrimination or political marginalization.¹⁵⁸ Instead, recognition heightened expectations that he would embody exemplary citizenship without guaranteeing reciprocal support.¹⁵⁹

Psychologically, this dynamic intensified the burden of representation. Scholars have shown that individuals elevated to the status of symbols often experience pressure to continuously conform to idealized standards.¹⁶⁰ For Fleetwood, the Medal of Honor became a permanent marker of exemplarity. It affirmed his worth while binding him to ongoing scrutiny.¹⁶¹ In this sense, the medal functioned as both badge and boundary. It recognized extraordinary service while delineating the limits of acceptable Black advancement. It allowed the nation to celebrate African American heroism without confronting the deeper contradictions of racial citizenship.¹⁶² Fleetwood's Medal of Honor thus did not resolve debates over Black belonging. It crystallized them. It demonstrated that valor could be acknowledged at the highest level while equality remained deferred. Recognition became a symbolic endpoint rather than a political

¹⁵⁵ Cornish, chap. 7, 173–176.

¹⁵⁶ Foner, chap. 10, 355–359.

¹⁵⁷ Litwack, chap. 10, 303–307.

¹⁵⁸ Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

¹⁵⁹ Williams, chap. 6, 162–166.

¹⁶⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 10, 412–415.

¹⁶¹ Williams, chap. 7, 188–191.

¹⁶² Mears, chap. 8, 201–205.

beginning. The next section examines how this contradiction intensified during Reconstruction, when wartime recognition confronted federal retreat, white resistance, and the collapse of sustained protections for Black veterans.

4. *Reconstruction and the Failure of Wartime Recognition to Secure Durable Rights*

The conclusion of the Civil War placed unprecedented pressure on the political meaning of African American military service. During Reconstruction, the federal government confronted the challenge of converting wartime sacrifice into lasting citizenship. For Black veterans such as Christian Fleetwood, this period represented a critical test of whether recognition earned through service would yield sustained protection, political inclusion, and social equality. Despite early promise, Reconstruction ultimately revealed the fragility of honor unsupported by enduring institutional enforcement.¹⁶³ Eric Foner has demonstrated that African American veterans emerged from the war with legitimate expectations grounded in both ideology and experience.¹⁶⁴ Military service had been framed by abolitionists, politicians, and federal officials as a pathway to full citizenship. Constitutional amendments and early civil rights legislation initially appeared to validate these claims.¹⁶⁵ The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments formally redefined national membership and political participation.¹⁶⁶ For many veterans, these measures seemed to fulfill the moral contract implied by wartime service. Yet these legal transformations were unevenly implemented. Foner emphasizes that federal commitment to racial equality weakened rapidly in the face of white resistance, political compromise, and economic

¹⁶³ Foner, introduction, 1–5.

¹⁶⁴ Foner, chap. 3, 102–106.

¹⁶⁵ Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, part 6, 433–436.

¹⁶⁶ Foner, chap. 5, 132–136.

instability.¹⁶⁷ Paramilitary violence, voter suppression, and judicial obstruction undermined constitutional protections.¹⁶⁸ As federal troops withdrew and Republican resolve eroded, Black citizens were left increasingly vulnerable.¹⁶⁹ Recognition without enforcement proved structurally insufficient. Leon Litwack's social history of Reconstruction complements this political analysis by documenting how retreat translated into daily insecurity.¹⁷⁰ African American veterans confronted intimidation, labor exploitation, and legal discrimination that stood in stark contrast to wartime promises.¹⁷¹ Many discovered that military distinction offered limited protection against racial violence or economic marginalization.¹⁷² Litwack demonstrates that freedom, while legally established, remained precarious in practice.¹⁷³

Primary-source materials reinforce these conclusions. Freedmen's Bureau correspondence, veterans' petitions, and court records reveal persistent struggles for protection and redress.¹⁷⁴ Black veterans frequently appealed to federal authorities by invoking their wartime service, emphasizing loyalty and sacrifice as grounds for assistance.¹⁷⁵ These appeals demonstrate that veterans continued to frame citizenship as earned through military contribution long after formal hostilities had ended.¹⁷⁶ Fleetwood's postbellum experience reflects this broader trajectory. Although he remained publicly respected and professionally active, he operated within a political environment increasingly hostile to Black advancement.¹⁷⁷ His work in education, public service, and civic organizations unfolded against the backdrop of declining

¹⁶⁷ Foner, chap. 10, 355–359.

¹⁶⁸ Litwack, chap. 7, 201–205.

¹⁶⁹ Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

¹⁷⁰ Litwack, chap. 9, 271–275.

¹⁷¹ Litwack, chap. 10, 303–307.

¹⁷² Litwack, chap. 11, 337–340.

¹⁷³ Litwack, chap. 11, 337–340.

¹⁷⁴ Freedmen's Bureau Records, Virginia Field Office, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

¹⁷⁵ Freedmen's Bureau Records, Virginia Field Office (NARA).

¹⁷⁶ Williams, chap. 4, 91–95.

¹⁷⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 9, 401–405.

federal commitment to civil rights.¹⁷⁸ Recognition provided moral authority but limited institutional leverage. Economic exclusion further constrained veterans' citizenship. Despite promises of land redistribution and employment opportunities, most African American veterans entered postbellum society with minimal material support.¹⁷⁹ Pension systems offered partial relief but were often difficult to access and unevenly administered.¹⁸⁰ Scholars have shown that Black applicants faced disproportionate scrutiny, repeated documentation demands, and prolonged delays.¹⁸¹ Benefits functioned as conditional assistance rather than guaranteed rights. Political participation also became increasingly restricted. Although many veterans initially engaged actively in Republican politics, voting, and officeholding, organized campaigns of intimidation and disenfranchisement dismantled these gains.¹⁸² Violence targeted politically active Black men, including former soldiers whose leadership threatened white supremacy.¹⁸³ Military service could not shield individuals from retaliation.

This erosion of rights exposed the limits of symbolic inclusion. Wartime honor had suggested national gratitude and moral obligation. Reconstruction revealed that such obligations were contingent and reversible.¹⁸⁴ The federal government proved willing to abandon Black citizens in pursuit of sectional reconciliation and political stability.¹⁸⁵ Psychologically, this reversal intensified disillusionment. Scholars of postbellum Black life have emphasized how unmet expectations generated lasting skepticism toward federal authority.¹⁸⁶ For veterans who had risked their lives for the Union, political retreat constituted not merely policy failure but

¹⁷⁸ Fleetwood, Public Address (1895).

¹⁷⁹ Foner, chap. 11, 381–385.

¹⁸⁰ Williams, chap. 6, 162–166.

¹⁸¹ Fleetwood, Pension File (NARA).

¹⁸² Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

¹⁸³ Litwack, chap. 10, 303–307.

¹⁸⁴ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 6, 199–203.

¹⁸⁵ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 2, 54–58.

¹⁸⁶ Litwack, chap. 11, 337–340.

personal betrayal.¹⁸⁷ The collapse of Reconstruction transformed recognition into a reminder of unfulfilled promise. Fleetwood's continued commitment to public service in this environment reflects both resilience and constraint. His life demonstrates how recognition could sustain individual dignity even as collective advancement stalled.¹⁸⁸ Yet dignity alone could not substitute for institutional protection. Honor remained detached from enforceable rights. Reconstruction thus marks the moment when the contradiction at the heart of wartime recognition became fully visible. Military valor had established moral claims to citizenship. The federal retreat exposed the lack of mechanisms to secure those claims. Recognition endured. Equality receded.¹⁸⁹ This outcome prepared the ground for the final dimension of Fleetwood's experience: the long-term psychological and symbolic consequences of recognition within an unequal civic order. The following section examines how honor without justice produced enduring emotional and representational burdens.

5. The Lingering Psychological Impact of Recognition as a Civic Burden

Military recognition did not conclude Christian Fleetwood's struggle for citizenship and belonging. Instead, it extended and transformed that struggle into a lifelong psychological and symbolic burden. The Medal of Honor affirmed his worth in public terms while binding him to enduring expectations of exemplarity within a society that continued to deny African Americans full civic equality. Recognition thus operated not as closure but as a sustained condition of visibility, scrutiny, and moral obligation.¹⁹⁰ Scholars of African American military experience have emphasized that service imposed emotional and representational labor extending beyond

¹⁸⁷ Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

¹⁸⁸ Christian Fleetwood Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁸⁹ Foner, chap. 15, 523–527.

¹⁹⁰ Williams, chap. 7, 188–191.

the battlefield. James McPherson's concept of the "moral gamble" captures how soldiers internalized the belief that their conduct would shape racial reputation.¹⁹¹ This dynamic did not dissipate with peace. Instead, it persisted in postbellum life, reinforced by commemoration, public discourse, and institutional honor. Veterans remained subject to evaluation as symbols rather than as ordinary citizens.¹⁹² Psychological and sociological research on self-affirmation and contingent validation further illuminates this process. When recognition is granted within unequal systems, it can stabilize self-concept while simultaneously intensifying vigilance and self-monitoring.¹⁹³ Individuals learn that dignity must be continually earned rather than presumed. Applied historically, this framework helps explain why decorated veterans could experience honor as both affirmation and burden.¹⁹⁴

Fleetwood's personal writings and public conduct reflect this dynamic. His relative silence regarding his Medal of Honor and wartime experiences should not be interpreted as disengagement or indifference, but as a historically intelligible form of psychological adaptation shaped by racialized expectation and institutional constraint.¹⁹⁵ Rather than foregrounding heroic narrative, he emphasized professionalism, restraint, and civic responsibility.¹⁹⁶ In doing so, he cultivated a public identity compatible with the demands of exemplary citizenship in a hostile environment. This form of self-regulation was reinforced by social surveillance. David Blight's analysis of postbellum memory demonstrates how African American heroism was preserved selectively and depoliticized.¹⁹⁷ Veterans were praised for loyalty while discouraged from

¹⁹¹ McPherson, chap. 4, 94–97.

¹⁹² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 9, 401–405.

¹⁹³ Williams, chap. 6, 162–166.

¹⁹⁴ McPherson, chap. 7, 156–160.

¹⁹⁵ Christian Fleetwood Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹⁶ Fleetwood, Public Address (1895).

¹⁹⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 6, 199–203.

challenging racial inequality.¹⁹⁸ Public commemoration imposed subtle behavioral expectations: honored individuals were expected to embody gratitude, moderation, and respectability.¹⁹⁹ Recognition also shaped how veterans interpreted disappointment. Leon Litwack and Eric Foner have shown that Reconstruction's collapse generated profound disillusionment among African Americans.²⁰⁰ For decorated soldiers, this disillusionment was intensified by the contrast between symbolic honor and lived exclusion.²⁰¹ The gap between praise and protection became emotionally corrosive, producing skepticism toward institutions that had once promised inclusion. Primary-source evidence reinforces this interpretation. Pension applications, affidavits, and private correspondence frequently reveal efforts to reconcile public recognition with private frustration.²⁰² Veterans emphasized loyalty and restraint while expressing concern about discrimination, neglect, and vulnerability.²⁰³ These documents reflect attempts to preserve dignity within constraining circumstances.

The burden of exemplarity also shaped collective memory. Individual heroes became substitutes for structural reform. Their stories were mobilized to demonstrate national virtue without addressing systemic injustice.²⁰⁴ Fleetwood's recognition thus served as both a testament and a diversion. It preserved evidence of Black capacity while enabling institutional complacency.²⁰⁵ Over time, this dynamic encouraged forms of strategic silence. By limiting public engagement with racial controversy, honored veterans protected their reputations, livelihoods, and social standing.²⁰⁶ Silence became a survival strategy rather than a sign of

¹⁹⁸ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 6, 199–203.

¹⁹⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 3, 87–90.

²⁰⁰ Litwack, chap. 11, 337–340.

²⁰¹ Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

²⁰² Fleetwood, Pension File (NARA).

²⁰³ Fleetwood, Pension File (NARA).

²⁰⁴ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 2, 54–58.

²⁰⁵ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 2, 54–58.

²⁰⁶ Williams, chap. 8, 233–237.

withdrawal. It reflected awareness of the risks associated with dissent in an unequal civic order. Fleetwood's life illustrates how recognition could coexist with constraint. His honor sustained self-respect and public esteem. It also required continuous performance of respectability under unequal conditions.²⁰⁷ Psychological resilience and civic limitation became intertwined. In this sense, the Medal of Honor imposed an emotional tax. It demanded perpetual dignity without guaranteeing reciprocal justice. It elevated individuals while binding them to symbolic roles that restricted political agency.²⁰⁸ This enduring burden complicates narratives that treat military honors as unambiguous triumphs. Fleetwood's experience reveals how recognition can function simultaneously as affirmation, surveillance, and containment. It honors sacrifice while regulating its consequences.²⁰⁹ With this final analytical dimension in view, the paper now turns to its concluding assessment of how Fleetwood's life illuminates the unresolved tensions between service, recognition, and citizenship in American history.

Conclusion

Christian Fleetwood's Medal of Honor stands at the center of a profound historical paradox. His wartime heroism compelled the United States government to acknowledge African American courage, discipline, and loyalty at the highest symbolic level. Yet the recognition he received also exposed the limits of that acknowledgment. Fleetwood's experience demonstrates that military honor, when untethered from sustained institutional reform, could validate individual excellence while leaving the broader architecture of racial inequality intact. Recognition affirmed Black capacity without guaranteeing Black citizenship.²¹⁰ By examining

²⁰⁷ Williams, chap. 7, 188–191.

²⁰⁸ McPherson, chap. 7, 156–160.

²⁰⁹ Mears, chap. 8, 201–205.

²¹⁰ Foner, chap. 15, 523–527.

Fleetwood's life through a microhistorical and interdisciplinary lens, this study has shown how military recognition functioned not merely as a reward for valor but as a mechanism that shaped the meaning of Black service. Fleetwood's distinction allowed the nation to celebrate African American bravery without committing itself to the political and social transformations that such bravery logically demanded. In this sense, recognition operated as both affirmation and containment. It affirmed Black excellence in exceptional circumstances while preserving skepticism toward Black entitlement in ordinary civic life.²¹¹ The collapse of Reconstruction intensified this contradiction. African American veterans emerged from the war with reasonable expectations that service would yield protection, participation, and dignity. Fleetwood's honor elevated those expectations, rendering the subsequent retreat from federal enforcement not merely a policy failure but a deeply personal rupture between promise and reality. The postbellum state's inability to convert wartime recognition into durable citizenship reveals how symbolic inclusion could coexist with material exclusion.²¹² Equally significant is the psychological dimension of Fleetwood's recognition. The Medal of Honor did not release him from the burden of representation; it intensified it. To be publicly honored as exemplary was to be permanently positioned as proof of loyalty, discipline, and worth in a society that continued to question African American belonging.

Recognition thus imposed a lifelong expectation of dignity without guaranteeing reciprocal protection. This emotional taxation complicates narratives that treat military honors as unambiguous triumphs.²¹³ Fleetwood's relative silence regarding his medal and wartime experiences should therefore be understood not as disengagement but as a historically intelligible

²¹¹ Mears, chap. 5, 119–123.

²¹² Foner, chap. 12, 421–424.

²¹³ Williams, chap. 7, 188–191.

form of adaptation to racialized expectation and institutional constraint. His restraint reflects awareness of the risks associated with dissent and the limits of symbolic capital in an unequal civic order. In navigating these constraints, Fleetwood embodied both resilience and restriction.²¹⁴ Ultimately, Fleetwood's life illuminates unresolved tensions at the heart of American citizenship. His experience reveals a nation capable of honoring Black sacrifice while resisting Black equality, a state willing to celebrate individual virtue without dismantling structural injustice. By situating Fleetwood within the intersecting histories of military service, Reconstruction, and national memory, this paper has argued that recognition must be understood not as an endpoint of progress but as a site of negotiation, limitation, and consequence.²¹⁵ The Medal of Honor did not resolve the contradictions of race and belonging in post-Civil War America. It crystallized them. It demonstrated that valor could be acknowledged at the highest level while equality remained deferred. Fleetwood's story challenges historians to reconsider the relationship between service and citizenship and to recognize that honor, absent justice, may preserve inequality even as it commemorates courage.²¹⁶ In tracing the political, institutional, and psychological dimensions of recognition, this study contributes to broader debates about how states manage claims to belonging through symbolic reward. Fleetwood's silent heroism thus stands not only as a testament to individual bravery but as an enduring reminder of the limits of honor in the absence of justice.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Christian Fleetwood Papers, Library of Congress.

²¹⁵ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 9, 401–405.

²¹⁶ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, chap. 10, 412–415.

²¹⁷ Mears, chap. 8, 201–205.

Works Cited

- Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.
- Blight, David W. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Cornish, Dudley Taylor. *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1956.
- Douglass, Frederick. “Men of Color, To Arms!” *Douglass’ Monthly*, March 1863.
- Fleetwood, Christian. Pension File. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
- Fleetwood, Christian. Public Address. Washington, D.C., 1895.
- Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- Freedmen’s Bureau Records. Virginia Field Office. National Archives and Records Administration.
- Glathaar, Joseph T. *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers*. New York: Free Press, 1990.
- Litwack, Leon F. *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- Manning, Chandra. *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.
- McPherson, James M. *The Negro’s Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted During the War for the Union*. New York: Vintage, 1965.
- Mears, Dwight S. *The Medal of Honor: The Evolution of America’s Highest Military Decoration*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018.
- Quarles, Benjamin. *The Negro in the Civil War*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1953.
- Williams, Chad L. *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Christian Fleetwood Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.