

Fighting for "Double Victory:" Newburyport's Black Soldiers and Sailors

Black soldiers and sailors from Newburyport have fought in each of America's military conflicts, often serving a nation that did not recognize their rights as full citizens.



Soldier and horse from the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment (Colored)
Courtesy of Rick Carline and the Military Images Magazine



The Cousins Family of Newburyport



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BROTHERS ON LEAVE
Frank G Cousins of 242 Water street, a member of the Merchant Marine has been at home for a 30-day leave has returned to New York to sign up for another ship. While on an eight month cruise on the S S. Barbara Fritschle, he was in four different ports in Russia, Scotland and England
William J Cousins has finished his course of study at Hampton Va and is home on 5 days leave. He has been transferred to California and expects to be shipped across
Kenneth L. Cousins has just returned to his base in Earle, N J after five days at home
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FROM LEFT:
Frank G. Cousins, Sr., George R. Cousins and spouse Corrine Cousins of Newburyport
Courtesy of Cousins family

Kenneth L. Cousins, U.S. Navy, c. 1944
Courtesy of Cousins family

"Brothers on Leave," *Newburyport Daily News*, November 14, 1944
Courtesy of Newburyport Daily News

DURING THE CIVIL WAR (1861-1865), President Abraham Lincoln's U.S. Army and Navy became heavily dependent on Black soldiers and sailors. By the end of the war, one in four U.S. Navy sailors was Black. Despite their significant numbers, Black service members faced widespread discrimination.

When Evans Covington of Newburyport enlisted, the Navy assigned him the lowest rank of "Landsman" despite his 14 years of prior naval service. Covington sailed on the USS *Richmond*, part of the fleet that seized New Orleans. Discharged from the Navy in 1863, he immediately joined the renowned Black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment and fought in South Carolina.

Contrary to recruitment promises, the government paid Covington and other Black soldiers much less than their white peers. In response, they refused to receive any pay until it was made equal. Covington died in 1864 in the "Government Asylum for the Insane," a facility intended to treat veterans for mental illness related to military service. Back in Newburyport, his wife Victoria was repeatedly denied a widow's pension.



Unidentified Private in 54th Regiment in 1863
Courtesy of Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Some of Newburyport's Black soldiers and sailors were as young as 15 years old when they enlisted, including Arthur L.W. Fowler who joined the 5th Colored Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. Fowler was among the first to gallop into Richmond, Virginia, during the capture of the Confederate capital in 1865. After the war, he returned home to live with his family on Boylston Street. However, Black Civil War veterans found a mixed reception in Newburyport, encountering prejudice as deeply entrenched as the Confederate positions they had faced. Although the city's congressman, Benjamin F. Butler, commended Black soldiers, the *Newburyport Daily Herald* printed a vicious anti-Black poem about Black people's expectations after the war.

During World War II (1941-1945), the Cousins family sent four brothers into military service, joining over a million Black men and women serving in the U.S. military. Despite Newburyport High School forcing Frank G. Cousins Sr. to walk at the back of his 1941 graduation procession due to a racist complaint, he still chose to serve his country. Frank joined the Merchant Marine and crewed dangerous missions on the Liberty ships that delivered crucial war supplies to allies England and Russia. Kenneth L. Cousins and William J. Cousins joined the Navy's segregated facilities, and George R. Cousins joined the Army Air Forces. Back home, George used the GI Bill to secure no-down-payment loans to purchase several houses, a benefit often denied to Black veterans elsewhere. Although the U.S. military fully desegregated in 1948, the fight for equality was far from over. *Text by Geordie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner, Cyd Raschke (2023)*