Veteran, Author, Activist: Joseph T. Wilson of Norfolk and Black Leadership in the Civil War Era
Elizabeth R. Varon, September 15-16 Jepson Colloquium

On September 25, 1891, Joseph T. Wilson of Norfolk was buried in the cemetery of the National Soldiers’ Home near Fortress Monroe, Virginia with military honors, in a ceremony attended by an “immense throng of battle-scarred [Civil War] veterans.” Wilson had earned a hero’s tribute. During the Civil War, he served as a soldier in not one but two path-breaking black regiments, and after the war he achieved renown as a writer and activist. Obituaries described Wilson as a man of refinement who “carefully cultivated his mind with the best literature of the world,” and as an “agitator” who showed “bulldog tenacity” in addressing “questions of great concern to the race.” Wilson’s eulogists praised as his crowning achievement his popular 1887 book *The Black Phalanx*, the most comprehensive study of African American military service that had ever been published. They predicted that this “masterpiece” would stand as the “proudest monument to Wilson’s memory.” And they were right. In 1891, editor Irvine Garland Penn, an authority on black literary culture, wrote that the sales of *The Black Phalanx* “surpass[ed] that of any other work written by an Afro-American.” For more than a decade after the initial publication of the book, African American newspapers promoted *The Black Phalanx* and offered copies of it as prizes for long-term subscribers. An 1898 ad in the *Richmond Planet*, for example, insisted that “every patriotic colored man, woman, and child” in America should own *The Black Phalanx*, and offered the book at half price to loyal readers of the paper. In 1900 the *Black Phalanx* was featured at the World’s Fair in Paris, France, in an exhibit on black literary achievement. In 1911 it was hailed by Arturo Schomburg and John Edward Bruce as one of the foundational works in the field, as they organized the Negro Society for Historical Research in New York. In 1944, Carter G. Woodson recalled in the *Negro History*
Bulletin that his own historical consciousness had been shaped by the experience of reading The Black Phalanx aloud to an illiterate U.S.C.T. veteran he had befriended when he worked as a coal miner in West Virginia. In short, The Black Phalanx was a profoundly influential book.¹

And yet Joseph T. Wilson and his life’s work have, in modern day scholarship, been underappreciated. As a soldier, Wilson has been overshadowed by men such as Robert Smalls and Hiram Revels, who represent how black military service translated into political leadership during Reconstruction. As a writer, Wilson has been overshadowed by his contemporary George Washington Williams, a fellow Civil War veteran turned scholar, who is regarded as the dean of modern African American history and a pioneer in the professionalization of the field. While Civil War historians frequently cite The Black Phalanx, they have tended to treat it as a reference work rather than as a piece of scholarship worthy of sustained analysis. Studies of postwar black politics in Wilson’s native Virginia acknowledge his political activism but do not connect it to his literary pursuits.²

This essay argues that Wilson, a crusader against the denial of history, deserves to be remembered. The essay will show how Wilson’s unique experiences during the war, and the politics he practiced in the singular setting of postwar Norfolk, shaped his textual strategies, particularly his focus on the theme of black leadership.

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Wilson’s battle over Civil War memory began with a fateful decision he made in September of 1864: to return home to his native Virginia. Wilson was born in Norfolk in 1837. Surviving records suggest that his mother was a free woman of English and Native American descent and his father was African American and enslaved; the 1870 federal census designated Joseph Wilson as “mulatto.”³ In around 1850, Wilson left Norfolk and made his way to New
Bedford, Massachusetts, where he attended public schools and chose, as so many young men in that port town did, to take to the sea, aboard a whaler bound for the South Pacific. Wilson was working in Chile, on the Valparaiso and Santiago Railroad, when he received word in 1862 that the Civil War had broken out. He decided to return, as soon as possible, to America—he booked passage to New York, and from there to Union-occupied New Orleans, where he hoped to be reunited with his father Bristow, who had been sold south years before. In New Orleans, Wilson enlisted as a private in a newly formed black Union regiment, the 2nd Louisiana Native Guard. After being wounded and honorably discharged, he returned home to Massachusetts, only to re-enlist, this time in the famous 54th Massachusetts. In February of 1864 he was wounded a second time, at the battle of Olustee in Florida, and that spring he was again honorably discharged and sent back to Massachusetts. Remarkably, Wilson chose to enter the fray a third time. In September of 1864, after a fourteen year absence, he returned to Norfolk. That winter he signed on, as a wheelman on a Union dispatch boat, in Union General Ben Butler’s amphibious expedition from Hampton Roads to capture Fort Fisher in North Carolina, the South’s last major Atlantic port. He then signed on with the U.S. secret service, “operating with his squad on the Elizabeth and James rivers, and in front of Richmond with the army of the James.” The end of the war found Wilson back in Norfolk, tending a government supply store that provided goods to freedpeople.

Why did Wilson—who had in effect escaped the South three times—choose to return to Virginia? Family ties surely played a role but so too, we can surmise, did Norfolk’s distinct position in the Southern political landscape. Occupied by the Union army in May of 1862, Norfolk, like the Hampton Roads region more broadly, was a proving ground in which Southern blacks could define freedom in the presence of white allies such as Union army personnel and
Northern missionaries. Norfolk blacks were soon able to establish independent churches and schools, and to make use of institutions such as freedmen’s savings banks, employment societies and poor relief agencies. And they were able to express their aspirations in civic rituals such as the massive parades marking the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Indeed Norfolk was the setting of what may have been the first attempt by African Americans to vote in the liberated South. An April 4, 1865, in the week before Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, a group of Norfolk men, Joseph T. Wilson among them, established the Colored Monitor Union Club, dedicated to obtaining the right of suffrage. Later that spring, on May 25, they attempted the bold experiment of casting ballots in a local election for state assemblymen, voting for white candidates who supported black suffrage. Officials in one of Norfolk’s wards agreed to record their names on disputed ballots. In the end, the votes didn’t count, but the men had made a point: if their votes had counted, the suffrage candidates would have won.  

On June 5, 1865, a committee of eight men, Wilson among them, promulgated an address on “Equal Suffrage,” insisting that black voting was “a necessity as a protection against the votes of secessionists and disloyal men.” Wilson’s voice comes through clearly in this address, which began by offering a history lesson. “It is a common assertion, by our enemies, that ‘this is a white man’s country, settled by white men, its government established by white men, and shall therefore be ruled by white men only,’” the address noted. But such a view could not stand up to the facts: black labor, Wilson and his comrades argued, had built the nation, and the blood of black patriots had sanctified it in Revolutionary War and Civil War. These Norfolk activists cast themselves as guardians of Virginia’s future: “Give us the suffrage, and you may rely upon us…to keep the State forever in the Union.”
The need for protection was dramatized the following year, when, on April 16, 1866, Norfolk was the site of the first major race riot of the Reconstruction era. The trouble broke out when angry whites, emboldened by Andrew Johnson’s conciliation of former Confederates, disrupted a parade of Africans Americans, who were commemorating the passage that April of the Civil Rights Act of 1866; the whites were particularly incensed that the black marchers were escorted by a group of armed, uniformed U.S.C.T. veterans. Joseph Wilson, who had assumed editorship of the local Unionist newspaper, the *True Southerner*, was slated to preside over the day’s main event. He was on the speakers’ stand awaiting the arrival of the processional when he heard the report of pistol fire and watched the peaceful gathering devolve into violent melee, one that was followed by a wave of vigilante attacks on the black community and a slander campaign by the white press, which cast the black marchers as a drunken, depraved, blood-thirsty mob. Wilson’s *True Southerner* refuted these slanders with another history lesson: “These liberated slaves are soldiers just from the war,” his April 19 editorial noted archly. “It has been a custom, not only in this, but in every nation, for returned soldiers to attend national celebrations in their arms….Are we to be forbidden to hold national celebrations in our own country, lest we offend the enemy?” Later that year, a white mob ransacked the *True Southerner* offices, forcing the paper to shut down.7

These formative events in Wilson’s postwar political career established a pattern that would be repeated over the next two decades, of progress met by reaction. In 1867, Congress’s Reconstruction Acts enfranchised the freedmen, and Wilson assumed a prominent political role at the state level, as a fixture at Republican party conventions and events. His was a radical voice: he called for land confiscation and redistribution, and corresponded regularly with leading Radical Republicans such as Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner. In 1869, Virginia’s
white Conservative leaders negotiated a compromise with the Grant administration and Republican Congress whereby they agreed to abide black suffrage in the state’s new constitution provided that former Confederates would suffer no penalties of disfranchisement. The state was readmitted to the Union on these terms, and military reconstruction formally ended; as whites outnumbered blacks in Virginia, the white Conservative party (as the Democrat-led coalition called itself) soon seized control of the state government from the Republicans. The existence of black majority wards in places like Richmond and Norfolk meant that some black men continued to be elected to the General Assembly and other political offices, and to win Republican party patronage appointments, in the early 1870s. Wilson himself served on the Norfolk city council, and as Internal Revenue Service gauger and customs inspector. He joined prominent white Republicans in stumping for U.S. Grant in the presidential election campaign of 1872, and served as a Presidential elector, for Rutherford B. Hayes, in 1876.8

But as he rose up the ranks, the spectre of violent reprisals continued to haunt Wilson. In 1871 a rampaging Conservative party mob set upon Wilson’s house, smashing his windows, firing their pistols, and shouting “‘where is the n-----, we have got one, and we will have another, &c!’” In the midst of such brutality, the opportunities for black men to participate in governing were steadily closed off. In 1876 as the last Federal troops were removed from the South, Conservatives in Virginia imposed measures intended to suppress the black vote: a poll tax and a law making petty theft grounds for disfranchisement. Wilson was in the vanguard of those protesting these new measures, but to no avail; as disfranchisement spread, the numbers of blacks elected to the General Assembly declined precipitously in the late 1870s.9

Many black Virginians took heart from the emergence in 1879 of the Readjuster party, a reform-minded coalition of Republicans and Democrats that proposed to repudiate part of the
antebellum state debt and reduce the rate of interest to be paid on it in order to protect services like public schooling. The new party’s head, former Confederate general William Mahone, successfully appealed to black voters, promising to promote education and protect black voting. Wilson, though, regarded the Readjuster movement with suspicion, as he believed it undermined Republican unity and that white Readjusters saw blacks as political pawns. Wilson became a champion of the loyal Republican “straightouts,” who tried to offer an alternative to the Funder-Democrats (who opposed repudiation of the debt) and to the Readjusters. As Wilson explained in an 1881 public letter to Frederick Douglass, published in the newspapers, the white Readjusters in Norfolk had proven no better than their conservative Democrat predecessors: they imprisoned blacks “without authority of the law, ordered them whipped for trivial offences, [and] sentenced them to the chain gang for no crime.” In 1884, with the Readjuster movement in retreat, Democratic majorities in the state legislature appointed new electoral boards for the Commonwealth’s cities and counties, giving them license to further suppress black voting. In 1889, only four black men were elected to the Virginia General Assembly. No others would be elected until 1968.10

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Such was the political atmosphere in which Joseph T. Wilson wrote The Black Phalanx, and this backdrop is essential context for understanding his distinctive narrative choices. In some respects the Black Phalanx represents the genre of “race history,” and closely resembles the two other major studies of African Americans in the Civil War written in the 19th century: William Wells Brown’s The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity, published in 1867, and George Washington William’s A History of the Negro troops in the War of the Rebellion, published in 1888. All three books saw history as “an ongoing struggle toward
the goal of human freedom.” All chronicled the desire of blacks to enlist and the opposition they faced in the North; the evolution of the Union’s emancipation policy; the heroic comportment of blacks troops at Port Hudson, Fort Wagner and other storied battles; the discrimination they faced, particularly with regards to pay; the Confederate policy of no quarter and its tragic implications at the Fort Pillow massacre; and the final triumph of Union forces in the Virginia theatre. All offered what the scholar Dickson D. Bruce Jr. has called “an ironic conception of American history”—they pointed up the irony that America’s survival as a nation during the Civil War era “depended upon a supposedly ‘dependent’ people.” And all struck notes of hope, reassuring their readers, as William Wells Brown put it, that “progress is slow, but sure.”

And yet in many ways, The Black Phalanx stands out, for Wilson’s unconventional choices. While Brown found antecedents for black soldiering in the slave rebellions of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, and Williams found them in the Haitian revolution, Wilson by contrast made no mention of slave rebellion as a context for black Civil War service. Instead Wilson focused, in his two introductory chapters, on black military service in the American Revolution and the War of 1812, emphasizing, as he had in his response to the Norfolk riot some twenty years earlier, that African American soldiers were agents of the state, and of the nation—patriots not insurrectionists. This was a considered choice. Wilson was very learned in the global history of abolition; indeed in 1882 he published a book on that subject, entitled Emancipation: Its Course and Progress, from 1491 B.C. to A.D. 1875, which connected abolition in the United States to emancipation in the West Indies, Russia, Cuba, Brazil and other societies. Wilson was keenly aware that opponents of emancipation had long invoked dystopian images of the Haitian Revolution in order to associate black freedom with, as he put it, the “crimson flame of carnage and crime.” And so he chose to portray American slaves not as rebels but as recruits, who were
mobilized by the “steady tramp of the steel-crowned, blue-clad legions.” In Wilson’s view, there was only one set of rebels in the American Civil War—and they wore the Confederate grey.\textsuperscript{12}

This emphasis was essential to establishing Wilson’s second major theme in his introductory chapters: the galling ingratitude of whites towards black patriotism. Wilson furnished as his central example the experience of William Wells Brown’s own grandfather, Simon Lee, who served in the American army only to be re-enslaved afterwards—“sent back to his master, where he spent the remainder of his life toiling on a tobacco plantation.” This was a typical fate for black soldiers in America’s early wars, Wilson argued, proof that patriotic service was “no protection against outrage.”\textsuperscript{13} Wilson signaled to his readers early on, in other words, that he was not going to offer an uplifting tale of the Civil War generation building upon the struggles of past generations. Indeed, Wilson’s chapters on the Civil War begin with his assertion that white prejudice grew more virulent in the decades after the Revolution and was at a peak during the Civil War. In his fourteen chapters on the war years, Wilson details the indignities blacks suffered within the Union army and the atrocities perpetrated on them by Confederates. What makes his account distinctly poignant and revealing is that he shares his personal experiences of soldiering, typically in asterisks-marked discursive footnotes. In his chapter on USCT recruitment, he relates that he was, when stationed in New Orleans, accosted by a mob of white Union soldiers who demanded that he take off his blue uniform and literally tore it from his body when he refused; such attacks on black soldiers, he notes, were frequent. In his chapter on the Department of the Gulf, Wilson shares, again in a footnote, an even more troubling story, of black pickets in his regiment, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Louisiana Native Guards, being fired upon one night by fellow Union soldiers, of the white 8\textsuperscript{th} Vermont regiment. Black soldiers, Wilson establishes, “suffered much at the hands of their white fellow comrades in arms.”\textsuperscript{14}
Of course Wilson regarded Confederate mistreatment of blacks to be altogether more shocking--a regime of outrages rather than indignities. He used *The Black Phalanx* to drive home the point that barbarity towards blacks was Confederate policy, promulgated from on high by Jefferson Davis, who sought to bring about a “war of extermination against the negro soldiers.” Wilson recounts the April 12, 1864 massacre of surrendered black soldiers at Fort Pillow, Tennessee in unflinching detail, calling it a “shocking crime of wanton, indiscriminate murder.” And he describes the Confederate massacre of retreating and surrendering black troops at the Battle of the Crater in Virginia on July 30, 1864 as an inhuman “repetition of the Fort Pillow Massacre.” Once again, what sets Wilson’s account apart is that this was all deeply personal for him, for he bore direct witness to a postwar campaign to cover-up these crimes. Reflecting on white commemorations of the war in his native Virginia, Wilson observes that “No battle fought during the war… elicited so much comment and glorification among the confederates as that of the crater. It…has been the subject of praise by poets and orators upon the confederate side.” Wilson furnishes as an example an oration in 1876 in which a Confederate veteran claimed fraudulently that the blacks troops at the Crater were “inflamed with drink” and therefore deserved the treatment they got.15

The preeminent Confederate hero of the Crater was none other than William Mahone, who would head the Readjuster party, the very reform coalition that Wilson rejected. Mahone assiduously “used his fame as the ‘Hero of the Crater’ to advance both his business and political interests.” Wilson’s own deep knowledge of the war prevented him from ever trusting Mahone, even after the Readjusters delivered on some of the reforms they promised, such as abolishing the whipping post as a punishment for African Americans. Wilson repeatedly, publicly, characterized Mahone as master manipulator, who pretended to be “in favor of giving increased
rights to the colored population” because it would increase his own power base and ensnare unwary voters. Mahone responded by using his patronage powers as a U.S. Senator to exact vengeance on Wilson, securing Wilson’s removal, late in 1881, from the U.S. Customs’ Service.16

In The Black Phalanx, Wilson countered Mahone’s false narratives of the war by setting the record straight. The battle of the Crater, Wilson observed, had been a debacle for the Union because the black soldiers who were initially tasked to lead the assault had been replaced at the last minute with white troops, who charged into the crater the mine created, rather than around it, trapping themselves and the black units who then tried to rescue them. For Wilson, the Crater symbolized not only Confederate barbarity but the costs to the Union of failing to recognize the capacity of blacks for leadership. Indeed, Wilson’s desire to defend and vindicate black leadership rings out in the pages of the Black Phalanx. He opens the book by explaining how he was commissioned to write it by members of the Grand Army of the Republic, the venerable Union veterans’ organization in which Wilson had earned the official position of aide-de-camp to the commander-in-chief, at the rank of colonel. The illustrations in The Black Phalanx feature portraits of U.S.C.T. soldiers who entered the officer ranks during war, such as Major Martin Delaney, Captain P.B.S. Pinchback, and Lieutenant James Monroe Trotter. Wilson knew of course that black officers, especially commissioned officers, at the rank of lieutenant or above, were rare; black regiments were under the command of white officers. But he believed that the symbolic importance of black officers, commissioned and non-commissioned, far exceeded their numbers. And that is why he made another surprising choice in The Black Phalanx. Rather than focusing on his own experience in the famous 54th Massachusetts regiment, Wilson focuses instead on his tour of duty with the 2nd Louisiana Native Guard, and on his comrades in the 1st
and 3rd Louisiana Native Guards. These Louisiana regiments were the site of a unique, albeit short-lived, experiment in black military leadership: they contained “nearly 90 percent of the total number of black officers who would serve in infantry or artillery units in the war.”

The 1st Louisiana Native Guard had its origins in a local militia unit consisting of members of New Orleans’ elite free men of color. Shortly after the Federal occupation of New Orleans in the spring of 1862, its leaders pledged their allegiance to the Union, and in the fall of 1862, the 2nd and 3rd regiments, consisting primarily of former slaves, were mustered into Union service. Most of the line officers of these units were African American, and Wilson draws on their stories to illustrate black gallantry. He tells for example the story of Captain Andre Cailloux, an Afro-Creole from New Orleans’ distinctive class of gens de couleur libre, who led a brave if futile charge against Confederate defenses at Port Hudson, Louisiana. Wilson reminds his readers that the martyred Cailloux became the first African-American military hero of the war, his sacrifices celebrated in newspaper articles, poems, and in a massive funeral procession in Union-occupied New Orleans. Wilson also brings to light the story of Major Francois Ernest Dumas of his own 2nd Regiment. “A gentleman of fine tact and ability,” Dumas was one of only two African Americans (along with Martin Delaney) to hold the rank of Major during the war, and he ably led his men in combat at East Pascagoula, Mississippi in the spring of 1863, the first Civil War engagement featuring black company-grade officers.

Wilson clearly believed that Cailloux and Dumas, with their fine educations, were officer material from the start. But Wilson was also careful to point out that men who had “worn the galling chains of slavery” proved, in their own right, to be able and efficient noncommissioned officers. Lamentably, the Louisiana experiment with black officers proved to be short-lived: when Union General Nathaniel Banks, who regarded black officers as unfit for duty, took over
command of the Department of the Gulf, he pressured men such as Dumas, by subjecting them to humiliating examination boards, into resigning. But the black-led Louisiana regiments had nonetheless made their mark. Had the Louisianans failed to display courage, “the colored troops would have been universally condemned,” and consigned permanently to non-combat roles.19

In Wilson’s analysis, the stories of black officers serve to dramatize the ways that the veil of racism occludes the past. Wilson ends his chapter entitled “Officers of the Phalanx” by raising the issue of racial passing. He notes that “quite a number of mulattoes served in white regiments, some as officers,” and he related a personal story. Wilson was lying wounded on the battlefield of Olustee, Florida in February of 1864 while he was serving with the 54th Massachusetts, when an officer rode up to him and passed Wilson his canteen. The officer asked “Don’t you know me?” to which Wilson said “no.” The man identified himself as “Tom Bunting” and said to a shocked Wilson “We used to play together in our boyhood days in Virginia.” The officer then dashed away to his white Massachusetts regiment. “Numerous instances of this kind could be cited,” Wilson notes. This story was meant to illustrate that racism and not racial inferiority held blacks back—whites literally could not see the achievements of people of African descent.20

It must be noted that no modern scholars acknowledge Wilson’s focus on African American leadership. Instead, recent works repeatedly characterize Wilson’s account of black military service as “defensive” in tone, as if Wilson was in retreat and his literary work a sort of rearguard action against the resurgent forces of white supremacy.21 Such a characterization is misleading. Wilson’s commemoration of black military leadership dated back to the very moment of Union victory: in May of 1865, Wilson offered the first of his many public tributes to the Louisiana Native Guard regiments, in a speech in Norfolk that was reprinted in the
Unionist newspaper there. For Wilson to celebrate black leadership in the spring of 1865, when the experiment of black voting had not yet begun, was bold; for him to celebrate black leadership in 1887, at a time when most whites had deemed the experiment in black citizenship a failure, was, arguably, even bolder.²²

Tellingly, African American readers in Wilson’s own day did take note of his focus on leadership. The review of The Black Phalanx in the New York Age, for example, proudly listed the names of the “colored commissioned officers,” men such as Delaney and Pinchback, whose portraits were featured in Wilson’s book. The eminent reformer Charlotte Forten Grimke cited Wilson in an 1889 published letter to the editor of the New York Evangelist. That periodical had claimed that though black soldiers “were brave enough in the ranks…no one had the natural capacity to command.” Grimke shot back, “May I ask what authority you have for this statement?” “I would like to refer you to a book entitled ‘The Black Phalanx,’” she continued, noting “there were many colored officers who acquitted themselves honorably, and the fact that there were no colored colonels or generals, may readily be accounted for by the strong prejudice” which kept blacks out of the ranks until midway through the war.²³

Perhaps Wilson’s boldest choice of all was his choice of a title: The Black Phalanx. A phalanx was “an ancient Greek military formation of heavy armed infantrymen in close ranks.” The word connoted courage, efficiency, and prowess. Wilson chose the term both to tap “the prestige of Greece and Rome in Euro-American culture” and for its connotations of discipline and unity. Quoting Ulysses S. Grant’s assessment that the black man was “in discipline a better soldier than the white man,” Wilson argued that it took a special kind of self-control for black troops to face a foe that would give them no quarter and yet to refrain from any acts of inhumanity, of vengeance and retaliation, against that foe.²⁴
Success for a phalanx “depended on fighting as one united and cohesive unit.” It was just such unity that Wilson felt was missing from black politics in the wake of Reconstruction. As I’ve noted, in the years he researched and wrote the *Black Phalanx*, political divisions and personal rivalries plagued the Republican party in Virginia. The early 1880s furnished numerous examples of how costly such divisions could be. In August of 1881, the Republican State Convention in Lynchburg fractured, with Wilson’s straight-outs splitting with the Readjusters and opting to hold rump convention. Wilson was elected chairman of that convention, and in his opening speech he “urged the Republicans to stand by their colors, and to surrender to no set of men their principles and their manhood.” The convention split over whether to nominate its own ticket of candidates for Governor and Lieutenant Governor, and although some delegates nominated Wilson himself for these posts, he could not garner the necessary support. Wilson’s closing speech expressed his “extreme chagrin and bitter disappointment” at lack of solidarity among the delegates.25

Divisions among Republicans got so bad in Norfolk itself that for a time, rival factions there held two separate celebrations of the Emancipation Proclamation. Wilson used the occasion of an 1885 speech commemorating emancipation to decry these developments. The enemies of equality were united, he proclaimed, in their determination to keep black men down; whites had made a “science” of “injustice and wrong.” In the face of such a foe, blacks could not afford to divide their votes, to defer to white leaders, or to choose any but the very best men—“men of learning and moral worth”—to lead them. “Freedom is not individual privileges but the right to organize,” Wilson insisted, adding, in a military metaphor, “Let us see to it in the future that we stand united and feel the touch of the elbow.” The freedom “won by the blood of
our fathers and brothers,” he concluded, could only be preserved by “the united effort of ourselves.”

In proposing that African Americans must close ranks in peacetime as they had during the war, Wilson appropriated elements of the “regenerative militarism” that was such a strong feature of late nineteenth-century culture: its “celebration of blood sacrifice in combat” and of the efficiency of armies as a model for social organization. As Jackson Lears and others have shown, militarism could be adapted to various ideological agendas, from the bellicose imperialism of Teddy Roosevelt to the utopian reforms of Edward Bellamy. In Wilson’s case, militarism tapped a current in abolitionist culture that cast the leaders of the freedom struggle as “moral gladiators,” wielding the weapons of oratory and of the written word. Wilson’s emphasis on the phalanx as the metaphor for political unity also reflected his own theory of history, as the long struggle of Democracy against Aristocracy. “History proves beyond a doubt,” he wrote in his 1882 book *Emancipation*, “that the advancing spirit of freedom has always been met by a relentless war waged by the oppressors of mankind.” In such a universe, the forces of freedom could never break ranks or let their guard down.

What then should we make of Wilson’s life? This essay has emphasized that his literary career was inseparable from his political activism. Wilson was in many respects a transitional figure: a bridge between the early black historians such as Williams Wells Brown and modern luminaries such as Carter G. Woodson; a bridge between Frederick Douglass’s antislavery activism and W.E.B. Du Bois’ promotion of the talented tenth; and a bridge between the emancipationist mode of Civil War commemoration, with its emphasis on abolition as the great achievement of the war, and the Union Cause tradition, with its emphasis on the saving of the
nation. But Wilson did not only mark progress. He also catalogued the lost promises of the Union war.

It was a source of deep disappointment to Wilson that his intellectual achievement did not translate into greater political authority. *The Black Phalanx,* as I noted at the outset of this essay, earned Wilson considerable acclaim, in the form of robust sales and positive notices in journals such as the *A.M.E. Church Review, New York Age, Cleveland Gazette* and *Philadelphia Tribune.* Unfortunately, such tributes came in the midst of new waves of indignities and outrages. The white press in Richmond, covering an 1890 “Colored People’s Convention” in the city chaired by Wilson, sneeringly put his G.A.R. title of Colonel in quotation marks. That year Wilson had already undertaken a sobering mission to Washington, D.C., on behalf of Virginia’s blacks, to protest the continued deterioration of their political status: he was part of a five man delegation that testified before the “House Committee on the election of the President and Vice President” that widespread election fraud in the last presidential race had disfranchised tens of thousands of black voters. Invoking the Fourteenth Amendment, they asked that the representation of the South be reduced to the extent that suffrage was suppressed. Their appeals fell on deaf ears.

The disjuncture between achievement and reward is the theme of what is perhaps Wilson’s most moving piece of writing: his poem, published in the 1881 volume *Voice of a New Race,* entitled, “The Negro Statesman.” The poem tells the story of a humble freedman who has a stirring vision—the dream that he appears on the Senate floor to argue on behalf of Charles Sumner’s Civil Rights Bill, an anti-segregation measure that was debated for years before finally passing in 1875. Wilson writes of this character,

He dreamed the nation’s forum he’d won
To tell the marvelous tale of his race,
Upon the Senate floor he stood;  
A thousand waiting ears were opened  
To catch his matchless eloquence.”

In the speech that follows, the protagonist traces out in microcosm the very themes of solidarity and patriotism that would animate *The Black Phalanx*:

Because I am black, the color of the skin  
May enhance the opinion, where prejudice has root,  
That I am lured by individualism,  
To contend for equal rights.  
But sirs, I speak not for myself alone,  
But for thousands of those who me have sent  
Do I plead here for equal public rights  
For which your fathers and our fathers  
In the Revolutionary strife did fight….  

…War necessity made the Negro free  
You agree his manhood with yours the country from dissolution helped to save.  
Equal in patriotism even with the bravest brave.  
Equal now in the law,  
He seeks to be raised with those whose lives  
And fortunes he helped to save.

In the poem’s final verses the speaker, his fantasy dispelled, crashes to earth, finding himself alone in his gloomy cabin, a storm pattering on the roof, the darkness pierced by flashes of lightning. In conjuring this character’s “brooding mingled vision of hope, ambition and despair,” Joseph T. Wilson described himself.30
Notes


4. New York Freeman, January 24, 1885; Richmond Daily Dispatch, August 20, 1875; Cromwell, In Memoriam, p. 8.


16 Lynchburg Virginian, August 11, 12, 1881; People’s Advocate, Nov. 19, 1881. On Mahone and Confederate commemoration of the battle of the Crater, see Kevin M. Levin, Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder (University Press of Kentucky, 2012), pp. 42-51.
18 Wilson, Black Phalanx, pp. 176, 208, 211-14; Weaver, ed., Thank God My Regiment is an African One, pp. 15, 40-42, 168.
19 Weaver, ed., Thank God My Regiment is an African One, pp. xvii; Black Phalanx, p. 528.
20 Wilson, Black Phalanx, pp. 179-80, 200, 397, 503.
21 For characterizations of Wilson as defensive see, Shaffer, After the Glory, p. 183; Casey, New Men, p. 160; Levin, Remembering the Battle of the Crater, p. 84.
25 Lynchburg Virginian, August 11, 1881; Richmond Whig, August 12, 118.
28 Richmond Planet, June 28, 1890; Cleveland Gazette, Feb. 18, 1888; New York Age, March 10, 1888; A.M.E. Church Review, (January 1890).
29 Richmond Dispatch, April 15, 1890; New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, and Macon Telegraph, Jan. 26, 1890.