



Civil War Bluejackets

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MAJOR NEW PROJECT TO REVEAL NEW INSIGHTS INTO 19TH CENTURY BRITISH AND OTHER IMMIGRANT SAILORS IN THE U.S. NAVY

A Northumbria University-led project is set to help tell the stories of British and other immigrant sailors in the American Civil War in ways never before possible.

The “Civil War Bluejackets” Project—so named because of the distinctive

uniform worn by U.S. Civil War sailors—is a collaboration between historians at Northumbria University, Newcastle, and computer scientists at the University of Sheffield and the University of Koblenz-Landau. Funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project launches on 6 September 2022 with a call for citizen volunteers to help transcribe tens of thousands of Civil War “Muster Rolls”, documents that were carried on board U.S. ships and which capture the personal details of the c.118,000 men who fought on water for the Union between 1861 and 1865.

The project team are making use of the online [Zooniverse platform](#) to share tens of thousands of these Muster Rolls, and are asking the public to help in revealing their contents. Principal Investigator Professor David Gleeson of Northumbria University said:

“We are calling on “people-power” to help us tell the story of common sailors in the Civil War in a way never before possible. We estimate that over 30 percent of these men were British or Irish immigrants—another 15 percent were African American. With your help, we aim to create a new freely available database of these men, and use the information generated by citizen scientists to explore the social and military experiences of these ordinary people in a way never before possible.”

As well as using public transcriptions to decipher the Muster Rolls, the team also hope to develop new software to allow computers to “read” 19th century hand-writing. Co-Investigator Dr Morgan Harvey of the University of Sheffield commented:

“By comparing the public’s transcriptions with the original 19th century hand-writing, we hope to “train” computers to assist in the reading and deciphering of historic documents, thereby creating a major new tool in the armoury of anyone interested in uncovering the past.”

Included among the stories the team hope to reveal are the thousands of English, Scottish and Welsh men who helped the U.S. battle the Confederacy on water. The project will also look to discover more about some of those who returned to home shores—men like George H. Bell from North-East England, whose remains rest today in Elswick Cemetery, Newcastle Upon Tyne. In November 1864, George was awarded the Medal of Honor—the U.S. equivalent of the Victoria Cross—for his extraordinary courage off the coast of Texas during the American Civil War.

Those interested in finding out more about the project can visit the www.civilwarbluejackets.com website, or go direct to the Zooniverse Civil War Bluejackets page at <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/bluejackets/civil-war-bluejackets>

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk