

Maj. Octavius V. Catto
(1839-1871)
Inducted 2013

The great Civil War Era African-American leader and civil rights martyr from Philadelphia, Octavius V. Catto was a professor at the Institute for Colored Youth, forerunner of Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. Catto recruited his own African-American students as Soldiers during the Civil War and led the successful campaign to desegregate the streetcars in Philadelphia in the 1860s. After the Civil War, Catto joined the Pennsylvania National Guard. Catto was promoted to Brigade Inspector General with the rank of Major, making him one of the highest ranking African-Americans in the military services at that time. During the election campaign of 1871 there was an attempt by political opponents to prevent African-American citizens from voting. During this campaign, Catto was activated for service to help quell the riots and prevent the murder of Black voters. In the course of his duties Catto was shot and killed near his home. The public funeral held in his honor by the City of Philadelphia was the largest since that of Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

During the Civil War, the call went out for African-American troops, then called "Colored Troops." Prominent citizens in Philadelphia, both Black and White, joined together to recruit and train them. Among them were Octavius Catto and Frederick Douglass. These men worked together with the newly formed Union League of Philadelphia to help fill the ranks of the Colored Troops training at Camp William Penn at La Mott, Cheltenham Township, and to secure and educate experienced white officers to lead in command positions in the Colored Troop Regiments.

Eventually, 11 regiments were trained and mustered for service. Credit belongs to Catto and his friends. These units added greatly needed strength to the Union armies in the field; a number of these troops distinguished themselves in combat and several Soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery. In 2012, The Pennsylvania National Guard revived the Catto medal which had been lost to history. This is the only medal of its kind in the entire National Guard. The Medal recognizes exemplary members of the Pennsylvania National Guard for public service and community support.