

ALEXANDRIA Gazette Packet



A new tradition honors the memory of black Americans

June 12, 1997

By Pamela Cressey

A new tradition was born on Memorial Day weekend this year. City Councilmen Bill Euille and Bill Cleveland with a small citizen group placed a wreath at the site of the Civil War era Freedmen's Cemetery to commemorate the possibly thousands of African Americans buried there.

For the last 40 years the site has been known not as an historic burial ground, but as a gas station. Starting in the mid-1950s with the construction of a "Flying A" station, the site has been a landmark - the last place to buy gas before continuing out of Alexandria south on the Mount Vernon Memorial Parkway. Little did people know that the asphalt covered the graves of escaped slaves spanning in age from newborn infants to those over 100, victims of malnutrition, small pox and influenza.

City Council adopted a resolve which proclaimed May 25-31 an annual Week of Remembrance of the Freedmen's Cemetery "in memory of the African American slaves who sought haven in our City and their descendants and those who seek freedom from injustice throughout the world."

Who is buried under the asphalt and perhaps the nearby streets? We don not know for sure, since the historical documents discovered to date do not provide definite evidence to link all the "freed peoples" listed in a burial record maintained by Reverend Gladwin with this place. But there is compelling data from different sources to indicate that some of the buried by the U.S. military authority commanding Alexandria were soldiers in various regiments of the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT). Rev. Gladwin's ledger provides their names, rank, age and regiment and a few details about their burial.

Very little has been published about the African American regiments in the Civil War. You can find some good overviews, but individual regiments have not received sufficient attention. The troops who died in Alexandria's hospitals were from different regiments, including the 1st-5th, 8th, 10th, 16th-19th, 23rd 25th-27th, 28th-31st, 39th, 43rd, 54th, 56th, 102nd, 115th-117th, 125th, 134th, and 135th. A few black soldiers were members of state regiments, such as the 3rd Connecticut, 5th Massachusetts, and 24th New York Cavalry. The USCT regiments with the greatest number of deaths in Alexandria were the 19th, 27th-29th and 135th.

To find out more about the activities of these groups I turned to the World Wide Web and started a search. Fortunately, I found The U.S. Civil War Center at Louisiana State University (<http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/>) and e-mailed Albert Nofi, the military historian. I then proceeded to move through the various links and located regimental historic and battle summaries posted by individual soldiers and then link with summaries of their regiments and battles. Great stuff and lots of fun, although you do have to go to the National Archives personally to retrieve most of the information about the soldier.

Let's see if we can figure out why these men died in Alexandria from the regiment summaries. Rev. Gladwin recorded the deaths of several soldier with the 27th USCT beginning on May 19, 1864. On that date, Private Charles Maton died at L'Ouverture Hospital (the black hospital on the block bounded by Prince Duke, Payne and West streets). A few days later, Private Moses Artiste (age 40) and Private Adam Smith (age 30) also died. The 27th did not sustain losses again in Alexandria until August 16, when Private Oscar Brady (age 18) died. Then again in November and December, two more 27th soldiers died, Private Sam Wilson (30). Presumably all these men were buried at the "new cemetery" which was at the outskirts of town on South Washington Street.

It may be that the first three men were, either hurt in battle or became ill while, the 27th was involved in its first campaign which took them from Rapidan to the James River from May to June, 1864. The regiment had been organized at Camp Delaware, Ohio, January 16 of the same year and was first ordered to Annapolis. It was attached to the Army of the Potomac until September of 1864. The three later deaths, however, may have been related to the 27th's activities in the Siege of Petersburg and Richmond from June 16 to December 7. Perhaps Priv.. Brandy was somehow involved with the Mine Explosion battle July 30 which resulted in his death in August. The battle at Boydon Plank Road in Dinwiddie County was commanded by Major General Winfield Scott Hancock (US) against Major General Henry Heth on October 27-28th, and the 2,900 casualties may also have included Privates Smith and Wilson. Although Union troops originally took the Road, the Confederates' counterattack regained the Plank Road for the rest of the winter.

On December 20th at the Baptist Church Branch of L'Ouverture Hospital, both Priv.. Wilson and another soldier, Priv.. Caleb Mason (28), died. Their names appear one after the other on Gladwin's ledger page. We have no knowledge whether they passed away from disease of injuries, or both. Mason's regiment, the 39th, also served in the Petersburg-Richmond Siege ending December 7.

So much remains to be discovered about these men. Who were they, and how did they come here? Why did they die and did others in the hospital survive? And perhaps most perplexing to those interested in the Freedmen Cemetery, why do their grave markers appear as the first ones in the African American section of Alexandria National Cemetery, and yet the markers of those who died before December 20th appear far down the lines of stones? Were any of these men buried at Freedmen's Cemetery as the documents indicate? And still another puzzle: why

does Priv.. Mason's marker state a different regiment than Rev. Gladwin noted and also appear much newer than most others?

Look for local author Ed Miller's new book on the 29th U.S. Colored Infantry this fall from the University of South Carolina; it will provide illuminating history and some clues for us to follow. Interested in military history? Call me at 703-838-4399 to help in our search.

Pamela Cressey was the Alexandria City Archaeologist.

This caption appeared with an image printed in the Gazette:

The marker of Private Caleb Mason is the first in the African American part of Alexandria National Cemetery at the end of Wilkes Street. Why is his grave the first, when 114 black soldiers died before him?