

PennLive.com May 27, 2022

Black Civil War soldiers to get long-delayed honors on Cumberland County memorial

By Charles Thompson

It's 151 years late.

But come Monday, five Black soldiers from Cumberland County who died in the Civil War while serving with the Union Army's U.S. Colored Troops will have their names added to the rolls of a longstanding monument on Carlisle's Public Square that pays perpetual tribute to the county's Civil War casualties.

The addition to the Carlisle monument is an outgrowth of an ongoing effort to elevate the Black history of Carlisle and Cumberland County, including a push to have a new monument added to the county's Veteran's Courtyard that would honor the service of all known county residents who served with the U.S. Colored Troops.

But, first things first.

Research associated with those efforts has led to the identification of these five Black soldiers - all members of the celebrated 54th Massachusetts - who perished while serving in the war. They are:

- Pvt. Henry King, 27, a West Pennsboro Township resident killed in action at James Island, S.C. on July 16, 1863.
- Pvt. Augustus Lewis, 20, a Shippensburg area resident killed in action at Fort Wagner, S.C., on April 15, 1863.
- Pvt. Edward Parks, 43, a Carlisle resident who died of dysentery at Morris Island, S.C. on Oct. 3, 1863. Parks was survived by wife and two daughters, and his wife received a widow's pension. She later relocated to Philadelphia.
- Sgt. Alfred Whiting, 23, a Carlisle resident who was wounded and captured at James Island, S.C., and died on June 26, 1865 in a Union

Army hospital in Alexandria, Va., where he is buried. Whiting was married and his wife was awarded a widow's pension.

- Pvt. Stewart Woods, 27, a Penn Township resident who was wounded and captured at James Island, S.C. on April 15, 1863, and died of disease at Wilmington, N.C. on March 15, 1865.

The five names have been added to the bronze plaques on the base of the monument, and they will be celebrated in ceremonies following the community's annual Memorial Day parade.

Historians have a couple of theories as to how this oversight happened, but it all seems to be rooted in the racial segregation that was a hallmark of the time, even in the Union states.

Cara Curtis, archives and library director at the Cumberland County Historical Society, noted that the origin of the original Civil War combat units was regionally based, with units organizing on a regional level and being identified by their state of origin.

The all-Black U.S. Colored Troops, especially at the outset, tended to see willing Black volunteers from all over answer specific recruitment calls, and travel to where those units were formed.

"Massachusetts is the first to say: 'We're enlisting people of color,' and people from all over come up and there are quite a few from South Central Pennsylvania that go to Massachusetts to enlist.... As soon as they can fight, they go a distance north to enlist," Curtis said.

Records show that of the 1,007 soldiers enrolled in the 54th - one of the first to be mustered - more than 300 were Pennsylvanians.

When the public monument in Carlisle was planned in the late 1860s and erected in 1871, it was likely that the organizers started, and perhaps finished, with the lists of the Cumberland County-based units. It's unclear whether the failure to dig deeper to include any Colored Troops at that time was an error of omission or commission.

The question lingers because of the open knowledge at the time that there were Black veterans in Carlisle - enough to warrant the establishment of a Black Grand Army of the Republic veterans post - and the Decoration Day parades after the war seemed to have included the prominent Black cemeteries in the town.

"It (the existence of Black veterans) wasn't a secret," Curtis said.

But at the same time, Black residents weren't well-positioned to fight for inclusion.

At the time of the Civil War, local historian Barbara Barksdale said, many Black residents were former slaves who were unlikely to have had any formal education. A lot of the U.S.

Colored Troops, because they couldn't read or write, didn't even know about their rights to apply for veteran's benefits like a pension or a free headstone, let alone the town fathers' planning for a monument.

Barksdale, as chair of the Pennsylvania Hallowed Ground Project, has made it her mission to identify, preserve, restore and educate people about the graves and final resting places of Black veterans.

What happened with the Carlisle monument, she said, is not uncommon in the annals of Black history. In fact, she's not personally aware of any similar public monuments that did include U.S. Colored Troops from the start. That, Barksdale said, is a de facto reminder of the racist attitudes of the day - even when it came to the matter of preserving the Union.

In Carlisle, that oversight is being corrected now, thanks to years of mostly volunteer research into the U.S. Colored Troops from Cumberland County by a group that launched out of a 2011 internship at Cumberland County Historical Society by Stephanie Jirard, currently Chief Diversity Officer at Shippensburg University.

And that's important, too.

"Recognizing the veterans of the United States Colored Troops is very, very important because that's one of the reasons why we have a bit of freedom here," Barksdale said.

"It should create a feeling of pride for anyone, whether they're a person of color or not, to say that this person actually was at the frontier of change here in the United States. Because without all of that, would we still be having a Confederate States of America? What would the changes have been if the Civil War had gone the other way?"

"It's just so important that we honor and list their names, and let them be known to the world. Because otherwise they're just nothing but a bubble of dust floating to the air and you would never know who they were."

The matter of completing the record is satisfying to Ruth Hodge, a retired librarian and archivist from Carlisle who was part of Jirard's core group. "I'm glad that they are trying to rectify the history," Hodge said earlier this week. "That's one of the reasons why you study history, is to make sure that the record is correct."

Efforts to track down descendants of the five Cumberland County soldiers have not had any hits to date. But they may, in time. And for everyone else, Curtis and Barksdale hope the 2022 additions to the list will be a fresh point of historical pride to the community as a whole.

"I mean these men are so incredibly brave and their stories definitely need told," Curtis said of the U.S. Colored Troops. "If you got caught in the South by Confederate soldiers they

could have just killed you or re-enslaved you, or all sorts of horrible things. Like you're going into super-enemy territory where all sorts of horrific things could happen to you."

It is 151 years overdue. But on this day, these Black men whom history overlooked the first time around, will get a morning all to themselves.