

A Biography of Henry Worrell:  
His Experiences as a Veteran and a Man of Color

Christina Ulrey

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Henry Worrell was born around 1835 in Lynches Station, Kent County, Maryland, to father Richard Worrell and mother Ellen, both of whom were also native Marylanders.<sup>1</sup> He was born into slavery, and served alongside his mother in the home of Catherine and Dr. Peregrine Wroth.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Wroth (1786-1876) was a graduate of Washington College, and a well-respected doctor for half a century. In 1846, he became a Lecturer and Professor of Chemistry at his alma mater, a position he kept until 1854. He was a member of the College's Board of Visitors and Governors, and was elected president of that organization after the death of Judge Ezekiel Chambers. He married Catherine on October 3, 1839. They were together until her death on December 28, 1854. It was the third of his four marriages.<sup>3</sup> Henry's father was a free man as of December 27, 1854, the date Catherine's will was written. Henry is listed as "Harry" in Catherine's will, in the clause granting freedom to Catherine's slaves. He was granted his freedom outright, but his siblings who had not yet reached the age of majority were given to their father Richard until their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.<sup>4</sup> The slave certificate Henry received after Catherine's death was dated September 16, 1858.<sup>5</sup>

In 1859, Henry married Sophia Brown in Chestertown, MD, in a ceremony officiated by Rev. George C. Stokes.<sup>6</sup> Sophia was about 22 years old.<sup>7</sup> Years later, in a

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<sup>1</sup> SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Henry Worrell, MSA 4126. Pp. 37, 69; U. S. Census Bureau (1900). *Twelfth Census of the United States: Kent County, Maryland, 4<sup>th</sup> District*. Retrieved from Ancestry.com.

<sup>2</sup> Will of Catherine Wroth. KENT COUNTY REGISTER OF WILLS (Wills) 1851-1872, Book JF 1, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> George Adolphus Hanson, *Old Kent: The Eastern Shore of Maryland*, 1967, Reprint, (Kelly, Piet & Company, 1876), 201-202.

<sup>4</sup> Will of Catherine Wroth. p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Pension File Collection. pp. 64, 74-75.

<sup>7</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 66.

document related to his pension, Henry would remark that there was no written record of this marriage because they were “married in slave days.”<sup>8</sup> This reflects one of the greatest challenges to former slaves when dealing with various legal matters. Very few written records were kept about their lives as slaves, making it difficult to prove things like age, identity, and relationships. In a time when these things could sometimes be difficult for anyone of any race to prove beyond a doubt, their lives were made even harder.

Witnesses to their marriage and living arrangements were called in during pension investigations to testify on the couple’s behalf, assuring the Bureau of Pensions that neither had been married before, the couple lived together, and they had never divorced. Edward and Amarita (?) Miller and Henry and Annie Barrett were among these witnesses.<sup>9</sup> It was fairly unusual for a couple to stay together so long in the context in which they lived. Marriage was a much more fluid institution than it is today, and many members of their community married several times. In 1862, Sophia gave birth to a daughter, the couple’s only child. They named the baby girl Jane. She would go on to marry a man named William Shorter sometime prior to August 1898.<sup>10</sup>

On September 26, 1863, Henry enlisted in Company D of the 7<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Infantry in Kent County.<sup>11</sup> From there, he was sent to Camp Belgium.<sup>12</sup> Prior to enlistment, he had been working as a farmer.<sup>13</sup> Henry would serve in the United States

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<sup>8</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Pension File Collection. pp. 73-73, 77-78.

<sup>10</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> United States. NARA. *U.S. Colored Military Troops Service Records, 1861-1865*. Retrieved from Ancestry.com. p. 1323.

<sup>12</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 56.

Army for two years, ten months, and 25 days.<sup>14</sup> His commanding officers included Captain Thomas McCarty, Lieutenants Mack and Burmark, and 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant William Hudson.<sup>15</sup>

Henry's enlistment came at a time when the nation was in heated debate over whether or not to allow black people to serve in the military. On September 16, 1863, the *Kent County News* had run a reprint of an article from the *Baltimore American* saying that the War Department had decided to allow the enlistment of African American men to count toward the state quota.<sup>16</sup> The Union had enacted a draft, and allowing black men to count toward the voluntary enlistment numbers meant that fewer white men would be forced away from their homes and onto the battlefield. However, not everyone was in favor of this policy. A month later, slave owners had grown weary of the nearby presence of "a large negro force" that had recently arrived "for the purposes of enlisting negro slaves." The white citizens sought information from their congressman and the President about why the troops were stationed there. The President responded that enlistment would not begin "under ninety days," but the landowners and congressman were not appeased.<sup>17</sup> The enlistment efforts did, in fact, stop within the week. By October 31<sup>st</sup>, the focus shifted from the active enlistment of local slaves to those who had already been removed to Baltimore. Only about one third of those men were actually allowed to serve, but the others had not been returned to the Eastern Shore. Slave owners speculated that they would eventually receive compensation from the federal government for the loss of

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<sup>14</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Pension File Collection. pp. 67-68.

<sup>16</sup> *Kent County News*. (19 September 1863). Re-reported from the *Baltimore American*. From file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>17</sup> "Negro Enlistments in Maryland." *Kent County News*. (24 October 1863). From file on reserve in Miller Library.

their slaves to the war effort, but not for those men who had been turned away in Baltimore.<sup>18</sup> News came on November 7<sup>th</sup> that when the enlistment of colored troops was reopened in Maryland, Chestertown would be among the towns with a recruitment station. The story also ran with a description of the compensation that would be paid to slave owners for the manumission of enlisted troops. Elsewhere in the same issue, the newspaper reported on “An official report from Colonel Birney stat[ing] that the total number of negroes mustered into the service, in this State between the sixth of July and first of December, 1863, was three thousand one hundred and ten.”<sup>19</sup> In Kent County, according to a story from December 26, 1863, by the beginning of December, a total of 1625 men had joined the Union Army. 209 of these were African American volunteers.<sup>20</sup>

In August of 1864, while preparing defensive fortifications at Petersburg, Henry suffered an injury to his back and hip. Henry would later recall,

[W]hile carrying logs to construct breastworks, my comrade who was engaged with me in some work let go his end of a log and threw the whole weight of it upon me from which I have never fully recovered.... At times I am a great sufferer, not being able frequently to do any work whatsoever.<sup>21</sup>

He received two days of treatment in the camp, but never received any more professional medical help. He managed future pain with self-treatment, to the best of his ability.<sup>22</sup> His captain, Thomas Carter, sent him to work on the wagon train while he finished

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<sup>18</sup> *Kent County News*, (31 October 1863). From file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>19</sup> *Kent County News*, (7 November 1863). From file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>20</sup> “The Draft,” *Kent County News*, (26 December 1863). From file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>21</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 59.

recovering.<sup>23</sup> The muster rolls reflect that he was absent in September and October 1864, and then he returned to his company.<sup>24</sup> His injury would not bother him again until later in life, when it would begin to cause him great pain on his right side.<sup>25</sup>

On January 16, 1865, Henry Worrell was appointed Corporal for the 7<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Infantry in place of Anderson.<sup>26</sup> It was difficult and rare for an African American soldier to be promoted to any officer's rank. The reigning powers forbade granting commissions to men of color, for fear that white soldiers would be unwilling to follow a black man, causing an upheaval in the military hierarchy. Black soldiers fought relentlessly for the ability to lead troops. In 1865, after a build-up of pressure from changing attitudes and the proven mettle and experience of black regiments, a few men were finally promoted to the rank of lieutenant.<sup>27</sup>

Sources disagree about the date and location of the end of his service. One record says that he was mustered out in Indianola, Texas, on October 13, 1866.<sup>28</sup> Other sources say he was honorably discharged at Federal Hill in Baltimore, MD on this day or in December of that year.<sup>29</sup> Still more say that he was discharged on November 16, 1866, possibly in Texas.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> *U.S. Colored Military Troops Service Records, 1861-1865*. p. 1331.; Pension File Collection. p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> *U.S. Colored Military Troops Service Records, 1861-1865*. p.1333.

<sup>27</sup> Noah Andre Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 373.

<sup>28</sup> *U.S. Colored Military Troops Service Records, 1861-1865*. p. 1343.

<sup>29</sup> Pension File Collection. pp. 44, 47-48.

<sup>30</sup> Pension File Collection. pp. 4, 37.

A little more than a decade later, in 1879, Henry turned from farmer to sailor because of rheumatism pain as a result of his wartime injury.<sup>31</sup> In 1880, Henry is listed on the U.S. Census as a servant for Joseph A. Wickes. He lived with the family at their home at 304 High Street. His occupation is listed as sailor. This Census also lists a person whose name appears, in the Census taker's handwriting and spelling, to be Simon Worrell. However, that person is listed as a married woman. As there are no other servants, this is likely Sophia, just listed incorrectly.<sup>32</sup> The effects of Henry's injury continued to worsen with age, and he was soon forced to quit sailing as well.<sup>33</sup>

In 1882, Henry is listed as one of the representatives for the Charles Sumner Post #25 of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.). William T. Demby (or Denby) also served in this position at this time. This was the founding year for Chestertown's G.A.R. post.<sup>34</sup> It would take another eight years for members of the G.A.R. to buy the land on which the social hall would stand. This purchase was made on March 10, 1900, by Perry H. Landen, Thomas Carmichael, Wesley Broadway, William H. Barrett, and George James, all trustees of the post. It cost them \$220 to buy the property from Peter G. Miller and wife Mary Olivia Miller of Philadelphia.<sup>35</sup> The social hall still stands, despite several years of vacancy in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During the veterans' lifetimes, the Charles Sumner Post organized annual memorial services for deceased Civil War veterans from both races and sides of the

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<sup>31</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (1880). *Inhabitants in Chestertown, in the County of Kent, State of Maryland*. p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 55.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Gannon, notes on *Roster of the G.A.R., Department of Maryland, 1882-1929*, Library of Congress, compiled 2000. Kent County Arts Council.

<sup>35</sup> Deed transferring Princess Street lot to the Trustees of the Charles Sumner Post. *Kent County Land Records*. March 1900. Lib. JTD 3, fol. 216-217, p. 12.

war.<sup>36</sup> The post, along with the Women's Relief Corps, No. 1, a ladies' auxiliary, would parade to the local cemeteries, perform a memorial service for each of the fallen veterans, leave flowers at the graves, and return to the post for sermons and more reflection and celebration. The first mention of this parade is in the June 2, 1883 issue of the *Kent County News*. That year, the post had 28 members. Henry was an officer of the guard.<sup>37</sup> Together, the Charles Sumner Post and the Women's Relief Corps served an important role in maintaining a memory of the sacrifices of their fellow soldiers and sailors in both the black and white communities. The white press recognized this, and spoke favorably and respectfully of these actions. On June 1, 1889, the *Kent County News* reported that, "The sacred duty of honoring the memory of those who died in defense of our country, or who having survived the misfortunes of war have since fallen by the wayside, seems to devolve entirely upon the colored people of our town."<sup>38</sup> Nearly every year for two and a half decades, at least one of three local newspapers took the time and space to mention the G.A.R.'s efforts to memorialize the sacrifices of area veterans. They also commended individual people involved for their leadership and service.

The G.A.R. and W.R.C. were about more than just their own members, or even the veterans of the area. They brought the entire black community together. Sometimes, it was part of the veterans' services. For instance, on May 31, 1890 the *Kent County News* said, following Decoration Day, "Yesterday was appropriately observed in Chestertown

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<sup>36</sup> *Kent County News*, (5 June 1886, 1 June 1889, and 31 May 1890). From file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>37</sup> *Kent County News*, (2 June 1883). From file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>38</sup> "Memorial Day," *Kent County News*, (1 June 1889). From file on reserve in Miller Library.



by Sumner Post, G. A. R., and the colored people generally.”<sup>39</sup> This suggests that the ceremonies were a part of the greater African American social sphere, not just a Post event. Other times, the organizations worked on charitable efforts to protect their neighbors. In addition to providing flowers and snacks for the Memorial Day and Decoration Day events, the Women’s Relief Corps provided care for community members who had fallen ill. When a member of the group died, they also made sure they got a proper burial.<sup>40</sup>

On August 25, 1890, Henry completed his first application for pension to make up for his inability to work as a result of rheumatism from his injury at Petersburg.<sup>41</sup> He would complete several applications for an increase in monthly pay over the years, to varying degrees of success. It took over two years to receive any feedback for at least one of these applications. On September 16, 1913, Henry’s attorney, William A. Burk (also a shoe salesman and repairman), wrote a letter asking whether or not this application, dated June 12, 1911, had been received. They had heard nothing back about it in all that time.<sup>42</sup> A month later, Henry had a letter written on his behalf (by Samuel L. Might) asking again about the status of his application. In this letter, he said that his neighbor, Hamilton Frisbee, sent his application in the same envelope and had already received approval of his pension increase.<sup>43</sup> The records of his fight for compensation reflect a taste of the racism he and other people of color faced after the Civil War. They constantly had to

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<sup>39</sup> “Decoration Day,” *Kent County News*, (31 May 1890). From file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>40</sup> *Kent County News*, (5 June 1886); *Chestertown Enterprise*, (29 May 1907). Both from file on reserve in Miller Library.

<sup>41</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 34

reaffirm previously accepted facts about their age, identity, injuries, and service. It is as if the automatic assumption was that people were lying. These hurdles were challenging and demeaning, and in no way indicative of the respect they should have received as war veterans.

Despite being unable to physically handle much manual labor, Henry did maintain employment while receiving his pension. In 1900, the U.S. Census lists him as a hostler.

<sup>44</sup> By March 5, 1902, according to a Surgeon's Certificate recording a physical mandated by the Pension Commission, Henry was forced to give up this job, as he was "Frequently laid up with [rheumatism] a week at a time."<sup>45</sup> In 1910, the Census records the couple as servants in a private home. He and Sophia also hosted a boarder in their home at 94 West Queen Street—a 41 year old steam boat chambermaid named Elizabeth Johnson.<sup>46</sup> He was engaged in "House work" at the time of his death.<sup>47</sup>

Henry died of Bright Disease (a type of kidney disease) on December 16, 1918, in Chestertown, MD.<sup>48</sup> According to his doctor, Chas. W. Whaland, who signed the death certificate, Henry had been suffering from this condition for 15 years. He was buried in Chestertown on December 18, 1918.<sup>49</sup> His and Sophia's graves can be found in Jane's Cemetery on Quaker Neck Road in Chestertown.

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<sup>44</sup> U. S. Census Bureau (1900). *Twelfth Census of the United States: Kent County, Maryland, 4<sup>th</sup> District*. Retrieved from Ancestry.com.

<sup>45</sup> Pension File Collection. p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> U. S. Census Bureau (1910). *Thirteenth Census of the United States: Chestertown, Kent County, Maryland, 4<sup>th</sup> District*. Retrieved from Ancestry.com.

<sup>47</sup> Death Certificate, Pension File Collection. p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Bright Disease," accessed May 14, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/79572/Bright-disease>.

<sup>49</sup> Death Certificate, Pension File Collection. p. 69.

Henry Worrell's name and story have been nearly forgotten. He is not immortalized in textbooks. There are no buildings or streets named for his influence. However, like everyone, his experiences represent a unique cross-section of history. He lived during one of the most dynamic periods in this nation's history. Born into slavery, he was given the chance to lead men in an effort to secure the freedom of their families. The law of the land prevented him from getting an education in his youth, but in the twilight of his life, he managed to learn how to read.<sup>50</sup> He lived to see a second war, one referred to as the "War to End All Wars," and watched a new generation of soldiers ship off to battle. He witnessed the spread of automobile transportation, electrification, and radio. Henry's story is one of adversity and struggle, but also one of perseverance, love, and community. When he came home from the war, he and his brothers faced discrimination unbecoming of their sacrifices, but they banded together, and kept their memories alive.

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<sup>50</sup> U. S. Census Bureau (1910). *Thirteenth Census of the United States: Chestertown, Kent County, Maryland, 4<sup>th</sup> District*. Retrieved from Ancestry.com.

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