

Mike Canavan
Professor Goodheart
Chestertown's America
Biography of Hamilton Frisby
May 10, 2013

**Corporal Hamilton Frisby
Company A, 9TH USCT
1887 Representative Sumner Post No. 25, G.A.R
Chestertown, MD**

The Man was a gift. A wedding present to be precise. In 1852, twenty-two year old Catherine married John L. Davis, a farmer of Chesterville, Maryland, and her mother no doubt hoping to furnish her daughter with a respectable dowry, included among her bequests antebellum America's most valuable commodity; a thirteen year old boy named Hamilton Frisby¹. At that tender age no boy should be forced to say good bye to his family and yet Hamilton was being ripped away from his mother and father and his younger brothers, to live apart from them, for how long not even could know for sure to become another man's property, a man he hardly knew and for no other reason than because the man was white and this boy was black.

By 1852 Hamilton Frisby was but one of nearly 26,000 slaves living on the Eastern Shore of Maryland². Though only the tiniest fraction of their, rapidly approaching total, four million brothers and sisters in bondage throughout the United States, they represented the unwilling backbone of the national economy, men, women, and indeed children from whose sweat, blood and tears poured the wealth of America. Truly, without them Maryland's wheat would be left to rot in the fields, entire households would simply cease to function, while production in many of its largest industries would grind to a halt. In having allowed this "peculiar institution to become

¹ "Evidence of Title" National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 8th through 13th, including the 11th (new); Microfilm Serial: M1821; Microfilm Roll: 40, NARA1431.

² Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985, 70.

so thoroughly ingrained into their lives and livelihoods, Marylanders in this manner were very much like their neighbors in the Union's other slaveholding states and their attitudes as well as treatment of the human chattel within their borders. Thus the notion as Frederick Douglass would later criticize "that slavery in the state of Maryland exists in its mildest form, and that it is totally divested from those harsh and terrible peculiarities, which mark it in the southern and south western states"³ was wholly inaccurate. However, it accurate to recognize that being in the upper south there were some obvious regional differences that would have made Hamilton Frisby's experience as a slave in Maryland vastly dissimilar from say a fellow slave in Mississippi. As it was wheat and other such grains not cotton which was the chief crop in Maryland's temperate climate, generally speaking Hamilton would never have spent very much time cultivating his master's crops nor would he have had much company out in the fields while he did so, regardless of whichever Maryland farmer his mistress had gifted him to. These types of climatic differences in Maryland such as its crops and therefore its seasonal growing pattern would be some of the very conditions that would in part help Maryland's community of free African Americans to grow. By 1850, on the Eastern Shore this population numbered nearly as much as their slave counterparts⁴ and farmers such as the Davis's took advantage of both groups. Simply put this mixed labor force allowed them to keep their enterprises as flexible and as profitable as possible, taking on additional wage labor only as needed instead of continually taking on more slaves which were costly to maintain. The Davis's as slave holders were unique in that Hamilton was not the only person they owned on their six thousand dollars' worth of property⁵. By 1860 James L. Davis held two more slaves in addition to Hamilton who though

³ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 23

⁴ Fields, 70.

⁵ Year: 1860; Census Place: District 3, Kent, Maryland; Roll: M653_477; Page: 975; Image: 421; Family History Library Film: 803477.

not named can still be identified despite what little information the census takers were interested in; B, M, 21⁶. At the same time the Davis's also employed two African American laborers whose names, Samuel Redding and Jonas Clark history does record on the list of Kent County, Maryland's free inhabitants⁷. Thus for young Hamilton, who would have to endure twelve long years of bondage before tasting it himself, his first experience with freedom was watching another man enjoy what he was denied.

But Firsby's days of servitude had been numbered from the moment the roar of cannon first echoed across Charleston Harbor. Since then for nearly three years, brother had slain brother in near countless numbers to the point where even after desperate conscription measures both armies, North and South witnessed their manpower ebbing to their lowest points since the conflict began. However, in opening days of 1864, the Union armies found themselves in even more dire straits than their southern foes. Unlike the Confederate forces like the Army of Northern Virginia which found it could safely rely on the reenlistments of its veteran troops, Union forces would soon see the three year enlistments of their most battle harden troops expire and there was simply no telling how many if any of these men would stay on after their discharge⁸. President Lincoln desperately needed a new source of man power and fortunately there remained for the north one great source fighting men who had not yet been adequately utilized. As early as 1862 Black regiments had been recruited for service in the Union armies however members of the War Department and really throughout the Lincoln Administration had done their best to stifle these attempts and had expressly forbid the enlistment of Black soldiers⁹.

⁶ Kent, MD 1860 Federal Census – Slave Schedule

⁷ Year: 1860; Census Place: District 3, Kent, Maryland; Roll: M653_477; Page: 975; Image: 421; Family History Library Film: 803477.

⁸ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York Oxford University Press 1988, 719.

⁹ John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), 20.

Given the such an idea was sure to hold and fearful of how it might affect Border-state temperament as well as that of Pro-Union democrats, were the war to somehow become a moral crusade against slavery, President Lincoln was determined to keep the war about preserving the union at a time when the idea of union seemed to be the only thing holding it together. Thus the conflict would remain the white man's fight until the white man started to become in short supply and soon the war would not only be a struggle between Union and Disunion but the final duel between Slavery and Freedom it was always meant to be and while President Lincoln still could not overnight make the war to preserve the union simultaneously the war to end slavery without stepping on too many political toes he could make African American empowerment a "military necessity". "I further declare and make known that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service"¹⁰.

Hamilton Firsby would enter into that service for a term of three long years on January 17th 1864 as a Private in Company A of the newly mustered 9th United States Colored Infantry¹¹. Whatever, his reasons, whether he was looking to aid in the war effort as the "unquestionably loyal"¹² Union man the government obligated he swear as or he wanted to take advantage of a good deal in light of what seemed the beginning of the end for slavery in America, Hamilton's master James Davis agreed to part with his servant of twelve years and accept President Lincoln's program of compensated emancipation and took a three hundred dollar bounty in

¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln, The Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, A Transcription, Featured Documents, National Archives and Records Administration. www.Archives.gov

¹¹ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 8th through 13th, including the 11th (new); Microfilm Serial: M1821; Microfilm Roll: 40, NARA1405.

¹²Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops NARA1432

exchange for his slave's service in the army.¹³ A slave no longer Private Frisby's first weeks as a free man would be incredibly grueling ones. Stationed at Camp Stanton, in Benedict, Maryland, the men of the 9th would spend these winter days occupied in seemingly ceaseless drill, learning the skills that would save many of their lives in the years to come¹⁴. However, to once again quote Mr. Douglass, by far the most valuable lessons taken in by the men of the 9th in these, their first days as soldiers were of the dignity and respect that came with wearing "an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket,".¹⁵ For many these were completely new experiences, which once felt they would never again willingly relinquish, to any man white or black. Finally, on March 3rd 1864, Pvt. Frisby his training complete, marched out of Benedict to board the steamship that would take him out of Maryland for what was likely the first time in all his twenty-five years, to Port Royal South Carolina¹⁶.

The 9th would conduct operations in the vicinity of Port Royal for nearly five months, kept busy with raids into enemy territory like the Ashpoo expedition and it was one raid on John's Island from July 7th -9th, that the Hamilton Frisby and his comrades would meet the enemy for the first time. Though it had only been a minor skirmish, the 9th had finally received its baptism of fire and proved their steadiness in battle. They would need this in the days ahead for a month later the 9th redeployed to Virginia¹⁷.

Even after having vowed "to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer", Lieutenant General, Ulysses S. Grant seemed no closer to breaking the stalemate in Virginia as the autumn leaves began to fall. Despite nearly four months of siege and fierce frontal assault from

¹³ Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 28.

¹⁴ "History of the Ninth Regiment Infantry, U.S Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers" Volume 366, Page 183. Accessed Via Archives of Maryland Online.

¹⁵ John David Smith Ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 391.

¹⁶ "History of the Ninth Regiment Infantry, U.S Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers" Volume 366, Page 183. Accessed Via Archives of Maryland Online.

¹⁷ Ibid

Union troops, the thin gray line against all odds continued to hold firm. By late September the labyrinth of earthworks and redoubts protecting Petersburg and Richmond must have appeared virtually impenetrable, until fortune it seems intervened for the Union cause. Phil Sheridan's cavalry had moved into the Shenandoah Valley threatening to overtake Confederate General Jubal Early's corps and having no reserves to spare Lee had no choice but to pull an entire division out of the rebel defenses to support Early. Confederate manpower and materiel having already been extremely stretched Grant saw an opportunity to finally shatter the Confederate line once and for all. While Grant still viewed Petersburg and with it the bulk of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia as the principle prize of this, his latest offensive, the Commanding General had allowed himself to be persuaded to accept an amendment to his tactics by one of his subordinates, Major General Benjamin Butler. It was Butler who implored Grant to see that any assault made on the Confederate line ought to be a two pronged effort and that while Meade and Army of the Potomac once again moved against Petersburg, he and his 35,000 man Army of the James should strike the defenses surrounding Richmond¹⁸. With the Gray Fox finally cornered between a rock and a hard place, Butler was certain his men, after more than three bloody years, would at last be able to bring the Confederate capitol to its knees.

Yet, while Butler had every confidence in his army there were however those, Generals Grant and Meade included, who seriously questioned its abilities. For the force that General "Beast" Butler had the honor to command carried with it the unique distinction of comprising the largest number of United States Colored Troops then assembled in the Union armies¹⁹ and in the wake of the Crater debacle at Petersburg three months earlier, there lingered a great deal of

¹⁸ John David Smith Ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

¹⁹"New Book: The Battle of New Market Height: An Interview with Author Jimmy Price", *Civil War Trust: America's Civil War Battle fields*.

skepticism as to the mettle and competence of the USCT's under fire. However, it was not to persist much longer. Granted, by the fall of 1864 few of the James' USCT regiments could boast very impressive service records²⁰. Even before the Crater, Union commanders had been reluctant to send their Black units into the thick of it, relegating them instead to the tortuously monotonous tasks of manual labor and garrison duty. The truth was that moderately seasoned troops like Private Frisby and the 9th USCT, having skirmished with rebels troops in South Carolina and survived the Bermuda Hundreds campaign since their arrival in Virginia, were the exception not the rule among the Union's African American soldiers. However, what they may have lacked in combat experience, they more than made up for in unshakeable morale which was nothing short of astonishing in spite of the tragedies that had littered the recent history of the USCT'S. Many of Butler's USCT regiments had been present at Petersburg and while held in reserve had been forced to stand idly by and witness firsthand their comrades advance toward their doom. Although of course what was to make a greater impression, were not the horrors they had seen with their own eyes but what the couriers and dispatch riders could only bring word of. Only five months the infamous massacre at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, where Confederates under Nathan Bedford Forrest had murdered in cold blood the entire surrendered garrison of African American troops after it surrendered, the outrage was almost still too much to bare. Yet, instead of demoralizing Butler's men, these disasters only seemed to foster a burning desire to avenge the sacrifices made by their brothers in arms. Striking camp on the evening on September 28th 1864, in preparation for the long trek to Richmond's outer defense, they knew their chance had come.

At 5:30 AM the next morning, shots rang out just below the crest of New Market Heights, Virginia as Colonel Samuel Duncan's all Black Third Brigade neared the Confederate

²⁰ Ibid

breastworks²¹ and sure enough the eighty minutes that followed would prove to be among the finest hours of the United States Colored Troops in the American Civil War. Riding to the head of his advancing columns General Butler himself addressed the troops and gave the order to take the Heights “at the point of the bayonet”²². Continuing their push up the treacherous heights, Duncan’s was quickly joined by the other USCT’s brigades of the Brigadier General Charles J. Paine’s Third Division, noted historian and African American Civil War Veteran George Washington Williams provides a chronicle of what followed. “With a yell that told the enemy his position untenable the Negro division sprang forward and charged down a hill, through a tortuous stream, and up a hill again to the abatis. Preceded by pioneers, they never flinched under the terrific fire while a way was being cut for them. The enemy, emboldened by the apparent hesitancy of the dark warriors, sprang upon his works and exulting called out, “Come on, darkies, we want your muskets!” The troops rushed forward, crying, “*Remember Fort Pillow!*””²³. From their trenches above the rebel defenders put up spirited fight, until at last a breach was made and by none other than two units of essentially raw recruits. The 36th and 38th USCT, who after having sustained 30 minutes of absolutely withering confederate musketry, charged held long into the enemy and not long after at the cost of more than 1800 members of Paine’s division, this sector of New Market Heights had been dearly paid for²⁴. Before this day was out no fewer than 14 Congressional Medal of Honor recipients would be made from men of the United States Colored Troops, while an additional 200 would receive a medal for valor²⁵. For the moment however the battle was far from over.

²¹ Smith, *Black Soldier in Blue*, 190.

²² George Washington Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 -1865*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1888, 252.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Smith, 190.

²⁵ Smith, 192

Just to the north of where Paine's division had breached the confederate line, there still stood in the rebel defenses one salient that refused to yield, perhaps the most formidable redoubt of the entire array, a position known only as Fort Gilmer. Upon observing the fort, it seemed to Brigadier Generals Foster and Birney of the Union Army's X corps that the only chance the Federals had of taking the position was to again exploit there one great advantage; superior numbers. While Foster's white division would assail Gilmer from the north, the first Brigade of Birney's division would advance from the east. The first however, would be at a decided disadvantage during its attack as it would be going in to battle well below full brigade strength. One of its regiments the 29th Connecticut had not yet arrived on the field, while yet another, the 45th USCT was deemed by Briney too green to be sent into the maelstrom that would await them Fort Gilmer and so the General looked to his three remaining regiments the 7th, 8th, and 9th USCT and no doubt prayed that their tenacity and courage would be sufficient to carry out alone the deadly work that had been entrusted to them²⁶.

Following in the example of their compatriots from Paine's division earlier that day there would be no shortage of brave deeds and heroic sacrifices before Gilmer's walls as Williams describes the scene there. "It was indeed, an inspiring sight to see these troops charge Fort Gilmer. Shotted cannon blazed and smoked and hurled grape and canister at the assaulting columns. But on they went, and many of the Negro soldiers actually crawled up to the mouth of the cannon. A sergeant of one of these regiments planted his flag on the fort, but was blown to atoms the next moment by a cannon discharged when he was but two feet from its mouth"²⁷. Obviously, it was not for lack of courage or martial skill why as the sun began to set on that September day the Stars and Bars remained flying over fort Gilmer, rather it was merely poor

²⁶ Smith, 193.

²⁷ Williams, 252-253

leadership. For the rather uninspired plan General Briney devised really was not worthy of the name strategy, instead he simply readied his regiments in line of battle and one after the other let the buglers sound the charge. First the seventh, then the eighth, both of whom made gallant efforts before being repulsed and finally the 9th was to have their turn. Before being forced to withdraw just as the units before them had done, the Ninth Regiment United States Colored Troops would make three separate attempts to scale the parapet, each more fierce than the last and by the time it was over the Union dead closest to Gilmer's moat would all bare a number "9" on their uniforms. Of the contingent the 9th sent to Gilmer on September 29th, only half would ever again return to their regiment. This not only included those among the killed or wounded, but those whose gallantry on the parapets had left them captured by the enemy. For these unfortunates awaited a fate worse than death, the return to captivity and re-enslavement²⁸.

The Battle of New Market Heights would continue into the next day September 30th, when the soldiers of the 9th USCT awoke in their new positions near the recently captured Fort Harrison (just to the south of Fort Gilmer), to find two entire confederate divisions amassing in their front. The rebel counter-assault that followed however would be handily repelled by the new Union occupants of New Market Heights a position thanks to the Army of the James would remain in Union hands and pose a continual threat to the safety of Richmond until the end of the war²⁹.

While promotions and commendations would abound in the wake of this triumphant battle, it is important to remember that not every hero of that field left with a medal for his deeds. For Private Frisby his only parting gift from Fort Gilmer would be the rebel minié ball that had passed through his leg during the charge. While his regiment was consolidating and reinforcing their hard won fortifications on New Market Heights, Hamilton would spend the next three

²⁸ Smith, 193

²⁹ Ibid

months in a military hospital in Point of Rock, Virginia, recuperating from a wound that would never fully heal³⁰. Reporting back for duty in January 1865, Hamilton Frisby, though deemed fit enough for service, would never truly be the same man he was³¹.

Although Private Frisby returned to his regiment just in time for the spring campaign, it would prove thankfully, to be a short one. On April 3rd 1865 just days before the end of the war, the 9th United States Colored Troops once again marched on Richmond but this time were able to parade through the streets of the defeated capitol.³² Two months later the men of the 9th were on a steamer to Brazos Santiago Texas weather or not the Texas heat didn't agree with Frisby or perhaps more likely his leg wound was acting up when the 9th Left the Brazos river to take up its post as part of the garrison in Brownsville Frisby needed to stay behind until he was fit for travel which was not to be until October of that year.³³ During their time stationed in Texas the 9th USCT would almost certainly have been active in helping the federal government enforce early reconstruction policies though it seems reasonable to assert that given the positioning of Brownsville right on the U.S- Mexico border in the southernmost part of the state, the primary duty of the 9th USCT while in Texas had been patrolling and defending the border. There the regiment remained for more than a year until October 2nd 1866 when as many of the ninth's number were no doubt nearing the end of their three year enlistments, it was ordered to strike camp and make for New Orleans.³⁴ Not long after arriving in New Orleans, Hamilton found that

³⁰ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 8th through 13th, including the 11th (new); Microfilm Serial: M1821; Microfilm Roll: 40, NARA1405.

³¹ "History of the Ninth Regiment Infantry, U.S Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers" Volume 366, Page 183. Accessed Via Archives of Maryland Online. NARA 891

³² Ibid

³³ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 8th through 13th, including the 11th (new); Microfilm Serial: M1821; Microfilm Roll: 25,1422

³⁴ "History of the Ninth Regiment Infantry, U.S Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers" Volume 366, Page 184. Accessed Via Archives of Maryland Online.

he was Private Frisby no more but had been “selected from the most intelligent privates, who have been longest in the service and who are noted for their military appearance and attention to duty”³⁵ and promoted to Corporal³⁶. When the 9th USCT finally disbanded on November 21, 1866, the transformation Hamilton had undergone in less than three short years had been nothing short of remarkable, he had left Kent County, Maryland a slave, but he would return a model soldier, a commander of squads and guard details, a man with two blue chevrons on his sleeve.

For the past three years three year’s Hamilton Frisby’s only address had been Company A of the 9th USCT and now having mustered out of the army in Baltimore with the rest of his regiment, Corporal Frisby, his duty done returned home to Kent County the only home he had ever known before the war. While simultaneously adjusting to the transition of soldier to civilian and slave to citizen could not have been easy, Hamilton appears to have taken them both in real stride the new changes in his life and these first years back from the service contained some very impressive successes. In June of 1868, Hamilton for the first time in his life became a home owner. Having received the second half of his one hundred dollar bounty at the end of his enlistment and of course three years of army wages Hamilton had enough to afford a three hundred dollar lot with a house on Scotts Point just outside of Chestertown³⁷. The investment was almost certainly part of his wedding plans. The following month after purchasing the house he married Sarah Maria Boyer, a local woman just two years his junior³⁸. Two years later, the couple was still living at the Scotts Point house and having become a farmer Hamilton must have made some important improvements upon his land, for it had more than doubled in value by

³⁵ August V. Kautz, *Customs of Service For Non-Commissioned Officers and Soldiers*. Pennsylvania, 1864, 46.

³⁶ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 8th through 13th, including the 11th (new); Microfilm Serial: M1821; Microfilm Roll: 25.

³⁷ Kent County Land Records 66, Liber JKH 7, 1868, Folio 529 -530.

³⁸ Kent County Marriage License Index APR 1865 to 1886, 44.

1870. Thus with Hamilton having established the means to provide for them both Sarah for her part was able to stay home and keep their house³⁹.

However, Hamilton's marriage despite these promising beginnings would not last. For what-ever reason Sarah was not content with the match and so at some point before 1880 decided she would prefer it if she "lived with another man as his wife"⁴⁰. Now it is worth mentioning that, what Sarah Frisby did was not a particularly difficult task for an African American woman of this period. In fact informal marriage remained the prevailing type of matrimonial bond in the African-American community⁴¹. Although, many wished to abolish this practice in favor of formal marriage and thereby eliminate the influence of this vestige from the days of slavery and the irreverent view of African American marriage, it did however allow women to the ability to leave objectionable unions. For Sarah, under a Common Law marriage, which is what Mr. and Mrs. Frisby almost certainly shared as there is no record which indicates the Frisbys were ever officially married and issued a marriage certificate only a date from which they became recognized by the community as being man and wife, it was as easy as living somewhere else to end her marriage.

Life became hard for Hamilton after Sarah left him. He was getting older now, approaching his forties and soon he would begin to feel the old war wound beginning to act up. The pain would grow very debilitating over time, limiting him and what he could do, very bad tidings for someone who makes their livelihood through physical labor and even worse for someone who was now living alone. Perhaps, for these reason Hamilton Frisby decided it best to

³⁹ Year: 1870; Census Place: Chestertown, Kent, Maryland; Roll: M593_590; Page: 160A; Image: 323; Family History Library Film: 552089.

⁴⁰ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126, Letter of William A. Burk to G.M Saltzgaber.

⁴¹ Donald Robert Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans*. Lawrence, University Press of Kansas

leave Scotts Point and reunite with his family. In 1880 he was living with his parents Horace and Ellen Frisby as well as his brothers Charles and Samuel in Charlestown, Md ⁴². While Hamilton was still managing as best he could to find work as a farm laborer, his youngest brother Samuel age eleven was seeking an education.⁴³ No easy feat in 1880 given the options available to him as a result of an 1868 law which completely reorganized the manner in which Maryland's schools were supported. Under this law the state had essentially surrendered its authority to distribute funds and yielded full discretion to the counties to allocate the state wide tax. The decision would then be that school taxes were to be distributed based on the population of each local, to the effect that the taxpayers would be directly supporting the education in their immediate area. However, given the very segregated nature of nearly all post-bellum communities, the result tended to be white taxes paid for white schools and naturally black taxes what little was generated from what meager property they owned supported predominately black schools⁴⁴.

Having been home from the war for nearly fifteen years, it must have by now been clear to Hamilton Frisby as it was already clear to countless African American veterans who had suffered discrimination and prejudice since leaving the army that neither they nor their race were being treated as they should have been, as in the manner they were confident they had earned. In some cases for more than two years they had risked life and limb, day in and day out and gladly; under the belief, the hope and the prayer that when the war was over won they would be able to return and be recognized as full citizens of a grateful nation. Instead, although they had certainly accomplished much of what they had set out to do, they knew full well slavery had been the last

⁴² Year: 1880; Census Place: Charlestown, Kent, Maryland; Roll: 512; Family History Film: 1254512; Page: 149B; Enumeration District: 053; Image: 0297.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Fields, 134- 135.

casualty of that war and what's more that they themselves had killed it. However, at same time they had come to realize that where the "peculiar institution" lay today, was in at best a shallow grave. Until they could bury it fully the men of who had been The United States Colored Troops knew that they, their families and friends were doomed to be second class citizens. Yet, in Chestertown during the early 1880's there was assembling a unit from a new army that would be dedicated to making the "until"; now. So by mid-decade Hamilton, an old soldier but young enough to still possess plenty of fight left in him would return to Chestertown to once again take up arms in the fight for equality but not just for his own sake although he would battle long and hard on that account but perhaps Hamilton had other motivations. Perhaps in donning the uniform of the Grand Army of the Republic he knew might be setting an example for young Samuel, a visual reminder to never let his potential would never be limited by the color of his skin.

Established first in 1882 Chestertown's Charles Sumner Post No. 25 Grand Army of the Republic boasted a roster of twenty five members⁴⁵, each of whom knew the full extent of how incredibly significant their organization was. Formed in the years following the close of the war the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R) was America's premier association of Union Civil War Veterans as well as the only fraternal organization of its size to abide by, at least theoretically, a race blind membership policy. In practice however Black and White veterans rarely coexisted under the roof of the same post. This is due in part to prejudice attitudes which prevailed in some posts as current members voted on the admission of new members and on more than one occasion a perfectly eligible African American applicant was turned merely away on account of

⁴⁵ Barbara Gannon, *Roster of G.A.R*, Department of Maryland 1882 – 1921, Library of Congress, Compile 2000, Kent County Arts Council.

his race⁴⁶. However, the separation of white and black members of the G.A.R into single race posts can also be explained by nothing more than simple geography as G.A.R posts were always the product of the community around them. For example in Chestertown there was never a parallel post for white veterans, who were either too few or too disinterested in starting a post before the county's former USCT'S decided it was time for the G.A.R to establish a presence in Kent County⁴⁷.

There are innumerable reasons why Chestertown's formerly blue clad black men would want to join the ranks of the G.A.R., aside of course from a sense of patriotism and soldierly nostalgia there was a whole host of benefits membership in the organization could that a veteran would not normally have access to. For example, G.A.R membership often helped a eliminate some of the hurdles in government pension applications. G.A.R posts also often organized support structures to assistant the widows and orphans of Civil War veterans and saw to it that their members received a proper burial⁴⁸. Yet, undoubtedly a major part of the attraction of so many African American soldiers to the G.A.R was the ethos of equality it espoused in word if not always in deed. Just these men had once fought to prove themselves equal to their white counterparts as soldiers, so too did they wish to prove themselves equal as worthy of the respect due all veterans. Of all its activities this would prove to be the central mission of the Chestertown's Sumner Post whose selection of namesake is very telling. As opposed to White G.A.R halls which were typically named for the great generals who had once lead them, those posts which were predominantly African American possessed a wider variety of names including not only many of their former officers, but also fallen comrades and political figures. Post

⁴⁶ Shaffer, *After the Glory* 149.

⁴⁷ Barbara A. Gannon, *African Americans in the Grand Army of the Republic: Chestertown to Oklahoma City*, Lecture at Washington College, March 1, 2002, C.V Starr Center

⁴⁸ Shaffer, 136

number twenty-five in Chestertown was named in honor the late radical Republican senator Charles Sumner whose attacks on slavery earned him a savage caning on the senate floor by southern representative Preston Brooks just five years before the Civil War and whose legislative record throughout reconstruction earned him the respect of African American citizens across the country. Evoking the name of Sumner the USCT veterans of Chestertown had by the same token issued a mission statement for their organization that in all their activities they would carry on the legacy of African American dignity and empowerment that the worthy Senator Sumner had fought for.

For Hamilton Frisby and other members of the Sumner Post this fight would begin with the claiming the rights and privileges due them as men who had answered the call in their country's hour of need. Hamilton would submit his first application for an invalid pension in 1885 a year after medical examiners in 1884 had discovered a "hard foreign body" lodged in his left leg just below the knee and although the "body" appeared to baffle the federal examiners, Hamilton was sure to have known exactly what it was. Having been introduced only in 1866 government pensions for military service were viewed strictly as "a reward for the worthy not a general entitlement" however Hamilton was sure that having taken a bullet for his country that he would be counted among the worthy. Meanwhile he also suffered from bouts of Rheumatism which medical examiners in 1887 would find to be direct result of the rebel lead still lodged in his leg. These problems were compounded by the apparent weakening of his heart which caused Frisby to occasionally experience spells of vertigo and dizziness.⁴⁹ Yet, in spite of these obvious disabilities received as a direct result of his military service Pension Bureau examiners were still not satisfied and would quibble with Frisby over the most mundane of

⁴⁹ "Examining Surgeon's Certificate: in the Case of Original Applicant No.512.140". SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126.

details in his application for example failing to list every military hospital at which he received treatment.

However, Frisby knew he possessed a secret weapon in his battle with the Pension Bureau and when it demanded that he provide testimony of an officer or 1st Sargent who could substantiate his claim that his affliction was a direct result of combat Frisby knew he could turn to his past and present brothers in arms for aid. To satisfy the Bureau, Sargent of Company C 9TH USCT and future trustee of the Charles Sumner Post, Thomas Carmichael came forward to support of Frisby's story. Carmichael gave sworn statement before a Justice of the Peace that he saw with his own eyes Hamilton Frisby struck in the leg during the charge on Fort Gilmer ⁵⁰ and although, the Pension Bureau generally preferred documentary evidence as opposed to eyewitness statements, not long after Hamilton's pension was at first dispensed rate of \$ 4 per month⁵¹. No doubt Frisby would forever be in Carmichael's debt and perhaps this encouraged his greater involvement at the Sumner Post.

In 1887 Hamilton Frisby was elected by his fellow members to be their representative to the state and national G.A.R encampment⁵². Perhaps as an N.C.O during his service, it had been easier for Hamilton to earn the respect of his comrades and thus become an officer of the G.A.R. As a delegate for his Post it and a kind of ambassador to the rest of the G.A.R community at these, Hamilton in this capacity would have had more direct contact with white Grand Army members, who would not make Frisby's appointed task an easy one. Hamilton would have been continually exposed to the prejudice felt by white veterans for the former black soldiers who had fought side by side with them. Not only did whites often refuse to accept African American

⁵⁰ "In the Claim for Original Invalid Pension No.512.140 of Hamilton Frisby late Corp. Co "A" "9" Reg. USCT. SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126.

⁵¹ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126

⁵² Barbara Gannon, Roster of G.A.R, Department of Maryland 1882 – 1921, Library of Congress, Compile 2000, Kent County Arts Council.

veterans in their post many went further to doubt the competency of African Americans to run their own posts⁵³. Meanwhile, the general direction the G.A.R seemed to be taking was reconciliation with confederate veterans, which only further alienated Black veterans like Hamilton from the national organization. Not all felt this way of course there were still white Union veterans who remembered the vital contribution of African American soldiers “if you lay wounded, if you were surrounded by the enemy as thick as a swarm of bees, at any moment you were liable to see a black crawling up to you and when he came you knew he was your friend”⁵⁴. For many that contribution had African Americans the same rights and privileges as any Union soldier as one white veteran would stand up and say at a Detroit encampment in 1891 “A man who is good enough to stand between the flag and those who would destroy it . . .good enough to be a comrade in the Grand Army of the Republic”⁵⁵. However, it would become clear to the members of many African American posts, Charles Sumner No. 25 included, that to truly address the issues they cared about they would need to organize those actions themselves. As proven by the passage of many a Decoration Day in Chestertown, a time for remembrance largely ignored by the white community, where members of the Sumner Post and its Women’s Relief Corps alone organized the annual laying of wreaths and flowers by the graves of their fallen comrades.

Perhaps as a result of the frustration inherent in his position as a Sumner Post’s representative and the heartbreaking instances of intolerance he may have seen as well as the pain and suffering caused by his ever-deteriorating medical situation, Hamilton Frisby had become a “quarrelsome and disagreeable”⁵⁶ man and one endowed with very little patience. One

⁵³ Shaffer, 151.

⁵⁴ Shaffer, 147.

⁵⁵ Shaffer, 149.

⁵⁶ “A Shooting Case” Kent News Microfilm Collection Washington College Maryland

morning in 1888 while out with his dog, Frisby, at the time an of Mrs. E.R Wickes, found himself in an argument over the animal with a fellow Wickes employee by the name of Johnson which ended in Hamilton shooting and by all accounts fatally wounding Johnson however Johnson's ultimate fate is not certain and given the absence Frisby be in any trial record for the crime it may be that Johnson may have recovered or his wound not a serious as was initially reported. After this incident Hamilton truth be told became no less quarrelsome as his war with the pension Bureau and continued to act disagreeable as least as far as Bureau special examiners were concerned but if one were to take a offense with his methods they could not argue with his results by 1905 Hamilton had fought his invalid pension up to a rate of ten dollars a month.⁵⁷ Though, even with these gains in his pension with little to supplement it, the government funds were not much to live off of. being able only to perform "one third" the work possible from an able bodied man, Hamilton's pension seemed the only source of income on which he had to survive which meant the last years of Hamilton Frisby's life were likely very frugal ones. His fortunes it seemed had taken a bad a turn it seems as in forty years he had gone from proudly owning to merely renting the roof over his head.

The last days of Hamilton Frisby would be spent at 428 Calvert Street in Chestertown⁵⁸ until May 23, 1916 when he succumbed to what appeared to be arterial sclerosis and congestion, passing away at the age of 73⁵⁹. To his brother Samuel and his niece Fanny Blake he each left fifty dollars⁶⁰ and to his former wife Sarah who at the time was going by the name Sarah Rigby, Hamilton found it in his heart and wallet to leave her ten dollars⁶¹. Since their separation more

⁵⁷ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126.

⁵⁸ Year: 1910; Census Place: Chestertown, Kent, Maryland; Roll: T624_566; Page: 14B; Enumeration District: 0055; FHL microfilm: 1374579.

⁵⁹ State of Maryland Certificate of Death 6694 for Hamilton Frisby

⁶⁰ Kent County Register of Wills, Liber EC 1, Folio 225.

⁶¹ Ibid

than forty years earlier not only had the couple been unable to fully repair their relationship, they had failed to even establish “friendly terms”⁶² with one another. For this and the particular animosity which existed between husband and wife, both parties seemed equally to blame. On an 1898 pension voucher that inquired as to Hamilton’s marital status he had written “am a widower” and though Sarah was alive and well it was clear enough that even twenty years later she was still dead him⁶³. However, Sarah had proven she could be equally cruel if not more so “she would not go and do anything for her husband [Hamilton] while he was sick”⁶⁴. Yet, despite this posthumous attempt at reconciliation by Hamilton Sarah was not to be satisfied with Sarah Frisby filed for a widow’s pension a month after her first husband’s death. Meanwhile, William A. Burk, a Chestertown shoe merchant and associate of Frisby’s was determined to keep her from inheriting what he felt she did not deserve. In the weeks following Frisby’s death Burk wrote several letters to the Pensions Bureau in Washington insisting that Hamilton’s nephew was a far worthier recipient of his pension and might be more appreciative of the blood his uncle had shed to earn it. As of fall 1916 the heir to Hamilton Frisby’s legacy had not yet been determined.⁶⁵

As per his wishes Hamilton Frisby was laid to rest in the cemetery of Chestertown’s Methodist Church and it is likely that there Hamilton’s passing was saluted with G.A.R honors by the surviving members of the Sumner Post. As to what kind of headstone Hamilton was provided in uncertain a search through an index of tombstones in Kent County shows no listing

⁶² Letter of William A. Burk to G.M Saltzgaber dates May 24, 1916. SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126.

⁶³ Certificate No, 312777, Name Hamilton Frisby, Department of Interior, Bureau of Pensions, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126.

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126.

for a Hamilton Frisby. It may have been nothing more than a wooden cross with his name and dates which could not have hoped to stand the test of time. However, Hamilton's best memorial is perhaps of course his own memory and though the solemn truth may be that Corporal Hamilton Frisby was but one ordinary soldier who "The world will little note, nor long remember" but it can never forget what he as well as each and every African American Civil War soldier did.

Works Cited

Courtesy of the Maryland State Archives

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (U.S. Colored Troops Pension File Collection) Hamilton Frisby, MSA 4126.

Accessed Via Ancestry.com

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Infantry Organizations, 8th through 13th, including the 11th (new); Microfilm Serial: M1821; Microfilm Roll: 40, NARA1431.

Census Records

Year: 1860; Census Place: District 3, Kent, Maryland; Roll: M653_477; Page: 975; Image: 421; Family History Library Film: 803477.

Year: 1870; Census Place: Chestertown, Kent, Maryland; Roll: M593_590; Page: 160A; Image: 323; Family History Library Film: 552089.

Year: 1880; Census Place: Charlestown, Kent, Maryland; Roll: 512; Family History Film: 1254512; Page: 149B; Enumeration District: 053; Image: 0297.

Year: 1910; Census Place: Chestertown, Kent, Maryland; Roll: T624_566; Page: 14B; Enumeration District: 0055; FHL microfilm: 1374579.

Books

Fields, Barbara Jeanne. Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

Kautz, August V. Customs of Service For Non- Commissioned Officers and Soldiers. Pennsylvania, 1864, 46.

McPherson, James M. Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era. New York Oxford University Press 1988, 719.

Shaffer, Donald Robert After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans. Lawrence, University Press of Kansas

Smith, John David Ed., Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Williams, George Washington. A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1888, 252.

Articles

“A Shooting Case” Kent News Microfilm Collection Washington College Maryland

“History of the Ninth Regiment Infantry, U.S Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers” Volume 366, Page 183. Accessed Via Archives of Maryland Online.

Blassingame, John W. “The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland.” Maryland Historical Magazine, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), 20.

New Book: The Battle of New Market Height: An Interview with Author Jimmy Price”, Civil War Trust: America’s Civil War Battle fields. <<http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/new-market-heights/new-market-heights/-new-book-the-battle-of-new.html>>

Lincoln, Abraham. The Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, A Transcription, Featured Documents, National Archives and Records Administration. Archives.gov
<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/transcript.html>

Other

Barbara Gannon, Roster of G.A.R, Department of Maryland 1882 – 1921, Library of Congress, Compile 2000, Kent County Arts Council.

Barbara A. Gannon, African Americans in the Grand Army of the Republic: Chestertown to Oklahoma City, Lecture at Washington College, March 1, 2002, C.V Starr Center

State of Maryland Certificate of Death 6694 for Hamilton Frisby

Kent County Register of Wills, Liber EC 1, Folio 225.

Kent County Marriage License Index APR 1865 to 1886, 44.

Kent County Land Records 66, Liber JKH 7, 1868, Folio 529 -530.

Kent, MD 1860 Federal Census – Slave Schedule. U.S Census.org <<http://us-census.org/pub/usgenweb/census/md/kent/1860/sl-0327a.txt>>