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5/10/13

Chestertown's America

The Ever Not-so famous Thomas Carmichael

While taking a walk through Chestertown it is easy to notice the history that has been strongly persevered. However, even today there is not a great presence of racial diversity. The history that is mostly preserved are the buildings which wealthy white families lived in or even buildings which important white men, like George Washington. However, every house in Chestertown is rumored to have Washington's footsteps in it at some point or another. The history of the darker side of American History is far more hidden. There are few, if any, physical markings of slavery, which was present in the town. There is one building that until recently was just another abandoned building on a side street in Chestertown. This building was once

the Sumner post, which used to be the meeting and community building for African American Civil War Veterans. This building is being refurnished and ready to celebrate the past no matter how gloomy. This post was once the meeting house for one Veteran named Thomas Carmichael.

Thomas Carmichael was born in Talbot Maryland in November 1831¹, but must have moved to Chestertown shortly after where he spent the remainder of his life. There are no records that suggest that the Carmichael family was enslaved during any part of Thomas' life, but we know that they would have struggled a great deal. One timely circumstance supporting this thought was that the year before Carmichael was born Andrew Jackson was elected president. Jackson was born in the Carolina's² and grew up around slavery, which made the institution of slavery a commonality of his life. In turn, during his presidency Jackson's main focus was on the Second Bank of America and not a lot of focus was on slavery.

Another influence on the times for a free African American man was that of Nat Turner's Rebellion which was on August 21, 1831 in

¹ U.S. Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1861-1865 record for Thomas Carmichael

² Andrew Jackson. <http://whitehouse.gov>

Southampton, Virginia. The rebellion was led by Turner with a following of 40 to 50 slaves, whose goal was to rise against their masters. Their attempt to storm to armory in Jerusalem, Virginia failed and they instead were stopped and fought on a plantation near Jerusalem. In the end about 55 white men, women, and children were killed. Nat Turner was caught and put on trial, where he pled not guilty, but was eventually convicted and hung November 11, 1961³. After the rebellion the restriction on free blacks tightened, which would have almost certainly affected the Carmichael family.

Records between the dates of Carmichael's birth until the 1860 Census have not been found; however, it is likely that he grew up in Chestertown at this time. Chestertown in 1860 was right in the heart of the antebellum period, and the residents were mostly Southern Sympathizers, which meant that they were not Confederates and did not want to secede from the Union; however, they were still in favor of slavery. The 1860 United States Census stated that Thomas Carmichael is now 29 years old, living in Chestertown of Kent County, Maryland, with his wife, Alphonsa a Mulatto woman who is 20

³Nat Turner Biography. <http://Biography.com>.

years old, and son George B. Carmichael who is a year old⁴. The term mulatto refers to a person who is of half white and half black race. The family is living under Eliza Robinson, who it is assumed is Eliza's mother. This assumption came because in the 1850 Census Alphonsa is 12, with the maiden name of Sheppard, and is living with Eliza and Vincent Roberson and Margaret Sheppard, who is 16⁵. In the 1860 Census Eliza is listed as a school teacher. Although no other trace of this has been found, a mulatto school teacher would have been especially rare at this time in history.

In national matters, James Buchanan was the President of the United States from 1857–1861 and he was faced with the rapidly splitting nation. He attempted to use the Constitutional law to keep slavery, but the North did not accept this and continued to fight.⁶ This left the country in a fatal state for the next president.

Thankfully the next president was Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln did not step into his presidency ready to abolish slavery; he actually wasn't planning

⁴ 1860 United States Federal Census

⁵ 1850 United States Federal Census. *Ancestry.com*

⁶ James Buchanan, *http://whitehouse.gov*.

to at all. However, as the United States became distinctly divided more and more by the issue, slavery was forced to the forefront of Lincoln's issues and he knew that it was inevitable that he had to fight for the abolishment of the act. On January 1, 1863 Lincoln declared the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed slaves in the "Rebel States". Of the many actions that this then caused one that pertained heavily to Thomas Carmichael was that military service was now allowed and encouraged for African American men.

"Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."

Frederick Douglass⁷

This quote by Frederick Douglass exemplifies the view of the African American population during this period of time. Soon after the 9th Regiment

⁷ Teaching With Documents: The Fight for Equal Rights: Black Soldiers in the Civil War. <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/>

of Colored Soldiers was formed in Chestertown in 1863 and a year later Thomas Carmichael enlisted as a private⁸. At his time of enlistment, Carmichael is listed as being a Sailor⁹ which would not seem peculiar seeing that Chestertown has such a close proximity to the Chester River.

The Chester River had decreased in its significance to the town for commercial use since the Colonial Era. At one time the Chester River was a bustling shore for transportation and shipping, but during the time that Carmichael was a sailor on the Chester River he would have seen a lot of ship work, building, and possibly some type of fisherman. The town of Chestertown relied heavily on the Chester River for their seafood, which was a large part of their diet, along with the nutrition from personal or local farms.

As stated by Frederick Douglass, the African American soldiers who enlisted in the U.S. military ready to fight for their freedom and the freedom of others, began to find out that they were not there to fight but more be used as a gesture towards the Confederate Army. This signaled that the

⁸ U.S. Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1861-1865 for Thomas Carmichael. *Asestry.com*.

⁹ *Ibid*

African Americans who used to be their slaves are now fighting against them and they were going to lose. This point is further showed in the film *Glory*, which documents the accounts of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment of Colored Soldiers. Throughout the film the soldiers are continually denied the same privileges as white soldiers; for example, a scene where the soldiers receive their stipend for their service and it was ten dollars for their labor where as white troops were receiving thirteen dollars for their service¹⁰. The equality even in the Union army was greatly skewed. However, that is not to say that the troops were not of great importance to the war because they were in fact of huge significance on and off the battlefield. The Colored troop in *Glory* does not account for the experiences of every Colored troop in Civil War, but did represent the trials and tribulation which they did encounter. Tracing the steps of the 9th regiment there is a correlation between the 54th and 9th regiment in the use of the troops in battles. The troops rarely fight as much as the white troops, and the cause of this has been questioned by many. Did the government just want to scare the Confederates with Colored

¹⁰John David Smith, "Let Us Be Grateful That We have Colored Troops That Will Fight," in John David Smith, ed., *Black Soldiers in Blue: African-American Troops in Civil War Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pg.14

troops? Or was the Government afraid of giving African Americans guns and the knowledge of how to fight?

Thomas Carmichael's influence in the Civil War is not as grand as others, but the impact of even the 9th Regiment of Colored Troops was significant in its own way. The regiment traveled quite a bit, but that is common for the troops. The 9th regiment formed in 1864 began its journey March 3rd to Port Royal, South Carolina. From early March until late June the regiment remained at Port Royal until late June when the venture to John's Island, South Carolina began. In a local newspaper from South Carolina there was an article written about the battle that occurred that the 9th regiment was apart of. The small newspaper is called *The Post and Courier*, and it reported about a battle also referred to as Burden's Causeway that occurred between the Union troops, who among them were the 9th regiment, "Union forces were partly U.S. Colored Troops"¹¹, and Confederate troops. While this is not a popularly known battle, this small town in South Carolina is proud to remember the battle that was fought on the ground on which they now live:

¹¹*Obscure Civil War Battle Fought on John's Island*. Bo Peterson. July 10, 2010. [The Post and Courier](#).

“Over shadowed by the larger legacies of Fort Sumter and the battle for Charleston. But it’s not forgotten”.

The regiment then traveled to Virginia in August and participated in the battle of Fussel’s Mills, Virginia. At this battle they were the last regiment to yield up to its position and fall back under fire from the enemy. After this point the 9th regiment becomes quite stale and is removed from battle until April of 1865 when the regiment was present during a glorious entry into Richmond. The regiment then traveled to Texas, New Orleans, and then Louisiana all before returning to Maryland in 1866. Thomas Carmichael’s discharge from the military on November 26, 1866 and this marks the end of his physical involvement in the Civil War; however, as time will tell the Civil War has left its mark on him and he will leave its own mark on Chestertown.¹²

Coming home from war is as difficult now as it was a hundred years ago and it will be in a hundred more. The experiences during war are unlike anything we are accustomed to; therefore the reactions which are brought

¹² History of the Ninth Regiment Infantry, U.S. Colored Troops, Maryland Volunteers.

about from war can be anywhere from minor to severe and mental to physical. When the war ended in 1865, all African Americans were now free. This feeling must have been an immensely over-whelming one at that, but also quite terrifying. There were men who had been enslaved their entire lives and now they had no land and no home to return to. Others, like Carmichael, were free before the war and could go back home. The Census of 1870 has Thomas Carmichael home in Chestertown with his wife, Alphonsa, his mother-in-law Eliza Robinson, and the five children: George, 10, Edward, 8, David, 6, Benjamin, 4, and Mary, 1.¹³

1875 was a great year for blacks after the Civil War because the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was passed. This Act gave equal access to public places to anyone and individuals could not be discriminated based on race. This would later be over-turned and in 1892 with the case of Plessey vs. Fergusson the term Separate but Equal was the law of the land. This would have greatly affected a majority of the African American Civil War soldiers who fought in the civil war. These soldiers, who gave their lives to keep their nation one,

¹³1870 U.S. Federal Census.

In later Census Edward Carmichael is Elizabeth. This is to be the fault of the Census taker and the gender is really female and the name is Elizabeth.

were now being given separate facilities that were anything but equal to white facilities.

In 1880 Thomas Carmichael is now living with William T. Demby, his wife P. Elizabeth Demby, and son William T. Demby in Chestertown¹⁴. William T. Demby was in the 29th Regiment of Colored Soldiers Company H and enlisted in 1864, the same year as Thomas Carmichael¹⁵. At this time Carmichael's marital status is married, yet he is living apart from his own family. This is very interesting, but also shows the camaraderie of the African American soldiers in Chestertown. It is interesting that Carmichael is living apart from his family, but not entirely uncommon. From pension records that will be further explained, Carmichael had a great deal of injuries in result from the war and it would be impossible to aid his family without working. Being in a house with another civil war veteran would be more comforting to Carmichael and he would be able to be taken care of more easily without his wife taking care of him and all the kids.

¹⁴1880 U.S. Federal Census.*Ansestry.com*

¹⁵ US Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1861-186. *Ancestry.com*
Listed as William Demby

The injuries which Carmichael acquired during the war were noted by a series of pensions recorded from 1898 until 1912. In a pension record the soldier would document his injury and if he were able to still work or not and then it would be reviewed and either accepted or rejected based on the discretion of the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions. Thomas Carmichael reported an injury to his left ankle that prevented him at first from most work and as the years went on he was completely unable to work due to these injuries. Along with the pension itself there are testimonies from doctors and neighbors accounting on behalf of the applicant.

Thomas had many men write on his behalf as well as doctors who documented his injuries. His injuries are as follows: varicose veins of the left leg and senility, which is a softness in the muscle due to age: both of these injuries the surgeon testifies are preventing him from “earning a support by manual labor”.¹⁶ Along with numerous doctor testimonies, there are many testimonies by neighbors and his community members who attest to Carmichael’s condition and his character. Peter Elizabeth Demby even writes

¹⁶Surgeon Certificate, December 12, 1900. “Courtesy of the Maryland State Archives”

on his behalf and testifies to an injury of the left ankle. There were also numerous accounts from men from the same regiment as Carmichael. The abundance of support from the community and the regiment attest to the character of Carmichael because men were willing to come forward and provide testimony to give him support which meant he was an upstanding soldier and man.

“You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him”.¹⁷ This quote is directly associated to Carmichael because during the war he was promoted to sergeant and in no doubt was a support to his fellow African American Soldiers. This is noted by the numerable soldiers in whom Carmichael testified on behalf of for their own pensions. He was not testifying to get anything out of it, but simply aid in the cause of a fellow veteran.

Sumner post was founded in 1908¹⁸ and used as a common ground for African American Soldiers to convene together. After the war there were many difficulties faced by African Americans and it was difficult to escape the

¹⁷ Malcolm S. Forbes. From *The Sayings of Chairman Mao*. 1978.

¹⁸ Kent County Circuit Court (Charter Record) 1869-1984. Articles of Incorporation of Charles Sumner Post No. 25 Grand Army of the Republic. MSA CM648. Maryland State Archives, Annapolis.

cruelties that the war brought, but that is what the Sumner Post did for a lot of these soldiers. Thomas Carmichael, along with four others, was named trustee to the property of the post. The other trustees were all soldiers and each wanted to have a place which would aid in the convention and connection of the soldiers in Kent County. The Sumner Post was named after an antislavery senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner¹⁹, who strongly stood on the side of the abolition of slavery.

Thomas Carmichael's death came in 1916 at the age of 85. Carmichael lived through 22 presidents, the bloodiest war our country has ever known, and the enslavement of his people to see freedom. The amount that the United States changed from the time Carmichael was born to his death was so great that I would argue it is the most from anytime in history. Though Carmichael was a small town guy who was free before the time of war and came home to a family and house, he fought for those who weren't free and was even apart of creating connections with those whom we fought with by helping with the establishing of the Sumner Post in Chestertown, MD.

¹⁹*Charles Sumner Post #25*. Kentcountartscouncil.org.

Walking around Chestertown for me now, I now have an entirely new perspective of its history. I no longer just see the reign of the white men in its history, but rather now I hear the voices of all of those who may not have been given the chance to speak freely in their own community. The Sumner Post has been abandoned for quite some time, but just like those who unearth its secrets, the uncovering of the Sumner Post will bring about new discoveries and appreciations for Chestertown's past. No matter what our history consist of, it is important to bring to life all aspects of it. A town is a living thing with a past and can only grow and improve with this knowledge. I don't think I will ever walk past the Chestertown monument to the USCT without thinking of Thomas Carmichael.