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Chestertown's America

Professor Goodheart

Alexander Chaney: Freeman Drafted

Alexander Chaney was born in Millington, Maryland located in Kent County on the Eastern Shore on March the First of 1839¹. He was born free to his parents Alexander and Charlotte. According to land records in Kent County Alexander's father was a landowner in Millington starting in 1837. His mother was not listed in the census the following year in 1840, and is quite possibly she passed away in the first year of Alexander's life. Records show that Alexander was living with a white family by the name of Norris. He is listed as a free black in an established free black family according to Maryland

¹ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (National Archives) US Colored Troops Pension File Collection, MSA SC 4126.

Colonization papers.² In the time before the Civil War there is not a wealth of Information on Alexander. We do know that he was a laborer around the county of Kent and that in 1862 he married a woman by the name of Elizabeth.³

In the fall of 1864 Alexander was working as a laborer in the Chestertown Area, and he was twenty-five years old.⁴ On September 24 Mr. Chaney was drafted into service with the Union Army. He would be assigned to the United States Colored Troops Sixth Regiment Company A.⁵ He would join up with his unit at Camp William Penn outside of Philadelphia on November 20th. The regiment mustered out a year to the day after he was drafted

² Maryland Colonization Papers (Census of Free Negroes), 1817 - 1880, MSA SC5977, Reel 21, pg. 257.

³ 1900 United States Federal Census

⁴ U.S. Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1861 - 1865, Record for Alexander Chaney.

⁵ ADJUTANT GENERAL (Civil War Muster Rolls) US Colored Troops 4th Regiment, MD. Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1867, MSA S 936-46 MdHR 50,055-46.

September 20, 1865.⁶ He received an Honorable Discharge in Bradford, Pennsylvania.⁷

When Chaney joined the 6th United States Colored Troops they were stationed in the trenches outside of Richmond, Virginia. On December 7th, 1864, just shortly after Chaney arrived, they would begin the first of two expeditions to Fort Fisher in North Carolina.⁸ The first expedition would last until the 27th, and the next would begin January 7th, 1865 and would end with the capture of Fort Fisher on the 15th. The next major outing would be to Fort Anderson between February 18th and 20th, as well as the capture of Wilmington, North Carolina on the 22nd.⁹ It is believed that during

⁶ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

⁷ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

⁸ "6th Regiment, United States Colored Infantry". *Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System*. National Park Service. Retrieved May 8, 2013

⁹ "6th Regiment, United States Colored Infantry". *Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System*. National Park Service. Retrieved May 8, 2013

his time in Wilmington that Chaney contracted yellow fever.¹⁰ The yellow fever would be the apparent root of medical problems later in his life. The next and final event they 6th United States Colored Infantry would take part in would be the Campaign of the Carolinas. This lasted from March 1st until April 26th.¹¹ The first leg of the Campaign was the advance on Kinston and Goldsboro and the occupation of Goldsboro, this lasted from March 6th until the 21st of March. The last battle would be the advance on and the occupation of Raleigh, North Carolina, which started on April 9th and ended on the 14th. Finally then 6th United States Colored Troops would witness the surrender of General Johnston's Army. General Johnston surrendered the Army of Tennessee and all remaining Confederate forces still active in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. It was the largest surrender of the war,

¹⁰ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

¹¹ "6th Regiment, United States Colored Infantry". *Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System*. National Park Service. Retrieved May 8, 2013

totaling 89,270 soldiers.¹² The men of the Sixth would spend the next five months performing various duties in North Carolina before being mustered on September 20, 1865.¹³

Life of an African American Civil War Soldier was not the typical life of a soldier. It was regularly observed that African-American soldiers were better behaved than their white counterparts according to some officers,

“I maintain that, as a whole, the men were remarkably free from inconvenient vices. There was no more lying and stealing than in average white regiments. The surgeon was not much troubled by shamming sickness, and there were not a great many complaints of theft. There was less quarrelling than

¹² Symonds, Craig L. *Joseph E. Johnston: A Civil War Biography*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

¹³ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126

among white soldiers, and scarcely ever an instance of drunkenness.”¹⁴

These men were fighting for freedom and even their right to be free, but still some officers treated them like slaves, “So, in dealing out punishments, we had carefully to avoid all that was brutal and arbitrary, all that savored of the overseer. Any such dealing found them as obstinate and contemptuous.”¹⁵ This was one of the biggest issues in these African American units, they had white officers some of whom did not know how to treat them, and especially those escaped slaves from the southern states. Other issues also arose that you did not see in the white ranks, “For instance, at first they disliked to obey their own non-commissioned

¹⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2001.05.0021:chapter=12> (accessed May 8, 2013), 257.

¹⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2001.05.0021:chapter=12> (accessed May 8, 2013), 259.

officers. "I don't want him to play de white man ober me."¹⁶ The other issue that they faced was that they were very rarely given a chance in combat they were seen more as a labor source than a combat unit. "Accordingly the practice which has hitherto prevailed no doubt from necessity of requiring these troops to perform most of the labor on fortifications and the labor and fatigue duties of permanent stations and camps."¹⁷ These troops did see some action but they were mainly in the way of brief skirmishes off the major battlefields of the war.

After his discharge Mr. Chaney returned to Chestertown and Kent County and his work as a laborer. Between his return and when

¹⁶ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009)<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2001.05.0021:chapter=12> (accessed May 8, 2013), 260.

¹⁷ George Washington Williams , *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1888)http://books.google.com/books?id=eTAOAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0

he could begin filing for a pension the details of Mr. Chaney's are slim. An 1870 census did have him listed as being a "jailbird".¹⁸ His arrest records were not readily available even after a long search through Kent County Records. On July 17 1884 he is listed as marrying Elizabeth Carroll.¹⁹ Research has been inconclusive as to if this is the same woman that he married in 1862 because she would have been fourteen at that time. While not impossible, this match would have been odd. Also, in some records post 1862, which was the time of the first marriage, he is listed as a divorcee.

Post war feelings toward African-Americans in Kent County were mixed to say the least. Maryland had been on the Union side of the war, but the Eastern Shore was full of Southern sympathizers and now former slave owners. Initial feelings were relaxed and welcoming, "the *Kent News* (1864c) described the feelings of white

¹⁸ 1870 United States Federal Census

¹⁹ Marriage License index of Kent County 1865-1886 pg.24

citizens as follows: "The late slave-owners have sense enough to know that the negroes are not responsible for the change which has been wrought to their condition, nor do we believe there is any disposition to persecute or oppress them."²⁰ In a short time though the acceptance seemed to fade away. According to a visiting officer, "Major Henry Von Shirach, described violence in Chestertown as stemming from the younger class of men aged 16 to 20 who, "without any provocation whatever, will kick, beat and abuse every colored boy or man coming near them, without being interfered with in the least by either authorities or citizens."²¹ While the violence was a concern, the post war life did have some positive affects on the freedman community of Kent County. It allowed the

²⁰ Elizabeth M. Clay, "CONSTRUCTING A COMMUNITY: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN KENT COUNTY, MARYLAND FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO THE PRESENT." (Unpublished undergraduate\., Washington College, 2008).

²¹ Elizabeth M. Clay, "CONSTRUCTING A COMMUNITY: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN KENT COUNTY, MARYLAND FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO THE PRESENT." (Unpublished undergraduate\., Washington College, 2008).

family unit of blacks to become strong and secure, in the time of slavery no family was ever safe or settled unless they bought their freedom. The post war freedman veterans decided to create a place to call their own. The end result was the Charles Sumner Post of the Grand Army of the Republic. The Sumner Post was incorporated in 1908 at the hands of seven freedman veterans.²² This post served as a community center to these men and a historical reminder of what they fought for. The Sumner Post is now one of the few remaining buildings of its kind in the country, and is being restored and will hopefully stand forever as a memory to the brave men it was founded by and for.

In 1900 Alexander is living in Chestertown with his wife and son Alex Junior. In 1907 we see Alexander start to apply for his

²² 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.

pension. This is curious because due to most records this would make him only sixty-eight and not eligible for a pension yet. He even attempted to use testimony from his white childhood friend Thomas E. Norris who stated that Alexander was “at least as old as him”.²³ Mr. Chaney did begin receiving pension around 1910. The medical alignments that qualified him for pension were, defective eyesight, sore throat and weakness of back and breast.²⁴ These are possibly from the yellow fever he contracted in Wilmington, North Carolina during the war. It is more likely that these just came about with old age, but Mr. Chaney was able to take full advantage of the ailments. Alexander Chaney died on June 8, 1917 in Chestertown, MD. He was seventy-eight years old. He died of a heart infection.²⁵

²³ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126

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He is buried in Janes Cemetery in the Quaker Neck section of Kent County.²⁶

²⁶ Walter J. Kirby, Roll Call, The Civil War in Kent County, Maryland, 27.