

Fort McHenry

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine
Maryland



A Black Soldier Defends Fort McHenry

Library Field Guide No. 1

History

William Williams is listed with the names of other recruits on the muster roll of the 38th U.S. Infantry and should not warrant a second glance. But this recruit is different. Williams was a 21 year old runaway slave laborer.

No. 203 William Williams



Private, U.S. Infantry by artist Keith Rocco (2002). Courtesy, Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, NPS.

William Williams, alias “Frederick Hall” had run away from his owner Benjamin Oden in Prince George’s County, Maryland in the spring of 1814. On April 14th Williams enlisted as a private in the 38th U.S. Infantry. Federal law at the time prohibited the enlistment of slaves into the army because they “could make no valid contract with the government.”

The officer who enlisted Williams did not question him. A reward notice by his owner, described Williams as “a bright mulatto...and so fair as to show freckles.” Nevertheless, Williams received his enlistment bounty and was paid a private’s wage of \$8 per month to serve five years or the duration of the war.

In early September 1814, the 38th U.S. Infantry was ordered to Fort McHenry, where during the bombardment, Williams was severely wounded, having his “leg blown off by a cannon ball” and died two months later. Williams was not the only person of color to serve in the War of 1812. There are numerous documented records of others at Baltimore.

Michael Buzzard – served at Fort McHenry in the U.S. Corps of Artillery.

George Roberts – a free black who served aboard the private armed schooners *Sarah Ann* (1813) and *Chasseur* (1814).

Charles Ball – who served as Ordinary Seaman aboard Commodore Joshua Barney’s U.S. Chesapeake Flotilla as did flotilla cook **Caesar Wentworth**.

Gabriel Roulson – served as an Ordinary Seaman aboard the U.S. Sloop of War *Ontario* at Baltimore. Many other skilled free blacks like **John Allines** and **James Ambly** worked as naval mechanics in the Baltimore naval yards, building naval ships and privateers and helped build the city’s defenses.

All Marylanders can take pride in the contribution of Williams and others whose names may be lost to history, but who fought beside their neighbors, friends and owners to help save Baltimore during its time of crisis during the War of 1812.

References

“Mirage of Freedom: African-Americans in the War of 1812” By Christopher T. George, *Maryland Historical Magazine* (Winter 1996)

“A Black Soldier Defends Fort McHenry,” By Scott S. Sheads, *Military Collector & Historian*, Spring 1989)