



BLACK CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE "CRADLE OF SECESSION"

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Introduction

When one thinks of Blacks in Confederate Charleston, he or she immediately conjures up images of downtrodden slaves who toil on their masters' behalf. While working in defense of the city they wait patiently for the chance to bolt to the Union when the opportunity presents itself. Where this scenario was certainly accurate in a number of cases, we seldom hear of those Blacks, free and slave, who were instrumental in the Confederate defense of the harbor and city, and in a surprising number of cases, of their own free will. We are shown a sea of White faces in Forts Sumter, Moultrie, and Johnson. We are told of the White slave masters who press their slaves to produce material for the Whites at the front lines. What about those Blacks in Charleston who do not compliment politically correct ideals? Their memories cry out for honor and recognition just as much as the Union's 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry and runaway slaves who became successful after freedom, all of whom are trumpeted to great glory by modern history texts. Hopefully, this publication will be a modest start toward recognition of these great men and women.

The Slaves

With the fascination of the War for Southern Independence continually growing in intensity and instance, more and more information is being uncovered that documents the service of loyal Southern slaves, but unfortunately many remain mentioned, but not named. One who honors the memory of all those who sacrificed for Confederate Charleston can only hope that these nameless heroes will get their earned recognition and deserved honor with further research and future discoveries. Nameless heroes such as the Negro casualties cited numerous in the Official Records:

FORT SUMTER, July 19, 1864 - 7.30 p. m.

Three hundred and twenty-two shots (68 missed) fired at fort to-day; also 126 mortar shells (53 missed). This is the heaviest fire we have been subjected to since the bombardment commenced, though a good many of the shots were only from 30-pounder Parrotts. C. C. Bedell, signal corps, slightly wounded in head. Privates D. D. Heath, Company G. Thirty-second Georgia, and J. R. Gordan, Company A. same regiment, very slightly wounded. One negro slightly wounded.

FORT SUMTER, July 20, 1864.

Seventy-one Parrott shots (19 missed), 175 mortar shells (53 missed) fired at fort. Private J. A. Todd, Gist Guard, wounded in head and leg, not dangerously. One negro killed; 2 severely wounded, 5 slightly

wounded. Firing from Gregg at southwest angle with 8-inch Parrotts and with mortars from middle battery this morning. (5)

Fortunately, there are also those few whose names are known, such as Harvey Barron, Anderson Chambers, and Sam Leech who served at Fort Sumter, and Anthony Barnett who served on Sullivan's Island. (20)

Ex-slaves in the Charleston area told tales of their own service, or service of relatives, in a Federal Writers' Project work known as the "Slave Narratives" compiled from 1936 to 1938 during the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Interviewers were sent throughout the United States to record the life of slaves and the times of slavery as relayed by the ex-slaves themselves. Many were well into old age, but their voices were strong when they spoke of times before and during the War for Southern Independence.

It is not uncommon knowledge that many slaves accompanied their masters into battle for the Confederacy, but what is not commonly known is the spirit in which they served. A visitor to Charleston in 1861 observed that thousands of Negroes in the city "grinned from ear to ear" at the thought of being able to shoot Yankees. (17) With this observation in mind, it is even more fascinating to the modern day history enthusiast.

William L. Dunwoody was born in Charleston in 1840 to Charles, a free man, and Mary Dunwoody, a slave. His father was killed when the Federals attacked South Carolina. Later, Dunwoody lived in Auburn, Alabama with his young master, a doctor who had helped drill the sixty-ninth Alabama. William says he remembers President Jefferson Davis passing through. He later warned of the advance of the Yankees by riding through town on a mule yelling, "The Yankees are coming!" (1)

Henry Brown had two older brothers, Tom and Middleton, who fought in the war. He doesn't indicate which side, but it's possible they fought for the Confederacy since he didn't mention anything about them running away or meeting up with the federal fleet at Port Royal. (2)

At one hundred and four years of age, Richard Mack tells of his service in the Confederate Army with vivid excitement. He served as the body servant of his master, Captain Cherry in the Confederate cavalry. Apparently, Mack was well paid for his services, "I had thousands of dollars in Confederate money when the War broke up. If we had won I would be rich." When Captain Cherry was killed, he then served with General Bamberg as an orderly. Mack claims to have seen Lee many times and knew him, presumably from the time when Lee was the military commander of Charleston. He also went up in a hot air balloon as an observer because "...my eyes were good - they carried me because any object I saw, I knew what it was..." They went up on Beaufain Street and came down on the Citadel Green. After the war in 1876, Mack says he rode with Wade Hampton's Red Shirts at the head of 500 Negroes, "I was Captain of them. I rode 'Nellie Ponsa' and wore my red jacket and cap and boots. I had a sword too."(3)

When slaves did not serve on the front lines, they contributed in many other ways. The

most important would have to be in the capacity of protector of the women and children whose husbands and fathers had heeded their State's call and shouldered arms for South Carolina. The inscription on a marker erected in 1895 in Fort Mill, South Carolina best acknowledges this most important role:

1860
*Dedicated to the faithful slaves who, loyal to the
sacred trust, toiled for the support of the army,
with matchless devotion, and with sterling fidelity,
guarded our defenseless homes, women and children,
during the struggle for the principles of our
"Confederate States of America"*
1865 (10)

Almost just as important was by their work they always completed as people in bondage. By keeping the plantations running, food and textiles could be sent to the troops defending against a determined and hostile invader. Often times, the slaves were not exempt from harsh treatment by the Union forces, and many times they were subjects of outright abuse, or as Tena White said, "De Yankee been go in de colored people house, an dey all mix up, an dey do jus what dey want. Dey been brutish." (9)

Henry Brown's father, Abram, was one such slave treated none to gingerly by his liberators. With the imminent approach of the Federals, his master Dr. Rose entrusted his worldly possessions to Abram for safe keeping. When the Union soldiers overran the Rose plantation, they demanded that Abram hand over his possessions that they felt were actually his owners'. When Abram claimed the items as his own and refused to give them up, "The Yankees told him that they thought he was lying, and if he didn't tell the truth they would kill him." He didn't relent, and the Yankees went away leaving him with Dr. Rose's possessions. (7)

Another important contribution to those slaves who supported from the home front was in the way of monetary charity. Contrary to popular belief, slaves were often rewarded for their hard work. This is referred to by General Robert E. Lee in his letter to Richmond advocating enlisting slaves into the Confederate forces:

There should be a system of rewards, too, for good conduct and industry, these rewards to be paid to the meritorious over and above the hire paid to their masters. Most of the negroes are accustomed to something of this sort on the plantations ... These would aid materially in promoting the efficiency of the organization and might receive extra wages as a reward and encouragement. (6)

Many South Carolina slaves willingly contributed these monetary rewards to a most notable and needed cause, naval protection of Charleston Harbor. The ironclad gunboat CSS Palmetto State, known as the Lady's Gunboat because of the vigorous fundraising by South Carolina ladies for it's construction, was funded in part by the monetary contributions of the slaves. (8)

An innovative and new contraption was constructed to protect Charleston Harbor, the "torpedo ram." It was designed to be a small, armored vessel that was low lying on the

water and armed with a torpedo spar on the front. When a target was selected, the torpedo was to be driven into the side of the enemy vessel below the water line and detonated. The most noted of these boats was the David, which was built in Charleston by plantation slaves. (12)

Free Black Civilians

The seemingly smallest part played by the populous during Charleston's darkest hours helped keep it all together enough for South Carolina to retain Charleston and deny the strenuous efforts by Federal naval and land forces to march victoriously through the city until February of 1865.

One such citizen was Paris Forest. He was freed from his bondage by his master long before the war. During the Siege of Charleston by the Federal Navy, Forest worked on the docks. One day he came home from work and laid on a cot he had set up by the front door. A Federal shell crashed through his home on Tradd Street destroying it. His neighbors came rushing over expecting to discover that he and his daughter had been killed. They were found unharmed in the pile of rubble. Forest survived the war to become a very highly respected member of the community in Charleston. (4)

Other Black civilians participated in more momentous and dangerous tasks. On April 7th, 1863, the Union navy went into action against Fort Sumter. The fall of this symbol of defiance was an obsession to the Northern forces, as well as its tactical advantage to Charleston Harbor. A great ironclad armada was assembled for the mission of pounding Sumter into submission. The attack failed. A victim of Sumter's defenders was the USS Keokuk. After it sank in shallow water on the 8th, Adolphus La Coste got to work salvaging her heavy eleven inch guns under cover of night from right under the noses of the Federal fleet. The salvaging group consisted of several civilians, some soldiers from Sumter, and a Black man named Edwin Watson. Their feat was incredible, especially considering that Admiral Du Pont of the Federal navy declared the guns unsalvageable. These guns were soon in action against his fleet. (11)

When the infamous "Marsh Battery," also known as the "Swamp Angel," started hurling long range shells into the heart of Charleston, fires became a frequent occurrence. When the first shell crashed into Pinckney Street in the early morning on August 29th, 1863 and subsequently started a fire, the first fire company to arrive on the scene was composed of free Black firefighters. They battled the blaze all the while cursing the Federals. (13)

This was a scene these men faced time and again for the next two years, the most challenging when the Confederates evacuated Charleston on February 17th in the face of Sherman's approach. All the White fire companies had been converted to militia and sent to join General Johnston's army. This left the free Black firemen to feverishly try to extinguish the fires that popped up all over the city created by the destruction of the ironclads Chicora, Palmetto State, and Charleston to prevent their falling into the hands of the Union. (14)

The monetary contributions by civilians to the war effort was also absolutely essential. In modern texts, the fine women of the South are highly credited with this exertion of patriotic effort, and deservedly so. Also, however less hyped by modern texts are the contributions of free Black Southerners. In addition to entire companies of free Blacks marching to recruiting offices all over the South to join (sometimes they were allowed to fight and sometimes not), patriotic free Blacks were very liberal in the offering of their money to advance the cause. This money was earned by business endeavors, special balls and dances to raise money, as well as using their artistic talents for the same purpose. Free Black citizens of the city of Charleston were no different.

One example was a singing group calling themselves the "Confederate Ethiopian Serenaders," who gave special concerts in Charleston to help finance the ironclads CSS Chicora and Palmetto State. (15) The very same ironclads to which many slaves also contributed their earned treasure, and which according to the rosters of the Chicora show us three Black crewman aboard. (18)

City and Harbor Defenses

On arena where there is no question as to the value of service to Charleston's defenses was in fortifications and earthworks. Charleston presented a large land area as well as miles of sea coast and the harbor to protect from the Union navy, and the land forces they intended to land with the mission of taking Charleston. Free as well as slave Black Southerners toiled in this important endeavor.

Wallace Burn accompanied his master's son, Frank, in the defense of Charleston on the earthworks with the 21st South Carolina Volunteer Infantry. He wrote to his master telling of his seven days there where both he and Frank had been slightly wounded by flying bricks from the exploding Yankee shells that were bombarding Fort Sumter. They then went on to Fort Johnson. (16)

Heddie Davis tells of her father's days of service at Fort Sumter with his master, Even Lewis. He, "stayed up dere to Fort Sumter four years a fightin en hoped shoot dem old Yankee robbers." After the war he proclaimed that, "dey was de worst people dere ever was," in reference to the Yankees. (21)

One of the most heralded assaults on a Charleston fortress occurred on July 12th, 1863 at the earthwork fort called Wagner. Among it's defenders was Private John Wilson Buckner of the 1st South Carolina Artillery. Buckner was the nephew of a wealthy and successful free Black businessman in Charleston. Private Buckner was wounded just days before the repulse of the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry, USA. This attack was recently made famous in the movie "Glory." (19)

Closing

This publication is just a small sampling of the undoubtedly thousands of Blacks who served Charleston, their home, during those terrible four years of war and siege. When

we think of Confederate Charleston, let's not dwell on the White faces, on the White casualties, on the White accomplishments, let's instead see the whole picture which includes much more than what popular history texts show us. Where the Confederacy is often viewed as a society based on honor and clarity, though it may be a distorted view of such for some, let us be sure that this characterization of the Old South holds true for all who toiled on it's behalf. To do less would be nothing short of a grave dishonor to the memory of those who were pushed into the closet of forgetting, and a high crime against history itself.

Footnotes

- (1) Slave Narratives: Volume 2, Part 2, Pages 225-230
- (2) Slave Narratives: Volume 14, Part 1, Page 118
- (3) Slave Narratives: Volume 14, Part 3, Pages 154-155
- (4) Slave Narratives: Volume 14, Part 3, Pages 214-216
- (5) Official Federal Records of the War of the Rebellion: Series 1, Volume 35, Part 1, Page 226
- (6) Official Federal Records of the War of the Rebellion: Series 4, Volume 3, Part 1, Pages 838-839
- (7) Slave Narratives: Volume 14, Part 1, Pages 118-119
- (8) The Siege of Charleston 1861-1865, E. Milby Burton, page 124
- (9) Slave Narratives: Volume 14, Part 4, Page 198
- (10) Black Confederates, compiled and edited by Charles Kelly Barrow, J. H. Segars, R. B. Rosenburg, page 67
- (11) The Siege of Charleston 1861-1865, E. Milby Burton, page 146
- (12) The Siege of Charleston 1861-1865, E. Milby Burton, page 219
- (13) The Siege of Charleston 1861-1865, E. Milby Burton, page 252
- (14) The Siege of Charleston 1861-1865, E. Milby Burton, page 321
- (15) Black Confederates, compiled and edited by Charles Kelly Barrow, J. H. Segars, R. B. Rosenburg, page 12
- (16) Black Confederates, compiled and edited by Charles Kelly Barrow, J. H. Segars, R. B. Rosenburg, page 32
- (17) Black Confederates, compiled and edited by Charles Kelly Barrow, J. H. Segars, R. B. Rosenburg, page 46
- (18) Black Confederates, compiled and edited by Charles Kelly Barrow, J. H. Segars, R. B. Rosenburg, page 47
- (19) Black Confederates, compiled and edited by Charles Kelly Barrow, J. H. Segars, R. B. Rosenburg, page 48
- (20) Black Confederates, compiled and edited by Charles Kelly Barrow, J. H. Segars, R. B. Rosenburg, page 122

(21) Slave Narratives: Volume 14, Part 1, Pages 254-255