

Black History and Eastchester's Civil War Legacy

By

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At one time in the seventh century slaves constituted ten per cent of the population of the town and at the outbreak of the Civil War freed blacks across New York were treated a second class citizens. In 1860 the voters of Westchester voted against Lincoln in 1860 objecting to his position on slavery and in 1864 because of his handling of the war. The draft riots in New York City, the bloodiest in American history, spread to Eastchester. Racism was rampant in most Northern states and New York was no exception. Over one hundred freed blacks were murdered during the New York City draft riots following Gettysburg. Northern workers felt their jobs would be threatened by the emancipation of former slaves. Quarrymen in Eastchester took sides with the rioters, tore up the train tracks, and threatened to burn down the house of every Republican.

Historians believed that there were no volunteers from the town of Eastchester in this the bloodiest of all conflicts. The only people to fight allegedly were paid substitutes who received large bounties to replace men who did not wish to fight. A young seventh grade girl, Stephanie Cimmino, would prove all the historians wrong when she brought into my seventh grade social studies class a Xerox copy of a Civil War journal written by her great, great grandfather, William Thiselton.

Thiselton, a veteran from the Mexican War along with 100 others had volunteered to fight in August of 1862. They volunteered not to end slavery but to preserve the union. In his journal he wrote that "the only motive that brought this body together *was* in defense of our country's cornerstone, the constitution." In his journal Thiselton describes how the New York Sixth Heavy Artillery consisting of 1100 volunteers from Westchester, Putnam, and Rockland counties fought in major battles in May and June of 1864 that proved to be the bloodiest in the history of this country.

The regiment was formed before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and blacks were allowed to volunteer. Even after blacks were allowed to join "colored companies, they faced discrimination in the form of lower pay, segregated units, and poor sanitary conditions. Meanwhile the New York sixth Heavy Artillery with over 100 volunteers from Eastchester fought in the bloody and decisive battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Cold Harbor, and siege at Petersburg. It would be at Petersburg that both the New York Sixth Heavy Artillery and black soldiers would unit against the Confederates.

In late June of 1864 a plan to end the war with the use of "colored troops" was put together by General Ambrose Burnside. At the siege of Petersburg. Petersburg was the railroad center of the confederacy and capture of the city would have ended the conflict. Former Pennsylvania coal miner were to dig a tunnel underneath the trenches surrounding the city, denote a huge explosion, and use a regiment of "colored troops" to storm through the tunnel and capture the city. The strategy of using black soldiers was

rejected in a council of war both because the commanders thought that were not competent and that the appearance of blacks would incite the enemy.

On June 30, 1864 the plan was put into effect when a huge explosion was denoted in the early morning hours in Petersburg.. A huge crater was created and at first it looked like the plan would succeed. The first wave of white troops were not equipped with scaling ladders and by the time the regiment of “colored soldiers” appeared, Union troops were sitting ducks for the Confederates. The Union troops both black and white were massacred and forced to retreat. The plan was a disastrous failure.

Union commanders looking for a scapegoat wrongly blamed the failure on the incompetence and cowardice of “colored soldiers.” However, William Thiselton and the Eastchester volunteer soldiers were present on that fateful day. In his journal Thiselton wrote:

“It has been asserted by both military and civilians that negroes will not have the courage nor the endurance to fight. Every man who witnessed the charge of colored troops on the 30th of July, 1864, can truly testify that no body of men whatever the color or race could have fought more valiantly or desperately than the 9th corp. on that day.”

Today the descendants of William Thiselton still live in Eastchester and Mount Vernon. If the Cimminos had not volunteered William’s war journal, there would be no record that Eastchester men voluntarily fought in the Civil War not simply to preserve the union but to create a new birth of freedom where to use Reverend King’s words people “are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

