

Insights & Observations

Local facts, faces shaped the Civil War

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The nation's sesquicentennial observances of the Civil War, starting next year, will be a good time to separate myth from fact and appreciate how people from our region shaped the conflict.

Contrary to one popular belief, the war was not started to end slavery. It was fought to stop the spread of slavery to new states in the West. Only in late 1862 was the larger issue broached.

President Abraham Lincoln had intentions to free slaves in states not under Union control but proper timing of the Emancipation Proclamation was essential. The militarily dreadful year 1862 was certainly not a propitious time to do so; the Confederacy had rung up a string of impressive victories and was about to invade the North.

Lincoln waited for a decisive Union victory to amass the necessary political capital, and the proclamation was finally presented after the September 1862 victory at Antietam. Once the proclamation was signed on Jan. 1, 1863, the way was cleared to arm Northern blacks for service in the Union forces — a prospect that frightened many Northerners. By the war's end, about 180,000 African Ameri-

cans had served in the Union Army.

Numerous camps were established to train black soldiers. Of them, only Camp William Penn in La Mott, Pa., trained blacks exclusively. It was established in what is now Cheltenham Township the week before the Battle of Gettysburg.

The choice of location was curious. La Mott was dominated by Quakers, the most outspoken of whom was the diminutive abolitionist and women's-rights pioneer Lucretia Mott. The Quaker residents of La Mott were strong Union supporters. So a military training camp — named for a Quaker — was protected by a community of Quakers who, as a matter of belief, are strict pacifists. Curious indeed.

Let us look at the experiences of two black Chester County veterans trained at Camp William Penn.

Pvt. John Smith was a member of the 43d U.S. Colored Troops. The 43d was organized at Camp William Penn in March 1864, participated in the siege of Richmond, and played a critical role in the Battle of the Crater. After the fall of Richmond, the 43d joined in the pursuit of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Smith was there when Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

Smith went with the 43d to Texas until his regiment was mustered out and discharged in Philadelphia on Nov. 30,



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John Smith and James C. Boggs, two African American Civil War soldiers who trained at Camp William Penn in La Mott, are buried side by side in the Old Caln Meeting House graveyard.

1865. He was a Chester County resident at the time of his death on Nov. 6, 1901.

A copy of the Application for Burial of Deceased Soldier for Smith is at the Old Caln Historical Society museum in the Old Caln Meeting House near Downingtown. The notarized application indicates that Smith was a laborer at the time of his death.

Three of Smith's acquaintances appeared before the

Chester County commissioners to affirm that "this man not being able to work for several years had no means of support except his pension." They asked the county to pay his \$35 interment expense. Smith's clearly marked grave is in the northeast corner of the Old Caln Meeting House cemetery.

Cpl. James C. Boggs served in Company D of the Eighth U.S. Colored Troops. In Janu-

ary 1863 the regiment left Camp William Penn for Florida, where it fought in the Battle of Olustee with calamitous results. The Eighth was later sent to Virginia.

While in the Richmond area, Boggs saw action in September 1864 at Chaffin's Farm as part of the Battle of New Market Heights. The battle was noteworthy because of the manner in which the 3,800 African American

troops heroically acquitted themselves. Of the 16 Medals of Honor awarded to "colored" troops during the Civil War, 14 were awarded for their valorous actions at New Market Heights.

Like Smith, Boggs was present at Lee's surrender. After service in Texas, the Eighth was mustered out in November 1865. Boggs died on Aug. 10, 1886, and Chester County was petitioned to cover his burial expenses. Boggs is also buried at Old Caln.

The Civil War nominally ended slavery in the United States, but one wonders whether the Northern black soldiers had additional, more personal, motives for enlisting. And we can only wonder whether these two brave men experienced a greater degree of racial equality after the war. Sadly, my guess is that they did not.

At Camp William Penn these two largely forgotten men developed their war skills under the de facto protection of Quakers. This prepared them to fight with distinction for the Union and paved the way for them to help bring about, and to witness, Lee's surrender. They now lie buried beside each other in the Quaker graveyard at Old Caln.

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