

Kelly Haswell

Professor Goodheart

AMS 300-10 – Chestertown's America

10 May 2013

Alexander Chaney: Soldier, Laborer, Enigma

Drafted into the Union Army in 1864, Alexander Chaney was truly a part of one of the most life-changing wars in American history.¹ While he may not have joined the army intentionally like many other African American soldiers, he fought for something that would help enslaved people throughout the country. In the 1860's, half of the black population in Maryland was enslaved.² But, it should be noted that this was considerably less than its southern neighbors. Many Maryland slave owners had seen slavery as a moral issue and struggled with the thought of owning human beings and using them for labor.³

Born in Millington, Maryland into a free black family on March 1, 1839, Alexander knew a very different Maryland than one knows of today.⁴ Slavery was abundant and he was truly lucky to have been the son of free African Americans, Alexander and Charlotte Chaney.⁵ It is unclear as to how Alexander Sr. obtained his freedom; it could have been due

¹ ADJUTANT GENERAL (Civil War Muster Rolls) US Colored Troops 4th Regiment, MD. Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1867, MSA S 936-46 MdHR 50,055-46.

² Slavery and the Civil War, <http://www.kentcountyhistory.org/key/civilwar.php>.

³ Slavery and the Civil War, <http://www.kentcountyhistory.org/key/civilwar.php>.

⁴ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (National Archives) US Colored Troops Pension File Collection, MSA SC 4126.

⁵ Maryland Colonization Papers (Census of Free Negroes), 1817 – 1880, MSA SC5977, Reel 21, pg. 257.

to the fact that wheat, the major cash crop on the Eastern Shore, was less labor intensive than the heavily farmed tobacco of the South.⁶

But, his father was indeed a free man. In fact, Alex Chaney Sr. is on record as to having done a transaction with a wealthy white man named Samuel Hyland Freeman in which Chaney sold him a mill in Still Pond that he had bought at auction for \$300 in 1838.⁷ This also reflects White landowners views on African Americans. At least in this case, many were willing to do business with free man, Alexander Chaney, Sr. He also owned \$600 worth of land and worked as a laborer to support his family in 1860.⁸

Alexander Chaney Jr. spent most of his life working as a laborer, living among both whites and blacks.⁹ This could possibly be where he met his childhood friend, Thomas E. Norris.¹⁰ This could mean that the Chaney's were a middle-class family who lived among other middle or working- class families, regardless of their race.

Just because he was born a free man does not mean that he was articulate. Neither Alexander nor his wife Elizabeth ever learned how to read or write.¹¹ This fact shows how scarce education was for working-class African Americans in Kent County. But, this was not

⁶ Slavery and the Civil War, <http://www.kentcountyhistory.org/key/civilwar.php>.

⁷ Land Transactions, Alexander Chaney Sr.

⁸ 1860 United States Federal Census.

⁹ 1850-1910 United States Federal Census.

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

¹¹ 1860-1910 United States Federal Census.

always the case – as Alexander’s father was literate and probably fairly intelligent considering the real-estate business he conducted earlier in his life.¹²

According to legal documents, Alex wed Elizabeth Carroll on July 17, 1884.¹³ However, sources lead us to believe that Carroll was either a second wife, or they had been cohabitating as early as 1862.¹⁴ It is clear that the duo had at least two children together, Alexander, Jr. and Harriett. Alexander, Jr. was born in 1863, just one year before his father was drafted into the regiment, and his little sister Harriett was born in 1871. This means that young Elizabeth was only 14 years old when her son was born, which is possible but very unlikely. This leads us to believe that Elizabeth Carroll was his second wife. However, there is currently no evidence of a previous wife.

The enlistment of African American troops into the Union army began in 1862 due to the lack of volunteers. John Blassingame explains this in article, “Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland”, “As a result of the decrease in the enlistment of white volunteers, soon after the outbreak of hostilities, the Lincoln administration realized the importance of Negro manpower.”¹⁵ The United States Colored Troops brought something to the Union army that the Confederates could not match – more manpower. And so it was important to the Union cause to have as many USCT recruits as they could muster, especially in the border state of Maryland.

¹² 1850 United States Federal Census.

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

¹⁴ 1900 United States Federal Census.

¹⁵ John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), pg. 20.

...by virtue of their geographical location, manpower and economic resources, they were in a position to provide aid of inestimable value to either side. Maryland, bordering on the Union capital and serving as a passageway between the warring sections, stood out as one of the most important of the "border states."¹⁶

Eventually all free blacks and slaves, with their masters' consent, were able to enlist in the Union army. The recruiters even had to meet a quota and if it was not met, slaves could be recruited without their masters' permission.¹⁷ The meeting of this quota led to the draft in which Alexander Chaney was a part of. The recruiter in Easton, Maryland did not meet his quota and therefore drafted the young soldier.¹⁸

On September 20, 1864, 25 year old Alexander's life surely changed forever as he was drafted in to the 6th Regiment United States Colored Troops.¹⁹ He began his duty with Company A two months later on November 20, 1864 near Richmond, Virginia.²⁰ While the company never fought in any large-scale battles, the skirmishes in which they fought may

¹⁶ John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), pg. 21.

¹⁷ John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), pg. 24.

¹⁸ ADJUTANT GENERAL (Civil War Muster Rolls) US Colored Troops 4th Regiment, MD. Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1867, MSA S 936-46 MdHR 50,055-46.

¹⁹ ADJUTANT GENERAL (Civil War Muster Rolls) US Colored Troops 4th Regiment, MD. Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1867, MSA S 936-46 MdHR 50,055-46.

²⁰ ADJUTANT GENERAL (Civil War Muster Rolls) US Colored Troops 4th Regiment, MD. Volunteer Infantry, 1863-1867, MSA S 936-46 MdHR 50,055-46.

have been imperative to the Union cause and therefore vital to the end of the institution of slavery.²¹ He was honorably discharged a year later on September 20, 1865.²²

Enlisting African American soldiers into the Union army was a topic that was highly debated during the Civil War. And, many white citizens were not content with the decision of the Union army to draft Colored troops into the armed forces. The infamous Draft Riots began occurring in the various states in which African Americans were being enlisted in 1863.

There will be no attempt here to describe the infuriated mobs that destroyed human life and property in their resistance to the draft, but only so much of the bloody drama must be told as affects the Negro martyrs. Nowhere did the fury of the mob flame more furiously than in the abodes of Negroes.²³

Many white men were recorded as to having started mobs and riots when in the presence of Colored Troops. Some rioters even reportedly ransacked the workplaces of several African Americans; even going so far as to wrecking the African American orphanage.²⁴ And, officers in positions of power did not approve of this new influx of Colored troops, "Many of the Provost Marshals resigned when slaves were enrolled."²⁵

²¹ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

²² SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

²³ George Washington Williams, "A History of Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865", pg. 174.

²⁴ George Washington Williams, "A History of Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865", pg. 175.

²⁵ John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), pg. 24.

But, the soldiers stayed strong throughout this doubt of their strength as true Union soldiers,

The outlook for the Negro soldier was certainly unpromising at first blush; but he knew how to be patient, and with intensest longing listened for the call to battle, where he hoped to command the respect of the enemy and the admiration of the Government.²⁶

These men had the ability to look past what others thought of them in order to excel and fight for the Union. The sad thing is that, unlike the white Union soldiers who only had the enemy of the Confederates, the Colored Troops had enemies of Confederate and Union soldiers. So, the men they were fighting for were ultimately fighting against them. This was especially heavy the border states, like Maryland.²⁷ So, it is only imaginable that Alexander Chaney faced this same discrimination. Some of this of this discrimination was “vociferous enough to compel Lincoln to halt recruiting of Negroes in October, 1863.”²⁸ This was in order until many poor Whites saw the recruitment of African Americans as working in their favor because it was less White men dying during the war.²⁹

This discrimination did not end once these men were mustered out of the military. At a decoration day ceremony in Baltimore in 1880, a fight broke out between a “coloured

²⁶ George Washington Williams, "A History of Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865", pg. 180.

²⁷ George Washington Williams, "A History of Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865", pg. 177.

²⁸ John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), pg. 26.

²⁹ John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Negro Troops in Maryland." *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1963), pg. 27.

man” and a “bar keeper” which then led to a larger riot at Laurel Cemetery.³⁰ Veterans of the United States Colored Troops were facing anger and resentment anywhere they were going, even when honoring their fallen comrades.

It is obvious that life would have been hard to him after he was mustered out of the military. Unlike the white Union soldiers who were able to go on to do better things, many African American soldiers had to return to their lives as they were before the war; that is unless they were enslaved. Surely that is why Alex had to live out his days as a hard working laborer. He probably took great pride in the fact that he was a part of a battle that helped so many others, but he could not rejoice in it as the other soldiers could, as he was forced to return to his menial job.

Surely life was hard for a veteran Colored soldier. In fact, both Alex and his wife Elizabeth were arrested in 1870 for reasons yet to be discovered.³¹ In the census from June 1870, the duo were listed as “jail birds” in the occupational column by the census taker. It is unclear as to what the two were imprisoned for, or if they even had a trial. And, due to the lack of paperwork from the time, Alex’s criminal secret may never be uncovered. But, sadly, it was a commonplace for these African American troops to be arrested. Many were discriminated against because of the color of their skin – a scene that is seen all too much throughout history.

³⁰ “Peace of Decoration Day, The Kent News, Saturday, June 5th, 1880.

³¹ 1870 United States Federal Census.

Certainly this jail record should not subtract from the glory that is the Union army that he fought for. It can be assumed, fairly certainly, that his crime was of no great danger because the record of it is so hard to find and it was not mentioned at all in the soldier's pension file.

For the rest of his life, Alex struggled in order to gain an increase in his pension. As a Civil War veteran and a hard working laborer, he suffered from many common ailments that a man living such a demanding life would experience. He complained to his doctor of defective eyesight, pharyngitis – more commonly known as a sore throat – and back and chest pain.³² He claims that this should add to his pension as he had been experiencing these ailments since he was stationed in North Carolina with his Company.³³ This was a very common thing – sickness within the regiments. In fact, the 6th Regiment United States Colored Troops lost more men to disease than to actual battle.³⁴ Perhaps his doctor knew that too and therefore suggested that he receive \$10 a month because he was a man that had worked his entire life and not one of his ailments was caused by immoral behavior.³⁵

Alexander's life ended on June 8, 1917 when he died of a heart infection.³⁶ The 78 year old spent his last days living with his wife in his house on Calvert Street in Chestertown.

³² SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

³³ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

³⁴ 6th Regiment United States Colored Troops, <http://www.pa-roots.com/pacw/usct/6thusct/6thusctorg.html>.

³⁵ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

³⁶ SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (NATIONAL ARCHIVES) US COLORED TROOPS PENSION FILE COLLECTION, MSA MC 4126.

After his death, his wife, Elizabeth, moved to Baltimore to live out her days with her daughter and grandson, Harriett and Norman.³⁷

It is truly sad that not more can be discovered about this fascinating man. Sadly, knowledge of records for middle-class African American men is less than ideal for the struggling historian. The paper trail that this man has left has led to some amazing discoveries and stories, but due to the lack of documents, his story is one that is full of holes. Yes, he was an average laborer from the Eastern Shore, but he should be remembered for the cause for which he fought. And, one can only hope that his story be told in its full detail in the future.

³⁷ 1920 United States Federal Census.