

Walter D. Arbo
2 Clocktower Place, Apt. 141
Nashua, NH 03060
603.881.4806
603.881.2442
arbo@star.enet.dec.com

The Story of Milo J. Freeland; "First Colored Man Enlisted from the North in the Rebellion of 1861"

On January 1, 1863 President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared "all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free". The proclamation also declared that "such [freed] persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States." A few weeks later, on January 26, 1863, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton authorized Gov. John A. Andrew of Massachusetts to organize a regiment of volunteers of African descent. Andrew immediately began organizing the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. On Feb. 7 John W. M. Appleton of Boston became the first of the white-only officers commissioned in the 54th. Just nine days later Milo J. Freeland of Sheffield enlisted and, according to his gravestone, became "the first colored man enlisted from the North in the Rebellion of 1861".

Sheffield, located in the Berkshire Mountains in the Southwestern corner of Massachusetts, is one of several towns, including Great Barrington, Lenox, Stockbridge and Lee, which in 1863 had a rich tradition of patriotic African-Americans. Among the more notable were Elizabeth Freeman and Agrippa Hull. Elizabeth Freeman, known as Mum Bett, was brought to Sheffield shortly after her birth in 1742. Mum Bett married and had a daughter, but lost her husband in the Revolutionary War. In 1781, after being injured fending off an attack on her sister by her master's wife, she sued for her freedom on the grounds that she was born free and equal. A jury in Great Barrington freed her and effectively ended slavery in Massachusetts. Agrippa Hull was brought to Stockbridge in 1765, and in 1777 enlisted and served in the Revolutionary War, serving as an orderly to the Polish General Tadeusz Kosciuszko. Hull's discharge papers were personally signed by George Washington. Mum Bett died in 1829, and Agrippa Hull in 1838. In 1840 Milo Freeland was born, heir to a tradition of proven patriotism.

On April 20th, 1861, one week after the start of the Civil War, Milo Freeland married 17 year old Sophronia E. Way at the house of S.J. Parker, then minister of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Stockbridge. Twenty-eight year old Lucretia Clow, who had lived with Sophronia from the time she was born, was her bridesmaid. The wedding was not officially recorded by the church or town, but is attested to in affidavits filed in 1888 and 1916 by Sophronia Freeland for her husband's pension. Charles Way and John Clow of Stockbridge, who also enlisted in the 54th, were presumably the brothers of Sophronia and Lucretia, and may also have been present. If Milo had married quickly with plans to follow in the footsteps of Agrippa Hull or Mum Bett's husband, he would soon be disappointed. It would be nearly two years before the Union would allow African-Americans to enlist.

The call for recruits for the 54th went out in the first weeks of February. On Feb. 15, 1863, David Addison left Sheffield and went north to Pittsfield to enlist in the new 54th regiment. He was

followed the next day by two other men from Sheffield: Milo Freeland and Nathaniel Johnson. On Feb. 18th ten more men enlisted, four from Great Barrington, four from North Lee, and one each from Lenox and Sheffield. Although David Addison enlisted before Milo Freeland or Nathaniel Johnson, he deserted from camp during training. The honor of being the first enlistee then fell to Freeland or Johnson. Johnson, it appears, deferred to Milo Freeland, and would have been the primary witness to Freeland's claim after his death in 1883.

But the roster of the 54th lists more than a dozen men who had enlistment dates between Feb. 10 and Feb. 16. Why, then, did Nathaniel Johnson and the other veterans from the Berkshires believe that Milo Freeland was the first enlistee? The roster was not published until 1894, eleven years after Freeland's death. (It can be found today in a Da Capo Press reprint of the second edition of the regimental history, *A Brave Black Regiment*, written by Luis F. Emilio.) Without the roster, the veterans of the Berkshires would have relied on an oral tradition rather than a written one.

Milo Freeland and the recruits from the Berkshires probably reported to Camp Meigs in Readville, outside of Boston, in late February or early March, and were assigned to Co. A. Since Co. A was full by March 15, we know they did not arrive after that date. Co. C, made up mostly of men from New Bedford, had a separate camp at New Bedford where they were known as the Morgan Guards. All but two of the contenders to Freeland's title were in Co. C, including Richard M. Foster, who enlisted on Feb. 10. Co. C did not arrive at Camp Meigs until March 10, probably two weeks after the men from the Berkshires. It is possible that Freeland's claim was based on the fact that he and David Addison were the earliest recruits among the first men to arrive at camp. If this is true, then we must also assume that the two other early recruits not in Co. C, Eli Biddle of Boston and Francis H. Fletcher of Salem, reported to camp after the Berkshire soldiers, possibly because they could live at home while camp preparations were being finished.

Like other claims to "first" or "youngest", Milo Freeland's claim may also have been hotly contested. For example, Elbridge J. Copp of Nashua, New Hampshire, served in the 3rd New Hampshire Volunteers and claimed to have been the youngest commissioned officer in the Union Army. This claim was disputed publicly in the Boston Journal by two other contenders from Vermont. There is no indication that anyone else claimed to be the first African-American enlisted for the Union, and we do not know if Freeland was commonly considered the first enlistee by anyone outside of the Berkshires. Emilio does not mention him in the regimental history, but opposite p. 176 there is a fine photo of a pensive-looking Milo Freeland. The regimental history contains photos of ten other privates from the regiment, so Freeland's photo does not necessarily imply notoriety.

When he enlisted, Milo Freeland had been married less than two years, and was still childless. Like most soldiers he lacked the savings necessary to support his wife in his absence, and relied on the enlistment bounty and his monthly pay. As early as March 1863 Gov. Andrew had indicated that he expected black soldiers to be treated the same as white soldiers: "I would say that in their position in respect to pay, equipments, bounty, or any aid or protection when so mustered is that of any and all other volunteers. ... They will be soldiers of the Union, nothing less and nothing different." But the federal government instead offered a lower sum commensurate with that paid to units organized from escaped slaves. A protracted dispute followed, and the 54th *en masse* refused any pay rather than take less than their white counterparts. This unprecedented state of affairs continued for more than eighteen months, despite offers from the government of Massachusetts to make up the difference. Finally, in August 1864, Congress agreed to equal pay for all colored soldiers who were free on April 19, 1861. According to Emilio "Some of our men

were held as slaves April 19, 1861, but they took the oath as freemen, by God's higher law, if not by their country's". Mum Bett's determination to be treated as "free and equal" had passed to the next generation.

The refusal to grant equal pay was part of a wide-spread belief in the North that blacks were not suitable for combat, but only servile labor. A year before the pay dispute was resolved, Col. James Montgomery, the commander of a brigade which included the Mass. 54th, berated the rebellious troops. The speech was jotted down by Srgt. Stephens of Co. B and preserved in Emilio's regimental history:

Men: the paymaster is here to pay you. You must remember you have not proved yourselves soldiers. You must take notice that the Government has virtually paid you a thousand dollars apiece for setting you free. Nor should you expect to be placed on the same footing with white men. Any one listening to your shouting and singing can see how grotesquely ignorant you are. I am your friend and the friend of the negro. I was the first person in the country to employ nigger soldiers in the United States Army. I was out in Kansas. I was short of men. I had a lot of niggers and a lot of mules; and you know a nigger and a mule go very well together. I therefore enlisted the niggers, and made teamsters of them.

This offensive but frank diatribe neatly summarizes the prejudices which caused the 54th to be continually assigned disproportionate amounts of fatigue duty. Col. Montgomery, ignorant of the fact that he was addressing Northern free-born blacks, fully expected that they would *not* prove themselves soldiers.

The Mass. 54th had arrived at the Sea Islands off the coast of Charleston in June 1863, but did not engage the enemy until July 16th. In a delaying action the pickets of the 54th saved the 10th Connecticut, which needed time to retreat from an undefendable position on James Island. After this skirmish the 54th was transferred from the command of Col. Montgomery to Brig. Gen. George C. Strong in order to join the assault on the heavily fortified Fort Wagner. Col. Robert Shaw, commander of the Mass. 54th, had written to Gen. Strong expressing his desire to join the operation against Wagner, and a preference for Strong's command over Montgomery's. Traveling all night on the 17th, the 54th arrived at Morris Island on the 18th. When Gen. Strong offered the 54th the chance to lead the attack, Col. Shaw accepted, even though his men were tired and hungry.

On the evening of July 18th the 54th led the rush on Fort Wagner. They expected to find the fort disabled after the heavy bombardment of the previous day, and were prepared to engage a diminished enemy garrison in hand-to-hand combat on the parapets. Proceeding up the eastern shore of Morris Island the regiment came under heavy fire when they reached a narrowed piece of shore which forced some into shallow water. The enemy was not as weak as the commanding generals had supposed, and when they emerged from their bombproofs the 54th was overwhelmed. Though they reached the parapets they were repulsed. The fierceness of the battle was described by Elbridge Copp of the 3rd New Hampshire in his memoirs: "The genius of Dante could but faintly portray the horrors of that hell of fire and sulphurous smoke ... The half can never be told - language is all too tame to convey the horrors and the meaning of it all".

The battle of Fort Wagner, portrayed in the movie *Glory*, established the 54th's reputation as a formidable regiment. Milo Freeland was not one of the many soldiers singled out for acts of

bravery by Emilio, so we can not be certain that he was in the battle. Only 600 of the 54th fought that day, some being sick while another 80 were assigned to a fatigue detail under Lieut. Higginson of Co. I. The soldiers from the Berkshires (Co. A) were on the very front of the assault with only Co. B between them and the sea. By the end of the battle 9 men from Co. A were dead, 10 were missing and 18 were wounded. The regiment as a whole suffered casualties of forty percent, but all of the dozen early recruits from Sheffield, Lenox, No. Lee and Great Barrington survived.

After Fort Wagner the 54th fought in the battles of Olustee and Honey Hill. Their service continued to be distinguished and their courage was legendary among the white troops that fought beside them. On the 20th of August, 1865 the regiment was mustered out in Boston.

After the war, Milo Freeland returned to Sheffield. Sophronia bore him five children: Eugene (1867), Jessie (1871), Harry F. (1876), Sarah (1879) and Benjamin (1880). Milo had suffered from "asthma" since he returned from the war. The exact nature of this asthma is not known, though it may have been the result of living in the swamps of South Carolina and Florida, or one of the many infectious diseases which killed large numbers of combatants. On April 16, 1883, Milo Freeland died in East Canaan, Connecticut, just south of his native Sheffield. The official cause of death was pneumonia. The next day the Berkshire Courier carried a terse obituary: "Freeland, Milo, colored, died Canaan".

Milo was buried in Lot B8, on low ground at the back of the Hillside Cemetery in East Canaan. The grave was marked by a finely cut marble stone with both raised and engraved letters in several fonts. The inscription reads:

Milo J. Freeland
died
April 16, 1883
Aged 43
A member of Co. A
54th Mass. Voll's.
The first Colored Man
enlisted from the North
in the rebellion of 1861.

It seems unlikely that Sophronia Freeland had the means to purchase the lot or the stone. With five children, aged 2, 3, 6, 11 and 15, she was two months pregnant with Milo Freeland, Jr., who was born the following November. The story of who provided the funeral expenses for Milo Freeland, or a description of the funeral service, remain to be discovered. A photograph of GAR post 210, taken in 1893 and preserved at the Family History Center in Sheffield, provides a glimpse of the contingent of veterans who may have attended.

In February 1888, five years after Milo's death, Sophronia Freeland's lawyer filed a declaration for widow's pension with the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions. Sophronia's claim was based on the assertion that Milo had "contracted asthma in service and succumbed to an attack of pneumonia by reason thereof." The declaration was witnessed by two veterans of Co. A, Nathaniel H. Johnson, who had traveled with Milo from Sheffield to enlist, and James H. Jackson of Great Barrington. The presence of Jackson's signature on this form is a surprise, since the regimental roster lists him as wounded and missing after the battle of Fort Wagner. He was never mustered out of the regiment or accounted for as a prisoner. Sophronia also needed to prove that

she was married to Milo and that she had not remarried. To this end her lawyer filed an affidavit from her life-long friend Lucretia Clow, which established:

That she was well acquainted with this claimant [Sophronia Freeland]. That she lived with her most of the time from the time she was eight years old, until her marriage to the soldier, her late husband; That she went with [?] her husband to the House of Rev. Parker living at Stockbridge Mass., an Episcopal Minister, and acted as witness and bride's maid at the ceremony. And she does not know of any other witness to the ceremony now living. And I further declare that the clergyman who performed the marriage ceremony died in Stockbridge about 9 years ago. That she knows this fact, being present at his funeral. She further declares that when Milo J. Freeland was discharged from service he returned to Sheffield Mass. and came to her house soon after; and I saw him subsequently when he appeared to be suffering from asthma. And she believes he was at times afflicted with it, ever since he left the service till his death. [in the margin] Affidavit further declares that this was the first and only Marriage of the claimant and her husband.

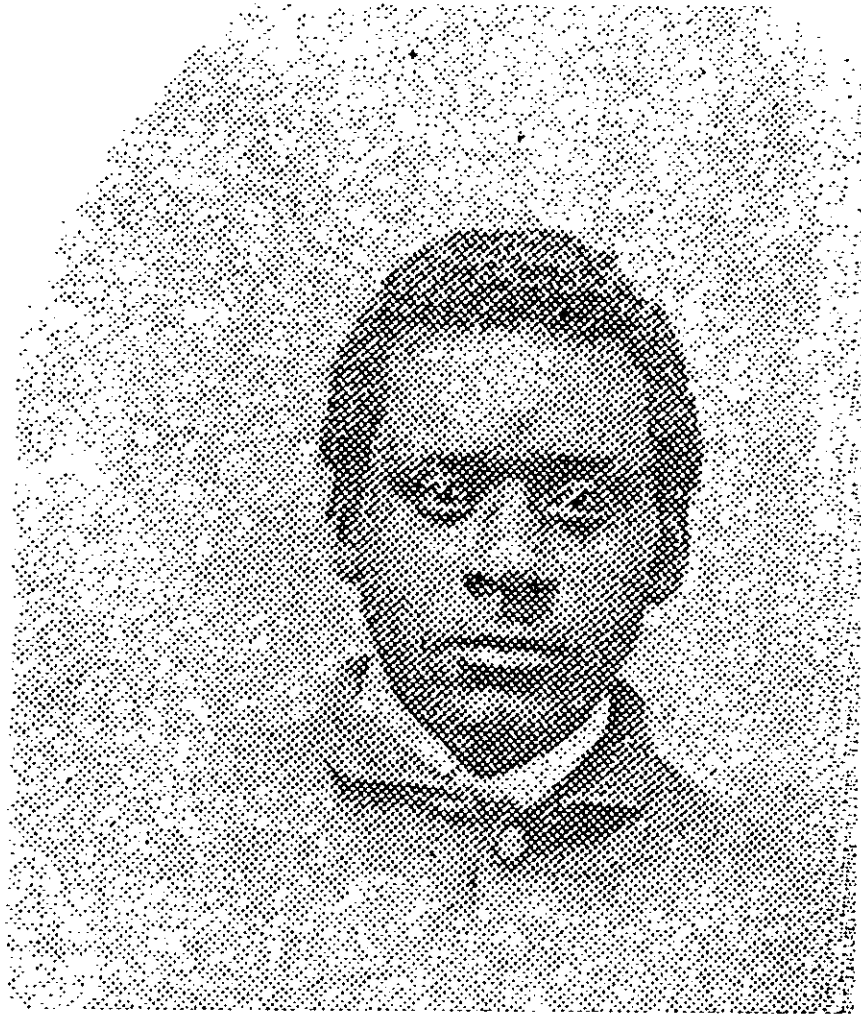
[The affidavit bears Lucretia's mark, since, unlike Sophronia, she could not write.]

By 1888 the federal government had become quite strict in review of applications for pension. Fraud in pension applications was not uncommon, and there are documented cases of soldiers applying for their pensions only to discover that it had already been granted to an imposter. Lucretia Clow's affidavit was not accepted as evidence of Milo's disability, and since the War Department had no record of disability or even hospitalization, Sophronia was not granted a pension.

By October 1915 Sophronia, now 71, had moved to West Haven, Connecticut, and hired another lawyer to investigate her pension application. Her new lawyer, unlike the first one, had not filed the appropriate papers showing power of attorney, so his inquiry to the status of her original pension application was rebuffed. But the Bureau of Pensions sent a complete response directly to Sophronia informing her that, pursuant to the Act of April 19, 1908, she no longer needed to prove that Milo's death was due to his army service. In November Sophronia's attorney refiled her application for a widow's pension, supplying the previously requested death certificate. In December the Bureau of Pensions requested either a marriage certificate or a second affidavit to corroborate Lucretia Clow's. Months later, in August 1916, Sophronia provided an affidavit from Jane Freeland and Frank Darling, both in their seventies and still living in Sheffield. It is not clear whether Jane was Milo's sister or sister-in-law. Sophronia also obtained a letter from the Rev. George G. Merrill, the current rector of St. Paul's in Stockbridge, attesting to the validity of her marriage. In the end, the Bureau of Pensions rejected Rev. Merrill's letter for lack of a seal, and added to its list of demands, among other things, a copy of Milo Freeland's signature, and his date and place of birth. Either Sophronia finally died, or she was simply too exhausted to pursue her claim for a widow's pension. Though the federal government finally acquiesced to the demands of the 54th for equal pay, it did not yield to Sophronia's lawyers.

In the years that followed, memory of Milo Freeland's patriotism faded from the community. His gravestone was broken cleanly in half and crudely repaired, probably before the cemetery census of 1934. In the late 1970s the stone was broken again, into three pieces, by a fallen tree. Two of the three pieces, containing the whole of the inscription, are preserved. The stone is now being replicated in granite by area residents with the same care and devotion given to the original. The

replica will be installed at the gravesite in the Hillside Cemetery on April 20, 1996 on the 113th anniversary of Milo Freeland's death. Plans are being made to display the remaining pieces of the original at a local museum while researchers continue to uncover the story of Milo Freeland and his fellow soldiers from the Berkshires.



Tri-Corners History Council

Please reply to:
25 West 43rd St. Room 2102
New York, NY 10036
October 24, 1995

Mr. Benny White
100 Taunton Avenue
Hyde Park, MA 02126

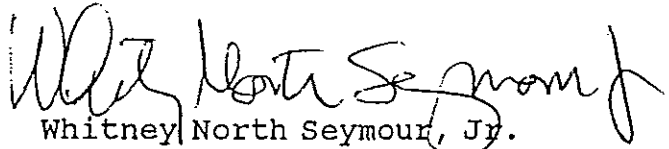
Dear Mr. White:

I am writing to follow up on your recent telephone conversation with Walter Arbo concerning Milo Freeland of Company A of the 54th Massachusetts.

The Tri-Corners History Council is hoping to arrange for the unveiling and rededication of the new Milo Freeland tombstone at his gravesite in the East Canaan, Conn. Cemetery on Saturday, April 20, 1996 (parade starting at 11 AM). We would be grateful if you could provide a 54th Massachusetts Color Guard for this event. We understand that it will be necessary for us to cover your expenses.

These plans are still tentative but we believe the timetable is realistic and therefore would be appreciative if you would put us in your 1996 schedule for April 20. A self-addressed return envelope is enclosed so you can let us know when your schedule is set. Many thanks.

Sincerely,


Whitney North Seymour, Jr.
Secretary

cc: Walter Arbo

Tri-Corners History Council

Please reply to:
Box 363
Salisbury, CT 06068

October 26, 1995

Stanley Ralph
Commander, VFW
104 S. Canaan Road
Canaan, CT 06048

Re: Milo Freeland Day

Dear Mr. Ralph:

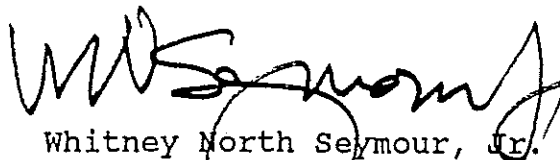
This is to confirm our request that your post help organize a parade and ceremony next April 20 to mark the unveiling and rededication of a new tombstone marking the grave of Milo Freeland in the East Canaan Cemetery. The parade will be led by a color guard from the 54th Massachusetts reenactment group, representing Freeland's regiment, and the parade itself will be limited to veterans and color guards from the veteran organizations in Canaan, Cornwall, Falls Village, Lakeville, Millerton, Salisbury, Sharon and Sheffield.

Would you be willing to serve as the host organization for these groups and invite them to participate? A tentative schedule is enclosed.

All of this is still in the planning stages and is still preliminary but we believe it will proceed as planned.

We still must raise \$3,000 to pay for the cost of the replacement stone. You were nice enough to suggest a possible contribution from your post. Would you inquire how much the post would be willing to contribute and let me know? Your help will be much appreciated.

Sincerely,



Whitney North Seymour, Jr.
Secretary
(212) 869-2212

Tri-Corners History Council

Please reply to:
Box 363
Salisbury, CT 06068

October 25, 1995

Scott E. Heth
114 King Hill Road
Sharon, CT 06069

Dear Mr. Heth:

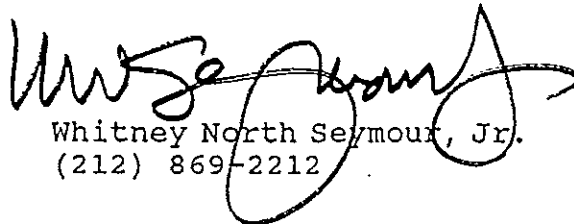
On Saturday, April 20, 1996, we are planning to hold a ceremony at East Canaan to mark the rededication of the replacement tombstone for Milo Freeland, said to be the first African-American to volunteer for service in the Union Army during the Civil War.

Tentative plans call for a short parade from East Canaan Congregational Church to the East Canaan Cemetery, followed by a brief ceremony and a picnic.

Would you and your colleagues in the Salisbury Band be willing to participate in the parade and then provide a band concert during the picnic following the parade? Could you also arrange to have the Rotary Club Bandstand made available for this purpose, or advise us how to do so?

Many thanks.

Sincerely,



Whitney North Seymour, Jr.
(212) 869-2212

