

Avon man answered Lincoln's call during Civil War

By Terri Wilson

President • Avon Historical Society

*"You are pioneers of the liberty of your race." — Frederick Douglass
New Haven, Conn. • Jan. 29, 1864*

IN HONOR of Black History Month, allow me to introduce you to an Avon resident who, as a common man, took an uncommon role 156 years ago in our American Civil War.

Pvt. Leverett Holden was one of over 900 African-American men in Connecticut who answered the call of President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 and joined the Connecticut 29th Regiment Volunteer Infantry (Colored). He was a resident of Avon at the time of his enlistment and he returned to live out his life here.

The Civil War ran from April 1861 to April 1865. The losses on both sides were overwhelming. Fresh Union troops were always needed, but the idea of enlisting African-American soldiers did not sit well with most in Congress.

Lincoln introduced the Emancipation Proclamation on New Year's Day 1863 and it was ultimately approved by Congress in 1864. By then, Connecticut



Union headstone of Pvt. Leverett Holden, East Avon Cemetery, Avon

had about 40,000 white men serving in 28 regiments. The Connecticut 29th (and a smaller 30th regiment) formed in December 1863 and departed from New Haven in January 1864 after hearing a rousing speech by famed abolitionist (and

Holden was among 900 African-Americans in Connecticut 29th

HIGHLIGHTS OF AVON HISTORY

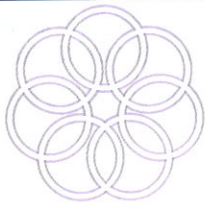
escaped slave) Frederick Douglass, who encouraged them by saying, "You are the pioneers of the liberty of your race."

The 29th took an active role in many later battles of the war, mostly in the South. They mustered out in October 1865 from Brownsville, Texas, and were honorably discharged in New Haven, Conn., in November 1865. Leverett was paid \$78.40 for his clothing allowance and \$6 for his arms, and he was owed \$100 by the government as his bounty for joining.

Who was Avon's Leverett Holden?

His enlistment papers of December 1864 state that he was born in Vernon, Conn., in 1825 (I was unable to find a definitive record of his birth). Along with many of his comrades, he was illiterate, so he gave his personal details verbally.

The U.S. census of 1850 lists Holden as living in the Wadsworth household



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HAILING A HERO

Descendants of the Connecticut 29th Regiment Volunteer Infantry (Colored) rededicate Pvt. Leverett Holden's grave in East Avon Cemetery in February 2014. Holden has no recorded descendants.

on Prospect Hill in Hartford. Today that house, built in 1828, is the oldest home in the West End on the corner of Albany Avenue. It operated as an inn until 1862.

The then-newly ordained Rev. James Pennington, an escaped slave and later a nationally famous African-American orator and abolitionist, spoke out against slavery in 1856 as the new minister of the Talcott Street Church in Hartford. That

speech took place in Gillette's Grove, which is known today to be the area where Aetna and the Mark Twain House are located. Not far from the Wadsworth house, would Holden have had the opportunity to hear this speech?

It is believed that Leverett left the Wadsworth employ prior to 1860 and traveled west over Talcott Mountain, settling in Avon. He does not appear in the

census of 1860. While in the Connecticut 29th, he was injured at the Battle of Petersburg (Virginia) in 1864 and treated at an X Corp Flying Hospital, which treated only African-American troops.

Coincidentally, Clara Barton, who later founded the American Red Cross, was stationed at that same Flying Hospital as a nurse. Could he have been treated by

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HOLDEN — continued from page 7

her, or did he know her? By the census of 1870, Holden is listed as living with Martha Williams in Avon in a small house on West Avon Road. In November 1869, he is listed in the ledger of the Avon Congregational Church as being paid \$1.75 for cleaning bricks from the church chimney.

As it turns out, the minister of the church from 1869-1871 was Rev. Henry G. Marshall, captain of the Connecticut 29th, so Holden probably received that job through that relationship. We also know he cut wood for Mrs. Hadsell, who owned a home and a store on East Main Street (Route 44).

at Criscuolo Park, on the corner of James and Chapel Streets in New Haven, near where the regiment left to join the Civil War. The monument contains the engraved names of all 900 men of color, by their town of enlistment, on black granite stones.

Erected in 2008, it is the most recent monument in Connecticut to the Civil War. Included is a center stone with images of soldiers and a list of their battles.

Two other men enlisted in Avon, but they were not residents.

The Connecticut 29th and Massachusetts 54th are the only African-American regiments that retained their identity upon

The Connecticut 29th and Massachusetts 54th are the only African-American regiments that retained their identity upon returning from the war.

Pvt. Leverett Holden died on Oct. 10, 1877 at age 56. He is buried in the East Avon Cemetery in a grave segregated from the others. In honor of his service, the Avon Historical Society rededicated his grave in February 2014, using the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) ceremony of 1919. Descendants of the Connecticut 29th brought their replica regimental flag and participated in the ceremony.

In honor of Holden's service in the 29th, I place a U.S. flag and GAR medallion on his grave every May. The GAR, a veterans group formed right after the Civil War, was the precursor of the American Legion.

The story of the 29th is a generally unknown story in Connecticut. It is worth learning more, especially during Black History Month. It is also worth a visit to a dramatic monument dedicated to the 29th

returning from the war. All others were incorporated into combined federal military units. The story of the Massachusetts 54th is told in the award-winning movie *Glory*. The descendants of the 29th actively participate in parades and give talks in schools and public gatherings about their ancestors' service.

The remnants of the original Connecticut 29th regimental flag have been removed from storage in the State Capitol's cellar and hold a place of honor encased in the underground walkway to the Legislative Office Building. + www.conn29th.org

Thanks to these sources for providing detailed info: *Avon Free Public Library's Local History Room*; *"Avon, Connecticut: An Historical Story"* by M. Francis MacKie; *Hartford Preservation Alliance Magazine*, 2/2009; *CT State Library*; *U.S. census data online*; *National Archives*

SYMBOL OF FREEDOM

A bald eagle perches in Canton.



Photo by Wendy Rosenberg

COMMUNITY INTEL

Runner combats cancer, honored at Patriots game

TRACY SAPERSTEIN of Simsbury has been recognized at a New England Patriots game for her fundraising work to combat cancer. She's raised over \$200,000 in just five years for Boston's Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

She began running in 2014 and joined the Dana-Farber Marathon Challenge team to run the Boston Marathon and fundraise for innovative cancer research. She has run Boston four times, and five of the six major world marathons. Saperstein ran her 10th marathon in Tokyo in March 2019.

At a Patriots pregame ceremony in December, she received the Crown Royal "That Deserves a Crown" honor as a Pats fan who's made major contributions to the New England community, via her marathon challenges and other fundraising events.

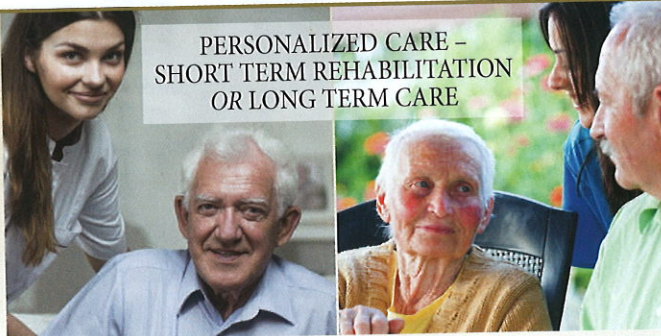
In 2017, she ran Boston in memory of a cancer patient and teen artist, Tatyana. Using Tatyana's artwork, Saperstein had an image custom-printed on some socks — and founded TatySocks.

The nonprofit's slogan: "DeFeating Cancer Two Socks at a Time." All proceeds are donated to cancer research. The original order sold out fast, and subsequent orders with designs by other cancer patients have sold well too. + www.tatysocks.com

UNICO Citizens of Year

THE AVON CHAPTER of UNICO National has given volunteers Karen Finocchio and Marybeth Twohig the 2019 Avon Citizen of the Year Award. Since 1986, they have led efforts at the Church of Saint Ann in Avon to prepare meals for Hartford's ImmaCare Emergency Shelter. To volunteer, call 860-675-4882. +

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