African Americans and the Grand Army of the Republic in Illinois

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The chronicles of the African American soldier in the Civil War have been successfully recorded in the annals of American history. Once the political and military necessities of President Abraham Lincoln aligned, African Americans both slave and free, made a valuable contribution to the Union cause and its subsequent victory. At the conclusion of the war the bronze soldiers in blue from Illinois returned to their communities and were joined by many of their United Stated Colored Troops comrades; individuals who were attracted to the Prairie State by the allure of its urban centers as well as the richness of its fertile heartland. It was not long before these men became aware of a fledgling, grass roots group consisting of former Union veterans called the Grand Army of the Republic. This group eventually progressed into a politically and socially powerful national entity stretching over a ninety year period during which it produced a rich and colorful history. However, conspicuously absent from the Illinois historical record is an account of the black veterans that joined a number of the eight hundred local branches that eventually dotted the landscape from Cairo to the Wisconsin border.

Routinely referred to as the GAR, the organization was formed in Springfield in 1866 and quickly expanded to other states, boasting a national membership of 409,489 by 1890.[1] Below the national headquarters were "departments", which in most cases were organized by states. Departments were authorized to go forth and recruit veterans, and when sufficient numbers were conscripted, the men were formed into "posts". In many aspects, the GAR reflected a military operation. Men were mustered into and out of the local posts, and were dropped from the rolls for nonpayment of dues or other violations of rules or policies. Established based on the tenets of loyalty, fraternity, and charity, the GAR clearly was operating counter to the social mores of the times in that the organization did not "officially" bar African American membership. Evidence shows that within the first year of its existence, African

Americans were being brought into the GAR, albeit in segregated posts.[2] Throughout the first two decades, it is apparent that local posts were left to determine the fate of African American applicants. The default decision was to assimilate them into white posts, but in geographical areas where significant numbers of black veterans resided, numerous all-black posts were granted charters.[3] Admittance to mainstream posts was not automatic, as one African American veteran discovered in 1887 when he was refused membership in the Worthen Post at Murphysboro, Illinois.[4] The lack of a definitive policy on the question of race came to the fore in the 1880s when the GAR experienced significant expansion into the Deep South. Led by Louisiana, departments in the Lower South argued vehemently for the total exclusion of black veterans, or at the very least the creation of a separate department for them. The Department of Illinois, in their 23rd annual encampment held in 1889, voiced it's disapproval of such harsh measures, providing some meaningful insight into their relationship with the African American veteran.[5]

This willingness of Illinois veterans to commingle with their black brothers warrants closer scrutiny given the history of race relations in the state. Article XIV of the 1848 Constitution of Illinois directed the General Assembly to stop the practice of owners bringing slaves into the state and then freeing them, and also sought to prohibit free blacks from setting up residence within its borders.[6] Five years later, legislation was enacted making it a crime for free blacks to move into the state or for others to assist them in that regard.[7] Despite these attempts to control the growth of the black population of the state, the coming of the Civil War would prove to be very detrimental to their ambitions. "As Union troops moved South, many blacks were confiscated, taken north and placed into virtual prison camps. These slaves did not lose their status officially, but instead were labeled by General Benjamin F. Butler as 'contrabands' of war.

As the war progressed in the West, many blacks were taken to contraband camps in Cairo."[8] The chorus of protest from Southern Illinoisans, many of which a generation or two earlier had themselves migrated from Tennessee and Kentucky, was deafening. While they "demonstrated overt racism the area was representative of many sections of the state. White populations in northern and central Illinois expressed an equal detestation for blacks."[9] This was borne out months later when the Federal government "ordered the disbursement of Cairo blacks into the interior of Illinois."[10] The period from the end of the war to the turn of the century was punctuated by frequent clashes between white laborers and black strikebreakers, further exacerbating existing racial intolerance. "Towns and cities throughout Illinois in the post-Civil War generation began to bar blacks completely or to speak of 'ordinances' that forbade blacks from remaining in town after sunset."[11] Against this backdrop of bigotry, one must hold in high regard the overall integrity of rank and file members of the Illinois GAR and their fierce commitment to their comrades in arms.

Nationally, GAR membership approached roughly 410,000 during the apex of its existence. Clearly the organization attracted a sizable portion of the men, both black and white, who donned the Union blue. As asserted earlier, African American veterans in Illinois appear to have had few obstacles in their path to GAR membership. There were distinct advantages to those who decided to join the GAR. Given their limited education and generally poor economic status, members found access to literate comrades a precious commodity. "The Grand Army proved of considerable value to former African-American soldiers with their Civil War pension applications."[12] "The Grand Army's help with pension claims increased the success rate of black members, especially compared to the applications of other African- American veterans."[13] In the case of USCT soldier Cyrus Greenleaf, assistance came from another Union veteran

whose humanitarian efforts were essential in securing him a place in the Illinois Soldiers and Sailors Home in Quincy. A resident of Springfield prior to 1881, Cyrus established a relationship with Joseph S. Thompson in the fall of 1886. By 1901 Cyrus is advanced in age and struggling with deteriorating health. Cognizant of this, as well as the fact that the old man has lost his discharge papers, and has several grown sons whom Joseph deems as "worthless", he comes to his aid. Hoping to exert some influence in his current capacity as quartermaster of Springfield's Stevenson Post (white), Joseph pens a support letter on post stationery in which he refers to his fellow veteran as a "splendid good old man."[14]

Another important membership bonus was the prestige that came from this association with the GAR; a benefit that oftentimes provided dividends for the soldier in both the black and white communities. "It was one of the few organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, where black and white men encountered each other on grounds of at least nominal equality."[15] "Black veterans treasured their inclusion in the Grand Army as they had valued being part of the Union army during the Civil War and strenuously fought efforts to marginalize their formal position in the organization. If being a soldier proved their manhood, being a full member of the GAR reaffirmed it."[16] Veteran status and GAR membership surely aided Hamilton Stokes in achieving a measure of credibility and stature in the town of Monmouth, where he lived for over forty years until his death in 1916. A member of Post 330, Hamilton, despite holding lackluster jobs such as a day laborer, whitewasher and janitor, received a five paragraph article on the front page of the city paper when he died. He was credited with having "many friends in both races, and was perhaps one of the best known colored residents of the entire city."[17]

It is difficult to measure how many black veterans applied for and received acceptance into the ranks of the Illinois GAR. Unfortunately, such statistics do not look as if they were created by the organization. However, a large number of the quarterly post muster rolls survive, along with the rosters of deceased comrades which were routinely published in the annual reports of the Department of Illinois, making it possible to assemble a fair amount of data.

The question of segregated GAR posts in Illinois is a most intriguing one. A preponderance of the material written about the black participation in the GAR strongly suggests that African Americans were routinely ushered into their own posts, once their numbers in the existing integrated post were sufficient to initiate the process.[18] However, when the rationale of race is supplanted by population density (of GAR members) in a given area, it is certainly plausible to reason that the formation of a black post was identical to that of additional white ones within the same geographic location. It would seem that shared cultural experiences, proximity to the meeting location, or the desire to play a leadership role could all be ample motivation to establish a new post. To date, research has uncovered four African American posts in the state located in the cities of Chicago, Springfield, Murphysboro, and Cairo. In all likelihood, there are several others still awaiting discovery once a more methodical search of the extant post records is undertaken.

John Brown Post 50 in Chicago was the oldest and most enduring of the black posts. One of twenty posts organized in 1879, Post 50 chose as its commander William Landre, and selected William H. Smith and Enos Bond as their delegates for the 14th Annual Encampment of the Department of Illinois. In November, the post participated with the rest of the department in a ceremony to welcome General Grant back to Illinois, and by the end of the year, membership had more than doubled to forty-two soldiers.[19] But, the following year was an ominous one

for the organization. Beset with problems in the first half of the year, at the end of August the post reported to its superiors that it had decided by a vote of 13 to 3 to turn in their charter.[20] The department responded quickly to the crisis and by the middle of September was able to say that "John Brown Post No. 50, has been disbanded, and reorganized, and is now in good working order."[21]

As the new century dawned, Post 50 was enjoying record growth. The post was now meeting at 2730 State Street in a place where the interior décor showcased pictures honoring their fallen hero and post namesake, John Brown. Yet Commander DeMond and his 125 comrades had to sense that many of them were reaching the twilight of their extraordinary lives of valor and sacrifice. In another fifteen years their number had been virtually cut in half, to sixty-four, and in another decade it was down to thirty-two.[22] However, those who thought these sable warriors could no longer wage battle had made a serious miscalculation. The department commander submitted this account in 1924 of an incident involving Post 50:

> Next, to my surprise, war was started in Africa, and John Brown Post No. 50 had risen in rebellion, and proposed to remove the present Commander. This was brought to me in a bill, purporting to be charges (but not in form) stating that the Commander had appropriated the funds of the Post in an unlawful manner; being arbitrary, and not conducting the affairs of the Post according to the rules and regulations of the Order. After bringing the parties together, and finding no real cause for action, I dismissed the complaint. After some Commanderly advice, and counsel for future action, at my suggestion they shook hands, and returned to their work as a Post, sadder but wiser men.[23]

By 1934, with their numbers dwindling to single digits, the tiny contingent of survivors from John Brown Post 50 had come to the realization that they could no longer run the post, and surrendered their charter. They did so in an elaborate ceremony at the Progressive Community Church on the first of July.[24] A few joined other posts, but most members elected to become comrades-at-large, a category created to address the rapidly declining number of posts and "homeless" comrades. James H. Lewis was the last verifiable Post 50 member to succumb to the ravages of Time, dying in 1944 just shy of his 104th birthday. Ironically due to his longevity, he was one of the only African Americans to hold a key position in the Department of Illinois hierarchy; his highest office consisted of a brief appointment as Senior Vice Department Commander in 1940.[25]

On September 25th, 1945, James Harvey died at the age of one hundred. He was affiliated with the George H. Thomas Post 5 in Chicago, and was honored in the middle of August as the last surviving black Civil War veteran in Illinois.[26] If truthfully bestowed, then Mr. Harvey's demise closes the book on the saga of African Americans and the Grand Army of the Republic in Illinois.

Notes

1. *Historical Journal of the Department of Illinois, Grand Army of the Republic* (Decatur, IL, 1951), 11.

2. Mary R. Dearing, *Veterans in Politics: The Story of the G.A.R.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 120.

3. Donald Robert Shaffer, "Marching On: African-American Civil War Veterans in Postbellum America, 1865-1951" (PhD diss., University of Maryland at College Park, 1996), 251-52.

4. Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, "GAR Posts in the State of Illinois," page 11, http://suvcw.org/garposts/il.pdf.

5. Wallace E. Davies, "The Problem of Race Segregation in the Grand Army of the Republic," *Journal of Southern History* 13, no. 3 (August 1947): 356-57, 360.

6. John H. Keiser, "Black Strikebreakers and Racism in Illinois, 1865-1900," *Illinois State Historical Society Journal* 65, no. 3 (1972): 313.

7. Johnetta L. Jones, "Negroes in Jackson County, 1850-1910" (master's thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1971), 17-18.

8. Dennis Frank Ricke, "Illinois Blacks through the Civil War: A Struggle for Equality" (master's thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1972), 215.

9. Ibid., ii.

10. Ibid., 234.

11. Keiser, "Black Strikebreakers," 326.

12. Shaffer, "Marching On," 264.

13. Ibid., 265.

14. J. S. Thompson to E. L. Higgins, Jany 29, 1901, folder 1090, RG 259.002, veterans' case files, Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL.

15. Shaffer, "Marching On," 268.

16. Ibid.

17. "Aged Colored Resident Dead," *Monmouth (IL) Daily Review*, February 28, 1916.

18. Shaffer, "Marching On," 251-252.

19. *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Encampment of Illinois Grand Army of the Republic* (1880), 43, 59, 62.

20. Wm. H. Smith et al. to [Department of Illinois], Aug 31, 1880, Grand Army of the Republic Collection, box 5, Manuscripts Department, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL.

21. *Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Encampment of Illinois Grand Army of the Republic* (1881), 102.

22. Chicago's Greetings to G.A.R. Veterans, folder 1, box 21, Illinois Writers Project: "Negro in Illinois" Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL; *Roster of Members of the Forty-ninth Annual Encampment of the Department of Illinois G.A.R.* (1915), 9; *Roster of Members of the Fifty-ninth Annual Encampment of the Department of Illinois G.A.R.* (1925), 7.

23. *Proceedings of the Fifty-eight Annual Encampment of Illinois Grand Army of the Republic* (1924), 46-47.

24. "Aged Vets of Civil War to Disband Post," *Chicago Defender*, July 7, 1934.

25. *Historical Journal*, 9-10; "Funeral Sunday for James Lewis, Civil War Vet," *Chicago Defender*, September 2, 1944.

26. "Honor Civil War Vet on 100th Birthday," *Chicago Defender*, August 11, 1945; "James Harvey, Civil War Vet, Dies; Aged 100," *Ibid.*, September 29, 1945.