

Celebrating Black History Month

Slave to soldier: George Martin's flight to freedom

BY PETE AMES
Town of Niagara Historian

As the Town of Niagara historian, I'm researching the lives of those buried in one of our local cemeteries.

Witmer Cemetery was originally the burying ground of the Witmer family, who settled here after arriving from Pennsylvania in 1811. The earliest gravestone in the cemetery is from 1828, but it's estimated that about 200 people have been buried there since.

I began my research at the front row, where a toppled headstone marked the final resting place of George Martin and Jane, his wife.

George's grandfather, Bryman Martin, was a free person of color in Virginia in 1810. George's father, Philip, a carpenter by trade, was also born free in Virginia. Before the Civil War, Virginia had one of the largest populations of free people of color, with about one in every eight people of African descent there being free. Some of these people were freed by their enslavers, or others who bought their freedom. Others were descended from Black men and indentured white women.

George Martin was neither. He was born into slavery on April 25, 1840. George's father married an enslaved woman named Jane (sometimes given as Jenny) in the mid-1830s, and she had five children.

Since colonial times, the partus doctrine (Partus Sequitur Ventrum) held that children inherited the status of their mother at birth so, despite their father being free, these children were all born legally enslaved.

George, his mother and four siblings (Lucy Ellen, Senora, Philip and Robert) remained enslaved until May 22, 1854, when they were freed following the death of their owner, Philip Burwell (the Burwells were a longstanding Virginia slave-owning family). Jane and Phillip quickly brought their family north to Pennsylvania with the aid of \$2.50 from one of Phillip's former employers.

The Martins lived firmly in the North, in Columbia, Pennsylvania, about 100 miles north of Washington, D.C. But like all African Americans in the North, they were under the constant threat of being abducted by Southerners or their agents and carried into slavery.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation came into effect on Jan. 1, 1863. It not only freed the slaves in the rebelling states, it also allowed for the enrollment of African Americans to fight for the freedom that could only be guaranteed by a victory of the Union.



George Martin's refurbished headstone in Witmer Cemetery is shown at a Town of Niagara Lions Club wreath-laying ceremony. (Lions Club photo)

On May 22, 1863, the War Department issued General Order 143 establishing the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The creation of the USCT provided an opportunity for action, and George Martin took it. He traveled to newly organized Camp William Penn outside of Philadelphia – the largest Black training facility in the North – and on July 3 he enlisted, ending up in Company C of the 3rd Regiment.

The 3rd was the first of 11 regiments, including some 10,500 Black soldiers, trained at William Penn. If they needed any reminder of the stakes, when Confederates stormed into Pennsylvania that June, they went on what has become known as "the slave hunt." Southerners and their sympathizers terrorized Black Pennsylvanians and carried them south – where they would be enslaved until death or emancipation.

More than 200,000 would join the U.S. Colored Troops. Frederick Douglass visited the camp on July 24 telling the men, many of them ex-slaves like himself: "The fortunes of the whole race for generations to come are bound up in the success or failure of the 3rd Regiment of colored troops from the North. You are a spectacle for men and angels. You are in a manner to answer the question: Can the Black man be a soldier? That we can now make soldiers of these men, there can be no doubt!"

The 3rd Regiment served at the sieges and capture of Fort Wagner and Fort Gregg near Charleston in late August and early September 1863. The regiment was then sent

to operate in Florida for the remainder of the war, where George Martin was discharged in Jacksonville on Oct. 31, 1865.

After the war, George's parents relocated to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where they lived out their lives. Jane passed away in 1871 and Philip in 1875. George, no doubt, visited them in Massachusetts before making his way to Elmira, New York, where he married Jane Decosta (?) in 1875.

They lived in Niagara, where George worked an eight-acre farm purchased with a mortgage for \$850. The Martins raised potatoes, producing 140 bushels in 1875. They had at least one child, Harry, born in about 1886.

Jane died in 1899 and their home was destroyed by fire in 1919. Afterward, George relocated to New York State Soldiers and Sailors Home in Bath, Steuben County, the largest of the state's veteran facilities, housing nearly 1,300 men.

George stayed at the Soldiers and Sailors Home until early September 1921 and then headed to Pontiac, Michigan, to live out the rest of his days. He died there on Jan. 3, 1924, and his body was shipped back to Niagara Falls, to be buried next to his wife, Jane, in the Witmer Cemetery.

Over the next hundred years or so, the foundation under George Martin's headstone settled and it fell over. Recently, the Town of Niagara Lions Club paid for a new foundation, had the stone reset and the plot landscaped. The Lions also sponsored a Hometown Heroes banner.

HONOR ROLL

NOW AVAILABLE ONLINE
To Find Your School's Honor Roll Listing
visit www.wnypapers.com
or scan the QR Code below



LEWISTON YOUTH Baseball IS BACK

REGISTER ONLINE TODAY AT
www.LewPortSports.com

Boys and Girls Age 4-16
Tee Ball – \$30
Baseball/Softball – \$60

Lewiston recreation is committed to following all safety guidelines and providing our young players with a safe, fun outdoor activity this spring!

For up to date information, follow our website and Facebook page at
www.facebook.com/LewistonBaseball

COACHES AND SPONSORS NEEDED!

THE SOUND OF THE CITY



• The GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK •

Sara Vaughn • Ella Fitzgerald • Lena Horne
Nat King Cole • Frank Sinatra • Tony Bennett

STREAMING LIVE AT WEBRRADIO.COM

The Youngstown Village Diner

425 Main St., Youngstown • 745-9858

The Diner will be closed
Monday March 1st thru
Tuesday March 9th for our
annual break...reopening on
Wednesday March 10th.

*As always... thank you all for
your amazing support...we
really appreciate all of you!*

Thank You
to Our Loyal Customers