

Chowan Discovery

Enriching the Roanoke-Chowan area and Beyond

RESEARCH, DOCUMENTING, PRESERVATION AND PRESENTATION

Speech for Juneteenth in Murfreesboro, June 19, 2021

By Marvin Tupper Jones

Good afternoon, I am Marvin Tupper Jones. My organization, the Chowan Discovery Group, researches, documents, preserves and presents the history of people of color mainly in Hertford County's Winton Triangle. Our website is www.chowandiscovery.org.

I'd like to thank the committee for inviting me to share this message with you. I look forward to attending next year's Juneteenth, and I am sorry I cannot be with you today.

It is fitting that today's Juneteenth is observed on this river park, for so many enslaved people freed themselves on the Meherrin and the Chowan Rivers.

Let us understand that Juneteenth is more about African Americans freeing themselves rather than being freed, and I will go on to explain.

The Civil War was fought over slavery. The war began in 1861 when enslavers shelled a United States coastal fort in Charleston Harbor. The enslavers forced the United States fort's commander to surrender. Eight months later in 1862, United States forces recaptured the Outer Banks, Elizabeth City and Edenton. Then, the Navy's gunboats ventured to Winton where enslavers fired upon the first U.S. gunboat to approach the wharf. It withdrew without casualties. The next day, it and several other U.S. gunboats returned, firing their cannons, landed troops in Winton and burned the town in revenge.

That day, February 20 1862, might have been the first day that our local African Americans freed themselves in large numbers and went away with the U.S. troops and the gunboats.

Beginning in May of the following year, African Americans living along and near the Meherrin, Chowan and Roanoke Rivers began enlisting in the United States Army. About 200,000 African Americans served in the United States Army and Navy during the Civil War. Perhaps a thousand of our region's men was among the soldiers and sailors.

Regiments were made up of more than a thousand soldiers. One of the regiments was called the 36th Regiment, Infantry, United States Colored. Men from Hertford, Northampton, Bertie and Gates were among those who enlisted. About twenty-six were from Hertford County. Their names will be called at the end of this message. Among these surnames are those that you recognize today such as Britt, Cooper, Gatling, Liverman, Parker, Riddick and Vaughn.

I mention these surnames because you may be descended from the heroes of the 36th and other African American regiments. I hope you will find that out. This is where I will tell you what the Hertford County men in the 36th Infantry accomplished and some of what they sacrificed.

Within months they raided the Elizabeth City area, destroyed rebel camps and supplies, and rescued over two thousand African Americans. Many of these United States African American soldiers were returning to their homes and bringing away their loved ones and friends.

Their next task was also unimaginable and ironic. At Point Lookout, Maryland for the first six months of 1864, the 36th Infantry guarded a large prison of captured rebels. Like the raid to Elizabeth City by formerly enslaved men, guarding rebel prisoners was very unnerving to the rebels in Richmond and elsewhere. John Lang died of smallpox at the camp. During this time, detachments of the 36th began crossing the Chesapeake Bay and raiding Virginia.

Ultimately, the 36th Infantry, United States Colored, along with other regiments, besieged Richmond and Petersburg for eleven months until the rebels fled both cities. In September 1864, Charles Mullen, Romulus Cooper and Joseph Wise were wounded at the great battle of New Market Heights outside of Richmond. Claiborne Miller was killed at that battle fighting slavery. The 36th Infantry took the honor of being the first United States soldiers to enter the defeated rebel capital. The 36th Infantry, including Hertford County men – who possibly may be your direct ancestors - defeated slavery.

The regiment's last act played a major role in Juneteenth. In June of 1865, they were on the way to the Mexican border in Texas during the time of Juneteenth. Their mission was to support patriotic Mexicans whose nation had been invaded by a force backed by European kings. Frank Williams died of pneumonia during his service there. The 36th Infantry and other African Americans returned to the east coast seven months later and were discharged from the United States Army. Enslavement was abolished, and our soldiers had entirely new and better lives to build on.

We were not taught the story of our Hertford County ancestors' successful fight for freedom. It was probably because it remained dangerous for our soldiers to pass on tales of African American courage and victory in the Jim Crow south. However, we have the ability to do so

now because of the efforts of the generations that reared us. I hope you will keep this story I told here, seek to learn more about African American victories for justice and play your own role the in expanding freedoms in the United States for all.

The names of our own Hertford County Civil War heroes of the 36th Regiment USC are:

David Berry

Eli Britt

Allen Cooper

George Cooper, Corporal

Henderson Cooper, Sergeant

Littleton Cooper, First Sergeant

Romulus Cooper

Solon Cooper, Corporal

Benjamin Gatlin [sic]

Jacob Gatlin

James H. Hunt, First Sergeant

Richard Jones

John Lang

Isaac Liverman

Moses Liverman, Corporal

Claiborne Miller

Charles Mullen, Corporal

William Newsom

Rochus Parker

Henry Purdy, Sergeant

Rueben Riddick, Corporal

Gilbert Skinner

Samuel Sutton

Thomas Vaughn

Frank Williams

Joseph Wise

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