

RESEARCHING MY FAMILY OF SOLDIERS AT NARA

By Marvin T. Jones

Seventeen members of the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) in my family, our own stores, a fairground and our own airstrips – that is what fascinated Alice Harris enough about my community to practically take me in hand to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C. Alice is the President of the AAHGS-Central Maryland Chapter. The Winton Triangle of Hertford County, where I grew up, is located in rural northeastern North Carolina and is a 260-year-old landowning community of color. Our recorded history pre-dates the Lost Colony and Jamestown, and I'm on the quest to produce many works about our 427-year-old history.

The weather was still miserable in April when I met Alice at NARA. She got me signed in, orientated and registered. I learned that many Union Army soldiers, their widows or minor children, and even dependent parents applied for and were granted pensions after the Civil War. Pension records often contain a wealth of information, including affidavits, accounts of events during the War, marriage records and genealogical information. Alice filled out the forms for four pension files of ancestors on the Robbins side of my family. Eight members of the Robbins family had served with the USCT during the Civil War. My great-grandfather Andrew Jackson Robbins, whose farm we still own and use, was one of them.

We had an early lunch in the NARA cafe while we waited for the pension files to be pulled. Alice wanted to hear more about the history of the Winton Triangle community. Later, we found that three of the four files we requested had been pulled. The pension records of my great-grandfather Andrew Jackson Robbins and those of his cousins John and Augustus Robbins were ready for review in the NARA Research Room.

Most pension records were turned over to NARA by the Veterans Administration (VA) early in the 20th century. However, pension files that were still active at that time, including that of Parker D. Robbins whose widow was still receiving payments then, are still at the VA. Parker D. Robbins is well-known in North Carolina history. I have submitted a request to the VA for his pension record.

With joy, excitement and anticipation, Alice and I laid out the first file, that of Parker's cousin John Robbins. Heretofore, I knew nothing about him. I first became aware of John when I saw his name next to the names of Parker and Augustus on the wall of the African American Civil War Memorial, a few miles from where I live in northwest Washington, District of Columbia. John, Parker and Augustus Robbins both served in the 2nd Regiment U.S. Colored Cavalry. We learned that John was wounded in 1862 near Suffolk, Virginia in a skirmish with Confederate soldiers. The right side of John's head was cut by a saber. The clearest testimony came from Robert Dollard, an officer who subsequently was appointed Attorney General of South Dakota. He wrote in his affidavit that John H. Robbins was in:



Andrew Jackson Robbins

Company "D" 2nd U.S.C. Cavalry in its engagement with the enemy in Suffolk, Virginia, where said John H. Robins was wounded, that [Dollard] remembers distinctly the remarkable escape from death of said Robins in the struggle where he was wounded; that he was struck on the head by his assailants in a hand to hand conflict (in which we were all engaged) with a saber, and it was regarded at that time as marvelous that he was not instantly killed thereby.

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Dollard went on to relate:

It is proper that I should be able on this to pay some slight tribute to a member of a company that twenty-six years ago, to-day, at Jones Bridge, on the Chickahominy River, did itself and the race to which its rank and files belonged a credit that ought to be imperishable in history, although injustice has denied it such a place.

Here Dollard refers to the 2nd Cavalry's role in the capture of City Point and Bermuda Hundred on the James River. This was crucial to the ultimate conquest of Petersburg and Richmond.

That day at NARA, Alice introduced me to Dr. Richard Reid of the University of Guelph in Ontario. Dr. Reid, who was researching that day, wrote a book, **Freedom for Themselves**, that focuses on four USCT regiments from North Carolina. I have stayed in touch with Dr. Reid. I learned from his book that many USCTs suffered from illnesses, stresses, wounds, unrelenting discrimination and poverty after the Civil War. John H. Robbins' condition was a clear example.

John received his first medical treatment three months after the skirmish. He never married, did not live near the three of his Robbins cousins who fared much better than he. He seems to have suffered alone in Portsmouth, Virginia for more than 30 years, having lost sight in his right eye from the saber wound. I think of him whenever I drive across the Chickahominy River during my monthly trips to North Carolina.

Sergeant-Major Parker Robbins, and his brother, Quartermaster Sergeant Augustus Robbins, enlisted with John in the 2nd Regiment, U.S.C. Cavalry. Before the War, Parker and his wife Elizabeth owned

a 102-acre farm in Colerain, North Carolina. He was a farmer and mechanic. After the War, both brothers served in the North Carolina State Legislature. They were recently honored in a General Assembly resolution sponsored by Annie W. Mobley (D), North Carolina House of Representatives, who now holds their delegate seat.

After Parker left the General Assembly, he served as postmaster of Harrellsville, a town between Colerain and Cofield, North Carolina. During that time, Parker received two patents, for a cotton plant cultivator and a saw-sharpening machine. He left the Winton Triangle area and moved to Duplin County. There, he ran a saw mill, built houses and operated a steamboat on the Cape Fear River. This coming January, we will erect a North Carolina Highway Historical Marker to honor Parker David Robbins.

I also discovered a little about Augustus Robbins, including his military and legislative service, and that he owned a store in Windsor, North Carolina. I did

not know where he was buried. I also learned that his son John attended Leonard Medical School at Shaw University. I wondered if John became a physician. Finally, I did the simplest thing – I searched on the Internet for “Augustus Robbins” and found one solitary search hit. Augustus co-founded St. Elmo Baptist Church in Windsor, a town twenty-five miles from the Winton Triangle. I knew I would find the answers in Windsor.

On a visit to Windsor, I arrived at St. Elmo and pulled my car alongside the small cemetery next to the church. There I found a four-foot high monument for “Dr. John Robbins,” the son! Behind his stone was a double monument for his parents, Leah Robbins and “Hon. Augustus Robbins.” I had my answers. I found Augustus and learned that his son John finished medical school and was indeed a physician.

Augustus' pension record revealed that while in military service, he fell off his horse, injuring his back; that he and his wife Leah married in an Episcopal church in Portsmouth, Virginia several days after his 1 January 1864 enlistment; and that his son John was born in 1867. Widows of Union soldiers were required to provide proof of marriage to obtain a widow's pension. Leah, after becoming a widow, had difficulty providing proof that she had been married to Augustus for over 60 years. Despite Augustus' list of ailments, it was especially pleasing to hold and read his letter to the pension office.

Of my great-grandfather, Andrew Jackson “Jack” Robbins, I had learned much from his youngest son, who was born months before Jack's death in 1903. It helped that I grew up on part of his large farm in the Winton Triangle. I even possess his



Sergeant-Major Parker Robbins

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first grave monument. Jack and his brother Noah Robbins were in the 34th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry, and both grew up around Parker, Augustus and John, all free people of color.

Jack's pension file was pretty thick since he had 16 children by three wives. His pleas for a pension came with affidavits from other veterans of the USCT in the community. All of them were in the 14th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, and one was Jack's brother-in-law. Some of these soldiers I had researched elsewhere, and I was delighted to see them show up in Jack's pension record.

I suspected that Jack Robbins was literate. I knew he provided a teacher for some of his children and that he probably supported his neighbors, one of whom served in the 2nd Cavalry, in establishing a community school, a school that my mother attended. My, was it neat to find his letter to the pension office! The double-sided writing has bled through, making for a poorly scanned image. But it is still great that a century after his death, one of Andrew Jackson Robbins's descendants got to touch his very words! So far, I have found that three of the Robbins cousins wrote letters shortly after the War.

Jack and his brother Noah each reported respiratory problems from exposure to heat, cold and humidity and the stress of building Union fortifications in South Carolina and Florida. Dr. Reid's book noted that non-combat conditions for USCTs frequently lead to permanent impairment or death. In Brazos Santiago, Texas where Parker, Augustus and John ended their service, scurvy, worse exposure and more hostility were added to the dangers of service for soldiers of color.

Susan Victoria Robbins, Jack's third and last wife, managed to outlive Jack by almost 50 years and had the task of raising her step-children in addition to her

own two boys. Susan kept records of her pension payments which I found a few years ago. Her claims in the pension file compare well with her personal notes. In June 1904, a special examiner from the pension office visited Susan. He described her as "a woman of some education and appears to be refined and truthful and bears a good reputation." This goes along with Susan's reputation as a fair and supportive step-mother of all of Jack's children.

Until Alice brought me to NARA, I had little information about Jack's first wife, Harriet Hayes, who is my great-grandmother. She was buried in Harrellsville, North Carolina, outside of the Winton Triangle, where most people of color were enslaved. She was buried under a Harrellsville church that was expanded over her grave. Neither she nor her mother were listed in census records before 1870. Harriet never lived in the Winton Triangle, among its long-standing community of free people. I suspect that she was a slave.

In Jack's pension record, I found an affidavit of particular interest. The witness, a lady who knew Harriet all of her life, cited Harriet's name and mentioned that her mother was married to a Ben Morris. I later found that a 40-year-old Benjamin Morris from Hertford County enlisted in the Union Navy – another pension record for me to pull. Two affidavits cited that Harriet died around 12 September 1881. She was 31-years old and may have died in childbirth. A witness testified that he helped bear her corpse to the grave and bury her.

My genealogy is loaded with the free ancestors who are traced to the 1600s and 1700s. Yet, it is my great-grandmother Harriet who haunts me the most. Jack's pension records provide new clues that could lead me to a fuller story about Harriet Hayes Robbins, a mother



Andrew Jackson Robbins with wife Susan Victoria Archer Robbins and their son, Charlie

of seven, who married into a brave family. She lived closer to slavery than most of my ancestors. She certainly saw the struggles of Confederate and Union soldiers as they moved back and forth against each other in her neighborhood. I am sure she saw slaves and whites escape to nearby Union lines and gunboats. She also may have escaped.

So far, from the pension files, I have learned about the suffering of war, its lasting effects on the health and well being of soldiers and how their community of kin, comrades and neighbors came to their aid with their testimonies. I learned more of the structure of their community and the people who each soldier and his widow knew. I learned about their landownership, marriages, children, friends and their loss of loved ones.

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Since Alice took me to NARA, I have made several more visits, each time coming back with a richer understanding of my community. In the past year, I have presented the Winton Triangle's Civil War History to various groups and on radio and television.

At a time when income, investments, education and even faith and family are being devalued, many of us can find new values within ourselves when we realize how many of us have ancestors who went forth to enlist in the USCT to see that everyone in this nation is a free person. When you take ownership of this, you take ownership of being an American. When you enrich your self-value, you enrich everyone who means something to you. That is what it takes to rise.

As I exhaust the available records held by the people of the Winton Triangle, the pension records of the NARA offer new sources for the research of my beloved home community. I am also allowed to pay a greater homage to our USCTs and their families. Other relatives served in the 14th Regiment, U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery which had over 40 soldiers from the small Winton Triangle community of free people of color. The forgotten witnesses in these pension records will tell me much about my community in its post-war years, years out of which came many successes from the expanded freedoms that the USCT won for us all.

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*Marvin T. Jones is the Executive Director of the Chowan Discovery Group (CDG) <www.chowandiscovery.org>. The mission of the CDG is to research, document, preserve and present the 400+ year-old history of the landowning tri-racial people of color of the Winton Triangle, an area centered in Hertford County, North Carolina. Jones has written and produced a stage production, *The Winton Triangle*. The book, *Carolina Genesis: Beyond the Color Line*, features Jones' summary of the Triangle's history. Jones began this project a decade ago by scanning the photograph collection of relatives and neighbors. The Winton Triangle digital collection now has over 6,000 files of photographs, documents, maps, audio and video recordings.*

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