

The Bugle Call Echoes

San Joaquin Valley Civil War Round Table

September 2004

Vol. 12 Issue 8

President's Message

Hello again to all.

As a reminder, the *Civil War Revisited* is coming up this weekend at Kearney Park. The dates are Sept 25th and 26th. This year will feature the reenactment at Spotsylvania. If you are planning on being there, I'm sure that Pattie Spencer could still use a few volunteers to help with our booth. You can call Pattie about volunteering at 304-8170.

The annual fund raiser will be coming up in Oct. If you have any Civil War books or other memorabilia that you would like to donate for a raffle or silent auction please contact me or any of the officers or board members so that arrangements can be made. Donations are appreciated and, as usual, all monies raised go toward the important work of battlefield preservation.

In Nov we will be holding elections for officers for the SJVCWRT for the upcoming two-year period 2005-2006. All volunteers for the ballot are appreciated. This organization relies on the help of all members and needs you to step forward and volunteer. You will find the extra effort that you put in to be very rewarding and it will enhance your enjoyment of our SJVCWRT.

This month our featured speaker will be Susan Williams from Sacramento who will talk about *Photography in the Civil War*. We look forward to Susan's visit and talk. Photography and sketches have done much to help tell the tale of this great conflict. This talk will help us appreciate these early pioneers of photography. Our meeting this month will be on Sept 30th at the Ramada Inn.

Tom

Civil War Photography topic at Sept. 30th meeting

Susan Williams is an Associate Parks and Recreation Specialist with California State Parks. She works in the Planning Division in Sacramento.

Susan received a fellowship from the Smithsonian Institution to conduct research on the Civil War photographs of Captain Andrew J. Russell for her Master's thesis. She received her degree from the University of California, Riverside, in 1978.

In 2000 and 2001, she received additional fellowships from the Virginia Historical Society to continue her research and write the article "Richmond Again Taken, Reassessing the Brady Myth through the Photographs of Andrew J. Russell." The article was published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* in 2002.

RSVP for the dinner meeting by contacting Barbara Moats at 229-3654 or bhmfresno@comcast.net.



Journals of 2 Ex-Slaves Draw Vivid Portraits

By RANDY KENNEDY

*Thanks to the efforts of Charlie Jorgensen we got this article from the New York Times**

The scene sounds like one conjured up by a screenwriter for a Civil War epic. As the Union Army converges on Richmond in 1862 and white residents frantically pack their silver, a group of slaves gathers in a hotel tavern after closing time. The slave in charge of the tavern, John Washington, pours the others drinks, and they all cheerfully toast to "the Yankees' health."

The scene is not from a movie. It is from an account that Mr. Washington wrote in 1873 and whose existence few people even knew of until the last few months. But through a series of coincidences, his handwritten autobiography and another powerful unpublished narrative much like it, by a former Alabama slave named Wallace Turnage, have surfaced and come to the attention of a Yale historian, David W. Blight, who calls them "altogether remarkable."

The narratives are likely to generate great interest in the academic world, in part because they speak to a lively debate in recent slavery studies: to what degree did Lincoln emancipate the slaves, and to what degree were they already emancipating themselves as the war ravaged the South? Mr. Washington and Mr. Turnage liberated themselves during the war, stealing away from their masters by rowboat, at great risk. But both were taken in by the Union Army, without whose help they might have been recaptured.

"What these narratives demonstrate in authentic and rich detail is that slaves became free by both means," Dr. Blight said. The publishing world will probably also be eager for the stories, especially after the success of "The Bondwoman's Narrative," an autobiographical novel written in the 1850's by a slave, Hannah Crafts, who made her way to freedom. That narrative, discovered and edited by the Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., became a best seller in 2002. Dr. Blight plans to publish the newly discovered narratives together, along with his research into the lives of their unsung authors.

The Turnage narrative was completely unknown to scholars until last year. For many years it was kept in a cluttered bureau drawer in the Greenwich, Conn., home of Mr. Turnage's daughter, Lydia Turnage Connolly, who died in 1984 at the age of 99.

His story, written on blue-lined paper in a leather-bound notebook, probably sometime in the late 19th century, ended up with a neighbor, Gladys Watt, who discovered only by reading it that Mrs. Connolly was a former slave's daughter. Mrs. Connolly often described herself as "Portugee" to explain her dark complexion; it is very likely, Dr. Blight says, that the fathers of both Mr. Turnage and Mr. Washington were white slaveholders. Mrs. Watt kept the notebook in a closet for years, in a clamshell archival box, unsure what to do with it. And then in the summer of 2003 she took it to the Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich, where Dr. Blight later gave a lecture.

"They asked me to take a look at it," he said in an interview last week near the Yale campus, smiling and admitting that because he was so busy at the time, "I really wasn't paying that much attention at first." But after the Washington manuscript was brought to his attention last winter, Dr. Blight realized the rarity of both manuscripts and their value in the emancipation debate.

The two narratives are also significant because, unlike many other such accounts, there is a wealth of genealogical information about the former slaves' lives that corroborates much of what they wrote. After the Turnage narrative was donated to the Greenwich historical society, the group hired two researchers to make sure it was authentic. "This is such a vivid and amazing story, the first thing we wanted to do was make sure it was not a fake," said Debra Mecky, the society's executive director. The researchers found that much of Mr. Turnage's account could be verified in census, Army and bank records.

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Journals of Two Ex-Slaves Draw Vivid Portraits continued

About 120 autobiographical narratives were published by freed slaves before the Civil War, the most famous of which were Frederick Douglass's. Another 100 or so were published after the war. But discoveries of new ones, especially those by slaves telling the story of their own emancipation, are very rare. Dr. Blight said that only a half-dozen or so exist, most housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. It is unclear whether Mr. Washington, who died in Massachusetts in 1918, or Mr. Turnage, who died in New Jersey in 1916, ever tried to publish his account during his lifetime.

"It is very exciting," said Randall K. Burkett, curator of African American collections at the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University in Atlanta. "The thing that's really exciting to me about these is that the provenance of both is so clear." Records show that Mr. Turnage went on to live a long and rich life after the war, some of it in New York City. For many years, according to the research of Christine G. McKay, one of the researchers hired by the Greenwich group, Mr. Turnage worked as a waiter, janitor and glass blower in Manhattan. In the 1870's he lived in the neighborhood then known as Little Africa — today's Greenwich Village and SoHo. He later moved to Jersey City, but he is buried in the Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn.

The Washington narrative was kept for many years by his granddaughter, Evelyn Washington Easterly, who briefly gave it to the Library of Congress in 1976. Before she died Mrs. Easterly gave it to a close friend, Alice Jackson Stuart, a college English professor who intended to publish it herself and spent some time at Harvard in the mid-1980's doing research related to it. But Professor Stuart died in 2001 with her work unfinished. The narrative then went to her son, Julian T. Houston, a Massachusetts Superior Court judge, who lent it to the Massachusetts Historical Society for safekeeping. Judge Houston, who writes fiction, later talked to his agent, Wendy Strothman, about the narrative. Late last year she helped find Dr. Blight, who has written extensively on slavery and was recently chosen to direct the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition at Yale.

While both narratives are gripping and often painful to read, Mr. Washington's demonstrates more writerly flair. Dr. Blight said that one of his jobs would be to try to determine the literary influences on both men. It is clear that both knew the Bible, but it also seems as if they may have been familiar with Frederick Douglass. (In one scene in the account by Mr. Turnage, he describes wrestling for two hours with a brutal overseer, echoing a famous account in which Douglass describes his own two-hour fight with an overseer.) Mr. Washington's story is shot through with dry humor. Immediately after the scene in which he describes toasting the Yankees, he tells how his mistress, in tears, implores him to escape from Richmond with her into the countryside.

" 'Yes madam,' I replied. 'I will come right back directly.' "

He had no intention of returning; instead he made his way to the Rappahannock River, where he rowed to freedom among Union troops. In a motif that shows up repeatedly in such narratives, he also writes in great detail about how he learned to read and write. Mr. Washington writes that while cleaning a room in his master's house, he would read — though "imperfectly," he says — Harper's magazine. Two boys who were friends of his master's family helped him learn to spell, he adds. Teaching a slave to read or write in the antebellum South was a crime, often severely punished.

Mr. Turnage's story tells much more of the brutality of slavery, because most of his years of bondage were spent as a field hand in Alabama. He writes of near-crippling lashings of female slaves and describes four unsuccessful attempts to escape, some of them followed by severe beatings, before he finally succeeded in 1864 after hiding in a swamp for a week. While hiding, he often slept in an unused Confederate lookout perch. One morning, he writes, as if he were witnessing a miracle, he saw the tide bring something in.

"Now when I got down there I seen a little boat very small indeed though the tide was going out," he says. "It stood like it was held by an invisible hand; so I got in the little boat and it held me."

A few hours later, as a storm threatened to drown him, he was pulled over the side of a Union gunboat by eight soldiers — and finally "had obtained that freedom which I desired so long."

He ends his story with a stern command to his readers not to regard his account as a "novel, nor a fable, but a reality of facts." "My reader," he adds, "I will now leave my book to your judgement. The end."

*For further information, excerpts from their journals, and pictures of these two former slaves go to the web at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/014/national/14SLAV.html?th>.

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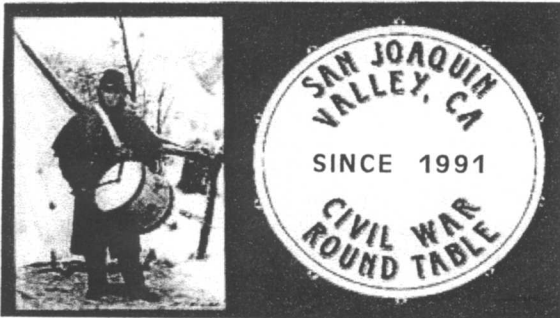
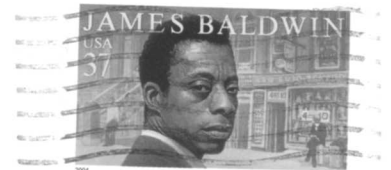
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