

# THE UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS: “A DOUBLE PURPOSE”

By The Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions

Submitted by Alma Jordon

**“A double purpose induced me and most others to enlist, to assist in abolishing slavery and to save the country from ruin.”**

Sgt. Major Christian Fleetwood, 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment U.S.C.T, Maryland

James Harris of Ridge and William Barnes of Hollywood are not familiar names to most St. Mary’s Countians and yet they are both recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor, received for outstanding bravery on the battlefield during the Civil War. What makes these two men stand out even more is that they were members of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) which was activated in May 1863 and disbanded in October 1865. In total, sixteen USCT soldiers received the Congressional Medal of Honor during the Civil War.

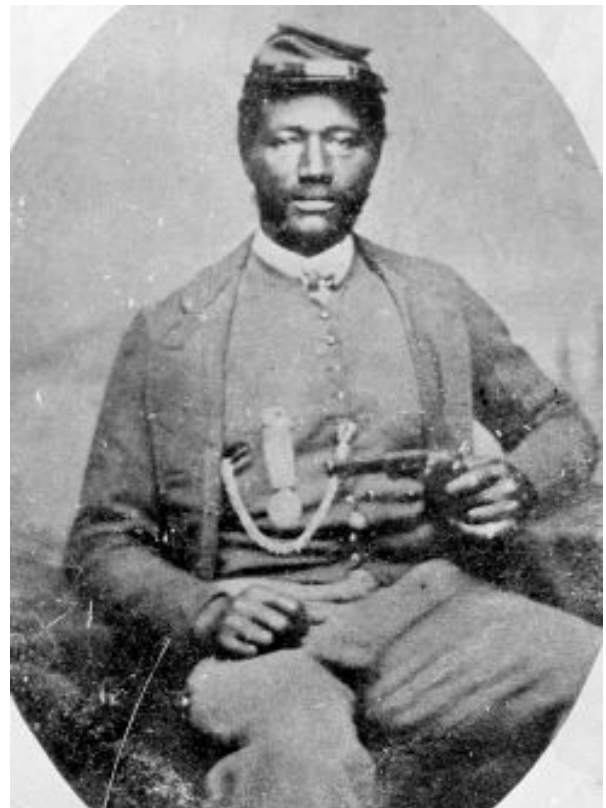
Congress had passed the Militia Act in July 1862 which allowed men of color to serve in the war to preserve and save the Union. Early on there was resistance to enlisting soldiers of color due to a concern for them carrying arms. Maryland offered its slave owners an incentive of three hundred dollars as encouragement to let their enslaved men enlist. The enslaved wanted to prove their mettle as men and so they left family and friends and risked their lives in hopes of liberating their people and to support the Union.

Although many people think that the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 abolished slavery in all states, it only declared that “all persons held as slaves in the rebellious states shall be henceforth and forever free.” Maryland had divided allegiances but was not considered a rebellious state and did not officially abolish slavery until it adopted a new constitution November 1, 1864.

Approximately 10% of the Union soldiers were made up of United States Colored Troops, which was comprised of 175 regiments totaling 180,000 men in the Union Army. In addition, over 9,000 African Americans served in the US Navy. Of the nearly 40,000 Black soldiers who died during the Civil War (nearly 35% more than other troops), 30,000 died due to infection or disease.

Of the estimated 8,718 Colored Troops from Maryland, approximately 700 were from St. Mary’s County, of which the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the USCT was primarily comprised. This infantry was organized in Virginia on January 23, 1864. The 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment’s most heroic conflict was the Battle of Chaffin’s Farm in New Market Heights, Virginia from September 29 thru September 30 in 1864. Sgt. James Harris and Pvt. William Barnes of St. Mary’s County, along with Christian Fleetwood and 13 other USCT soldiers were awarded medals for their bravery in that battle.

Harris and Barnes both served under the leadership of General Benjamin Butler, a white officer, with James Harris receiving the Butler Medal also.



SGT. JAMES HARRIS

The Butler Medal (also called the Colored Troops Medal) was the only medal in American history specifically designed and manufactured for Colored

Troops. It was commissioned by General Butler to honor the bravery of the USCT.



THE BUTLER MEDAL

Idolia Shubrooks, a St Mary's County resident, was the moving force behind getting a USCT monument placed in St. Mary's County. Her mother had given her an old rusty box which contained an old musket, military documents and other paperwork from her grandfather, Alexander Armstrong, who served as a private in the 38th Regiment, Company B, as a musician. She was directed to Agnes Callum, a well know historian/genealogist, who provided her the impetus she needed to do something to honor the bravery and legacy of her grandfather and other USCT.

She and her family organized a USCT Monument Committee and so it began. Various entities throughout the county got on board with letter writing, fundraising, phone calls, etc. She received help from the Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions (UCAC) who secured a State Bond Bill to fund the monument, along with the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW), Senator Roy Dyson, Delegate John Bohanan, the St. Mary's County Commissioners, a number of civic and religious organizations and many, many individuals.

The United States Colored Troops Memorial Monument now stands proudly in John G. Lancaster Park in Lexington Park, MD. It was dedicated in 2012

during the annual Juneteenth Celebration to honor the brave soldiers of color from St. Mary's County.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, wrote a tribute in the form of a poem in honor of the USCT. "The Colored Soldier" was his way of acknowledging the bravery of these formerly enslaved or freed men of color. Here is the last stanza of that poem.

**And their deeds shall find a record  
In the registry of Fame;  
For their blood has cleansed completely  
Every blot of Slavery's shame.  
So all honor and all glory  
To those noble sons of Ham –  
The gallant colored soldiers  
Who fought for Uncle Sam!**

#### REFERENCES:

1. The Enterprise, October 2017, Jason Babcock
2. USCT, [www.afroamcivilwar.org](http://www.afroamcivilwar.org)
3. Black Soldiers in the Civil War, Preserving the Legacy of USCT, Budge Weidman
4. USCT History [www.afroamcivilwar.org](http://www.afroamcivilwar.org)
5. The United States Colored Troops, Sean McLachlan & Charles River Editors

Editors Note: Walter Barnes and James Harrison both received the **Medal of Honor** for their service during the Civil War. That honor is displayed in two monuments to them at the United States Colored Troops Memorial at Lancaster Park in Lexington Park, MD. An attempt to photograph these two monuments was disastrous. Variable sunshine produced weird shadows and my camera produced skewed images, which I could not get my image enhancement program to correct. The monuments carry the following inscriptions.

## MEDAL OF HONOR

### PRIVATE WILLIAM H. BARNES

*RANK AND ORGANIZATION:* PRIVATE. COMPANY C, 38TH U.S. COLORED TROOPS. AT NEW MARKET HEIGHTS VA., 29 SEPTEMBER 1864. *BIRTH:* ST. MARY'S COUNTY, MD. *DATE OF ISSUE:* 6 APRIL 1865

*CITATION:* AMONG THE FIRST TO ENTER THE ENEMY'S WORKS; ALTHOUGH WOUNDED.

WILLIAM H. BARNES, A PRIVATE IN COMPANY C, 38TH U.S. COLORED TROOPS, ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL RECORDS WAS, "AMONG THE FIRST TO ENTER THE ENEMY'S WORKS, ALTHOUGH WOUNDED, AND HAS A MEDAL FOR HIS GALLANTRY," THE MEDAL WAS PRESENTED ON APRIL 6, 1865. BARNES WAS BORN IN ST. MARY'S COUNTY IN 1830 OR 1831 AND ENLISTED IN THE U.S. COLORED TROOPS IN RIDGE, MARYLAND, ON FEBRUARY 11, 1864. HE IS DESCRIBED AS "A 33-YEAR-OLD FARMER WHEN HE ENLISTED IN THE U.S. ARMY. HE STOOD 5'11" TALL." BARNES WAS PROMOTED TO SERGEANT IN JANUARY 1865, BUT NEVER LEFT THE SERVICE ALIVE. HE DIED OF TUBERCULOSIS AT INDIANOLA, TEXAS ON CHRISTMAS EVE 1865 AND IS BURIED THERE.

## MEDAL OF HONOR

### SERGEANT JAMES H. HARRIS

*RANK AND ORGANIZATION:* SERGEANT, COMPANY B, 38TH U.S. COLORED TROOPS. *PLACE AND DATE:* AT NEW MARKET HEIGHTS, VA. 29 SEPTEMBER 1864. *BIRTH:* ST. MARY'S COUNTY MD. *DATE OF ISSUE:* 16 FEBRUARY 1874.

*CITATION:* GALLENTY IN THE ASSAULT

JAMES H. HARRIS ENTERED THE SERVICE AT GREAT MILLS, MARYLAND ON FEBRUARY 14, 1864. HE WAS BORN IN ST. MARY'S COUNTY IN 1828 AND WAS LISTED AS A FARMER WHEN HE JOINED THE U.S. ARMY. ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL RECORDS. SGT. HARRIS SPENT NINE MONTHS IN THE HOSPITAL AFTER BEING WOUNDED AT NEW MARKET HEIGHTS. HE WAS MUSTERED OUT OF SERVICE ON JANUARY 23 1867 AT INDIANOLA, TEXAS. ALTHOUGH NO REASON IS GIVEN IN HIS RECORDS, HE LEFT THE ARMY AS A PRIVATE. HE SPENT HIS LATER YEARS AS A CARPENTER IN WASHINGTON, D.C. RECEIVING AN ARMY PENSION OF \$12.00 A MONTH AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH ON JANUARY 28, 1895. HE IS BURIED AT THE ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY IN ARLINGTON VIRGINIA (SECTION 27, GRAVE 985-11). \* HARRIS WAS NOT PRESENTED THE MEDAL OF HONOR UNTIL FEBRUARY 18, 1874. AN ORDER FROM GENERAL BENJAMIN BUTLER DATED 11 OCTOBER 1864 HAS THIS TO SAY: "SERGEANT HARRIS, COMPANY B THIRTY-EIGHTH U.S. COLORED TROOPS HAS A MEDAL FOR GALLANT CONDUCT IN THE ASSAULT OF THE 29 THIS INSTANT"