

Excerpt from "Walk the Walk: Encounters with Rochester's African-American Ancestors. Copyright 2020 The Landmark Society of Western New York.

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GEORGE BROWN: Well, as you can see, I'm a soldier.

I am the last surviving veteran of the Civil War at my church Memorial AME Zion, over on Favor street. My name is - well, perhaps I ought to tell you how I came about my name first - and how I became a soldier.

You may think he's a Rochesterian. He's got that nice blue cap on. He must have been a Union soldier. If you thought that, you would be half right.

I was a Union soldier - but I also followed the Confederate Army. I served on both sides of the War between the states - but let me tell you, it wasn't by my choice!

See, I was born a southerner. - down in Culpepper County, Virginia. Born a slave - on Mr. Gaines plantation. I was called George - and was generally known as "Mr. Gaines boy."

You should've seen me as a young man. By the time I was 17 I was tall, strong fella - just what they needed in the rebel army. So I was sent to War as a servant to Clarence Broadhurst - he was an officer in the Confederate Army.

We were in Stonewall Jackson's troops at Harper's Ferry. I saw the Confederates give the Yankees a real licking at White House Bridge. I didn't like that!

I was in the Confederate Army as a slave – I had to go where I was sent. In the army I was called Broadhurst's boy.

Well, the Confederate states weren't doing too well after a time. My master decided he needed money more than a servant, so he sold me in the Richmond slave market.

Tom Conners, a store owner from Marshtown, Tenn. paid \$1,450 for me. Half of the money was paid in gold and silver and the other half in Confederate money. Huh. The Confederate money did not turn out to be worth anything. Then, I became known as "Mr. Tom's George."

I wanted to get back in the War - on the Yankee side. Sometimes a small troop of a hundred or so Yankees would come through Marshtown, and some of the colored boys and men would run off with them. But usually these small numbers of Yankees were captured and the Negroes were sent back to their masters - and that was not at all nice for the boys.

I had sense enough not to try to get away 'til a good sized crowd of Union soldiers came along. I knew I had to keep my mouth shut, and wait. I waited a year.

One morning I was heading for Mr. Tom's store. It was about 5 a.m. I heard a rumbling sound - and saw a big cloud of dust moving on the edge of town. Yankee soldiers - marching into Marshtown. They were travelling in columns of two and twos. Those Yankees continued to pass through in an unbroken stream all day long, until after sundown. It was General Thomas troops marching up from Chattanooga. I watched them as they passed, and I says to myself, "Them's my boys!"

That night, after everybody had gone to bed, I went out to the Yankee camp. I got to talking with Lieutenant Moore, of the Seventh Tennessee Cavalry. He asked me if I would like to go along with them and I said that I would.

"Can you read?" he asked.

"I know the A.B.C's when I sees them." I told him.

Lieutenant Moore says "Tomorrow morning when the cavalry passes along you will see a black horse in line with a saddle on it but no rider. He will be in the line of men wearing the letter 'F' on their hats. That horse is for you - get on and ride with us."

Next morning, sure enough, that horse was in line and I go on him and started riding.

But I wasn't out of danger yet. The Yankees had no right to take what was considered private property - me. I had to get out of town.

The troops rode right through the center of Marshtown. I prayed no one would see me. The dust rose up from them horses, clip clopping along. Maybe the dust would hide me. I saw we were going to go right by Jim Conners place, Mr. Tom's brother. Mr. Jim's children were in the yard watching all those Yankees ride by. As I passed, they began to shout "there goes Tom's George!"

Mr. Jim came out and shouted "Where you think you're going, George?"

I yelled back "O, jest visiting." We kept riding.

We got out of Marshtown, but we were still in Tennessee – I was told to talk to nobody. If somebody recognized me I could be sent back to slavery.

We camped in Greenville. I was working with Major Sawyers in the horse tent, when I walked a hotel keeper from Marshtown - a friend of Mr. Tom's.

I jest kept brushing that horse. The fellow came right up to me and said "Hello, George."

I looked him straight in the eye and said "I never saw you before."

Major Sawyer asked me if I knew the hotelkeeper and I replied that I had never seen him before in my life. The major turned on the hotelkeeper and said "Now, you get out of this camp or I let go both my pistols at you." He went.

I got to Knoxville - and enlisted in the Union army. That was the proudest day of my life. I had belonged to so many men in my seventeen years of life. But I wasn't Mr. Gaines' boy no more. I wasn't Officer Broadhurst's servant. I was not Tom's "George."

No sir, I was free from slavery. Now I belonged to the wealthiest man on earth – Uncle Sam. I was a Yankee soldier in the Grand Army of the Republic - Private George Brown.

Course, us Yankee soldiers won the war.

I stayed in the army for a while, traveled around the country. After a while I decided to live up north. I got married, had me a bunch of children – got grandchildren, now. I know I'm an old fella - I am marching downhill now, I am on the way out, but that isn't anything to be afraid of. People have been good to me, Uncle Sam had provided for me, and I have faith in the Lord. The Lord has always looked out for me. We gotta say hallelujah to his great glory

Hallelujah!

No, no - A hallelujah, to be effective, must start in the feet and mount up the body to the head if you mean it.

(he demonstrates)

HALLELUJAH!

I am a Methodist of the hallelujah kind.

So tomorrow at my church - Memorial AME Zion, they're having a birthday celebration for me. I hope you'll all come. There'll be a big cake with 90 candles, and speeches –My grandchildren are going to perform some of the musical numbers, along with our church choir, and Pastor Taylor told me he is going to preach a sermon based on my life experiences.

Well, I got lots to do to get ready for the celebration. Gotta get to the barber.

(he starts to leave, then stops for a moment)

Imagine that. A sermon - about me.

Not too bad for a man some once thought worth only \$1,450.

George Brown salutes the audience, then turns and salutes the Ancestors. He starts Battle Hymn of the Republic, as the Ancestors each greet him, singing along.