

## THE LIFE & TIMES OF GEORGE

WASHINGTON (1840-1931) by James S. Johnson

On September 30, 1993, I traveled to Platte City, Missouri to meet a relative of my great-grandfather's slave owner, Gordon Miller, a retired insurance executive. The next week, Miller and his brother Jack took me to the site where my great-grandfather George Washington was a slave from the 1840s to the early 1860s. The site, now in ruins, was predominately a hemp farm, and is now within view of the Kansas City airport. The ruins consist of "the big house," out-buildings, and the remnant foundations of "slave quarters." This was an emotional tour, and culminated in a vow to preserve the memories of those buried, for posterity.

George Washington was born in "Old Virginia" in 1840, and was given as a wedding gift by his slave master to his daughter, who along with her husband, migrated by wagon and steamboat to Platte County, to farm hemp, corn and other cash crops. As was the custom of that era, George Washington was never permitted to learn to read or write, but he was undoubtedly influenced by rumors that Lincoln was about to free the slaves.

Pro and anti slavery advocates had been fighting in Kansas and Missouri since 1854. The abolitionist John Brown had saved Kansas for freedom by late 1858, before returning east to raid Harper's Ferry, and thence to become the martyred symbol of the North's cause.

In the winter of 1862, George Washington escaped by way of Parkville, Missouri, across the river and into the river-front abolitionist town of Quindaro, Kansas. There he found temporary sanctuary from slave bounty-hunters. Eventually he made his way to Leavenworth, where General Jim Lane, the "Grim Chieftain," was recruiting troops among free Blacks, especially from the swelling numbers of fugitive slaves. George enlisted in the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry Regiment in August, 1862, under the command of Col. James M. Williams. By the end of that month, some five hundred Black men were in camp; only months and sometimes days before, they had been fugitive slaves and considered property like farm animals. Now they were in uniform, under military discipline, marching in step, and impressing everyone with their "fine" appearance" and their superb precision on the drill field.

In early October, 1862, a detachment of 225 men from the 1st Kansas moved one hundred miles southeast of Leavenworth, to near Butler, Missouri. On the 28th, a group of about 500 Confederates surprised and attacked them. After a sharp skirmish, the 1st Kansas drove off the enemy. Ten of their regiment died, with 12 wounded. This was the first time in the war that Black troops had been in combat!! George Washington was part of that detachment.

Other battles in which the 1st Kansas took part included Cabin Creek and Honey Springs. In these engagements, they acquitted themselves "most gallantly, like veterans." General James Blunt declared: "I never saw such fight-



ing as was done by that Negro regiment...they make better soldiers in every respect than any troops I have ever had under my command."

President Lincoln's attitude had also changed as a result of the actions of Black troops in 1863. To a group of visitors and reporters complaining about the arming of Blacks, Lincoln said: "You say you will not fight to free Negroes. Some of them seem willing enough to fight for you." He went on to say, "You are dissatisfied with me about the Negro (but) some of the commanders of our armies in the field who have given us some of our most important successes, believe...the use of colored troops constitutes the heaviest blow yet dealt to the rebellion...When this war is won, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well poised bayonet, they have helped mankind; while I fear there will be some white ones, unable to forget that with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they strove to hinder it."

Nine months after Cabin Creek, the 1st Kansas was virtually decimated at the battle of Poison Springs, Arkansas. While again escorting another supply wagon train, the regiment suffered almost half of its men killed by their revenge-minded Confederate adversaries. Those Black soldiers who were able to escape were obliged to watch triumphant Confederates taunting the wounded men lying on the ground, before bayoneting or shooting them. For the rest of the war, the battle cry for Black soldiers in the West became "Remember Poison Springs!"

The 1st Kansas was formally mustered out of service in October, 1865. With modest money saved from his military service, and the promise of forty acres and a mule, George Washington purchased farm property in the integrated Bloomington/Clinton area of Douglas County, Kansas, married and raised five children. He proudly spoke of his exploits as an escaped slave, and his adventures as a soldier in the "Black Phalanx."

On the 13th of August, the Douglas County Historical Society formally dedicated a "George Washington Day," with a potluck supper and program attended by some 200 people. We also had radio interviews, and a feature article in the Lawrence *Journal-World* on August 7th.