

**"I DRILLED THEM WITH CORNSTALKS:" WILLIAM H. SINGLETON, A BLACK SOLDIER'S STORY**  
STUDENT HANDOUT 1

The following is an excerpt from William Henry Singleton's narrative, *Recollections of My Slavery Days*. The bold segment highlights his military service in the Civil War.

**III**

I cannot remember when the church incident with relation to the Presiding Elder occurred, but it could not have been so very long before the beginning of the war. We slaves used to go to the same church our master and the other plantation owners attended. Of course we used to sit back by the door by ourselves while they sat up front. The church was about five miles away from our plantation. We slaves used to walk while our masters rode. This Sunday for some reason they left me at home. But after they were gone I happened to think of a donkey I often rode and the thought occurred to me that I might ride him to church. So I got on his back and started off. He carried me to church in good style but when we reached there instead of waiting for me to get off he threw me off. I had no rope to tie him, so I left him outside and went in the church. The result was that he got in a fight with another donkey while the church services was in progress and created such a disturbance that I was later given a severe whipping for it.

But another thing happened during that service which caused a greater commotion than my donkey. Mr. Ayers, the Presiding Elder, called upon a colored man named Ennis Dilamar to pray. Ennis was a slave who had recently been purchased by my master and who had quite a local reputation as a religious man. The fact that Mr. Ayers should call upon a slave to pray caused great offense to the plantation owners and after the service was over and while the masters and their families were arranging themselves on the ground to eat their dinner, my master called Ennis to him and asked him what he meant by asking God to send the time when Ethiopia should stretch forth her arm like an army with banners, and said that he would teach him better than to use such words as that. Of course Ennis could not make any reply to this. He had simply been repeating what he had heard some white man say, because he himself could neither read nor write. However, they gave him a severe whipping right then and there. This seemed to disturb Mr. Ayers very much. He withdrew from the company and went over to where the slaves were preparing their dinner and told them that he did not see why a Christian man could not be allowed to use his gift of prayer even if he was black. In some way this remark got to the white people. So when the afternoon meeting was called my master told Mr. Ayers that his service was no longer wanted and that he need not visit the church any more. From that time on my master had charge of the meetings as local preacher and we never saw Mr. Ayers again.

**This incident, as I say, must have happened a short time before the beginning of the war, because shortly afterwards Samuel Hymans, a young man from our community who was attending West Point, came home for a vacation, but when the vacation was over he did not return to West Point. Instead he commenced to organize a company of soldiers. I was very anxious to go with him as his servant and my master, at his request, let me do so. The reason why I was anxious to go with Hymans was because I wanted to learn how to drill. I did learn to drill. In fact I learned how to drill so well that after a while when he was busy with other matters he would tell me to drill the company for him. After Fort Sumpter was fired upon. Hyman's company went to form with other companies in Newbern, the First North**

Carolina Cavalry. This regiment was stationed at Newbern until the 14th of March, 1862, when Burnside and Foster captured Newbern and drove our regiment to Kinston. At Kinston, I ran away from the regiment and made my way to Burnside's headquarters at Newbern. I secured employment as the servant of Col. Leggett, of the 10th Connecticut Regiment. I told the Colonel my story, but I found out later that my story was not believed and that they thought I had been sent by the rebels to secure information for them about the Union troops. I soon had an opportunity, however, to convince them of my honesty. A stranger was brought in to the camp and brought to headquarters as a suspicious person. He would give no information about himself and no one, of course, knew anything about him. Finally I was sent for and asked if I knew the man. I replied that I did, that he was Major Richardson of the First North Carolina Cavalry. After giving this information I was sent out of the room and later the adjutant on General Foster's staff came to me and told me I must not be too positive about this man because he was a Union man. My reply was, "If I am not correct, you can cut my throat." He told the guard to keep a watch over me, that they had not got through with me. So I was held until they could secure further information. They secured information the next day that I was a slave and had been a servant for one of the officers in the First North Carolina Cavalry and that it was a fact that I had run away from there. This information was secured [sic] from Colonel Leggett, for it was by his sentries that I was picked up when I came into the Union lines. Then I was taken to General Burnside's headquarters and asked the best way to reach the rebels at Wives Forks, before you could get into Kinston. I laid the route out for them the best I knew how, but said that if I were going to command the expedition I would give them a flank movement by the way of the Trent river, which was five miles farther from Wives Forks than the Neuse river. But they did not accept my proposition and attacked directly, with the result that they were repulsed.

I took part in that attack as a guide and had a horse shot from under me. A few days later I told Colonel Leggett that I would not fight any more unless I was prepared to defend myself. He said, "We never will take niggers in the army to fight. The war will be over before your people ever get in." I replied, "The war will not be over until I have had a chance to spill my blood. If that is your feeling toward me, pay me what you owe me and I will take it and go." He owed me five dollars and he paid me. I took that five dollars and hired the A. M. E. Zion church at Newbern and commenced to recruit a regiment of colored men. I secured the thousand men and they appointed me as their colonel and I drilled them with cornstalks for guns. We had no way, of course, of getting guns and equipment. We drilled once a week. I supported myself by whatever I could get to do and my men did likewise.

I spoke to General Burnside about getting my regiment into the federal service but he said he could do nothing about it. It was to General Burnside, however, and my later association with him, when I was with him for a time as his servant, that I owe what I now regard as one of the great experiences of my life. It was one day at the General's headquarters. His adjutant pointed to a man who was talking to the general in an inner room and said, "Do you know that man in there?" I said, "No." He said, "That is our President, Mr. Lincoln." In a few minutes the conference in the inner room apparently ended and Mr. Lincoln and General Burnside came out. I do not know whether they had told President Lincoln about me before or not, but the General pointed to me and said, "This is the little fellow who got up a colored

regiment." President Lincoln shook hands with me and said, "It is a good thing. What do you want?" I said, "I have a thousand men. We want to help fight to free our race. We want to know if you will take us in the service?" He said, "You have got good pluck. But I can't take you now because you are contraband of war and not American citizens yet. But hold on to your society and there may be a chance for you." So saying he passed on. The only recollection I have of him is that of a tall, dark complexioned, raw boned man, with a pleasant face. I looked at him as he passed on in company with General Burnside and I never saw him again.

On January 1, 1863, he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which made me and all the rest of my race free. We could not be bought and sold any more or whipped or made to work without pay. We were not to be treated as things without souls any more, but as human beings. Of course I do not remember that I thought it all out in this way when I learned what President Lincoln had done. I am sure I did not. And the men in my regiment did not. I had gone back to Newbern then. The thing we expected was that we would be taken into the federal service at once. It was not until May 28, 1863, however, that the thing we had hoped for so long came to pass, when Colonel James C. Beecher, a brother of Henry Ward Beecher, that great champion of our race, came and took command of the regiment. I was appointed Sergeant of Company G, being the first colored man to be accepted into the federal service and the only colored man that furnished the government a thousand men in the Civil War. The regiment was at first called the First North Carolina Colored Regiment. It later became known as the 35th Regiment, United States Colored troops. Soon afterwards we were armed and equipped and shipped to South Carolina and stationed at Charleston Harbor. From that time until June, 1866, when we were mustered out at Charleston, South Carolina, I was in active service, ranking as First Sergeant, Company G, 35th U. S. Colored Infantry. J. C. White was the Captain of that company and Colonel James C. Beecher was the commander of the regiment. We saw active service in South Carolina, Florida and Georgia. I was wounded in the right leg at the battle of Alusta, Florida. After the war ended we were stationed for a time in South Carolina doing guard duty and were finally mustered out of the service on June 1, 1866. My honorable discharge from the service dated on that day, although it is worn and not very legible now, as you can see, is one of my most prized possessions. Some years ago a man from the government service in Washington made out for me in a detailed form a record of my war service. It is in much more complete form than I have set it down here, but I think such details are of more interest to one's family than to the general public.

My life since the war has been the ordinary life of the average man of my race. I have not so many accomplishments to boast of, but I have done the best I could to prove myself worthy of being a free man. I came North shortly after the war and settled in New Haven, Connecticut. I secured a position as a coachman with a very estimable family, the Trowbridges. I worked for six years for Henry Trowbridge and then after his wife died I went to work for his brother, Thomas R. Trowbridge, for whom I worked for twenty-five years.

Shortly after the war ended I was converted in a Methodist church, of the A. M. E. Zion connection, in North Carolina, so when I came to New Haven I joined the A. M. E. Zion church of that city. It was in that church that I learned to read, although I had learned the alphabet and how to spell simple words while I was in the army. I became ambitious to learn all I could

and so read as many books as I could and availed myself of all the opportunities that presented themselves to educate myself. I saved some money from my salary, too. After the war my mother and brothers remained near Newbern and hired a little place known as the Salter place. When I had money enough I bought this place. But there was such a strong feeling against me at Newbern for the part I had taken in the war, that I could not go back there. The Klu [sic] Klux Klan said they would shoot me. My mother lived on the place until her death some years later. But I could not even go back to see her buried. My brothers remained on the place after that, but they did not live very long after my mother. Then I sold the place through a Mr. Wheeler of Newbern. I sold it for \$200 more than I gave.

As a result of my study and interest in religious things I gradually began to speak in the church in New Haven. Finally I was ordained a deacon and later I was ordained a local elder. I conducted for some years the religious services at the jail in New Haven and took part in the city mission work as assistant to the preacher in charge of that work. After my thirty-one years of service with the Trowbridges, I entered the itinerant ministry, devoting all my time to it for three years as a preacher in the A. M. E. Zion church in Portland, Maine.

It was in New Haven, too, that I married my wife. She was a Northern girl, Maria Wanton. Our married life was very happy. We had one daughter. She is married and lives in New Haven. Her husband's name is Chart [Collins] Fitch. She is the mother of eight children, two of whom died in infancy. The other six are all active, healthy boys. My wife died in 1898. Later I married my present wife. She was Charlotte Hinman, also a Northern girl, a resident of Staten Island. She has made me a good wife and we have been very happy.

At the end of my three years as pastor of the church in Portland, I resigned from the itinerant work and came to New York City, where I worked until about 1906, when I came to Peekskill, New York, which has since been my home. I worked first at the LeBaron place on Main street. Later I was employed by Mr. George F. Clark, on Crompond street, for whom I worked thirteen years. During the World War I was for a time engaged in work with the local Y. M. C. A. and the War Camp Community service. Since the war I have been employed by Mr. George W. Buchanan of Peekskill. I have been extremely fortunate in my employers. From all I have received kind and considerate treatment, vastly different from the rough, sometimes brutal treatment I received from my slave masters. It is as different, in fact, as freedom from slavery. It is impossible, I think, for those [who] have always been free to realize the difference. Now I feel that I am a part of the country, that I have an interest in its welfare and a responsibility to it. As a slave I was only property, something belonging to somebody else. I had nothing I could call my own. Now I am treated as a man. I am a part of society. I am a member of Admiral Foote Post. G. A. R. of New Haven, Connecticut, which I joined in 1879. I was for a year chaplain of the Post, resigning when I went to Portland. I also a member of Oriental Lodge, F. and A. M., of New Haven, Connecticut. Since coming to Peekskill I transferred my church membership to the Mt. Olivet Baptist Church of Peekskill. And I am a citizen of this great country and have a part in directing its affairs. When election day comes I go to the polls and vote, and my vote counts as much as the vote of the richest or best educated man in the land. Think of it! I, who was once bought and sold, and whipped simply because it was thought I had opened a book. And it is not only I who have this privilege, but millions of other men of my race. Ah, we can truly say, "Old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new."

I feel that I am greatly indebted to the government and to the American people for what they have done for me and for my race. I can not find words to express properly what I feel. But my heart is overflowing with gratitude, when I think of my situation and the situation of the people

of my race now, and think of all the blessings we enjoy, compared with our former situation. I feel that as long as I live an honest life, do my work and conduct myself properly, I have the respect and the good wishes of the community. And this is true, I believe, not only of myself but of every man of my race. As long as we are honest and obey the law, seek to educate ourselves and to show ourselves worthy of freedom, we will have the respect of the American people and fair treatment from them.

It is a great thing to have lived to see this day come. It is great to feel that the people of my race understand something of the debt they owe this great country and are showing their appreciation by trying to be good citizens.

God has been very good to me. I have preached His Gospel. I can read His book. America has been very good to me. I am one of its citizens. There is no stain on the Flag now. I once fought under its banner. The Great Emancipator is loved by the world now. He once shook hands with me.

Truly I can say with the psalmist, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."

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