A Look at the United States 101st Colored Infantry

and the Free Life of John Sullivan

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The Union Army during the American Civil War saw a need for more soldiers than what was needed in the previous wars fought by the United States. To help this problem, the North began allowing African-Americans to enlist in the Union army. As the Civil War progressed and the main focus of the war shifted from preservation of the Union to include the emancipation of slavery. With the hope that a Union victory would end the institution of slavery, many Blacks quickly joined the Union side to aid in the success of the north. Paired with the promise of emancipation was a decent salary, which would support the men and their family.\(^1\) Once the Civil War ended, most enlisted Blacks were discharged and went back to their antebellum life. However, the life of a Black before the war was very different after the war ended. Escaped or freed slaves who joined Union ranks found themselves returning to their plantations due to lack of other options.\(^2\) The freedmen wanted a better life and the stories of the open west led Blacks to pack up and move to the west.\(^3\) Enter John Sullivan. After being liberated by Union soldiers, he joined the Union army in the Tennessee 101st Regiment for the remainder of the Civil War. Afterwards he returned to his home working as a farmer. In the 1880s, Sullivan moved his family westward to Kansas and purchased 40 acres of farmland approximately four miles outside of Eskridge in southern Wabaunsee County. John Sullivan experienced the same hardships as many others went through, but what stands out is his persistence in staying on his own land, which was uncharacteristic of many Black farmers who came to Kansas. Sullivan lived a full and successful life on his farm, and never left to move to the city.\(^4\) His success was due in part to his


\(^2\) Ibid.


participation in the army and his close location and association with the people of Eskridge and Bradford.

The Emancipation Proclamation not only released all slaves in the South, but also reinforced the Confiscation Act of 1862, giving the Union permission to use the former slaves for the war effort. The need for able-bodied men and Union setbacks the previous year pushed the U.S. government to recruit Black into the Union Army. Recruitment posters urging Blacks to join the Union ranks, like in Figure 1, were posted all over the parts of the South that Union forces occupied. As newly freed slaves, they feared a return of slavery if the Confederacy was victorious. This poster in particular served two purposes, recruiting and as warning to any Confederate garrisons who detained black Union soldiers. The poster claimed equal treatment and protection of all soldiers regardless of race. Blacks who escaped the South were hesitant to turn around and march south knowing that they would be enslaved if captured as a prisoner of war. This poster says that if a soldier is captured and sold into slavery, that Union forces will execute Confederate prisoners.

The Colored Regiments were present in every piece of the war, but most of the time the regiments served defensive garrison roles, like manual labor, construction of camps, and guarding railways. No matter the assignment, the organization of colored regiments gave the newly freed slaves paid jobs. John Sullivan enlisted in the 101st Colored Infantry, which was organized in Tennessee on September 16, 1864. It was generally comprised of former slaves. The regiment did not actively participate in any battles, but rather was assigned the task of

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guarding the Louisville & Nashville Railroad in Tennessee and Alabama until it was disbanded on January 21, 1866. \(^7\) Even though the Tennessee 101st was far from the battlefield, they were the target of some skirmishes with Confederate battalions while guarding the railways.\(^8\)

The Tennessee 101st Colored Regiment existed for less than 18 months, but in that little amount of time the regiment served as a transition for its members, some leaving the army with new skills other than the farming they were accustomed to as slaves. More importantly though, everybody received pay, and that gave each soldier a chance to start a new life on the right foot. After being discharged, soldiers were initially better off than most other freed slaves, but that would wear away quickly with the money going to former slave owners who took from the blacks in the form of debt payment and land rent. The money earned by Black soldiers was not enough to purchase land, and what they had was just capital that would be used to pay rent as Blacks resorted to sharecropping and tenant farming.\(^9\) John Sullivan remained in Tennessee after the Tennessee 101st disbanded in 1866, following the tract so many other blacks after the Civil War had done.

As the years passed, sharecroppers and tenant farmers found themselves falling into an insurmountable debt. To add on pressure, the instatement of Jim Crow laws during the 1870s and the rise of the Ku Klux Kan made the lives of southern blacks miserable. However, there was a better life awaiting them. Word spread quickly around the Mississippi river and Tennessee that

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Kansas had vast open lands for the taking and the discrimination of the South was non-existent in the west. These stories of splendor sparked the Exodus Fever of 1879, and although John Sullivan was not part of the Exodus, he still saw Kansas as a place for new opportunity that he would not find in Tennessee. It took another five years before Sullivan would purchase 40 acres of land in Wabaunsee County, Kansas and move from Tennessee.

John Sullivan is not the only veteran of the Tennessee 101st to live in the Wilmington Township in Wabaunsee County, but one of three. It is likely that these men either met while enlisted in the Tennessee 101st or that they perhaps had known each other before enlisting. Whatever the circumstances, when the Sullivan family made the move to Kansas, they already knew people to call on for help so they were not completely unfamiliar with the new lands.

His wife and daughter almost certainly worked in the field alongside him to plant and plow the ground. He was fortunate to receive very lush land; Sullivan's property was fertile bottomlands and had a creek that ran through his property, offering water for irrigation that was a key factor in yielding large harvests. Sullivan also had a good relationship with the man he purchased his land from, William Mallory. Records show business transactions between the two with the same companies and people, and the relationship probably extended beyond that. It is likely that tools were communal between the two farms, allowing each other to borrow tools for

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12 Foster, Benetta. Notes on John Sullivan, Wabaunsee County. Email to M.J. Morgan. 2008. See also 1885 Kansas Agricultural Census, Wilmington Township, Wabaunsee County, Kansas; dwelling 29, family 30; March 1 1885. On Microfilm at Riley County Genealogical Society.
farming. Location was also a big factor in Sullivan's farm. The farm was about four miles from both Eskridge and Bradford, offering two places to buy and sell goods.¹⁴

In the 1880s, hard times seemed to constantly check any achievement for the Sullivan family. Death was not uncommon to the Sullivan family. In 1884 they lost a child still in infancy and Mrs. Sullivan passed away in the summer of 1886.¹⁵ John Sullivan married Catherine Bagwell, the daughter of John Bagwell, another fellow veteran of the Tennessee 101st Colored Regiment. They gave birth to another child in 1889 who died in infancy, and Catherine Sullivan was "dangerously ill" immediately after childbirth.¹⁶ Fortunately, John and Catherine had two children that lived into adulthood: their son John R. Sullivan, in 1888, and their daughter Mary S. Sullivan, born in 1892.¹⁷

In a time where many other Black families were leaving their farms to find work in the city, Sullivan was successful in maintaining his farm. The Sullivan farm had successful yields, but that was not always enough for the family. To compensate, John Sullivan worked side jobs to bring extra money, ranging from hired labor on area ranches to boxing.¹⁸ In 1896 Sullivan was awarded a pension from the Army, providing $6.00 a month plus back pay to support the family.¹⁹

John Sullivan was involved in both towns of Eskridge and Bradford as well as the Second Baptist Church. He went to the town for goods, supplies, and business transactions. Sullivan was involved in the Second Baptist Church in Eskridge, where he was a deacon until his death at the

¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ The Eskridge Star, 1 July, 1886; p. 3, col. 3. See also "Eskridge Cemetary," in New Branches from Old Trees: A New History of Wabunsee County, ed. Wabunsee County Historical Society, 120.
¹⁶ The Eskridge Star, April 11, 1889; p. 7, co.2.
¹⁷ The Eskridge Star, May 12 1892; p. 3, col. 4. See also 1900 United States Census, d 219, f 220, lines 86-89.
¹⁸ The Eskridge Star, April 11, 1889; p. 7, col. 2. See also The Eskridge Star, April 24, 1884; p. 4, col. 1.
¹⁹ The Eskridge Star, April 16, 1896; p.3, col. 3.
It is unclear whether John Sullivan or any black veterans were active in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). None of the names of the Black veterans were recorded at GAR assemblies or meetings. Sullivan may have concealed his army record, as there was confusion regarding which side he fought for.

Figure 2 - Headstone of John Sullivan. The shield insignia is used to designate soldiers who fought for the Union.

His descendents had associated him with Confederacy, but his army records, receiving of a pension, and union insignia on his headstone, as seen in Figure 2, provide evidence for a Union solider.

The Tennessee 101st Colored Infantry gave its members, including John Sullivan, an advantage once the war ended. With money, social connections, and sometimes land in

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20 The Eskridge Star-Tribune, September 23, 1909; p. 7, col. 2.
21 M.J. Morgan, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2008.
reimbursement, the people in the Colored Regiments who moved to the west had an advantage in sustaining themselves on their own farm. In Sullivan's case, it was not only the rewards of the Tennessee 101st, but also the location of his land and community involvement that led him to be successful as a farmer. He was the embodiment of the idea of the African-American dream after the Civil War. He left his home in Tennessee with his wife and daughter to travel west in search of a better life. Unfortunately, not all Blacks who looked to Kansas or elsewhere westward were as fortunate as he was.
Figure 1 - Civil War Recruitment Poster. This poster assured the safety of black soldiers and enticed those who had just been liberated to take up the cause of fighting for the North.

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