

A Look at the United States 101st Colored Infantry
and the Free Life of John Sullivan

Phil Cunningham

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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

¹ Engs, Robert F. Slavery in the Civil War Era. In Macmillan Information Now Encyclopedia [database online]. 2002. Available from <http://www.civilwarhome.com/slavery.htm>.

² Ibid.

³ Painter, Nell Irvin. 1992. The Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879. In *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction*, pp. 184-201. W. W. Norton & Company.

⁴ Katz, William Loren. 1971. A Black West in White America. In *The Black West*, 275-287. New York: Harlem Moon.

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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

⁵ Cornish, Dudley Taylor. 1956. *The Sable Arm: Black troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865*. University Press of Kansas.

⁶ Owen, Robert Dale, J. McKaye, and Samuel G. Howe. 1863. *Preliminary Report on the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission*. See also Owen, Robert Dale, J. McKaye, and Samuel G. Howe. 1864. *Final Report of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission to the Secretary of War*. Paper presented at Office of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, New York City.

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

⁷ Unites States colored troops infantry. In Torch Press [database online]. Cedar Rapids, IA. 2008. Available from <http://www.civilwararchive.com/Unreght/uncolinf3.htm>. See also Dyer, Frederick H. *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*. Torch Press. Cedar Rapids, IA. 1908.

⁸ Ainsworth, Fred C., Brig. Gen. & Kirkley, Joseph, W., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. U.S. War Dept., Washington Government Printing Office, 1897. Series I, Volume 3 1881, Series IV, Volume 2 1900. Washington Government Printing Office 1900. Available at <http://www.buffalosoldier.net/101stRegimentU.S.ColoredInfantry.htm>.

⁹ Painter. *The Economics of Oppression*. In *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction.*, pp. 55-67.

Kansas had vast open lands for the taking and the discrimination of the South was non-existent in the west.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

John Sullivan is not the only veteran of the Tennessee 101st to live in the Wilmington Township in Wabaunsee County, but one of three.¹² 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.¹³ 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

¹⁰ Ibid. Benjamin "Pap" Singleton and Migration to Kansas. pp. 108-117.

¹¹ Deed of Sale from William Mallory to John Sullivan, 19 Dec 1884, Wabaunsee County, Kansas, Book Y, page 171. Register of Deeds Office, Alma, Kansas.

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.

¹³ Joyce (Scott) Grisby, George Mercer. Oral Interview. December 4, 2008, by author at Joyce's home in Topeka, Kansas.

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.

age of 70 in 1909.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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 descendants 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 soldier.

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

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.

TO COLORED MEN!

FREEDOM, Protection, Pay, and a Call to Military Duty!

On the 1st day of January, 1863, the President of the United States proclaimed FREEDOM to over THREE MILLIONS OF SLAVES. This decree is to be enforced by all the power of the Nation. On the 21st of July last he issued the following order:

PROTECTION OF COLORED TROOPS.

"WAR DEPARTMENT, ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,
WASHINGTON, July 31."

"General Order, No. 233.

"The following order of the President is published for the information and government of all concerned:—

EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON, July 30.

"It is the duty of every Government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color, or condition, and especially to those who are duly organized as soldiers in the public service. The law of nations, and the usages and customs of war, as carried on by civilized powers, permit no distinction as to color in the treatment of prisoners of war as public enemies. To sell or enslave any captured person on account of his color, is a relapse into barbarism, and a crime against the civilization of the age.

"The Government of the United States will give the same protection to all its soldiers, and if the enemy shall sell or enslave any one because of his color, the offense shall be punished by retaliation upon the enemy's prisoners in our possession. It is, therefore, ordered, for every soldier of the United States, killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy, or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works, and confined at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to prisoners of war.

"ABRAHAM LINCOLN."

"By order of the Secretary of War.
"E. D. TOWNSEND, Assistant Adjutant General."

That the President is in earnest the rebels soon began to find out, as witness the following order from his Secretary of War:

"WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON CITY, August 9, 1863.

"Sir: Your letter of the 2d inst., calling the attention of this Department to the cases of Orin H. Brown, William H. Johnston, and Wm. Wilson, three colored men captured on the gunboat Isaac Smith, has received consideration. This Department has directed that three rebel prisoners of South Carolina, if there be any such in our possession, and if not, three others, be confined in close custody and held as hostages for Brown, Johnston and Wilson, and that the fact be communicated to the rebel authorities at Richmond.

"Very respectfully your obedient servant,
"EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War.

"The Hon. GIDEON WELLES, Secretary of the Navy."

And retaliation will be our practice now—man for man—to the bitter end.

LETTER OF CHARLES SUMNER,

Written with reference to the Convention held at Poughkeepsie, July 15th and 16th, 1863, to promote Colored Enlistments.

BOSTON, July 13th, 1863.

"I doubt if, in times past, our country could have expected from colored men any patriotic service. Such service is the return for protection. But now that protection has begun, the service should begin also. Nor should relative rights and duties be weighed with nicety. It is enough that our country, aroused at last to a sense of justice, seeks to enrol colored men among its defenders.

"If my counsels should reach such persons, I would say: enlist at once. Now is the day and now is the hour. Help to overcome your cruel enemies now battling against your country, and in this way you will surely overcome those other enemies hardly less cruel, here at home, who will still seek to degrade you. This is not the time to hesitate or to hizzle. Do your duty to our country, and you will set an example of generous self-sacrifice which will conquer prejudice and open all hearts.

"Very faithfully yours,
"CHARLES SUMNER."

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.

SOURCE: National Archives and Records Administration,
<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>

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