

NARRATIVE HISTORY

Sgt. William Henry Barnes

I. CONTEXT

Although the Civil War ended in April 1865, the occupation of Texas by the Union Army was only about to begin. In June 1865, battle hardened regiments of Union soldiers began flooding into Texas to maintain law and order and assist with the Reconstruction era in Texas. Troops were also ordered to the U.S. and Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley in case intervention was necessary in the war between France and Mexico. Many of these soldiers were from the Twenty-Fifth Army Corps that was formed of regiments of the U. S. Colored Troops (USCT). Their numbers eventually grew in Texas to 27,000; over half the initial number of Union troops in Texas.¹ William Henry Barnes, a private in the 38th U.S. Colored Troops, and Medal of Honor recipient, was among them.²

II. OVERVIEW

Responding to the “Act For Enrolling And Calling Out The National Forces” (Conscription Act) signed into law March 3, 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, on February 11, 1864, William Barnes entered a recruiting station at Point Lookout, Maryland, and joined the Union Army. From his enlistment record, it is revealed that Barnes was born in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, and was 23 years of age. He stood 5’ 11” with black eyes, black hair, a black complexion and he identified himself as a farmer. One day later, Barnes’ life in the Union Army began when he was mustered into service at Norfolk, Virginia.³ Six and a half months later, Private William Barnes was in the Balfour U.S.A.

General Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia with wounds received from a battle near Richmond, Virginia. He was released from the hospital and returned to duty with his regiment on December 12, 1864. ⁴

Early on the morning of September 29, 1864, the 38th USCT, as well as other regiments of the USCT, was preparing to attack seasoned and entrenched Confederate forces at New Market Heights, in Henrico County, Virginia. Among the Confederate forces were five infantry regiments from the famous Texas Brigade. It would be a brutal morning for these men, and it was to be the last for many. ⁵

On April 6, 1865, Private William H. Barnes was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in the battle. His citation reads: "Among the first to enter the enemy's works, although wounded." ⁶ Fourteen of the sixteen recipients of the Medal of Honor awarded to black soldiers in the Civil War were for action at the Battle of New Market Heights on September 29-30, 1864. ⁷ Of the twelve men on the order that received the Medal of Honor that day, alphabetically Williams Barnes would have been first on the list and is; therefore, likely the first black soldier to have physically received a Medal of Honor. ⁸

In July of 1865, shortly after arriving in Texas with the 38th USCT, Barnes was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, which at that time was the highest rank that could be attained by a black soldier in the Union Army. ⁹

The service of the 38th USCT in Texas included Brownsville and various points on the Rio Grande, Brazos Santiago Island, Galveston, and Indianola.¹⁰ However, from July through October 1866, Barnes was reported in the bi-monthly Company Muster Roll as “Sick” or “Sick in Hospital”. In the November and December Muster Roll, it is recorded that he “Died of Consumption in Hospital at Indianola, TX. Dec 24/66”. Only two years and four months after his heroic actions in Virginia, Sergeant William Barnes was laid to rest at Indianola, Texas.¹¹

III. SIGNIFICANCE

Although the assignment of the U.S. Colored Troops to Texas after the Civil War created many conflicts between the soldiers and the white citizens, the role of these troops was important to the early stabilization of the Texas government and the protection of the recently freed slaves. Another important contribution made by the U.S. Colored Troops was by virtue of their assignment to the Mexican border in the Rio Grande Valley, as a response to the French government of Maximilian in Mexico. The United States considered this to be a violation of the Monroe Doctrine but could not address the issue because of the Civil War. Now, with the close of the war, the full attention of the United States could be redirected to the perceived threat in Mexico, and the stationing of troops on the border was done with the intention of intimidating the French.¹²

The story of Sergeant William H. Barnes, and the U.S. Colored Troops in Texas, following the Civil War, is a significant part of Texas history and is largely unknown by our citizens today; even those in counties where the U.S. Colored Troops were stationed.

While the U.S. Colored Troops did not want to come to Texas, once stationed here they did their duty. The one thing that they wanted most of all was to go home to their families and to “begin their new life.”¹³ No doubt that was one desire both they and most Texans would have had in common.¹⁴

In 1867, the bodies of more than 300 soldiers were removed from the Indianola area and reinterred in a common grave at the San Antonio National Cemetery. Sergeant Barnes was among this group. A marker “In Memory of” William H. Barnes was placed at the San Antonio National Cemetery in the area of the group burial.¹⁵ A marker to Sergeant William H. Barnes at Indianola would be appropriate in memory of this Civil War Medal of Honor recipient who died there. It would also serve to bring attention to the citizens of Calhoun County this long forgotten piece of Texas history during the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Dr. David Work, *United States Colored Troops in Texas During Reconstruction, 1865-1867. The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (Jan., 2006), pp. 337-358

² William H. Barnes – Compiled service record.

³ William H. Barnes – Compiled service record.

⁴ William H. Barnes – Compiled service record.

⁵ Gordon Berg, *Battle of New Market Heights: USCT Soldiers Proved Their Heroism – America’s Civil War Magazine*, March 2006. <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-new-market-heights-usct-soldiers-proved-their-heroism.htm>

⁶ African American Medal of Honor Recipients (Civil War). National Park Service. http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/history/aa_medals.htm

⁷ Gordon Berg, Battle of New Market Heights: USCT Soldiers Proved Their Heroism – America’s Civil War Magazine, March 2006. <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-new-market-heights-usct-soldiers-proved-their-heroism.htm>

⁸ Medal of Honor Historical Society. Special Veterans Day Celebration memorialized the Medal of Honor deeds of four recipients who had been lost to history. November 12, 1988. San Antonio National Cemetery.

⁹ Gordon Berg, Battle of New Market Heights: USCT Soldiers Proved Their Heroism – America’s Civil War Magazine, March 2006. <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-new-market-heights-usct-soldiers-proved-their-heroism.htm>

¹⁰ Regimental History – 38th U.S. Colored Troops. <http://civilwarintheeast.com/USA/US/USCT38.php>

¹¹ William H. Barnes – Compiled service record.

¹² Dr. David Work, United States Colored Troops in Texas During Reconstruction, 1865-1867. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (Jan., 2006), pp. 337-358

¹³ Dr. David Work, United States Colored Troops in Texas During Reconstruction, 1865-1867. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (Jan., 2006), pp. 337-358

¹⁴ Murphy Givens, “Civilians, black soldiers clashed after Civil War. Caller.com, Corpus Christi, Texas. November 10, 2010. <http://www.caller.com/news/2010/nov/10/civilians-black-soldiers-clashed-after-civil-war/>

¹⁵ Gayle E. Alvarez, Medal of Honor Historical Society of the U.S. (personal email to author)