

Soldiers and Sailors

Loafing at the edge of the bay on later winter Sunday afternoon John Willis put down his guitar as he heard the sound of a marching band. From the distance he, along with Simon Rapalyea and David Carll, could see the blue uniforms of buglers, drummers and other musicians following a lad holding aloft the stars and stripes as a crowd followed them down the main street. The men picked themselves up from the grassy verge and joined the festivities as a dozen soldiers rallied the crowd with patriotic tunes.

John, the oldest of the group, spent September through April in Oyster Bay, during the harvest season on the docks assisting baymen with their catch as they dredged the fecund waters. The other months he lived at his family farm in Grantsville, near Westbury railroad depot.

President Lincoln called for volunteers to preserve the Union after the battle at Fort Sumter as the war stretched into months far longer than expected. More men were needed to secure the nation and recruiters were sent throughout the states.

David, an oysterman and dock laborer, scoffed at the recruitment effort.

“Look at those boys signing up for Uncle Samuel,” he said as he watched a clutch of men, from teenagers to those with white hair, put their signatures to the proffered documents.

“Give me a gun and I’ll go,” Simon, a stonemason, said.

“That’s what I mean. Why won’t they give you a gun? You know as well as I do why they won’t let you serve.”

“This isn’t a white man’s war,” John interrupted. “It ours.”

“Do you think they’re fighting for you? It’s to keep the country united. It is to keep us disunited,” David continued.

“You’re right, John,” Simon added. “It *is* our cause more than anything. But they, they’re fighting for the Union, not for us. They’re afraid of us.”

The friends knew the arguments about how to bring about emancipation. They had rehashed them many times. In newspapers, in church pews, in legislative halls—the debate was everywhere, unavoidable. Aside from the black press and a handful of abolitionists, few in New York supported the war.

“My neighbor Hallock,” John said, “has joined the 75th. He’s a Quaker but he knows that fighting for this cause is more important than turning the other cheek. There’s a caretaker at the Westbury Friends cemetery, Wheeler who’s escaped from Virginia. He’s fighting for us colored folks.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Simon interjected. “If a Quaker can pick up a gun, give me one, too.”

“Wake me up when that happens,” David said.

“I can’t sleep knowing that my brethren remain in chains,” John said. “I agree with Mr. Douglass: ‘We don’t need light, but fire. We don’t need a gentle shower, but thunder. We need an earthquake.’” He hesitated, then added, “I want to make the earth quake.”

John tucked his guitar under his arm and walked back to the boardinghouse.

The recruiters that day signed up a half-dozen men in Oyster Bay for the all-white army. But John wasn’t going to wait any longer. An advertisement in the Weekly Anglo-African—Men Wanted For The Navy! All able-bodied will be enlisted into the Navy upon application at the Naval Rendezvous, at Brooklyn Navy Yard—offered him a way to salve his conscience. The navy, always a motley mix of men, desperately needed sailors and accepted anybody able to serve.

John accepted \$10 a month in pay, although it was less money than he was accustomed to. But nothing was more important than service for this noble cause.

John entered the navy the rank of Landsman, the rank given to those with no experience on ships, to be assigned manual labor on board.

On March 31, 1863, John Willis joined the crew of the USS Daylight, a wooden steamer part of the Atlantic Blockading Squadron. He was assigned kitchen duty where he worked as a cook and waiter on the packet ship off the Virginia and Carolina coast.

Confined below deck most of the time, he found himself filled with the blues. At times homesickness overcame him.

“I indulge all day in thoughts of those far away and sigh for a letter, he wrote in his diary.” He hoped that a kind friend would send him one.

He shared close quarters with white men, black men from the Caribbean, some from Union states, immigrants, eating and sleeping together, all subject to the same stern discipline. He wrote about his kitchen work, waiting on the officers, the camaraderie, the checker games, music and dance, his guitar playing.

The first letter lifted his spirits for just a moment. His sister informed him that their mother had died. “Sad news for me,” was his entire entry.

John wrote about Daylight’s failed attempt to rescue a grounded Union ship. A Confederate blockade runner, Bendigo, had run aground off the beach and the Iron Age and Montgomery were ordered to float it. In the process, the Iron Age, too, was mired in the mud and quicksand.



From the report of F. S. Wells, Acting Volunteer Lieutenant, Commanding U.S.S. Daylight:

I immediately took my vessel in close to the Montgomery, as she was the leading vessel; sent her the end of a hawser; let go an anchor for the purpose of keeping the head of my vessel in a proper direction while the hawser was being made fast. Had been towing in this manner several minutes, when the bow chocks of the Iron Age gave way, thereby bringing a sudden strain on my hawser, which immediately parted on board the Montgomery, which vessel also became detached from the Iron Age, and moved farther offshore. As soon as practicable anchored my vessel with a kedge and line in a position to back in with safety. Made fast a new 10-inch hawser and tried to tow her off, but without avail, as by this time, 9:30 a.m., the tide had fallen several inches and the hawser had again parted.

It was high water between 7 and 8 o'clock p.m., and we continued our exertions, when a possibility of saving the Iron Age no longer existed. Her men with their effects were removed to

this vessel, and the Iron Age was set on fire and abandoned at about 5 a.m.

The Daylight at 5:30, as an explosion scuttled the Iron Age.

Shortly after, when the Daylight was being overhauled and fitted with a new boiler off Newport News, the men filled the bars along the docks, enjoying what was forbidden onboard. John acquired a taste for whiskey which he bought with the tips he received for the songs he strummed on his guitar.

Landsman John Willis transferred to the USS Mount Vernon, another steamer in the Atlantic blockade, while the Daylight remained in dock.



The chance to help end slavery changed when the government created the Bureau of Colored Troops. For the first time, David and Simon were eligible for the \$300 bounty created by their town for those who would “serve for three years or during the war, and also the sum of fifty dollars for nine months, in order to fill up the Quota of men which this Town is called upon to furnish to the General Government, for the purpose of speedily crushing the Rebellion.”

Simon had eagerly awaited this day and without hesitation decided to enlist. He was ready to put down his stonemason tools in exchange for a gun.

David remained skeptical.

“They’ve created colored troops,” he said. “This is isn’t fight for equality.”

“We’ll prove ourselves worthy,” Simon responded.

“I don’t need to prove myself to them. Take me as I am.”

“As Mary Louisa has,” Simon said teasingly.

“Yes, as she has.”

“Well, we’re not fighting for ourselves but for the freedom of those. . .”

“Yes, I know. I know.”

Simon added, “I agree with you on one point, David. Our pay should be equal to the white soldiers. It ain’t. But that will change, you’ll see.

Whatever misgivings David had had he put aside and the two enlisted in the 20th Colored Infantry. Mary Louisa, his wife, would use it to buy a plot on a hill a mile from the bay; Simon gave his inducement his wife, Bertha, to use as she pleased. Each woman would also receive a monthly \$3 allotment from the town.

The men took the railroad to Hunter’s Point, then a steamer to Rikers Island, in the East River. They were assigned to a worn cotton tent and issued bedrolls they placed on the bare, frozen ground. The worn tent had no bench, no stool, no furniture whatsoever. The weather remained bleak and icy for the next two weeks, as Pvt. David Carll and Pvt. Simon Rapalyea drilled and learned the basic skills of infantrymen. Rations were meager and the friends shared one dish of coffee a day, at forty cents a luxury they couldn’t afford a dish separately. They also drank water sparingly; a dollar a canteen was a costly necessity.

A delegation visited the encampment to learn about the camp’s conditions, to which the two men

readily testified. David and Simon met frequently with Rev. Henry Garnet, the noted abolitionist and black minister and chaplain to the colored troops. The previous year he had escaped with his life as Irish mobs protesting the draft burnt down the Colored Orphan Asylum, churches and homes of Black residents, leaving eleven dead.



Mary Louisa Carll and Bertha Rapalyea joined hundreds of other women on Sundays at the training grounds, bringing food and homemade comfort to the recruits.

On a waning day of winter, they bid their husbands good-bye. They met the colored troops at New York's 34th Street dock and followed the parade to Union Square. By now three hundred people had join the parade down Broadway led by a full army marching band.

Rev. Garnet addressed to the troops: "To have been mobbed, hunted down, beaten to death, hung to

the lamp-posts or trees, burned, their dwellings sacked and destroyed, their orphan children turned homeless from their comfortable shelter, which was destroyed by fire, and then, within a few months to be cheered along the same streets, are occurrences whose happening put ordinary miracles in the shade; the first, more hideous than hell; the last, one which might be, and was smiled on by heaven.”

The regiment turned down Canal Street to a ship waiting in the Hudson. Soldiers couldn't break rank as they boarded; their wives could no longer distinguish David or Simon from the other men in readying to sail on the Warrior for southern ports.

From the New York Times:

There was no more striking manifestation of the marvelous times that are upon us than the scene in our streets at the departure of the first colored regiments. They march in solid platoons, with shouldered muskets, slung knapsacks, and buckled cartridge-boxes down through our gayest avenues and our busiest thoroughfares to the pealing strains of martial music, and are everywhere saluted with waving handkerchiefs, with descending flowers, and with the acclamations and plaudits of countless beholders. They are halted at our most

beautiful square, and, amid admiring crowd, in the presence of our most prominent citizens, are addressed in an eloquent and most complimentary speech by the President of our chief literary institution, and are presented with a gorgeous stand of colors in the name of a large number of the first ladies of the City, who attest in parchment, signed by their own fair hands, that they 'will anxiously watch your career, glorying in your heroism, ministering to you when you are wounded and ill, and honoring your martyrdom with benedictions and with tears.'

A year after the recruiting band had walked down the main street in Oyster Bay, David Carll and Simon Rapalyea arrived in South Carolina. They were soon transferred to the USCT 26th, Company I.

Mary Louisa kept on the table in her bedroom a studio photograph of David, his kepi aslant, his eyes wide in anticipation, his lips slightly open, a man full of pride and wariness.

Mary Louisa and Bertha added their names to the two thousand signatures sent to newspapers, President Lincoln, the heads of departments in Washington, and members of Congress demanding "that the soldiers be put on the same footing as to bounty, pay and pensions without regard to difference in complexion."



Aboard the Mount Vernon, a screw gunboat that patrolled near the shore, John wrote about the treatment of a man escaping from slavery brought onboard.

“Yesterday contraband joined the ship. He was treated very rough by the crews. They refused to let him eat off the mess pans and called him all sorts of names.”

This was the only entry about runaways. But with nearly every pursuit into bays and inlets, the ship picked up men, women and children who made their way through swamps and sedges to the ocean’s edge. As soon as feasible, they were transferred to safety onshore. Skilled seamen often joined the crew as First-class Boys after a period of hazing, as did every sailor. The new enlistees were eagerly accepted as replacements for those who had taken ill or deserted.

John wrote about a white lawbreaker who “spent 30 days double Irons solitary confinement on bread and water except on every seventh day. Then he was to have full rations with the loss of three month’s pay,” and another white “lash’d up in his Hammock for three nights. He was then made to walk up and down the deck with A bag tied around him with a play card attached with the word thief upon it.”

The final entry in John’s diary was dated December 20, 1865, just days before the Mount Vernon joined a flotilla of fifty ships off Wilmington to lay siege to Fort Fisher, the most important fort remaining

in the Confederacy. For two days at Christmas time, the Union ships bombarded the fort. Having failed to force a surrender, Marines landed but were called back when rebel reinforcements arrived and weather worsened.

A week later, a reinforced Union Army arrived and attacked again after two days of heavy bombardment from the ship lines. Marines and sailors suffered terrible losses while the army succeeded in breaching the fortress wall.

The pounding of guns from fifty ships, Marines and sailors maimed and dead returned to the Mount Vernon; the smoke, the boom of howitzers, flashes from gun muzzles; bandaging wounds, shoveling coal in the ship's furnace, scrubbing, cooking—he wrote about none of this but remembered it in nightmarish dreams.

One week before being discharged, John was punished for sewing in the pantry. The punishment was light because the war was over and the officers preferred his cooking to all others.



Simon Rapalyea wrote:

Sept 11th 1864

Beaufort, South Carolina

Dear wife I once more take my pen in hand to inform you that I am well and hope that these few lines may find you the same as it did last time.

I received your kind letter the 7th was

glad to hear from you. I felt much pleased about the news from home. When we were recruited, we were promised 16 dollars. They told us if we would take 7 dollars now they will give us 10 dollars later and all our back pay and so they will. I think we will get paid again soon and then I will send you some more money. I think I should get home once more. Give respects to all my friends. Tell them I am well. We have some good news from the war. Our folks have taken Atlanta with 25 thousand janissaries. Today our regiment has fired 100 guns as cheers for it. Write soon and let me know the news around home.

No more from your husband

Simon Rapalyea

To his wife Mary Louisa, David wrote he was instructing in a school the regiment had opened for soldiers “who are enabled to read and write and cipher. I am happy to report that there is manifested a great sincerity to learn.”

The withholding of their rightful pay rankled Simon even more than it did David.

“I won’t pick up my musket again,” he told David.

“You’re right. It’s what we deserve. But we’re not mercenaries,” David replied. “We’re not fighting for pay. You convinced me of that.”

“I’m fighting for liberty and equality. I’m proud of having freed many, but I’m also fighting for my dignity to be treated equally.”

“What do you propose?” David asked.

They knew the fate of the black sergeant who, the previous year, a little way up the coast, in Hilton Head, had organized his company to lay down their arms demanding they receive their proper salary, not the \$7 a month they had been getting.

“Do you want to stand in front of a firing squad, too?”

“They called it a mutiny, but it wasn’t. It was a strike for lawful wages.”

“A firing squad doesn’t shoot you for that.”

Simon replied, “I’m ready to die to free the enslaved. Walker was a once a slave and he wouldn’t do his duty any longer.”

“Everyone shares the sentiment,” David said with sullen distrust.

“Then why shouldn’t we be ready to die to demand my dignity also? Freedom is only half the equation.”

Their fear wasn’t death in battle but the loss of both their freedom and dignity if they were captured by the rebels. They would rather be shot by their captors than be sent into slavery, a fate even more unthinkable than being sent to a prisoner of war death camp.

In a skirmish, a bullet lodged in Simon’s thigh; bitterness about striking for their pay was forgotten. Their resentment flared when white soldiers were sent

home immediately following the armistice while the soldiers of the 26th remained to exhume bodies for identification and dug fresh graves.

The war had taken its toll on the 26th regiment: 2 officers and 28 enlisted men killed; 3 officers and 122 enlisted dead from typhoid fever, diarrhea, dysentery, pneumonia, measles and tuberculosis.

Two years after Simon and David joined the ranks of the army Congress passed legislation granting full pay retroactively to USCT soldiers, \$7 a month, half the amount paid to white privates.



Mary Louisa Carll couldn't hold back her trembling when she caught sight of David for the first time in two years. She had prayed that he would return safely but didn't believe in prayers much anymore, not since her brother Thomas had died at Harper's Ferry, a soldier who had survived the Second Battle of Bull Run and the battles of Fredericksburg and Gettysburg was crushed beneath the wheels of a quartermaster's wagon and died after a double amputation of his legs. Thomas was buried in the Union cemetery in Winchester, Virginia, depriving Mary Louisa of the consolation of touching his tombstone, laying flowers on his grave.

The Carlls began their family life in the house that his bounty had paid for. David resumed his work as a laborer and oysterman. Over the next decades, they raised eight children: Herbert, Francis, Wilbur, Cassie, Eugene, Armenia, Herman, Agnes, Josie.

David's faith in the federal government was challenged when his application to the Pension Bureau for a funds offered to all soldiers was met with silence for many years. Finally, at the turn of the century, he began receiving \$6 a month pension for his service, a year after Mary Louisa's death.

Mary Louisa was buried beside her parents George and Freelove Appleford at the whites-only Wesley Methodist Church Cemetery. When David died, in 1910, he was interred at Pine Hollow Colored Cemetery, a mile from their home. Four years later, the Methodist Church removed nearly forty remains to nearby cemeteries. Her headstone at the original cemetery disappeared but records indicate that she was reburied in Pine Hollow. However, there is no headstone for her there or a record of having received her remains.



"I won't take work from that woman's family, Bertha," Simon said to his wife.

"Do you object to me taking in her laundry?"

"No, but I'd rather you didn't," he said. "The choice is yours."

"She pays fairly. If you take her offer and prove yourself, there's steady work to be had there."

"I don't need to prove myself to anyone."

"I know that. What I mean . . ."

"Steady or not, I can't bring myself to see that woman's face. I won't step onto the property."

This was a conversation Bertha wouldn't pursue. Simon had once told Bertha that Mrs. Townsend's

brother was the Confederacy's Prison Commissary General, the individual in charge of all the prisons holding Union soldiers, a person known for his cruelty even amongst the rebels.

The mere mention of Charlotte Townsend's name two decades after the end of the war caused Simon's mouth to tighten, and in his eyes—was it terror or rage that she saw?

Between Simon's intermittent masonry, they were able to support their family. Still, a regular income would ease the burden and they would be able to move from their cottage on Poverty Hill Road to a proper house.

Simon met with James Townsend in the wealthy family's parlor. They discussed the work expected of him and the pay. When Simon caught a glimpse of Mrs. Townsend, he abruptly ended the discussion.

"I won't work there," he told Bertha.

Bertha continued to bring in laundry from the Townsend family. One week when she was ill and they were short of money, Simon went to the Townsend home to collect the money due his wife.

The police surprised Simon at his household. When they found a pair of stonemason's hammers and a pair of bloodied overalls in his shed, they arrested him. The Townsends had been robbed and left on their kitchen floor with severe head wounds. When Charlotte regained consciousness, she told the police that a black man named Simon Rapalyea had come to collect money due to his wife. She then felt a blow to the side of her head.

The case against Simon was solid until the police discovered that the hammer and overalls belonged to another man they connected with another murder in the neighborhood.

James Townsend survived the attack but not Charlotte. And there was yet another murder. This time the police arrested and charged one individual for all four killings in the area.

Simon's limp worsened, which limited his ability to do heavy labor. The government disability pension helped them maintain their property. He and Bertha lived out the rest of their lives in their cottage. When he died at age 66, he was buried in Pine Hollow Cemetery. Bertha continued to receive his pension of \$10 a month, until her death five years later. She was buried by his side.



With savings of more \$500 upon his discharge from the navy, former Landsman John Willis built a general store for himself near Westbury depot, not wanting to board a ship again, not even to dredge for oysters in the bay. He seldom gave thought to his naval service, but each Decoration Day he silently honored his shipmates who had died in the war and his Westbury neighbor, Luther Hallock: killed by canon fire at Sabine Pass, Texas, while on a gunship mired in the river. His body was never found.

John employed James Smith, a soldier from the 26th color regiment, a man who had escaped from slavery and joined the Union army in South Carolina.

Smith traveled with David and Simon to New York when they were discharge and settled in Grantville, where he met John.

John's visits with David and Simon faded as they raised their families while he remained unmarried. His sister, since married, took care of the farm since their father's death. Mostly he had found sufficient companionship and sympathy with James.

Aside from establishing his business, life was uneventful for John and James. This changed in the winter of 1883. The police alerted residents that a murder had occurred in East Meadow and the killer was on the loose, a black man wearing a hat and worn coat. They believed he would attempt to escape on a train from Westbury to New York.

"If he come in here to wait for the train, keep him until we get here. Remember, he's dangerous."

This wasn't the first murder in the area. For months residents had lived in fright. Lydia Maybee and her daughter Annie had been found strangled under a cover of leaves in their stable, Garret Maybee left unconscious in the Brookville farmhouse; James and Charlotte Townsend, from a prominent Long Island family, murdered in their Oyster Bay home; and now less than a mile away from the village south of the railroad, another brutal murder, the bashing of Sealey Sprague's skull with a fish plate and iron bar, assaulting his wife and stealing \$38.

The men in the Willis store planned what they would day if the suspect did arrive. Less than an hour later, a man fitting the description entered Willis

Provisions. John and James tightened as they eyed him. They kept their cool.

The man asked when the next train for New York was scheduled to arrive, then taking a fistful of money from his pant pockets, bought crackers and cheese with a silver dollar. A gold watch chain dangled from the inside of his jacket.

“In a half-hour there’s a train,” John said.

The suspect sat on the bench by the hot potbelly stove. He had taken off his brogans and put his feet up on the bench to dry out his wet socks. He opened and shut the face of the watch he took from his pocket.

“Where’s the train?” the man demanded as he looked at the time yet again.

“Sometimes it runs late,” John replied.

The man quickly pulled on his brogans, stood and buttoned his torn jacket. He pulled his hat down to his brows.

“It’s cold out,” James said. “Stay put. Do you want more cheese?”

“The train will be here soon,” John added, as he moved out from behind the counter, attempting to keep the suspect from leaving before the police arrived.

The man took his hat from the bench and rose.

“Stop!” James interjected, placing himself in front of the door as John approached the man from behind. James clutched the smaller man while John brought Rugg to the floor, securing his wrists with rope, then tying him to a post.

While they waited for the police, a crowd gathered outside the general store. Word had spread that the wanted man was inside Willis Provisions.

John stood on the front step facing the group.

“This is his third murder. Give him to us.”

“The police will take him.”

“No need,” one man said as he held up a coil of rope.

“We’ll do this ourselves.”

“Give him to us.”

Farmers, tradesmen, merchants, laborers, childhood friends, newcomers in silk hats, strangers, women with dresses trailing in the snow, black and white citizens calling for Rugg to be handed over. Many men held their revolvers at their sides. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported: “Two hundred people at least [gathered], the idea of lynching Rugg seemed to strike everyone as the right thing under the circumstances.”

John spoke calmly, assuring them that justice would be done, that taking the law into their own hands was not a good thing to do.

“Don’t stand in the way, John.”

“Cool down, Abraham. Don’t do anything foolish.”

The police arrived before the mob could burst into the store. They conferred amongst themselves, then told the mob that they were taking him to Hicksville to be examined by an official. They reassembled there the next day.

The following morning the mob in Hicksville was disappointed. John had convinced the district attorney

that Rugg would face certain death there and persuaded him to change the venue for the arraignment. That night the suspect was put on night milk train to Long Island City where he was tried and convicted of murdering Mrs. Sprague and her daughter. The New York Times reported that on the night before his hanging, "Rugg passed a quiet night, praying half an hour before retiring, and sleeping calmly, after smoking a cigar and telling his watchers stories of his experience as a sailor."

Nightmares haunted John with greater regularity and he could no longer control the tremors in his hands. Profits from the business were consumed in drink. One morning James opened the store and waited the day for John to show up. That night James padlocked the store's door for the last time. John had abandoned his business, leaving his cracked guitar in the storeroom, telling no one where he was going.

James Smith took odd jobs in the village, on the grounds of a 500 acre estate north of the turnpike, until he was incapable any longer of working. In 1908, at age 71, James Smith died, a resident of the Jones Institute, the poor house established with the remaining funds Oyster Bay had raised to pay bounties to enlist men for the war.