

They 'gave their blood and lives'

The stories of seven Black Civil War veterans buried in a Lenox cemetery

By CLARENCE FANTO
The Berkshire Eagle

LENOX—An early-stage local history research project has confirmed that seven Black U.S. Civil War veterans are buried at the town-owned cemetery adjoining the landmark Church on the Hill.

The research was spearheaded by Barbara Lewis, a great-great granddaughter of Sheffield native Jeremiah Bradley,

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who fought with the storied 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment — the Civil War's best-known African American unit.

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Barbara Lewis, left, great-great granddaughter of Jeremiah Bradley, and her second cousin Eunice Jones took a pilgrimage to the Church on the Hill cemetery last August. Bradley's headstone is visible prior to its restoration.

PHOTO PROVIDED
BY JOHN CLARK



Veterans

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Lewis, a Boston-based cultural historian, poet and novelist, told *The Eagle* that the upcoming Juneteenth federal holiday on Monday is the ideal time to commemorate the role played by Berkshire County's African American soldiers who fought to save the Union. Lewis, now retired, directed the William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black Culture at the University of Massachusetts Boston from 2004 to 2019.

According to the National Archives, by the end of the Civil War, about 179,000 Black men (10 percent of the Union Army) had served in the U.S. Army, and another 19,000 in the Navy. Nearly 40,000 Black soldiers died during the war — 30,000 of infection or disease.

Bradley — who died in 1865 of dysentery, contracted during the war — and three others buried at the Church on the Hill cemetery served in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment from 1863 to 1865. Spearheaded by abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass and supported by Massachusetts Gov. John Albion Andrew, the regiment consisted of African-American enlisted men commanded by Col. Robert Gould Shaw and other white officers.

The service of the 54th Massachusetts, particularly their charge during the Second Battle of Fort Wagner in South Carolina, became one of the best-known episodes of the war, chronicled in the 1989 film "Glory," starring Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman and Matthew Broderick. It was based on the book by Peter Burchard, "One Gallant Rush: Robert Gould Shaw and His Brave Black Regiment."

"Our nation's cemeteries are repositories of history and the people who preserve them do the sacred work of remembrance," Lewis said.

She noted that Bradley and his family were from the Ashley Falls area of Sheffield, the county's earliest European settlement; he later relocated to Adams for work. His widow, Samantha, moved to Lenox after the Civil War. Bradley's headstone, made by Gross Marble in Lee, was installed at the Church on the Hill cemetery in 1890. He had been interred originally in Adams.

"There was a groundswell of African Americans from the Berkshires who volunteered to fight with the 54th Massachusetts," Lewis said. Some also fought with the 55th Massachusetts Regiment and the 5th Volunteer Cavalry.

She credited "the fighting spirit of the proud and determined African American men from the Berkshires, who fought with everything they had to keep the Union united."

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Sheffield native Jeremiah Bradley's restored headstone at the Church on the Hill cemetery in Lenox. Bradley is among seven Black Civil War veterans interred at the cemetery.

The headstone of Samuel Weaver, who also served in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, died in Pittsfield in 1895 and was buried Lenox.



Bradley's headstone was restored recently by a specialist, Tamara Conde of New Salem in Franklin County, who offered her services at no cost, Lewis pointed out. Lewis and her second cousin, Eunice Jones, visited the Church on the Hill cemetery last August before Bradley's headstone was cleaned and restored.

According to Bob Drinkwater, a historical archaeologist whose research collection is housed at UMass Amherst, Lenox was home to a few African American families starting in the 1770s, with

significant expansion in the mid-1800s.

The early Black enclave in Lenox derived from an indentured community that was hardworking, often of Dutch extraction, Lewis said. Members of the Van der Zee family, for example, operated a laundry and also a bakery, which made hosts for Trinity Church, where the Whitneys and Vanderbilts worshipped in summer. James van der Zee, a leading Harlem Renaissance photographer, received his early training in music and art in Lenox.

Citing published research by David Levinson, Emilie Piper and Eagle columnist Bernard Drew, Drinkwater reported that 13 African-American men from Lenox served in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and three in the 5th Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry, another unit comprised of men of color.

"According to local sources, African American men began migrating to Lenox from New York to take jobs building the estates in the 1840s, and when construction was completed, were employed as cooks and butlers, and African American women were employed as domestics, laundresses and dress-makers," Drinkwater wrote in his book "In Memory of Susan Freedom: Searching for Gravestones of African Americans in Western Massachusetts."

Lenox Library local historian Amy Lafave has listed not only Bradley's headstone in the cemetery, but also those of six additional African-American veterans who fought on the side of the North. She identified one of them, Henry Weaver, by coincidence because his headstone is next to Bradley's.

In order to more easily locate and identify the burial sites at Church on the Hill, the Lenox Historical Commission is working on cemetery signage and has created markings for the burial sites of the four Massachusetts 54th Regiment members.

"These soldiers and their families gave their blood and lives to establish their right to belong to the middle class in the country they fought to preserve," Lewis said.

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