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Stewart W. Woods: A Peculiar Casualty at Fort Wagner?

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Abstract

Captured in the darkness of July 18th on a sandy beach in South Carolina was a native of Adams County. Stewart W. Woods, born in Heidlersburg around 1836, found himself in the hands of the rebels, among a handful of his compatriots in the 54th Massachusetts. The fighting of Woods' war was over and his fate was unclear. Stewart was a free man, born under the folds of the same American flag under which he now fought. At some point, he had drifted over the mountain range and called Carlisle home when the war erupted in 1861. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Fort Wagner, 54th Massachusetts, USCT, United States Colored Troops, Underground Railroad

Disciplines

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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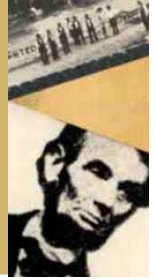
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There Be Squalls Ahead: This post deals with historical uncertainty and represents some research-in-progress. This story is still half-researched and needs some more work. Viewer discretion is advised.

Captured in the darkness of July 18th on a sandy beach in South Carolina was a native of Adams County. Stewart W. Woods, born in Heidlersburg around 1836, found himself in the hands of the rebels, among a handful of his compatriots in the 54th Massachusetts. The fighting of Woods' war was over and his fate was unclear. Stewart was a free man, born under the folds of the same American flag under which he now fought. At some point, he had drifted over the mountain range and called Carlisle home when the war erupted in 1861.

But in summer of 1863, Woods' native county was still stumbling bewildered, blindsided by the realities of war. Now Stewart Woods was blindsided by the realities of war too, far from home and excruciatingly vulnerable in the hands of the rebel army. In the 54th Massachusetts, Private Stewart W. Wood was an oddity, perhaps entirely unique.

Stewart W. Woods was white.

In his Compiled Service Record, Stewart W. Woods' complexion is listed as "white." His eyes were blue, his hair was brown. In the 1850 and 1860 census, although Stewart himself doesn't readily appear, there are no black Stewart households in Cumberland County.

One of the larger Woods families in Cumberland County in 1860 was headed by Richard Woods esq, a 56-year-old farmer. According to the shadowy and somewhat insubstantial world of the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania, Richard Woods was purportedly a local conductor. Richard Woods' son Samuel was the same age as Stewart Woods.

Why might Stewart W. Woods have been marked down as "white?" Was his skin just very light? But it isn't marked as "light" in the CSR, but clearly "white."

Led away from Fort Wagner, Stewart Woods wasn't dragged to Andersonville or any of the other Southern prisons penning in hundreds of loyal American soldiers. Instead, he and his compatriots became the awkward nucleus of a truly weird set of legal



Are these the comrades of a white enlisted man? / [PD LOC](#)

circumstances, as he and his fellows were tried by South Carolina's governor that August for slave insurrection. The soldiers were stripped of their uniforms, treated as common criminals and held inside Charleston's City Jail, where forty years before Denmark Vesey and his co-conspirators had been held under identical charges.

But why would a white man undergo such torture? If Woods *was* white, might he have been in the 54th Massachusetts *precisely because he was white*? Perhaps as in the South for generations light skinned black men had attempted to pass as white for a measure of freedom, Stewart Woods attempted to pass as black (all it would take was 1/8th of your lineage) in order to fight in a unit truly fighting for freedom.

In August of 1863, a criminal trial was called and the captives of the 54th were charged under South Carolina law for conducting a slave rebellion. But the case fizzled; the court decided that the charges overstepped South Carolina's jurisdiction. The soldiers were marched back to the city's prison and held there like criminals for nearly another year and a half, no real trial or charges. And Stewart Woods got sick.

Whether Stewart W. Woods was a white man on a moral crusade isn't precisely clear. But that Private Stewart W. Woods was on some sort of moral crusade is clear. Just a month before he was captured, the 54th Massachusetts marched through Darien, Georgia. Though Robert Gould Shaw reportedly called the burning of the town a "satanic act," Woods was content leaving a clear, proud calling card of who had torched the town in slave-holding Georgia. Woods plucked a book from some soon-to-be-charred shelf and [scribbled his name in the cover](#). "STEWART W. WOODS, was born September 21, 1834... Hidlersburg [sic], Adams County, Pennsylvania. 54th Massachusetts Volunteers." He followed those lines with the name of the unit again, content with the flag he fought under and the men he fought beside: "54th regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers, of Col. SHAW." So proud was he of his commanders that he noted all of their names; Shaw, Pope, Higginson and Tucker all were mentioned in the inscription.

Then Woods left the book to be found by the citizens of Darien as they wandered back into their wrecked city, wood framed walls charred black like the slaves their state had brokered in for hundreds of years. The book became his calling card, the signature he wrote on the inferno-artwork.



Months had passed from that day when Woods proudly burned Darien, Georgia, set torch to sin. By the spring of 1865, he was a shell of a man, the swampy and insanitary conditions of a city jail cell in a tropical city did their worst. He and his compatriots were exchanged in March of 1865, but it was too little, too late. Just 10 days after coming back to Federal lines, in a general hospital in occupied Wilmington, North Carolina, Stewart W. Woods succumbed to typhoid fever.

Should one of these faces be *white*?
What else don't we know about the USCT?

Was Stewart W. Woods white? Was he the only white soldier in the ranks of the 54th Massachusetts? Did he do it for Abolitionist fervor?

He did seem to take glee from a town meeting the torch, a town in a nation fighting to enslave men who looked like those who marched beside him. And Stewart Woods, whether white or black, fought for the destruction of a cancerous institution which had, for centuries, been strangling the vital American organ: liberty.

Special thanks to Chris Barr from Andersonville National Historical Site for some clarification and fascinating info on the men of the 54th Massachusetts who were captured during the battle at Fort Wagner. Andersonville has been doing gangbusters work under leadership of Chief of Interpretation Eric Leonard. Check out [their Facebook page later today](#) for more about the weird and amazing story of all of the 54th's captured's odd journey to everywhere but Andersonville.

Undoubtedly, Stewart W. Woods will continue to bother my historian's brain until this story gets more solid evidence. There is a mother's pension application at the National Archives submitted for Woods. Hopefully that application can help pin down more certain details about Woods' race, life and death. Stay tuned.