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Obsessive Digging in Carolina Sand and Baltimore Asphalt

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

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Obsessive Digging in Carolina Sand and Baltimore Asphalt

Abstract

My parents moved to Wilmington, North Carolina a couple years ago. I have to admit, I am fascinated when I visit the South, for the sheer fact that it is such a vastly different environment than I'm used to. For one thing, the war happened there. For another, the war got very complex and interesting there. [*excerpt*]

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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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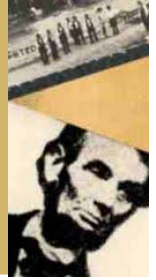
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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2013



My parents moved to Wilmington, North Carolina a couple years ago. I have to admit, I am fascinated when I visit the South, for the sheer fact that it is such a vastly different environment than I'm used to. For one thing, the war happened there. For another, the war got very complex and interesting there.

Wilmington has caught my fancy in particular. The campaign to capture that place singled the death knell for Richmond and Lee's defensive line guarding Petersburg. In many real regards, Wilmington ended the war.

But it has also become my own personal United States Colored Troops landscape. Living in Gettysburg, I'm used to the lily-white Civil War, where the combatants were fighting over the fate of the black man in America but were not (save a few choice, irregular exceptions on the field) themselves black. Imagining a landscape with black men literally fighting for their right to be human is such a foreign and often entrancing topic for me.

Last year, it was [standing atop Battery Buchanan](#) where the rebel troops from Fort Fisher surrendered to black soldiers, a palpable moment where everything changed.

This year, I wanted to revisit the Wilmington National Cemetery. I'd been one time before, drawn in by the [state highway marker](#) posted out front. That first trip I went unarmed, uneducated, just exploring with no foreknowledge.

This time, I wanted to know a bit more. So I began doing a little digging. Using a couple of databases, I began pulling up men in the USCT who died near Wilmington,

Some heroes are buried here... and some aren't. particularly after the Battle of Forks Road on

February 20th, 1865. The 5th USCT began sticking out in particular. Free men recruited in Ohio fighting against slavery in North Carolina was just fascinating.

All of this led, after random probing and hunting into the wee hours as my parents slept off the turkey, to an itinerary. We were going to go where a few of those men were wounded, and then where they were buried.

The problem is that most of the graves of USCT at the Wilmington National Cemetery are unmarked. The Veteran Affairs database yielded only one of the men who died of wounds after the Battle of Forks Road as buried in the cemetery. The rest would be a goose chase.

So, with my parents along for the fun, we began our goose chase.

Turns out, the VA database is right. Most of the men didn't have a tombstone to kneel next to, photograph or leave flowers at had I brought any. These men from Ohio are gone.

One in particular though, was my own mistake. We were looking in particular for William H. Quan.

Civil War Data lists that, "he died of wounds on 3/18/1865 at Wilmington, NC." By all rights he should have been in that cemetery somewhere.

Except the database is wrong. After we'd searched nearly every stone in the cemetery for Quan and come up empty handed, I kept digging at home.

Quan was sent out of Wilmington, transferred up the Atlantic coastline to the General Hospital at McKim's Mansion in Baltimore, Maryland. It was *there*, Army Surgeon Read reported in a letter in the soldier's Compiled Service Record, William Quan died on March 18th, 1865.

Unlike his Wilmington brethren, Quan's CSR even has a record of interment. Private William Quan, formerly of Fayette County, Ohio, aged 31 years, was buried on March 20th, 1865 in Laurel Cemetery at 10am. He left behind a widow back home in Ohio.

I got really excited then. This was my excuse to visit a graveyard in Baltimore. So I began to Google for directions to "Laurel Cemetery" in Baltimore.



William Quan's Grave Marker

And then I hit an even more horrifying truth.

Whereas his comrades who died in Wilmington have small marble cubes with numbers marking their graves, Quan's fate is much worse. In the late 1950s, in the height of severe racial tension in the City of Baltimore, the city and local speculators brokered a deal: [Laurel Cemetery would be condemned and sold for real estate development](#).

Graves would be moved, carted away to a new plot of land in Carroll County. But of the between 5,000 and 7,000 graves which were in Laurel Cemetery when the deal was struck, [only about 270 graves made their way to the new plot](#). William Quan isn't among them.

Quan likely lies buried where he was laid beneath the earth in March of 1865, in what remains of the Laurel Cemetery today: [a parking lot](#). His body sits below the tarmac where shoppers park their cars to go to "[Forman Mills](#)" and "[Dollar General](#)."

It looks like I have one more obsessive trip to make, this time to Baltimore. Perhaps I'll bring along a chunk of board painted "William Quan, 5th United States Colored Troops, 1834-1865," and a bike lock. I need to leave some flowers at the grave of a true unknown and forgotten hero.

He died serving his nation, serving in the United States army, and fighting for the rights of men who looked just like him. And today he's buried under a parking lot.