

The Other Henry Clay

by Lynne Belluscio

From records on file with the Genesee County Historians office, the first African American Civil War veteran listed is Henry Clay, who died September 13, 1925 and is buried in Machpelah Cemetery (Section E lot 24).

From what I can find, Henry was born February 25, 1849 as a slave in Washington, Georgia, near Savannah. While he was still a teenager, he accompanied his owner in the Confederate Army and they were both taken prisoner by Union troops. In 1864, he joined up with the New York 8th Heavy Artillery, and although he is listed as a veteran, I suspect that because he was black, he was never allowed to enlist.

The 8th Heavy Artillery was under the direction of Col. Peter A. Porter. It was written that Clay "went with Captain Cook of S. Byron, New York and worked as a servant for the Eighth New York Heavy Artillery." I've checked the roster for the 8th Heavy Artillery and there are several Cook names that are part of the group that enlisted in Byron. The only one that received the rank of Captain was mustered in at Lockport and was killed during the war.

In 1923, the Eighth Heavy Artillery held their 59th reunion at the Odd Fellows home on Park Place in Batavia, and Henry Clay joined the festivities and shared some old war stories: "I was along as a cook with Company I. I was only a young duck then, about 10 or 11 years old." (Probably a little older if he was born in 1849.) "You must have been a nice cook at that age," interposed his wife with a smile. "Oh, it wasn't much to be a cook in the army. I could carry water and peel potatoes and do things like Henry Clay's war experiences were with some of the heaviest fighting. He was with the Artillery at Cold Harbor, Fredricksburg and Petersburg. He was captured



An image from the Library of Congress.

by Confederate soldiers at Gettysburg. While under confinement, in Boonesboro, Pennsylvania, he attempted to crawl away and was bayoneted in the arm.

After the war, he came north and settled in LeRoy for a short time, working as a farm hand. He moved to Batavia in 1875, and lived at 92 Main Street with his wife. He worked as

a janitor in Batavia until his death, September 13, 1925. His wife, Lucy, died in 1934. The Machpelah Cemetery records notes that there are to be no red flowers placed on their graves. I cannot find a reference to this curious notation. One thought is that during the Civil War and after, there were groups of men in the South who were known as "red shirts" and they

eventually became members of the KKK. Perhaps the color red was symbolic of that activity.

One other thought that crossed my mind is that his name, Henry Clay, would not have been an endearing name to slaveholders in the South, and that more that likely he adopted the name, after he became a freeman.



We're
More
Than
Just
Print.

Get up-to-date
information on local
events and find out
what's going on in
your area.

Visit
our
Web
site.

leroyny.com