

**“LET HIM GET AN EAGLE ON HIS BUTTON”:
CAESAR HALL (1828-1896), AFRICAN AMERICAN CIVIL
WAR SOLDIER FROM HAMPTON AND WILLIMANTIC;
JULIA HALL, FARM WIFE AND LAUNDRESS**

Jamie Eves

“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U. S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship.”

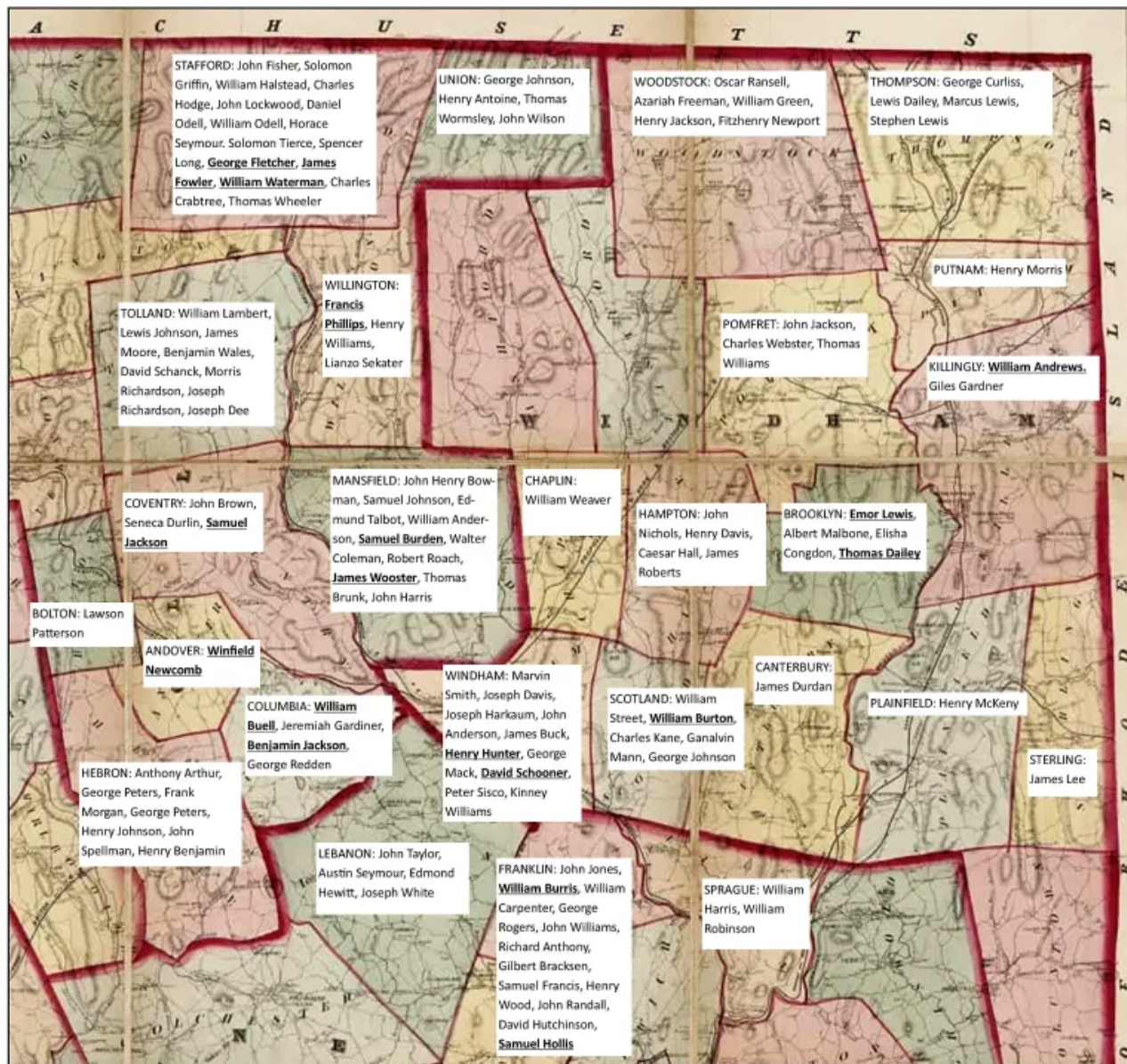
–Frederick Douglass

Most Americans believe that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in January, 1863, but a strong argument can be made that it was actually the Union Army that freed them. And because a significant portion of that Army (about 10%) was comprised of Black soldiers, African Americans themselves played a major role in ending slavery. Lincoln issued the preliminary version of the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, and the final version went into effect on January 1, 1863. A famous statue in Washington, D.C., located not far from the Capitol, depicts an enslaved man, shirtless and in chains, kneeling in gratitude before a standing Lincoln, who has one hand on the Emancipation Proclamation and the other hand outstretched, bidding the slave to rise. Emancipation, the statue seems to say, was a gift given to enslaved people by generous whites, a gift for which they should be grateful. But the statue would be more historically accurate if it depicted the enslaved man rising on his own, grasping in comradeship both Lincoln’s hand and the hands of two Union Army soldiers, one white and one Black.

Lincoln, who died before the statue was even commissioned, understood the vital role the Army played in emancipation. Whatever his feelings about slavery may have been in 1861 when he became President, by the middle of 1862 Lincoln was convinced that slavery was what had caused the Civil War, and that winning the War required ending slavery — that saving the Union and ending slavery were but two sides of the same coin. Lincoln also knew that the Emancipation Proclamation was merely an emergency wartime edict, and understood that the Proclamation did not free all of the slaves, only those living in Confederate territory recaptured by advancing Union forces. Ending slavery forever throughout the entire country, Lincoln knew, required both a Constitutional Amendment (the 13th Amendment, ratified on December 6, 1865) and victory on the battlefield. It was not Lincoln, nor even Congress, that had the power to end slavery in all of North America. That goal could only be accomplished by the guns and blood of the Union Army. Lincoln alluded to this reality in his famous Gettysburg Address. “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we [politicians] say here,” Lincoln had intoned, “but it can never forget what they [the Union Army] did here. It is for us

the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Although Lincoln respected the Constitution, he venerated the earlier Declaration of Independence, which had declared that, without exception, “all men are created equal.” That’s why, in the Gettysburg Address, he referenced the Declaration (which had been passed “four score and seven years ago”), not the Constitution. And as Lincoln also well knew, because he had authorized it as part of the Emancipation Proclamation, among the soldiers of the Union Army, upon whose success everything rested, whose sacrifices he hoped would not be in vain, were a large number of men of color, more than 175,000 by the time the War ended. The liberation of enslaved Americans was not simply declared, it was won on the battlefield, paid for with the blood of soldiers both white and Black.

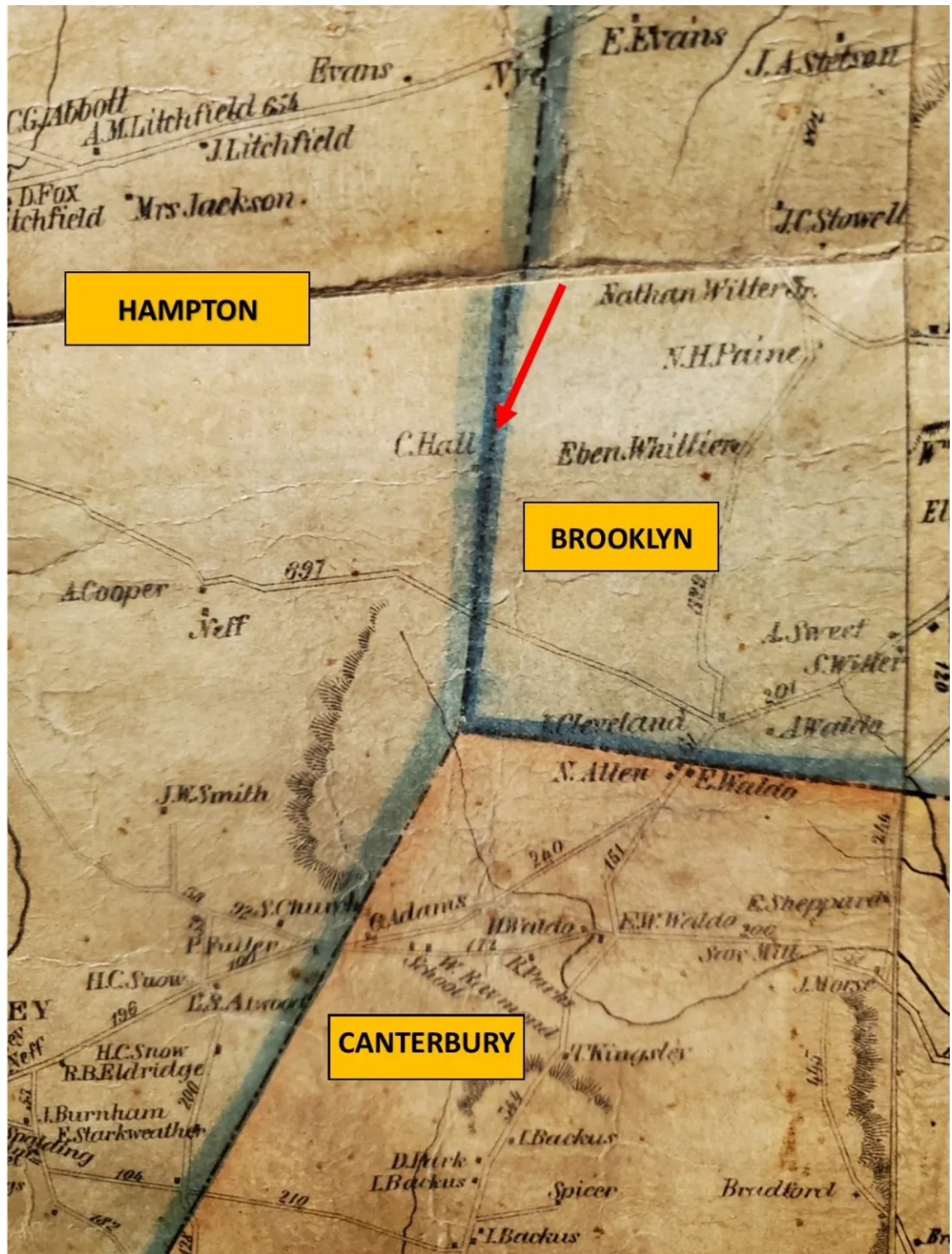
African American and indigenous men from Connecticut served with distinction in the Union Army during the Civil War, including men from the Town of Windham and its industrial borough of Willimantic. Five “colored” Civil War soldiers are buried in Windham cemeteries — two in the Windham Center Cemetery and three in the Old Willimantic Cemetery. Eight other African American men who lived in Windham and Willimantic also served, although they are buried elsewhere. This article tells the story of one of these men, Caesar Hall. Subsequent articles will cover the experiences of Lianzo Sekater, Joseph Davis, Marvin Smith, James Buck, John Harris, and the others.



African American and indigenous soldiers from northeastern Connecticut who enlisted in either the 29th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry (Colored) or 30th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry (Colored) during the Civil War. Those in boldface and underlined died in service.

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Caesar Hall, Jr. was born c. 1828 in the small farming community of Chaplin, CT. He was named for his father, an African American farm laborer whose name appears in official records as “Ceazer,” “Caesar,” “Cezar,” “Ceaser,” and “Cesar.” Caesar, Jr. grew up in a large household. Besides himself and his father, there were his mother Susan, who was also African American, his older brother Henry, and younger brothers James, Charles, George, John Q. A. (we may assume that the Q. A. stood for Quincy Adams), Gilbert, and Edwin. Sometime during the two years after Caesar, Jr. was born, the Hall family moved from Chaplin to the neighboring town of Hampton, also predominantly rural, where they would remain. The 1850 United States Census recorded Caesar, Sr. as a “laborer,” which probably meant that he was a farm hand,



Caesar Hall, Jr. appeared in official Connecticut records for the first time in 1850, in the federal Census, when he was 23 years old. The 1850 United States Census was a milestone for historians, because for the first time it recorded the names of everyone, not just the heads of

household, as had previously been the case. According to the Census, Caesar, Jr. was a free man and a farm laborer, like his father. He resided in Hampton, but not as a member of his father's household. Instead, he lived with Willard Talbot, a white farmer, along with Talbot's wife Maria, the three small Talbot children, and a young white woman named Elizabeth Bunn. Caesar, Jr. and Elizabeth would have been servants, working for wages, room, and board, and Caesar probably did much of the household's farm labor, probably working alongside Talbot. Shortly after the Census, Caesar, Jr. married an African American woman named Julia and moved out of the Talbot household. Caesar and Julia's marriages records could not be located, but the 1860 United States Census showed them living in their own household in Hampton. Now 31 (ages listed in the Census should always be taken as approximations, as the data was not always collected from the person in question, but rather could have been supplied by a family member or even a neighbor), Caesar, Jr. was still a farm laborer. He could read and write. At 32, Julia was a year older than her husband. And there were three children: Nancy N., 9; William P., 3; and Susan E., 1. Nancy attended public school.

In 1861 the Civil War began. Across Connecticut — across the entire North — African American men sought to enlist in the Union Army, only to be turned away. Both the federal Army and the state militias were for whites only. Men of color were not permitted to join, barred by a law enacted by Congress in 1792. (African American men *had* served in the Revolutionary War, before the 1792 ban.) But the Civil War went badly for the Union in 1861 and 1862, especially in the East. In 1862 the President and Congress, needing more troops, decided to lift the ban. The Emancipation Proclamation — issued in 1862 but put into effect on the first day of 1863 — called for recruiting “colored” soldiers, which meant African Americans, Native Americans, and other nonwhites. “Colored” soldiers would serve in segregated, all-black regiments with white officers, but they would be given the opportunity to fight. The first of these “colored” regiments to be formed and put into service was the famed 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the subject of the movie *Glory*. Connecticut moved more slowly than Massachusetts to recruit Black soldiers, in part because Governor William Buckingham feared that white soldiers might react with hostility. But a registration of potential “colored” soldiers — most of them African American — was held in the summer of 1863, enlistments began in late 1863, and volunteers were mustered into actual regiments — the 29th and 30th Connecticut Volunteer Infantries (Colored) — early in 1864. Among those who signed up was Caesar Hall, Jr., who joined the 29th C.V.I.

Just as white soldiers, Connecticut men of color probably joined the Union Army for a variety of individual reasons: duty, patriotism, peer pressure, adventure, signing bonuses, soldier's pay, a desire to save the Union, proving their worth, and — for some — to end slavery in the South and advance racial equality in the North. Indeed, for soldiers of color like Caesar Hall, ending slavery and achieving equality were doubtless at or near the top of the list, although they themselves were free. (Slavery had finally ended in Connecticut in the 1840s.) Altogether, 178,975 Black men served as soldiers in the U. S. Army, and another 20,000 served in the Navy. All told, the various “colored” regiments suffered a combined 2,751 combat deaths and around 36,000 deaths from disease and wounds. Sixteen were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. According to the historian Herbert Aptheker, African American soldiers were more

than 35% more likely to die from disease and wounds than white soldiers, because they routinely received poorer medical care. Although African Americans made up less than 5% of the population of the North, and were only permitted to serve during the last year of the War, they comprised around 10% of all Union troops during the War, meaning that black men joined the Union Army in greater numbers relative to their share of the population than white men. Doubtless, one of the reasons for this was that they were especially motivated to end slavery in the United States. But they were also moved by a desire to prove themselves as full American citizens, to make a difference in a crucial moment, to save democracy, to earn the respect of their white neighbors, and to further the cause of racial equality in the North as well as the South. It would be wonderful if Caesar Hall had put in writing his thoughts and feelings about all of this. But like most people of humble origins, he didn't. If he wrote any letters home to Julia, they didn't survive. Without his words, we can only judge him by his actions.

Caesar Hall, Jr., enlisted in the 29th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry on December 3, 1863, at Norwich, CT, the nearest large city to his home in Hampton. Hall was 36, a bit old for a soldier, but this was the Civil War, fought mostly by citizen soldiers whose ages ranged from their mid-teens into their 50s, a large proportion of whom were, like Caesar, married with children. Hall's recruitment papers indicate that he was relatively tall for the time, although short by today's reckoning, at 5' 5 1/2". He was recorded as having black hair and black eyes. (Every one of the Connecticut enlistment records I have seen for African American Civil War soldiers said they had black eyes, not brown, so I would not take the notation too literally.) Hall was assigned to Company H. He mustered in on March 8, 1864, and on April 30 he was "promoted" to full private. He served through to the end of the War, mustering out on October 24, 1865.

The matter of Hall's rank is not totally clear. African American soldiers were not permitted to be commissioned officers, but they could serve as corporals or sergeants. Hall's official record listed him as a corporal when he first enlisted. However, a January 1864 story in the *New York Times* told a different tale. According to the *Times*, Hall earned his rank while serving guard duty:

SAMUEL BOWERS, of New-York, a volunteer at the camp on Grapevine Point, attempted to desert on Friday night, by running the guard. CAESAR HALL, of Co. A [sic], Twenty-ninth Connecticut Volunteers, (colored) on guard at the time, ordered him to halt, when BOWERS threw snuff in his eyes. HALL pursued and closed with the runaway; he bayoneted him badly through the arm, broke his gunstock over his head, and brought him back to camp. BOWERS was sent to the hospital, and will probably recover. HALL was, this morning, promoted to be corporal.

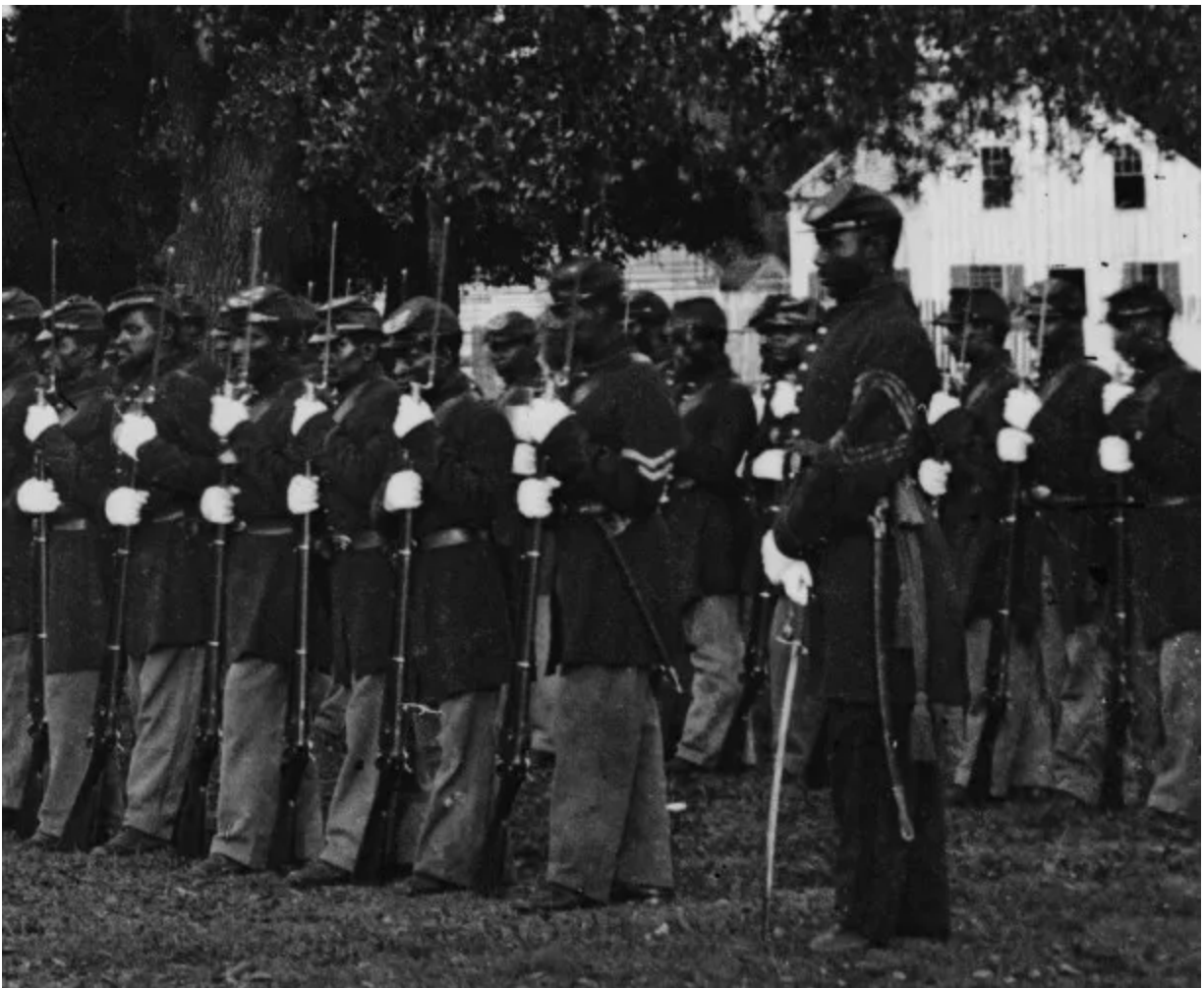
The 29th C.V.I. served with distinction. George Williams, in *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion* (1888), wrote:

On the 19th of November, 1863, the War Department authorized the Governor of Connecticut to raise a regiment to be designated as the "Twenty-ninth Regiment Connecticut Volunteers" (colored), to serve three years, or during the duration of the war; on the 23rd of November, in General Orders No. 17, the

work of recruiting this regiment was officially begun at Hartford. This regiment made a splendid reputation, losing nineteen enlisted men killed, two officers wounded, one hundred and twenty-one enlisted men wounded, one enlisted man missing, making total casualties one hundred and forty-three.

There is a monument to the 29th C.V.I. in New Haven, CT.

After enlisting, Hall joined the rest of the Regiment to be mustered in on March 8 in Fair Haven, CT. So many Connecticut African American men wanted to enlist that the state decided to create a second Regiment, the 30th C.V.I. When the 30th did not reach a full regimental compliment of 1,000, it was combined with similar regiments from other states to form the 30th United States Volunteer Infantry (Colored). The 29th was full, though, so on March 19, 1864, it left Connecticut for Annapolis, MD, under the command of Col. William B. Wooster of Derby, CT, a white officer who had volunteered for the assignment. Like all of the 29th's commissioned officers, Wooster was white. Before leaving Connecticut, Hall and the rest of the Regiment heard orations by Governor Buckingham (who by then had become a firm supporter of the idea of Black soldiers) and Frederick Douglass. In April, the Regiment left Maryland for duty at Beaufort, SC, where it participated in the tail end of the Sea Islands campaign. The photo of the 29th (below, from the Library of Congress) was taken in Beaufort.



In August, the 29th moved into the thick of things, joining the Union Army's big push to destroy Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and capture the Confederate capital of Richmond, VA. Determined to end the war sooner rather than later, Union General Ulysses S. Grant threw everything he had at the Confederates, including the 29th, reassigned to Virginia. Union troops advanced as two armies, the battle-scarred Army of the Potomac and the smaller Army of the James, trapping the Confederates in a vice. The 29th joined the Army of the James, advancing on Richmond from the south. Marching inland along the north bank of the James River in humid August heat, the 29th was present at Bermuda Hundred, Deep Bottom, and Strawberry Plains, although in reserve. They joined the trenches (the Civil War was the first real example of trench warfare) at Petersburg, and in September were sent to New Market, Chaffin's Farm, and Darbytown, although again, in reserve. Through it all, they carried their battle flag, now restored by the State of Connecticut.

At the end of October, 1864, Hall and the rest of the 29th saw their first combat at the Battle of Fair Oaks. Acting as the skirmish line for their Division, the Regiment suffered 80 casualties. From there they settled into trenches around Richmond, helping to garrison a line of forts along the Newmarket Road from November 1864 through April 1865. At the beginning of April, Richmond finally fell. The 29th was the first Union infantry to enter the defeated Confederate capital. Companies C and G — not Hall's Company H — were the skirmishers. With Richmond taken and his army surrounded, Lee surrendered and the Civil War neared its conclusion. With fighting over in Virginia, the 29th was brought back to the Union rear near Washington, D.C., and given the task of guarding prisoners. In June they sailed for Texas, where they joined their old friends in the 30th U.S.V.I. (Colored) in mop-up operations. They had arrived in Texas shortly after June 19, when the Union Army proclaimed all enslaved people in Texas emancipated, an event that led to the later holiday known as Juneteenth. In November they were sent home, honorably discharged at New Haven, CT.

Caesar Hall came home to Hampton and Julia and the kids. The 1870 United States Census saw his life apparently returned to normal. The Census listed him as 42 years old and a farmer, not a farm laborer. He didn't own any real estate, so he was likely a tenant farmer, still a step up from laborer. Julia was "keeping house," which meant that she undertook the myriad tough chores associated with being a farm wife. Nancy was 19, finished with school, and — although still living at home — worked somewhere as a household servant. William (13), Susie (11), and Mary (9) were in school, and would have helped with farm chores. The Halls made sure that all of their children got an education.

It all seemed perfectly normal, as if Caesar had returned from the War and picked up where he had left off. But something was wrong. Within five years from the Census — less than ten years after he returned from the War — Caesar and Julia separated and moved away. They went to Willimantic, CT, a nearby cotton mill city. Julia was listed in the 1875 Willimantic City Directory as the head of a new household — Mrs. "Cesar" Hall — a household that did not include Caesar. Julia listed her occupation as "laundress." She lived in the rear of a commercial block that fronted on Main Street, entering and exiting through a back door facing both a back alley and the railroad tracks. Her income could not have been much.



In the 1870s and 1880s, Julia Hall and her children lived in this building in Willimantic, CT. The photo shows the rear of the building, where Julia's apartment was located. The one-story brick wing — Neriman's Tailoring in the photo — did not exist then, and Julia probably lived in the back of the portion of the building now covered in gray vinyl siding. The space where the parking spaces next to the sidewalk are now located in the foreground of the photo, was in the 1880s Willimantic's Union (railroad) Station. A narrow street called River Street ran past Union Station and gave access to rear apartments to commercial buildings that fronted on the south side of Main Street. A small, wooden building existed where Neriman's Tailoring is now, and there was a courtyard between the buildings. An alley — still in existence — connected Main and River streets. Photo by Jamie Eves.

The 1880 United States Census revealed that Caesar had moved to Willimantic, too, but that he lived at a different address, a boarder in the household of Nancy Hendley. His occupation was recorded as laborer, but as he now lived in a city, it was unlikely that he was doing his accustomed farm work. The children, the Census said, lived with their mother, who was still working as a laundress, residing in the same back-door tenement as in 1875. By now, Nancy had grown up and moved away. William, 24, lived with his mother and worked as a cook.

Susan, 22, and Mary, 19, were employed as domestic servants. By 1892, according to that year's street directory, Caesar and Julia (although not the children, who by now had all moved away) still resided in Willimantic, still at separate addresses, Caesar as a boarder at 74 Elm Street, and Julia as a tenant at 68 Jackson Street. It was during these years in Willimantic that Caesar joined the local branch of the Grand Army of the Republic, a nationwide organization of Union Army veterans. Clearly, his years of service remained important to him. Caesar died on March 15, 1896, at the age of 68. He was buried in the Old Willimantic Cemetery beneath an official United States military headstone, proudly proclaiming his one-time rank of corporal.

What had happened? Had Caesar's and Julia's marriage always been rocky, and just simply came to an end sometime after 1870? Or had his wartime experiences changed Caesar in ways that affected the marriage? Had Caesar tried renting a farm when he got back from the War, only to fail financially, and then lost his marriage in the bargain? What eventually became of Julia? She is not buried in Willimantic; Caesar is all alone on his plot. Did she eventually move in with one of her children? Where did the children go? It is impossible to say.

And one more mystery: Who arranged for Caesar's burial? Could it have been Julia, carrying out one last wifely duty? Or had it been the Willimantic G.A.R.? The veteran's headstone was free, but someone would have had to take the time to arrange for it. And who made sure that it said "corporal"? Had Caesar ordered it himself as he approached death? Did Julia? Did the G.A.R.?

The story of Caesar Hall reminds us that we know little about the lives of ordinary men and women. They left behind so few records. But there are some lessons here to be learned. Emancipation was not a gift from white people to slaves, but rather was earned by the struggles, deaths, and sufferings of tens of thousands of Union soldiers, a disproportionate number of whom had been men of color, all of whom in some way paid a price for their achievement. Wars hurt the men and women who fight them, even those who survive. The Civil War also resulted in African American men achieving the legal right to vote under the Constitution, although sadly not so often in actual practice. (Women would not achieve suffrage until the 20th century.) I wonder, did Caesar Hall ever exercise his right to vote in Connecticut under the 15th Amendment, which made the old state constitution of 1818 — a constitution that only allowed white men to vote — a dead letter, at least legally? Did he ever exercise his full citizenship, as provided by the 14th Amendment, a citizenship demanded in the heat of battle? I think about that statue of Lincoln freeing the slaves, with the white Lincoln standing tall, proud, and powerful, and the the shackled black man crouched and servile, unable to fight for himself. I'm pretty sure that Lincoln would not have cared much for that statue, because he would have known how wrong it was. And I suspect that Caesar Hall wouldn't have liked it, either. I suspect that he would have considered the emancipation of his fellow people of color, and the rights promised (if not actually conveyed) by the the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to have been not gifts, but rights, mandated perhaps by the will of God, but earned by his own blood, sweat, and struggle. I am all for statues of Lincoln. But I would like also to see one of Caesar Hall — and of Julia Hall, too, who also suffered, struggled, and

endured. As I reflect on what I know about Caesar Hall — and how much I don't know — I realize that I am not at the end of a story, but at the beginning.



Bibliography: For more about the 29th C.V.I. (Colored), see Charles (Ben) Hawley, “The Twenty-ninth Regiment Colored Volunteers,” in Elizabeth J. Normen, with Katherine J. Harris, Stacey K. Close, and Wm. Frank Mitchell, eds., *African American Connecticut Explored* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 177-180. There is not yet, alas, a book-length history of the 29th C.V.I. (Colored). For a history of African American Civil War soldiers in general, see William A. Dobak, *Freedom By The Sword: The Official Army History of the U. S. Colored Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1867* (Washington: Center of Military History, 2011). For Lincoln’s views on slavery, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th Amendment, and the role of the Union Army in emancipation, see James Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition: Abraham Lincoln and the Antislavery Constitution* New York: W. W. Norton, 2021).