



Historical Society of the Nyacks

Newsletter

Volume 9

Issue 1

Winter 2014

A CIVIL WAR VETERAN IN NYACK

by Carol Weiss, Local Historian, Nyack Library; HSN Trustee

During the Civil War, almost 179,000 African-Americans served as volunteers in the Union Army. Wilson Wyatt, who lived in Nyack from 1868 until 1889, was one of them. Wyatt was a private in the Tenth Regiment of the United States Colored Infantry (USCT), which was in the command of Major General Benjamin F. Butler. The Tenth, formed in Virginia in 1863, was in Brigadier General Edward A. Wild's brigade. (Wild was an abolitionist and favored using African-American soldiers in battle. Not all of his fellow officers concurred.) Wild sent colored troops of the First and Tenth regiments to dig entrenchments at Wilson's Wharf, the site of a battle on the north side of the James River. They were also engaged in a similar operation on the south side of the James, where they took possession of an abandoned Confederate earthwork known as Fort Powhatan. Later, there was acknowledgement of their accomplishments:

"The regiments of this division having behaved with great gallantry in several actions, earning thereby the right to official notice, it is ordered that there be inscribed upon the colors of the First and Tenth United States Colored Troops the name 'Wilson's Wharf,' that being the place where they defeated the cavalry of Fitzhugh Lee."

Sometime after the war's end, Wilson came to the Nyack area. He may have had relatives here, as the name Weiant or Weyant is a local New York name, but there is no indication of how or why he came. The first record of Wilson is in the 1870 Federal Census where his surname is listed as White:

"Wilson White, PO Nyack Turnpike, age 26. Birthplace: Virginia. Occupation: Farmhand. No reading or writing. Wife: Josephine, age 23. Birthplace: New York. Occupation: Washerwoman. No reading. No writing. Four in household including Sabra, age 2. Birthplace: N.Y. Also Mary J. Smith, Washerwoman, age 28. Birthplace: New York. No reading, no writing."

In the 1875 New York Census, Orangetown Enumeration District, Wilson's last name is written as Weyant and his wife's birthplace is given as Rockland County.

After this, the news about Wilson is bleak. In April of 1876, the *Rockland County Journal* had this: "Wilson Wyant (colored) was arrested for being drunk and disorderly. Prisoner was fined \$10 and costs, in default of payment of which he was sent to the county jail." This was in a long column titled "Around Home." A year later, the *Journal* reported, "On Tuesday night Wilson Weiant was arrested for burglarously entering the cellar of
continued on next page

WINTER MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT GREAT GRANDMA'S KITCHEN

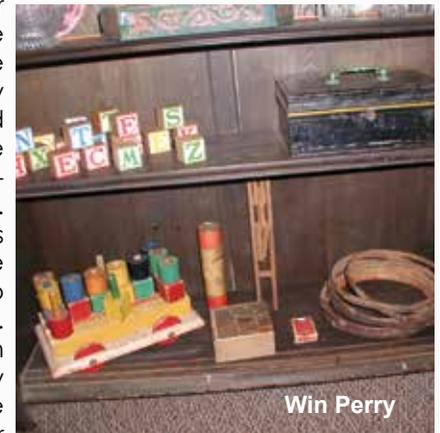
by Win Perry, AIA, Society President



Have you been to see our winter exhibit yet? You should go. *Great Grandma's Kitchen* is a heartwarming glimpse into a typical Nyack home of about a hundred years ago. My favorite elderly relatives, Great Aunt Emma and Cousin Peg, who lived at 34 South Midland

Avenue, had a stove just like this one, only a little bigger. It had a wood-burning side and a gas side. In both my father's generation and mine, Aunt Emma would fire it up to warm us and dry our socks when we returned from ice skating at the nearby Nyack Ice Pond where the West Gate (Best Western/Nyack-on-Hudson) is now.

Actually, that's her very own coffee grinder just visible to the left of the stove. Florence Katzenstein capitalized on many years of experience curating exhibits for



the Hastings Historical Society to produce this one for us in her inimitable style. Like Aunt Emma's house, the exhibit is full of delightful household implements, some of which are delicate and breakable. But Aunt Emma always had a shelf of toys and things for children to touch, and this exhibit does too.

Items in the exhibit are from the homes and collections of members and friends of the Historical Society of the Nyacks.

Great Grandma's Kitchen is open every Saturday from 1 to 4pm through February, and by arrangement at other times; call 845-418-4430. The museum is located at 50 Piermont Avenue, lower level, behind the Nyack Library.

Our spring exhibit will be *African American Entrepreneurs of the Nyacks: 1800-Present*, curated by Bill Batson. Please see details in this Newsletter on page 2.

Enjoy our exhibits!

LOCAL HISTORY IS SO REAL AND SO CLOSE YOU CAN REACH OUT AND TOUCH IT

Civil War Veteran, continued

Hollaway's saloon, on Broadway, and locked up. Wednesday morning the prisoner was committed to New City jail to await the action of the next Court." On June 30, 1877, the Grand Jury indicted Wilson for burglary and larceny. In July 1880, the *Journal* printed this item, which includes bits of commentary:

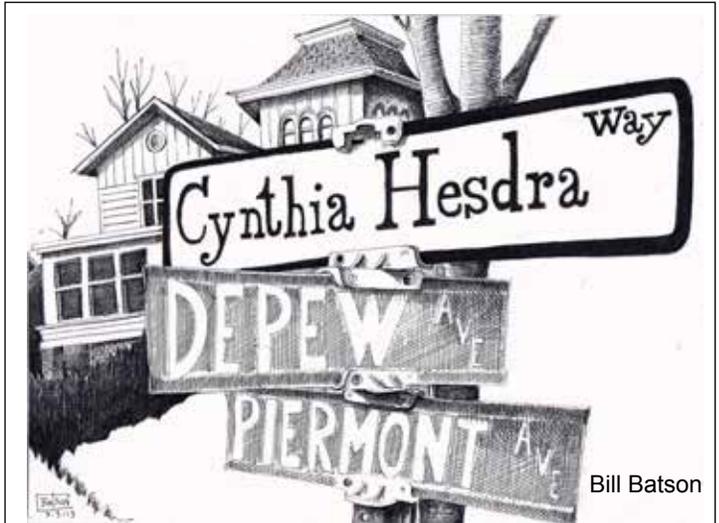
"Wilson Wyant, a colored man who has several times before got himself in trouble, hit his wife on the head with a net handle, on Tuesday last, and caused two or three bad scalp wounds. Mrs. Wyant was assisted to Justice Meeker's office, where she with difficulty made a complaint against her husband. An officer arrested the man a little before ten o'clock, and Justice Meeker, after a calm deliberation of the matter, sent him to the county jail for six months. Such desperate characters as Wyant and some others with white skin, should be kept locked up."

According to the 1880 Federal Census, Wilson and Josephine were living in the Onderdonk Block, the row of 1873 buildings on Main Street between Park and Bridge Streets. Wilson is listed as a laborer and Josephine is still doing laundry. Sadie (Sabra), now ten (12), is at school. Mary J. Smith is not listed as part of the household and does not appear in any other local records in the following 20 years.

Wilson Weiant-Weyant-Wyant-Wyatt-White died on February 2, 1889, and was buried in Mount Moor Cemetery in West Nyack. He was 47 years old. The spelling Wyatt is found on his Civil War record and Wyett in the cemetery records. Could there have been four or five different men? Eminent historian Carl Nordstrom did not think so. He lists several spellings for Wilson's entry in *Families in Nyack Before 1900*.

When Wilson arrived in Nyack as a young man of 24 or 25, after serving his country in the bloody Civil War, he found a bustling village where blacks and whites lived side-by-side, but where there were lines of class, culture, and community that could not be crossed. His skills were those of other returning veterans and many other men, young and old, who did not go to war. In that era, it was not uncommon to be illiterate. Many men were described as farmhands or laborers. Jobs came and went, and so Josephine, by taking in laundry, probably provided the steady income the family needed. In 1890, Nyack had a population of 3,900, of which 197 were African-American. Only 90 of these were males. It's likely that Wilson was known throughout the village, and he somehow became a man whose name appeared several times in the news.

There are many gaps in this short history. We don't know what brought Wilson to Nyack, whether family connections or military contacts. We don't know who he worked for when he was employed. We don't know what happened to his wife and daughter after he died. We don't know if he was born a slave. All we have are some mentions in the *Nyack Evening Journal*, some



African American Entrepreneurs in Nyack: 1800-Present

Photographs and artifacts requested—Sponsors welcome

Our spring exhibit (March-May) is titled *African American Entrepreneurs in Nyack: 1800-Present*. Starting with Cynthia Hesdra and continuing through black business owners of today, the exhibit will recognize the achievements of African American businessmen and women who were able to develop successful enterprises, despite the legacy of racial discrimination.

If you have a recollection of, or any photographs or documents relating to, an African American business in Nyack, or if you would like to help sponsor the exhibit, please contact the curator, Bill Batson at 845.675.3160 or wrbatson@gmail.com. The exhibit will be held in our museum in the lower level of DePew House, 50 Piermont Avenue, just east of the Nyack Library.

statistics in the federal and state censuses, and a small gravestone in Mount Moor Cemetery in West Nyack—altogether, just a few small images of a Civil War veteran who, for a while, lived in Nyack.

Visit www.nyackhistory.org/civilwar.pdf for a listing of sources for this article and a list compiled from Carl Nordstrom's card file on African Americans (Nyack Library) with additions from Jim Leiner's Civil War list, and cross-checking with David Cole (1822-1903), *History of Rockland County, N.Y.: Beers, 1884* (Nyack Library).

A Year of Sounds & Stories

365 Tales from Unexpected Places

The Nyack Library's oral history interviews are now online at Hudson River Valley Heritage (HRVH), including interviews with Hezekiah Easter and Tom Hackett. In addition, many Nyack stories will be highlighted throughout 2014 on the Sound and Story Project of the Hudson Valley's A Year of Sound and Stories: 365 Stories from Unexpected Places: www.ayearofsoundsandstories.org

**Save the Date: Houses with a Secret (See page 4)
Saturday, May 3, 2014**

REFLECTIONS

The Arts, Crafts, and Antiques Dealers Association (ACADA) for some years published the *Guide to Nyack*. In 1988, they printed reminiscences by Nyack resident, Helen Hayes, who recalled the years since 1932 that she and her husband, Charles MacArthur, lived in Nyack. MacArthur had grown up in Nyack. His father, the Reverend William T. MacArthur (1861-1949), was a minister and had been associated with the Missionary Training Institute, now Nyack College. The family lived in a house that is still on the college grounds. Following is a reprint of that article (Nyack Library Local History Room, ACADA *Guide to Nyack*, 1988-89, Helen Hayes's memories)—Gini Stollendorf, ed.

HELEN HAYES RECALLS 56 YEARS AS A NYACK RESIDENT



Wedding picture

What first attracted me to Nyack? Oh, that's a very personal thing! Back in the 1920s, when Charlie and I were courting, like all people in love, we wanted to get out of New York City, with all its razzmatazz, and go somewhere quiet and romantic. We would take the train up on the Westchester side and come across the Hudson River by ferryboat, which ran between Tarrytown and South Nyack and, in those days, had a lovely little Italian orchestra on board that played love songs on the violin, accordion, and guitar. One of them played *Santa Lucia* and *Come Back to Sorrento*. It was a wonderful treat! We would wander all up and down the streets of Nyack. Schmidt's Ice Cream Parlor on Main Street was a favorite of ours. Charlie used to hang around there when he was a teenager, looking for girls.

When we first moved here, 56 years ago, Nyack was the beautiful Hudson River town! The whole place was full of elegant people. But they were opposed, deeply opposed, to any change. Of course, life is made up of change and you have to change. Some of our neighbors were scared to death of us at first. They thought that we were going to destroy the town. Ours was the first swimming pool in Nyack. When we were building our pool and the garden terrace there was a terrible protest in the village. I

remember our postman, Jimmy, stopping by, walking down, and looking at it and saying "Hollywood comes to Nyack!" The 1930s and '40s saw some eccentric goings-on around that pool. John Barrymore, the great actor, was our frequent visitor. One summer, he stopped by to borrow a pack of cigarettes. Charlie gave him the cigarettes and asked if he would like a drink. Well, of course he wanted a drink! There was no time in any waking hour when he wouldn't like a drink! Like the good host, Charlie drank with him. It got to be bedtime and they had drunk their way through everything in the house, so John stayed the night. The next morning, the two of them were so badly off that they went down to the pool to try to refresh themselves. It was a hot summer day and the water in the pool was warm, so Charlie dashed up to the house and phoned the local ice company. They brought a truck filled with ice, which they dumped into the pool to cool it for these two hung-over men. John crawled out onto one of the ice blocks and said "I feel like a fly in a highball." The pool smelled like a highball too, with them in it!

There was the night Katharine Hepburn did marvelous dives into the pool. Another time, Lawrence Olivier and Vivian Leigh pulled up to our dock in Jock Whitney's (the millionaire) yacht and made themselves at home. During World War II, Charlie had a friend who commanded a cruiser (only one size smaller than a battleship!), which he took up the river to Iona Island for refueling. On his way back down he would anchor that enormous cruiser in the Hudson and come over in a launch to visit us. This house has witnessed some pretty amazing little incidents! One time, Averell Harriman (former governor of New York State) stopped by *Pretty Penny* to visit on his way to his estate near Tuxedo. I had a big candy bowl with all kinds of candy in it, including jaw breakers. I offered a jaw



Pretty Penny by Edward Hopper. Courtesy Hopper House and Smith College

breaker to Averell and he said that he had never had one! So I gave him one. I'm afraid that he didn't like it much, but it was Nyack that introduced Averell Harriman to jaw breakers! I've seen Nyack through good and bad times. Nyack had deteriorated to such an extent in the 1950s that someone wrote a newspaper editorial titled "The Town That Died," and it was about Nyack! But new life came to Nyack with the arrival of the antiques dealers, the Friends of the Nyacks—those young people who moved in and restored these charming old houses with their own hands. Those two forces together restored this town! The stores in town were almost empty when two young men came here and opened an antiques shop. It was my custom to walk to town and back every day for exercise. I did this every day of my life and I took to going in to visit these young men. We became friends and together we softened up the Village Board to allow that nice little shops would be open on Sundays. That was the beginning of wonderful Sundays in Nyack. Before the revival began in the 1960s, there were not many restaurants in Nyack! If Charlie and I wanted to eat out we would drive to the Wooden Indian in Central Nyack on Route 59. And then restaurants began to open, a string of top-class restaurants. Think of it! Isn't it wonderful! I am delighted to walk around Nyack and see the lovely old town successful again! People come from all over to enjoy Nyack. I am very devoted to it!

Newsletter



Historical Society of the Nyacks

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Please support local history by helping us to maintain and enhance our museum in the DePew House and by enabling us to continue popular activities such as our acclaimed House Tour, and our John Scott Armchair Walking Tours. Mail your payment to the address above.

Family/Joint \$28, Individual \$15,
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**Houses with a Secret
The Great Nyack House Tour
Uncover the Mysteries
Saturday, May 3, 2014**

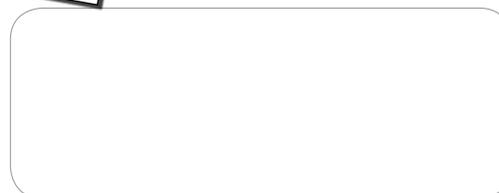
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**A Picture Postcard History of
Nyack's Churches
Nyack Library, Feb. - Apr.**

Non-Profit Org.
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10952

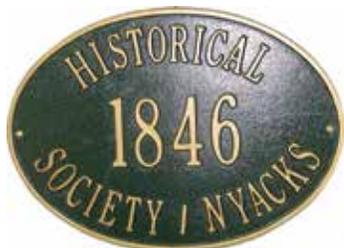
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Questions?

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