

## *The Records of Camp William Penn*

Federal records offer tantalizing evidence of the struggle for freedom in Civil War-era Pennsylvania. Among the more recent additions to the holdings of the National Archives at Philadelphia are records of Camp William Penn. Situated just outside of the city, Camp William Penn was the first camp built exclusively for the training of African American soldiers and the largest training facility for the US Colored Troops. It trained African American men from both Union and Confederate states who enlisted in the Union army. Surviving records detail conditions at the camp and the personal and familial circumstances of many of the men who enlisted. The records offer glimpses into race relations in Philadelphia as a whole, and Pennsylvania more broadly.

One particularly interesting record is a letter written in July 1864 to Major C. W. Foster at Camp William Penn. It describes the life circumstances of William H. Moore, a very young man and aspiring soldier attached to Company F of the Forty-Third Regiment of the US Colored Troops. Moore was left behind when his company departed, the letter indicates, because he was allegedly underage. The letter describes how Moore spent most of the previous three years in the House of Public Refuge after being placed there by his mother. After being discharged for good behavior, Moore worked for a farmer near Harrisburg and then enlisted as a waiter. Military officials noted Moore's age and what they perceived to be either his inexperience or inability to serve in a combat role. Some officials believed that Moore, despite his eagerness to serve, was—at best—suited merely to be a drummer.<sup>1</sup>

This letter opens up new questions about the lives of the men who enlisted as Colored Troops. We know from other surviving records from the camp that African American men serving there contended with poor sanitation and generally inadequate facilities. Were conditions in the camp better or worse than those they faced in childhood? How did the soldiers perceive and experience care by inadequately trained medical staff, the lack of a chaplain, and diseases like typhoid and pneumonia? How might Moore's expectations of life as a soldier for the Union army—and his underlying motivations behind enlisting—have aligned with the

<sup>1</sup> Louis Wagner to C. W. Foster, July 10, 1864. All citations are from Letters Sent to Camp William Penn, Provost Marshal General's Bureau (Civil War), Record Group 110, National Archives at Philadelphia.

harsh day-to-day realities of life at Camp William Penn?

Other documents from the records of Camp William Penn offer glimpses into yet other aspects of the lives of African American soldiers. For example, a set of letters about the August 1863 death of a white civilian in the vicinity of the camp suggests the ways in which local residents interacted with African American soldiers. Camp guards allegedly shot a white man by the last name of Fox. Fox apparently sat on a camp fence—a practice that he had been told was prohibited—and an argument ensued when he refused to do as black soldiers asked. While some of the details surrounding the shooting are sketchy, the case nonetheless opens up questions about the broader context of a war-torn and racially divided community.<sup>2</sup>

Another letter reflects on the presence of women at Camp William Penn. In a March 1864 letter, Lieutenant Colonel Louis Wagner, the commander in charge of Camp William Penn, complained about 120 African American women present at the camp the day of his visit. Many of these women, he believed, were prostitutes or under the influence of alcohol. Wagner noted, “the number of female visitors is large as nearly all the men at camp.” Yet he also cautioned against a proposed order that would have forbidden women from visiting the camp entirely. The intersection of race and gender in these and other documents in the records of Camp William Penn invite closer examination.<sup>3</sup>

One final example, a letter to President Lincoln, raises questions about the religious lives of African American Union soldiers. In February 1864, officials at the camp wrote to President Lincoln requesting that he appoint a chaplain for Camp William Penn. They claimed that a chaplain would benefit the 1,500 troops, especially those hospitalized, and they suggested that the school building on the grounds would be the best place to hold religious services and instruction. Only one regiment had previously enjoyed the services of a chaplain while at Camp William Penn. It remains unclear why the camp went without a chaplain for so long.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Wagner to C. W. Foster, Aug. 8, 1864.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Wagner to C. W. Foster, Mar. 22, 1864.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Wagner and M. R. Hammond to President Lincoln, Feb. 22, 1864.