

UP FRONT



ACROSS MY DESK

By Brian Butko, Editor

Figures bring Pennsylvania people and their stories to life

As the 150th commemoration of the Civil War swirls around us, a traveling exhibit being prepared by the History Center will include five life figures. Pittsburghers may recognize one of their own: Martin Robinson Delany, who became the highest-ranking African American officer in the United States.

Born to a slave father and free mother, Delany rose to become the first African American field officer (a major) in the U.S. Army. After moving to Pittsburgh in 1831, he dedicated himself to the cause of freedom, publishing the first black newspaper west of the Alleghenies and joining the Underground Railroad.

After the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, he recruited thousands of African American men to serve in the Union Army. He even petitioned Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton for command of a black regiment. His request ignored, Delany secured a meeting with President Lincoln, who was so impressed that he granted Delany a commission as major in the 104th United States Colored Troops.

Another figure will represent Tillie Pierce, a 15-year-old schoolgirl who wrote a touching account of her experiences during the battle of Gettysburg. When troops swept in on July 1, 1863, a neighbor invited Tillie

Martin Delany

RG98SCWP-145.96, The Bill Gladstone Collection at the
U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pa.




Map from Tillie Pierce's book shows the Weikert farm on the east slope of the Round Tops.

to her parents' house for safety. The Weikert farm was three miles south of town on the eastern slope of the Round Tops—which would themselves be enveloped by battle.

Her first day there, soldiers rushed towards the sounds of war, only to return later as a steady stream of wounded and dying men. The next day, she offered water to passing soldiers, including one who turned out to be General Meade. On July 3 they departed during the cannonade before Pickett's Charge, only to return that evening:

The air was filled with moanings, and groanings. As we passed on toward the house, we were compelled to pick our steps in order that we might not tread on the prostrate bodies.

When we entered the house we found it also completely filled with the wounded. We hardly knew what to do or where to go ... just outside of the yard, I noticed a pile of limbs higher than the fence.

Experiences like Delany meeting the president, or a girl caught up in a fierce battle, help bring the past to life. You can experience the exhibit starting at the Beaver Area Heritage Foundation when it opens there on March 31. 

For information on hosting the free Civil War Traveling Exhibit, sponsored by Peoples Gas Company, contact Natalie DeRiso at nderiso@heinzhistorycenter.org or (412) 454-6373.

