



Episode 3, G.A.R Photograph, Cazenovia, NY and Washington D.C.

Elyse Luray: Our first story investigates a curious photograph of blacks and whites taken during an era of racial segregation. A generation after the Civil War. As the 19th Century draws to a close, race relations continued to cast a shadow over the nation. Slavery had been vanquished, but in the South, violence against African Americans is reaching new heights – while segregation is winning support in the federal courts. Now, a collector from Etters, Pennsylvania has discovered an intriguing image that appears to show a bond between black and white in that divided era.

Angelo Scarlato: I have a feeling that this photo has some historic value to it.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray. And I'm meeting Angelo Scarlato to take a closer look at what he's discovered.

Angelo: I purchased the photograph in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and I'm hoping that you can tell me a little bit more about it.

Elyse: Alright. Well, let's take a look. Oh, wow, it's big.

Angelo: Yes. Let me take it out for you.

Elyse: Okay, it's in beautiful condition. Look at that. So what drew you to this picture?

Angelo: Well, look at some of the men.

Elyse: Angelo has a special interest in Civil War memorabilia.

Angelo: I can tell they're Civil War veterans by the style of their clothing. Look at the expressions on their faces. These men have seen battle. These are true veterans.

Elyse: Angelo is right. The men do seem to be veterans. But while I've seen a lot of photographs from the Civil War and its aftermath, this one is unusual. What would you like me to find out about this photograph?

Angelo: What I'm most intrigued about are these two African Americans. Given the social climate at the time, I find this to be rather unusual and rare.

Elyse: And that's why Angelo has enlisted my help.

Angelo: I'd like to know why these two gentlemen are in the group, who they are and what happened to them.



Elyse: Let's see what we've got. From the style of the picture and from the age of the vets, I'd say it dates from around 1900. It appears to be some type of reunion or a celebration, because they're all wearing flowers on their uniforms. The African American gentleman is holding the flag, which I think might be significant. And I really can't see anything on the medals or the ribbons, but on their hats it says, G.A.R – G.A.R...hmm. I'm pretty sure that G.A.R was a veterans group formed after the Civil War. But I'm heading to the Library of Congress to see what else I can learn. G.A.R stands for Grand Army of the Republic. It was the first major veterans' organization in America. Soldiers returning home from the Civil War faced emotional and physical devastation. The conflict had left some 600,000 dead and a half a million wounded. In April, 1866, army surgeon Benjamin Stevenson founded the G.A.R to give veterans a political voice. But was the organization integrated? During the Civil War, blacks had fought in segregated units. And by the time our photograph was taken, if anything, race relations had worsened in much of the country. Just four years before the G.A.R was formed, in 1896 the Supreme Court had endorsed segregation. This is the rules and regulation book of the Grand Army of the Republic. So maybe it will have some information here about admissions. Let's see what I can find. Listen to this: "Eligibility to membership. Soldiers and sailors of the United States Army, Navy or Marine Corps, who served in the war and have been honorably discharged shall be eligible to the membership in the Grand Army of Republic." So basically it's saying anybody who served in the Civil War, who was honorably discharged can be a member of the Grand Army of the Republic. This is interesting. Some Northern vets stayed in the South after the fighting and formed their own G.A.R outposts. Not surprisingly, racial tension divided those groups. Here's an account of a Mississippi official and what he has to say about allowing African Americans into the G.A.R. "We will not associate with them. And if the present encampment does not do something to relieve the Southern posts of this growing trouble, then the white G.A.R veterans will withdraw." So, clearly, this post has no intention of integrating. I found multiple accounts of hostility towards African American admissions. And this was during a time period when no organization was integrated. I'm not sure what to make of Angelo's image. And I haven't even started to figure out who these men are. By scanning the picture, I'm able to push in closer on some of the detail and text. If I look closely...Knowlton Post 160, Cazenovia, New York. I wonder what records there are of this Post 160? Looks like I'm going to Cazenovia. I'm curious how the postwar racial tensions played out in this tiny town. So, Sue, tell me what was the Civil War's effect on Cazenovia?

Sue: Well, it had a great effect.

Elyse: I'm meeting area historian Sue Greenhagen at the Cazenovia Public Library.

Sue Greenhagen: And about 387 men went into the army. 56 of them died in the war, and that is a considerable number. And they came home to families that were torn apart. It was very tough economic times for many people.



Elyse: She tells me of a community that was 4,000 strong, just 40 were African American. So the number of black veterans from Cazenovia would certainly have been miniscule. I have something to show you.

Sue: Oh, my goodness. That is beautiful.

Elyse: Sue's never seen Angelo's image. Although Cazenovia had long been sympathetic to antislavery forces and remained liberal after the war, she doesn't know the story of how the veterans group came to be integrated.

Elyse: So I'm trying to figure out who these two African American veterans are. Do you have any information or is there any way that I can find out their names?

Sue: I think we have to do a little research downstairs.

Elyse: If I can identify the men, maybe I can figure out the story behind Angelo's picture.

Sue: Well, these are the official record compiled by the town clerk.

Elyse: It seems the county has comprehensive records of the men who enlisted.

Sue: It gives personal information, including where they were born, when they were born. But it also will tell their race, whether they were black or white. And so we're looking for a "W" or a "C" – "W" for white and "C" for colored.

Elyse: We go through the microfilm, name by name. God this takes a long time. Ah! Finally, a "C". "John Stevenson". Okay. Well, that's one.

Sue: Okay.

Elyse: The first one. Another one. "C". "Joseph Brown". Okay. So we only found two African American soldiers.

Sue: John Stevenson and Joseph Brown.

Elyse: Are these the men in our photograph?

Sue: Not necessarily.



Elyse: Sue explains that the next town over, Smithfield, didn't have its own G.A.R post, so their veterans may have joined the Cazenovia post. A little more searching produces the name of a solitary black Smithfield veteran in the Cazenovia G.A.R – Alberta Robbins. Now I've got a real challenge on my hands. Three names, two men. I send off to the National Archives in D.C. for military and pension records on the soldiers. And I drop off their names with an historian and professional genealogist, Char McCargo Bah, to see if I can find out any family information. I know that these two people are either Alberta Robbins, Joseph Brown or John Stevenson. Do you think you could help me?

Char McCargo Bah: It's going be difficult, yes, but I can look into it.

Elyse: In the meantime, I'm meeting historian Barbara Gannon at the African American Civil War Museum.

Barbara Gannon: Oh, that's an excellent picture of....

Elyse: She's studied the G.A.R and say many of the local outposts, like Cazenovia, were integrated. Well, you know, I'm confused because this is during a time when segregation was the norm. So how did the G.A.R go against the grain? Barbara explains that even though military units have been segregated, the heat of battle had forged friendships that transcended color lines. Those friendships endured and flourished among veterans.

Barbara: I have a statement made by a senior official of G.A.R. "A man who is good enough to stand between the flag and those who would destroy it is good enough to be a comrade of the Grand Army of The Republic." If you'd suffered, if you'd sacrificed you were a comrade. Comradeship explained the interracial G.A.R.

Elyse: Veterans posts became a place where men bonded and helped heal each other.

Barbara: Today we might see post-traumatic stress as one of the results of the war. But there wasn't anyone who understood that. What these veterans had was each other.

Elyse: Integrated G.A.R groups like Post 160 in Cazenovia were among the first racially integrated organizations in American history.

Barbara: It was a revolutionary idea for this time period. There aren't any interracial social organizations. They just don't exist. There's only really the G.A.R.

Elyse: Now what are these flowers? I notice that they all have flowers on their lapels.



Barbara: Well, likely this picture was taken on Memorial Day, when these veterans would have literally put flowers on the graves of their deceased comrades. G.A.R actually instituted Memorial Day.

Elyse: Barbara believes the flag in our photo indicates a particular respect the veterans had for one of their comrades.

Barbara: In battle everyone is trying to take the flag down, because that's where everyone rallies on the flag. So this is a recognition that they must think very highly of this man and his qualities as a soldier.

Elyse: I'm more curious than ever to learn who these men were and what they did during the war. I've got to disqualify one name and figure out who's who of the remaining two. It's time to see if Char has turned up any clues.

Elyse: Hi, Char.

Char: Hi. How you doing?

Elyse: How's it going?

Char: Well, I think I found something.

Elyse: Oh, really?

Char: Yes. I think you're really going to be excited about this.

Elyse: Okay. "Whereas it has pleased our Heavenly Father to remove by death....It's an obituary for Alberta Robbins. "...Our faithful and highly esteemed color bearer." Ah, "the flag holder" Alberta Robbins. You found him!

Char: Yes. Yes.

Elyse: Oh, great job!

Elyse: One man identified. And Char thinks she may have a lead on the other. She's traced what may be a great, great grandson for John Stevenson. His name is George Geder. Now let's see if he's living. An Internet search turns up a family blog belonging to a George Geder. Genealogy, photography and restoration by George Geder.



Char: Yes.

Elyse: Oh, that's great! Maybe he can help me with the photograph. I tracked down George Geder in Santa Fe, New Mexico and waste no time looking him up. Hi.

George: Hi.

Elyse: I explained how he may be my last chance to figure out who the mystery man is in our picture. This gentleman over here is either your great great grandfather or it's a man named Joseph Brown. And, I was just wondering if you have any information that can help me try to figure out if this your great great grandfather?

George: Yes....

Elyse: What George showed me gave me what I needed to go back to Angelo. I tell Angelo his photo is rare and historic. During that time period in the late 1800's, the G.A.R were the first big organization in the United States to actively integrate African Americans.

Angelo: Really?

Elyse: The flag bearer, Alberta Robbins, had been given special respect by veterans.

Angelo: Very brave man. He didn't carry a musket, he carried the flag. And they followed him.

Elyse: And now you know who he is.

Angelo: Yes.

Elyse: Then I told him how I tracked down George Geder and how a family heirloom had unlocked the mystery of Angelo's picture.

George: What I can do is I can show you a photo that I have.

Elyse: Okay. And who is in this photograph?

George: Okay. In this photograph... Well, first off, that little boy there, that's my father. That's my dad. And he's sitting on the lap of who I believe is his grandfather. And that would be my great great grandfather, John Stevenson.



Elyse: Okay, so let's compare the photos.

George: I see the cheekbones. They seem to match. And the eyes look just about dead-on too. And I think that this guy and this guy are the same, and I believe that is my great great grandfather John Stevenson. Wow!

Elyse: I show Angelo George's photograph and the result of a test I had done on the images. A forensic detective for the New York State Police had measured the geometry of the faces for me. The size, shape and distance between the eyes in particular, on both faces, matched perfectly. Angelo and George's photographs were of the same man.

Angelo: Isn't that amazing.

Elyse: I also arranged for a visitor. And I'd like for you to meet somebody. George? He is the great great grandson of John Stevenson

Angelo: It's good to meet you, Sir. You should be very proud.

George: Yes, thank you. That's my great great granddad, John Stevenson, right there.

Elyse: Finally, I tell both men how I'd gotten military records back from the National Archive and had learned something of the story behind Angelo's photograph. Alberta Robbins had enlisted shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation. George's great great grandfather had joined the 29th Connecticut Colored Volunteers. That storied unit had fought heroically in several campaigns, capturing a Confederate position in the Battle of Chapin's Farm.

Elyse: And, Angelo, with your permission, I would like to present this to you George, which is a copy of Angelo's photograph of your great great grandfather in this GAR.

George: Thank you.

Elyse: A final stop. George has never been to Cazenovia. I think he'll appreciate what I'm about to show him. His great great grandfather's grave.

George: Wow.