

February, 2026

May Hamilton

As promised, we begin a new year of monthly Daufuskie Island Historical Foundation posts. Our February post is appropriately dedicated to Black History Month. Our story begins with a question from a reader of our previous posts and starts with a grave marker in the Haig Point Cemetery.

It's worth noting that there are seven identified cemeteries on Daufuskie, one for white residents, and six for blacks dating back to plantation days. This is a story for another day. The Haig Point cemetery is one of the black cemeteries and is located within the Haig property just off Haig Point Road.

The grave maker in question is one of the better preserved, but does not provide a lot of information:

May Hamilton

CO. B.

21 U.S.C.I.

No birth or death date, no inscription beyond the information above, but enough information to start some research.

The inscription indicates that May Hamilton was a member of Company B, 21st United States Colored Infantry (USCI). This unit was part of the Union forces during the Civil War, made up of freed or escaped slaves that volunteered to fight for the Union forces. Formed after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863, the 21st was one of several black units in the Union Army. The United States Department of War issued General Order #143 on May 22, 1863, establishing the Bureau of Colored Troops (USCT). Its purpose was to recruit colored soldiers to provide the Union Army with much needed additional manpower and to meet the demands of those who felt African Americans deserved the chance to fight in the Civil War.

The 21st Regiment USCI was organized from the 3rd and 4th Regiments, South Carolina Colored Infantry on March 14, 1864. May Hamilton had enlisted in the 3rd SC Infantry on April 27, 1863, at the age of 19. Prior to his enlistment, he had been born a slave on the Pope plantation on Hilton Head Island, identified as belonging to Eliza Pope. May was 5'5" tall based on his enlistment records.

The 21st Regiment was on duty at Jacksonville, FL until April 1864 when it moved to Hilton Head, SC, and then to Folly Island, SC, on April 18. It served on Folly Island, Morris Island and Coles Island operating against Charleston, SC until February 1865. It

served on an expedition to James Island, SC from June 30 to July 10 and saw action on James Island on July 2. The Regiment took part in the occupation of Charleston on February 18, 1865 and then performed garrison duty at Charleston and Mt. Pleasant, SC until August 1865, and at various points in South Carolina and Georgia till October 1866.

The 21st Regiment was mustered out at Charleston, SC, October 1866.

Authors note: *During the final two years of the war, more than 200,000 African American troops , nearly 1/10th of the Union Armed Forces (Army and Navy), played a vital role in major campaigns and battles. They earned many Medals of Honor (reports vary from 16 to 25). The USCT regiments participated in significant victories, including capturing Charleston and Richmond. Lincoln recognized their contributions and declared, "Without the military help of the black freedmen, the war against the South could not have been won."*

Following his discharge in 1866, May settled to Daufuskie Island. He appears to have purchased the land from H.M. Stoddard in 1884. Prior to that time, from about 1867, he was probably working the same tract under a Freedmen's Labor contract. The photo below shows a record of May Hamilton as a depositor in the Freedman's Savings and Trust dated 1868. (More research is needed to identify the specific contracts/transactions involved. The story of the Freedmen's Bureau and land reclamation and distribution after the Civil War will be a separate post.) The survey map below shows the plot of land belonging to May Hamilton in 1884 was part of the Cooper River tract owned by H.M. Stoddard. The tract was sold in 10 acre parcels to several individuals.

May was married to Chloe Young on November 20, 1866, by the Rev. A. Murchison of the Mitchelville Baptist Church. (Reverend Abraham Murchison of Mitchelville was influential in recruiting troops for the colored infantry.)

May and Chloe went on to have seven children: Rosie b. Oct 7, 1867; Maggie b. Jan 10, 1872; Sallie b. Apr 25, 1875; Jane b. 1877; Bristow b. 1883; Lizzie b. 1885; and Benjamin H. b. 3/22/1888. May was listed as a church Trustee when the property for Mt. Carmel Baptist Church No. 1 was acquired in 1901.

To finish our short story, we can fill in some more information about May Hamilton. Born December 3, 1844 to Bristow and Leah Hamilton in St. Lukes Parish (Hilton Head) SC. Information on his parents appears on records from the National Archives in Washington, DC; USA; *Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the*

Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874. The records also list siblings Peter, Andrus and Jane.

He died June 6, 1907 on Daufuskie.

Which brings me to a final point. Information for this post was developed from a variety of sources: Ancestry.com, FindaGrave.com (yes, this is a real thing), the Heritage Library (Hilton Head) website, and the US Archives site, among others. Anyone who has done family history research will tell you that records posted on the internet can have errors and inconsistencies. We have tried to stick with original material wherever possible. However, we welcome any feedback or information that anyone may be able to add or corrections, particularly if you are a descendant of May Hamilton, or have information on the family.

May Hamilton's story is one of many and he obviously lived a large life, one worth highlighting in Daufuskie history, which is a collection of individual stories like this one.

If you plan to visit any of the cemeteries on Daufuskie, please be respectful and carefully walk the grounds, staying on paths or clear areas. Do not touch or handle any of the remaining grave markers or attempt to move or straighten them.

Join us at the Daufuskie History Museum and learn more about our little island.

Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 10 am to 2 pm



No. 257 Record for Mary Hamilton A. 21

Date of application July 29, 1861

Where born North Road, S.C.

Where brought up Family Place

Residence Spartanburg, S.C.

Age 25

Complexion Brown

Occupation Dressmaking

Wife for Joseph

Children None

Father, Bristol Hamilton

Mother, Leah

Brothers, Peter Hamilton

Sister, Andrew, Jane

Mary Hamilton
 Clerk

Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company.