

John Johnson

A Short Biography

By Gail Astle
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John Johnson was born about 1840 in Stanton, Delaware. He enlisted on July 28, 1863 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and was mustered into Co. B, 6th Regiment USCI (United States Colored Infantry) at Camp William Penn near Philadelphia for a three-year enlistment. He could read and write and was a 5 foot 5-inch-tall, 26 or 27-year-old farmer with black eyes, black hair, and a black complexion. He was honorably discharged in Wilmington, North Carolina in October 1865. He did not muster out with his company and regiment because he was in the hospital in September 1865 in North Carolina.

Pvt. John Johnson engaged in heavy fatigue duty while digging the Army canal at Dutch Gap Virginia, near the James River in late summer of 1864 (Figure 2). This canal digging was physically demanding and dangerous work. Confederates firing shells down into the canal ditch, made it necessary for the soldiers to dig caves into the walls of the canal to serve as makeshift bomb shelters from exploding shells. Scarcely a day passed that a man was not killed or wounded. The conditions became even more miserable when the walls of the canal radiated heat from the sweltering summer sun and prevented the fresh air breezes from circulating. Fever, diarrhea, and disease often afflicted those at the job site. Illness ran rampant because soldiers lived in close quarters with poor hygiene and a poor diet.^{1,2,3} John's pension file indicated that he had contracted diarrhea from this exposure and he suffered from the condition for the rest of his life.

In December 1864, close to Christmas Day, his regiment traveled south to Fort Fisher, North Carolina. The following account, written by him, was presented when he applied for a pension in January 1891:

“The circumstances relating to the fact of my feet being frozen, and also to the time and place of the occurrence, are- as follows. My Regiment then stationed at Bermuda Hundred, Virginia state, was ordered to take transport [or boat] at City Point vis ‘under command of Gen’ Butler, on purpose to enter an attack upon, Fort Fisher, N.C. state. It happened in the month of December year 1864, at which time we embarked about dark (easily eve) and anchored out in the stream all night. It being an extremely cold night, and the transport being densely packed [with soldiers], I, with many others was compelled to make the open outer deck our couch for the night. Hence my feet got so badly frozen, during the night that I had no feeling from my knees downward for several days. We set sail the next morning and reached and bombarded Fort Fisher on Christmas day of the same year. The command was repulsed, and we returned being 23 days in all from the first to the last [day]. I have suffered ever since from the same affects.⁴” (Figure 3)

Frostbite was common during the Civil War where harsh exposure to sleet, snow, frigid wind

and icy rains left inadequately clothed soldiers vulnerable to the elements. Sometimes soldiers had to sleep in the snow without tents. Severe damage to the skin and tissues would occur when the water in the tissues froze into ice crystals. This depended on the length of exposure and how cold the temperature dropped. When nerve damage occurred, a loss of feeling developed in the affected part.⁵

He was subsequently absent from the muster rolls January 1864 until June 1865 due to sickness with hospitalization (frostbite and typhoid fever). He returned to duty in July but was hospitalized in September in North Carolina until he mustered out in October 1865. He suffered from this frostbite incident for the rest of his life. As a farmer and gardener, he could never walk long distances to work, especially in the cold, without suffering immense pain in his feet. Sometimes the condition was so bad that he would be bedridden for weeks. He also peddled or sold small items as a huckster to make ends meet. Commencing March 31, 1890, he received a pension of \$6 per month for the frostbitten feet incurred during the war.

After the war, he settled in Timbuctoo and was in charge of the public District #33 Timbuctoo School where he also taught.⁶ David Parker, Jr. remembered him as his teacher.

His first wife was Mary who became quite ill. Because John could not take care of her due to his poor health, she was taken to the Burlington County poor house where she died January 9, 1878. She was buried in Timbuctoo Cemetery by gravedigger and Methodist preacher, Adam Gibson, who was a founder (1854) of the cemetery church, Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church and a trustee of the Timbuctoo School (District #33). Records indicated that the Johnsons had no children.^{7, 8}

Reportedly, at Camden, New Jersey in the parlor of a white minister's house in August of 1881, John married a second wife, widow Sarah Taylor, whose surname as a slave was Graham after her master. They had met near Philadelphia around 1880. Eventually the married couple moved to Timbuctoo and Sarah was welcomed into the community as Mrs. Johnson. There were also no children with his second wife who already had several with her first husband. After John Johnson's death, Sarah moved away from Timbuctoo and lived with a son in Bucks County, Pennsylvania and then resided in Philadelphia. She received a pension as the widow of veteran John Johnson after his death on April 10, 1895 in Westampton (Timbuctoo), New Jersey, at age 54 years from Bright's kidney disease.



**Figure 1. Digging the Dutch Gap Canal on the James River, VA, 1864
(111-B-2006. National Archives Identifier: 526202)**

who, being duly sworn, declares each in relation to aforesaid case as follows:

I John Johnson Private, Co B-6 US
 C. I. was of Rebelion - 61.
 The circumstances relating
 to the fact of my feet being
 frozen and also to the time and
 place of the occurrence, are as
 follows. My Regiment then
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 take transport at City Point
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 Butler, on purpose to enter an
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 year 1864, at which time we were
 embarked at out dark (early eve) and
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 It being an extremely cold night and
 the transport being densely packed,
 I with many others was compelled
 to make the open water deck our
 couch for the night. Hence my feet
 got so badly frozen, during the night
 that I had no feeling from my heels

[OVER.]

downward for several days. We
 set sail the next morning, and reached
 and were landed Fort Fisher on Christ
 mass day of the same year. The command
 was repulsed and we returned being
 23 days in all from the first to the last
 I have suffered ever since from the same effects

Witness here, to signature, if by

Witness here, to signature, if by

John Johnson age 51 years.
 P. O. Address Mount Kelly, N. C.

Figure 2. Pension Affidavit of Pvt John Johnson, Co B 6th USCI (John Johnson Pension File)

Figure 3 shows that on Jan 10, 1891 John Johnson gave testimony of frost bite affliction incurred in December 1864 before Fort Fisher, North Carolina. This was written in his own hand. (John Johnson Pension File) He would later become a teacher and a "Principal" of the Timbuctoo School.

General References

John Johnson Pension File application # 465,199 and #613,449 (widow), pp. copies, Compiled Military Records, microfilm (National Archives, Washington, D.C).

Haas, Edgar, *History of Schools in Burlington County* (Burlington County Superintendent Report, 1876) (Burlington County Historical Society Library)

McMurray, John, *Recollections of a Colored Troop* (Brookville, Pennsylvania: privately printed, 1916)

Paradis, James M., *Strike The Blow For Freedom* (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: White Mane Books, 1998)

Trudeau, Noah Andre, *Like Men of War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998)

Citations

¹ McMurray 1916, pp. 45-47

² Paradis 1998, pp. 61-67

³ Trudeau 2002, pp. 283-284

⁴ *John Johnson Pension File*

⁵ *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* "Frostbite" (accessed May 12, 2008)

⁶ Haas, 1876, a page in the *History of Schools in Burlington County*

⁷ Burlington County, *Deed Book E-6*, p. 256 (Burlington County Courthouse)

⁸ Haas, 1876, a page in the *History of Schools in Burlington County*