

William H. Sullivan

A Short Biography

By Gail Astle
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William H. Sullivan was born free about 1842 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He enlisted at White House, Virginia on June 6, 1864 and on the same day was mustered into Co. D, 29th Regiment USCI (United States Colored Infantry) near Petersburg, Virginia for a three-year service. He was a 5 foot 7-inch-tall, 22-year-old butcher with hazel eyes, black hair, and a mulatto complexion. William H. Sullivan was honorably discharged on November 6, 1865 in Brownsville, Texas. (*Compiled Military Records*). The 29th USCI had been organized in Illinois. On April 25, 1864 the First Regiment Illinois Volunteers (Colored), except for Company F, became the 29th United States Colored Infantry.¹

William H. Sullivan, who is buried in the Timbuctoo Cemetery, claimed that there were two William Sullivans in his same company and regiment and that the other William Sullivan was from Galena, Illinois. He claimed that the *Compiled Military Records* accurately described himself except for the recorded medical and mustering in and mustering out information.

Printed and for sale at the Tribune Office, 211 Dearborn Street, Chicago, where blank forms of this kind are always constantly on hand.

VOLUNTEER ENLISTMENT

State of Virginia Town of White House

I, William Sullivan born in Philadelphia in the State of Pennsylvania aged Twenty two years, and by occupation a Butcher Do HEREBY AKNOWLEDGE to have volunteered this Sixth day of June 1864, to service as a SOLDIER in the ARMY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, for the period of 3 years unless sooner discharged by proper authority; do also agree to accept such bounty, pay, rations and clothing as are, or may be, established by law for volunteers. And I, William Sullivan do solemnly swear, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, and that I will serve them honestly and faithfully against all their enemies or opposers whomsoever; and that I will observe and obey the orders of the President of the United States, and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the Rules and Articles of War.

Sworn and subscribed to, at White House Va this 6th day of June 1864 before John A. Cross William Sullivan

I Certify, on Honor, That I have carefully examined the above named Volunteer, agreeably to the General Regulations of the Army, and that in my opinion he is free from all bodily defects and mental infirmity, which would, in any way, disqualify him from performing the duties of a soldier.

John A. Cross
Examining Surgeon.

I Certify, on Honor, That I have minutely inspected the Volunteer, William Sullivan previously to his enlistment, and that he was entirely sober when enlisted; that, to the best of my judgment and belief, he is of lawful age; and that in accepting him as duly qualified to perform the duties of an able-bodied soldier, I have strictly observed the regulations which govern the recruiting service. This soldier has Wedge eyes, Light hair, Black complexion, is five feet seven inches high.

John Smith to the City of Madison Wisconsin AC Kuapp 24th Regiment of US Col Volunteers, Recruiting Officer.

Mustered into the service of the United States, in Company D, 99th Regiment of IL Steel Volunteers, on the 28th day of July, 1864, at Charleston.

Figure 1. William Sullivan's Volunteer Enlistment Document (Compiled Military Records microfilm, National Archives, Washington, DC)

William Sullivan enlisted as a private, was appointed a corporal and then on July 1, 1865 was promoted to sergeant. Sgt. William Sullivan was honorably discharged on November 6, 1865 in Brownsville, Texas.

It could have been possible that there were more than one William Sullivan in the same company and regiment. Edward A. Miller in *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored Infantry*, describes the 29th USCI as a regiment made up of many runaway slaves who had come to Illinois having offered little or no information as to how they arrived there. "Because the company's initial recruits were mostly residents of Illinois for some time before enlistment, most of the soldiers seem to have had little concern that their former owners could track them down and somehow force them back into bondage. There was no real reason to change their names, but many had variations in spelling and other mistakes caused by the recruiters' haste in completing processing of new soldiers, abetted by a common inability of recruits to distinguish their names in writing."² William Sullivan could not read or write. It is possible that regimental documentation, may have been insufficient, erroneous or, in some cases, intentionally misleading when the volunteers themselves gave false names and unreliable information.

Recruitment was sluggish and ongoing. "Company D was recruited from all over Illinois, from Ogle County in the north to Shawneetown in the south, and some recruits were enlisted in Quincy and Chicago."³ Due to the lack of volunteers, recruitment in Illinois to fill Company F was slow. Some privates enlisted and were then forwarded to Virginia. Through the work of several agents, "it was not until 8 July that the majority of the new recruits...were mustered in...The following day...ninety-four men were reported to have left Chicago for the Twenty-ninth USCT, then in the field before Richmond."⁴ Even when recruiting seemed suspended, other companies may have continued to seek replacements due to the death of soldiers. In early June three new men joined the regiment in Virginia.⁵

The pension file deponent, William Sullivan, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania about 1842 and later resided in Burlington City, New Jersey. His regular occupation before (and after) the war was a cabinet maker. He then moved to Chicago, Illinois where he was employed as a butcher. He claimed that at the time of enlistment, he was hired by the U.S. Government as a teamster. He claimed that he enlisted in Springfield, Illinois and that afterwards, he was assigned to the said company and regiment. It was never stated how he arrived at White House, Virginia, the actual place where military records showed that he enlisted (Figure 2). As a teamster, he would have been an army wagon driver in charge of a team of horses or mules that pulled the supply wagon, and this could have been how he arrived at Virginia. But if he enlisted in Illinois, he could have been one of the hastily recruited volunteers with misplaced information.

William Sullivan first applied for a war pension in October 1872. However, information he gave to the Pension Bureau conflicted with the military service and medical records.

He alleged that on the morning of July 30, 1864, in the line of battle, he was wounded by a musket ball at the explosion of the mine near Petersburg, Virginia called the Battle of the Crater (Figure 3). Miller noted that the regimental casualty report records for the 29th USCI after the Battle of the Crater "are incomplete, partly because of officer losses in the battle and also because paperwork was not kept current at the front. Information on Companies B and D is the only contemporary battle count surviving, and it does not agree with the other records, probably because of uncertainties concerning missing soldiers just after he battle."⁶ This could have been the reason why there are no July 30 medical records for William Sullivan. "Company D's after-action morning report shows one killed, ten wounded, and seven missing among eighty men in

the action.” Miller’s subsequent research into the fate of these men from Company D showed some discrepancy in the counts and also reported that two men had affiliations with Galena, Illinois.⁷ There was no mention of a wounded William Sullivan. However, it is possible that other unnamed soldiers in the same company could have been associated with Galena, Illinois.

Wounded in the battle, the gunshot permanently destroyed the complete use of his right hand where partial amputation was performed at the third finger; he claimed to have been hospitalized until October 1864. Insisting he was a Civil War veteran, it was this injury, along with other conditions, that he listed to obtain an invalid pension. Army medical records, however, could not confirm the injury with hospitalization during this time frame. The records indicated that hospitalization of William Sullivan occurred several months later, in November and December.

As previously mentioned, William explained that the discrepancies were due to there being two similar-looking William Sullivans in the same company and regiment with different medical records. But the records did not show any other William Sullivan in this regiment. The *Compiled Military Records* listed only one Civil War soldier with the name of William Sullivan in the 29th Regiment USCI. The deponent claimed that the other Sullivan lived in Galena, Illinois, but the post office there could not locate such a person.

Because of the confusion, the Pension Bureau asked that he give them further proof of his regimental war experience by supplying the names, addresses and testimony from other officers and comrades from his regiment. The response recorded was that “He is unable to furnish the testimony of a commissioned officer in proof of his wounds from the reason that he does not (after due search) know where to find a commissioned officer of his regiment for that purpose”. This was not uncommon, since after the war, contacting veterans could be difficult. He also did not know the whereabouts of fellow servicemen because the regiment enlisted in Illinois and he was a resident of Burlington, New Jersey. His only witnesses were local veterans and friends who claimed to have been nearby when the explosion occurred and saw him wounded. Further investigation discovered that in some cases, the testimonies were inaccurate because the witnesses could not have logistically been at the scene. One of the most convincing testimonies in his favor came from the Burlington City white shoemaker, who was a Ward Master at the same hospital that William was sent to after he was wounded. He personally remembered William, the wound, and the time of the stay in the hospital. He confirmed the story.

William insisted that he was mustered out in Springfield, Illinois, but Army records showed that Sgt. William Sullivan was honorably discharged on November 6, 1865 in Brownsville, Texas.

When military records gave insufficient or contradictory information for a particular Civil War soldier, this information, compiled and organized several years after the Civil War, was transcribed onto a military record card titled, *Miscellaneous*. Such a card reported William H. Sullivan was (either) absent from July 30, 1864 to November 1864 because he was wounded (or) absent from Nov 20, 1864, January and February 1865 because he was wounded.⁸ The fact that these cards reported ambiguities shows us that the military records could have been, in some cases, erroneous or incomplete.

William never received a pension, although he persistently made claims and tried to qualify for one for the rest of his life. However, shortly after the war, he did collect a bounty and back pay

owed him by the government when he reported that a claims agent deceptively stole his bounty and back pay certificate. The fact that he could not read or write made him dependent on the services of agents who assisted in doing all the paper work for a fee. However, this made him vulnerable to dishonest agents who claimed the bounty for themselves.

William was rejected for his last pension claim under the Act of June 27, 1890 because his disabilities (partial loss of finger on right hand, chronic enlarged testicle due to kick from a Colonel Bross's horse, bronchial asthma, and rheumatism) were not severe enough to adequately prevent manual labor under the rating system. However, the Pension Bureau investigators must have also had their suspicions as to his authenticity.

He was honored for his service and given a veteran headstone that was placed in the Timbuctoo Cemetery.

There is no information on William Sullivan's family except that he was a widower. He died of heart disease on March 20, 1895 in the Mount Holly hospital at age 53.



Figure 2. The Ninth Army Corps charging the confederate works. Before Petersburg. Immediately after the explosion of the mine, July 30, 1864. (Frank Leslie's *The Soldier in Our Civil War*, Vol. 2, 1893)

Figure 3 shows the Ninth Army Corps of the Union Army of the Potomac, which the 29nd Regiment USCI belonged to, attacking the Confederate Army of northern Virginia. This battle was called the Battle of the Crater (also referred to in the pension files as the 'Battle of the mine explosion') and was part of the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia.

Reference

William H. Sullivan Pension File application # 178428, pp. copies, *Compiled Military Records*, microfilm (National Archives, Washington, DC)

Miller, Jr., Edward, *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-ninth U.S. Colored Infantry* (Columbia South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 1998)

Citations

¹ Miller 1998, p. 37

² Miller 1998, p. 29

³ Miller 1998, p.28

⁴ Miller 1998, p.44

⁵ Miller 1998, p.45

⁶ Miller 1998, p. 83

⁷ Miller 1998. P.85

⁸ 29th U.S. Colored Infantry, Miscellaneous Cards, William H. Sullivan (Ancestry.com)