

# William H. Davis

## A Short Biography

By Gail Astle  
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**William H. Davis** was born free on April 6, 1836 in Northampton Township, Burlington County, New Jersey. He enlisted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on December 22, 1863 and on the same day was mustered into Co. D, 22nd 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 7-inch-tall, 28-year-old brickmoulder with hazel eyes, brown hair, and a black complexion.

Initially appointed a corporal, he was promoted to a sergeant on February 23, 1864, a responsible non-commissioned officer position. Sergeants in black regiments were assigned these positions because they demonstrated “leadership ability, intelligence, integrity, and bravery.”<sup>1</sup> For unknown reasons, he was reduced to a corporal sometime in March or April of 1864. William Davis was wounded by a musket ball to the chest on June 15, 1864 at the Battle of Petersburg, Virginia. He was transported to and treated in the government hospital of Portsmouth, Virginia. During the war, gunshot wounds to head, neck, chest and stomach were usually fatal because of infection. At this time, there were no antibiotics and very little was known about disease and bacteria.<sup>2</sup> Upon his release several months later, William became sick due to exposure and was finally admitted in March 1865 to the Points of Rock, Virginia hospital for rheumatism. Reduced to private in January 1865, he was honorably discharged in Brownsville, Texas on October 16, 1865.

In the Union Army, a reported 280,000 cases of chronic and acute rheumatism included different diseases (non-contagious and usually not fatal) with joint inflammation and pain. Acute rheumatism is thought to have been caused by a bacterial infection that led to rheumatic fever. More common in winter, the convalescence could take one or two months for recovery. In the most serious cases, the infection produced heart damage. Chronic rheumatism generally included several diseases that could cause arthritic symptoms. Treatments that attempted to reduce inflammation and pain were often ineffective.<sup>3</sup>

William’s health suffered after he left the service. He worked as a brick maker and laborer as a means of support. With increasing age, manual labor became difficult because he suffered from a lame back and war-related sore feet from frost bite, bouts of rheumatism, and a gunshot wound to the chest. Not until the Act of June 27, 1890, called *The Disability Act*, was he considered for a pension. Pension laws were revised and broadened. Not only did they include eligibility for soldiers who were honorably discharged because of disability or illness incurred while in military service, but also provided pensions for veterans incapable of manual labor because of a permanent physical disability. After earlier rejected attempts, William was finally approved for a pension because of his disabilities of a lame back, rheumatism, heart disease, and senility. He received a pension of \$6 per month, commencing August 13, 1900. With persistent zeal and legal

assistance, he wisely oversaw his pension opportunities and updated his benefits into old age. Then in 1912 by the Act of May 11, 1912, he was able to collect \$27 per month due to old age and length of military service (Figure 2).

There is indication that the Davis family established itself within the Timbuctoo community after the war. William served as a School Board Trustee in the all black public District #33 Timbuctoo School.<sup>4</sup> He also was entrusted with the “old memorandum” record book of the Zion Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal African Church of Timbuctoo that in 1902 included a congregation of 26 members.<sup>5</sup> He produced this old book in 1905 to prove to pension agents the death date of Anna Christy, the first wife of deceased veteran Lewis Armstrong. Before Armstrong’s second wife and widow named Aramintie could receive a war pension, the death of his first wife had to be established, since there was never a divorce. This situation revealed the importance of keeping such a manuscript that listed important dates for at least its church members. During this time, often African Americans did not have documents or even knowledge to establish birth, marriage and death dates that were necessary proof of evidence before organizations such as the war Pension Bureau.

The death certificate for William H. Davis stated that he died in Timbuctoo on April 4, 1914 at about age 87 from pneumonia.<sup>6</sup> (His age at death was recorded incorrectly as the headstone has his actual age of 77 years.) His mother was Nancy Watlers (or Whye) and his father was John Davis. It was acknowledged that his only wife was Rachel Davis who died about 1874. William and Rachel made their home in Timbuctoo. They had several children, including George G. Davis of Timbuctoo (born June 19, 1868) who was the only surviving child after his father’s death.

Government funds paid for his military headstone and his burial in Timbuctoo Cemetery where his coffin was transported to this cemetery in a horse-drawn hearse with glass sides (Figure 3).

1288

ACT OF MAY 11, 1912.

No. 6022974

BUREAU OF PENSIONS

It is hereby certified That in conformity with the laws of the United States William H. Davis who was a Sergeant Co. D. 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment United States Colored Infantry is entitled to a pension at the rate of Twenty seven dollars per month, to commence May 22, 1912

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Given at the Department of the Interior this Ninth day of October one thousand nine hundred and twelve and of the Independence of the United States of America the one hundred and thirty seventh

Secretary of the Interior

Countersigned,

Commissioner of Pensions

Former payments covering any portion of the same time to be deducted.

**Figure 1. William H. Davis last pension claim under Act of May 11, 1912 (William H. Davis Pension File)**

Note that in Figure 2 he listed his rank as Sergeant even though he mustered out as Private.

Mount Holly, N. J., *Apr 13th 1914*

*Wm H Davis Estate*

**H. H. EARNEST**  
FUNERAL DIRECTOR

TELEPHONE CONNECTION. No. 13 GARDEN STREET, (Near Main)

*1914*

|                           |  |                 |
|---------------------------|--|-----------------|
| <i>Apr 7</i>              | <i>To Burial of William H Davis</i>    | <i>See</i>      |
|                           | <i>one Solid Chestnut Casket</i>       |                 |
|                           | <i>3 Pairs Silver Handles</i>          |                 |
|                           | <i>1 " Plate at rest</i>               |                 |
|                           | <i>Cream Satin Lining</i>              |                 |
|                           | <i>one " " Pillow</i>                  | <i>\$ 57.00</i> |
|                           | <i>one Outside Case</i>                | <i>7.00</i>     |
|                           | <i>Preservation of Body Embalming</i>  | <i>10.00</i>    |
|                           | <i>Two Patent Slippers</i>             | <i>2.00</i>     |
|                           | <i>paying for opening grave</i>        | <i>3.00</i>     |
|                           | <i>Flowing Remains</i>                 | <i>1.00</i>     |
|                           | <i>Use Hearse</i>                      | <i>5.00</i>     |
|                           | <i>and Service in full</i>             | <i>\$ 85.00</i> |
| <i>(application made)</i> | <i>By Com from U.S. Soldier Burial</i> | <i>35.00</i>    |
|                           |  | <i>50.00</i>    |

*This is to certify that I  
paid the Dr. Bill  
H. H. Earnest*

PENSION  
H  
APR 16  
1914  
U. S.  
OFFICE.

**Figure 2. Undertaker Hiram H. Earnest itemized list of expenses for William H. Davis burial (William H. Davis Pension File)**

Government funds not only paid for his soldier headstone but, as shown in Figure 3, also for his burial in the Timbuctoo Cemetery. His chestnut casket was carried to the cemetery in horse drawn hearse, inside a glass sided coach that cost \$5.

### General References

*William H. Davis Pension File application # 574753 and certificate # 1022974 pp. copies, Compiled Military Records, microfilm (National Archives, Washington, D.C.)*

Bilby, Joseph G., *Forgotten Warriors* (Hightstown, New Jersey: Longstreet House, 1993)

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

Lyght, Ernest, *Path of Freedom The Black Presence In New Jersey's Burlington County 1659-1900* (Cherry Hill, New Jersey: E & E Publishing House, 1978)

Schroeder-Lein, Glenna R., *The Encyclopedia of Civil War Medicine* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2008)

### **Citations**

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<sup>1</sup> Bilby 1993, p. 23

<sup>2</sup> Schroeder-Lein 2008, p. 219

<sup>3</sup> Schroeder-Lein 2008, pp. 264-265

<sup>4</sup> Haas 1876, a page in the *History of Schools in Burlington County*

<sup>5</sup> Lyght 1978, p.69

<sup>6</sup>*State of New Jersey Bureau of Vital Statistics- Certificate and Record of Death* (New Jersey Archives, Trenton, NJ)