

# WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## **From Slavery to Respected Washington County Citizen**

February is Black History Month and throughout the country there are newspaper articles, celebrations and salutes to some of the country's greatest African-Americans.

The Midwest had many of its own black pioneers and some of them came to Washington County to live and work more than a century ago.

During the Civil War, a young African-American boy wandered into a Union camp and his life was changed forever. This boy – about 12 years old – was named Jim, and he was owned by a man identified in records as "Mr. Carter." From that point, the boy was known as James Carter, and his life changed as he joined the Union's Iron Brigade, to fight against slavery.

Although his death certificate states he was born in Cattleburg, Virginia, Jim's birthplace was unknown. At the time of his death, he was "about 80 years old." A letter in the collections of the Washington County Historical Society gives a detailed account of Jim's life.

The letter, dated August 21, 1970, begins "Dear Catherine," and goes on to describe Jim's relationship with the Oscar Comfort family (of the Iron Brigade) during the Civil War.

The letter states that "Jim marched through Washington with the Union Army in the Grand Parade. Then he got army transportation to Wisconsin, where the unit was mustered out of service. Jim had been on the books as the personal servant of the bandmaster, who was single and had no use for a servant in civil life. So Oscar [Comfort] took him to his father's farm, where he became part of the farm help."

The Comfort family moved from Mineral Point, Wisconsin to Stillwater about 1877. Jim came along but soon moved out to live on his own. The letter says that "Just where [Jim] did work I don't know, but I can give you an idea. Stillwater at that time boasted of 30 saloons. Each saloon had at least two cuspidors (spittoons), some up to eight or ten. Each had to be cleaned daily. The pay was good, the job easy, if not agreeable, and Jim was not fastidious. As to which saloon or saloons he worked for I can't say. Suffice that there were always saloons which needed a porter who didn't drink, and who showed up when he was needed."

When Stillwater's military unit, Company K, was organized in 1883, the old Presbyterian Church on Myrtle Street was purchased for the armory. "Jim was the logical choice for janitor. He made many friends on that job."

Jim was described as "short in stature and not heavily built. Previous to the time I first saw him he had damaged an ankle. This was never completely repaired, so he walked with a limp," according to the letter. "Old-timers," she continued, "told me that he used

to march with the company in all parades before the accident."

Jim developed cancer and later died on December 26, 1913. His obituary in the Stillwater Messenger on January 3, 1914 says that "because of an honest endeavor to live right, to do the work he engaged to do to the best of his ability, James Carter, the colored caretaker of Company K Armory was given a burial last Sunday that many men of more prominence will never receive."

The funeral was held at the Simonet undertaking room, under the auspices of the ex-members of Company K. Rev. John McCoy of the Presbyterian Church presided over the funeral. The obituary also stated that "The room was filled, every chair being occupied and many standing. A number of beautiful flowers were sent by old friends."

The pallbearers were Dr. T.C. Clark, Major Orris E. Lee, R.S. Davis, L.H. Seymour, W.G. Bronson and W.E. Easton. A firing squad from Company K acted as escort and fired three volleys over the grave, followed by taps by Bugler Irving Corson. The firing squad consisted of Corporal Thompson, Privates Reuben Hagstrom, Charles Anderson, Arthur Nordstrom, Harry Bell, Lawrence Skramstad, Melvin Ludwig and Bert Harris.

A young black boy wanders into the camp of the Iron Brigade and turns out to be one of the most respected men in the City of Stillwater. What a journey.

Washington County's history is full of amazing stories that bring alive our past to shed light on the present.

*Brent Peterson is the executive director of the Washington County Historical Society. For more information, please visit [www.wchsmn.org](http://www.wchsmn.org).*