

*Narrative concerning the Civil War activities of Sgt. Alfred B. Hilton, the only native of Harford County to receive the Medal of Honor and only one of 18 African American soldiers to be given the medal for service during the Civil War.*

**The following is an excerpt from ABOVE AND BEYOND: THE CIVIL WAR CAREERS OF ALFRED B. HILTON AND CHARLES E. PHELPS, by James E. Chrismar, published by the Historical Society of Harford County in the Fall of 2000**

It's hard to imagine how two individuals, Alfred B. Hilton and Charles E. Phelps, could have been so vastly different, given the similarity of their experiences during America's grim civil war. Both were soldiers who fought in defense of the Union. Both belonged to military units comprised in large part of men from Harford County. Both played significant roles in Ulysses S. Grant's Overland campaign of 1864 against Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, and both were severely injured in near suicidal charges against entrenched rebel troops. Astoundingly, both were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Sadly both have been largely relegated to historical anonymity.

Alfred B. Hilton and Charles E. Phelps were in life's circumstances largely polar opposites of each other. The differences, as one might suspect, began at birth and intensified with the years. Hilton's life was characterized by poverty, illiteracy, insecurity, discrimination, obscurity, and an untimely death and burial far from family and loved ones. Phelps' life was one of privilege, affluence, prominence, professional acclaim, contemporary notoriety, and a lengthy and distinguished career that ended at home amidst those closest to him. In a curious manner the differences in the two men's lives testify to the racial and class conditions that led to the military struggle in which both served with such distinction.

Who were these men? What, precisely, were the specific details of their lives? How was it that they came to be part of America's vast war machine in the 1860's? What exactly was the nature of their service during the conflict, and what led to their being presented the nation's highest military honor? The search for answers to these questions begins in Harford County in the late 1830's or early 1840's.

Alfred Hilton was born in the Hopewell Cross Roads area, today's Level, Maryland, probably in the early 1840's, and was one of as many as fourteen siblings. That his biographical details are somewhat shrouded in the uncertainly common to most ordinary folk of the era is not surprising, especially considering his status as a free Negro. Alfred's father, Isaac Hilton, was

born before the turn of the century, possibly in the mid 1790's, and likely was a slave at the time. By, 1832, however, he had acquired his freedom and was married with five children.<sup>1</sup>

Alfred's mother was Harriet Hilton. Her life story, surprisingly, is largely a matter of public record but is also veiled in uncertainty. Newspaper accounts near the end of Mrs. Hilton's life indicate she was born in 1795 at Stafford, near Darlington, in the northern part of Harford County, but differ as to her legal status. Two assert that she was the slave of Cassandra Stump, the wife of John Stump, the enormously wealthy farmer and businessman of the prominent Rock Run-Stafford area family. Another contends that "when quite young" she was bound out to Mrs. Stump by her parents. When she was eighteen or nineteen years of age, around 1813 or 1814, she married Isaac, who may also have belonged to the Stump family. A variety of records suggest she gave birth to her first child in 1817.<sup>2</sup>

Alfred Hilton first appears by name in the Federal Census record of 1850. This record indicates he was eight years old, suggesting a birth date sometime in 1842. However, the 1860 census refers to his being 23 years of age, pushing his date of birth back to 1837. Military records are similarly contradictory. In all probability Hilton himself was likely unaware of his exact age.

Whatever his precise age, Alfred B. Hilton at the outbreak of the Civil War was living in the Hopewell area, near Havre de Grace, on a hardscrabble fourteen acre farm his parents purchased for \$320 from John and Sarah Charshie in 1860.<sup>3</sup> The household consisted of Alfred and his parents (now in their 60's); his brothers Abraham (29), Aaron (22), David (13), and James (8); and his sister Susan (10). Hannah Jones, a 40-year old African American woman, also lived with the family. Sisters Alice, Ann, and Eliza, cited in the 1850 census as being, respectively, 14, 7, and 6, apparently were no longer with the

rest of the family, and may have either been bound out by their parents or have lived with their own family, as did brothers Edward and Henry.<sup>4</sup> None of the adults, Alfred included, was able to read or write.

If Alfred Hilton took any notice of his situation at the time, he surely must have realized that his future in Harford County was rather bleak—and likely to worsen with time. He was a

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<sup>1</sup> Biographical details for the Hilton family have been gathered from a variety of somewhat conflicting sources. These include Alfred Hilton's compiled service record from the National Archives, the federal census for Harford County for 1850 and 1860, and various obituaries. See also Mary K. Meyer, comp., *Free Blacks in Harford, Somerset, and Talbot Counties, Maryland, 1832* (Mt. Airy, Md.: Pipe Creek Publications, Inc., 1991), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Hilton was 102 years old and the county's oldest resident at the time of her death in the fall of 1897. Two newspapers printed accounts of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, and three published obituaries. See the *Havre de Grace Republican* for August 24, 1895 and September 4, 1897; the *Harford Democrat* for September 10, 1897; and the *Aegis* for September 10, 1897.

<sup>3</sup> Land Records of Harford County (MD), WG, Liber12, Folio 64.

<sup>4</sup> These are the ages indicated in the 1860 census, and do not necessarily complement the ages cited ten years earlier in the 1850 population count.

man of color in a state that permitted African slavery. He was illiterate and seemingly without any particular occupational skills. He was one of three adult males living with aged parents on a subsistence farm expected to support a family of eight persons. Despite all these negatives the characteristic, ironically, that most imperiled Alfred B. Hilton was his legal status as a free Negro.

To be a free black man in Maryland in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was to be a near pariah, regarded, in the words of one white resident as a “most fruitful source of mischief and disquietude.”<sup>5</sup> The main problem, in the conservative mind, was the county’s relatively large and growing population of freedmen—persons thought to be greatly responsible for any unrest among and disappearance of Harford County’s dwindling number of slaves.

Harford County’s population in 1860 included 3644 free blacks and 1800 slaves, among a total population of 23,415. The number of free blacks in the county had risen by 50% in Hilton’s lifetime and by 31% in the decade of the 1850’s alone. During the same periods the slave count dropped by 46% and 20%. Purely racial considerations aside, non-slave holding poor whites, including the county’s expanding population of Irish and German immigrants, increasingly viewed free Blacks as competitors who suppressed the wages of the relatively few jobs as common laborers, the occupation most young black males claimed in the censuses of 1850 and 1860.

Reflecting the concern about the rising numbers of young men such as Alfred Hilton, a convention of Maryland slaveholders assembled in Baltimore in June 1859. Sixty prominent residents of Harford County, including including ten from Hilton’s Second Election District, at least nominally associated with the group, whose stated purpose was to affect the “speedy and certain migration of the free Negro from our state—peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.”<sup>6</sup>

The proposals of the slaveholders’ convention, though largely ignored, reflected the temper of the state’s political leaders. In 1858 the General Assembly enacted a law permitting free blacks who were convicted of a crime for which a white person could be sent to jail to be sold back into slavery. Harford County immediately instituted this policy. Two years later, in 1860, the legislature prohibited slave owners from freeing or manumitting any additional slaves, and in an outrageous and improbable act of apparent desperation actually sought to encourage free blacks over eighteen to seek court permission to renounce freedom, to choose a master, and to voluntarily return to slavery.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Southern Aegis*, May 7, 1859.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

If Alfred Hilton ever had the luxury to look forward towards the coming years of his life, his reaction must have been one of great concern and anxiety....

Indeed the arrival of Hilton's 4<sup>th</sup> USCT at Yorktown on October 1 (via Fortress Monroe and likely following bouts of sea-sickness) inaugurated weeks, eventually months, of strenuous work constructing fortifications and digging canals on the Virginia peninsula. When not busy with these labors the troops drilled and participated in tramps or forced training marches throughout South Central Virginia

. Brigaded with several other USCT regiments and now part of the Army of the James, the 4<sup>th</sup> camped on the right bank of the York River, three-quarters of a mile below the fortifications that enclosed the village. Gloucester Point, where the Colored Troops also labored on construction projects, was across the river. Williamsburg was twelve miles to the northwest. Despite its storied past, the historic locale the USCT troops occupied, scene of the Peninsular Campaign earlier in the war, had the look of desolation. One officer noted that it was "tumble down looking" and that "not a well to do person remained in the place."<sup>7</sup>

The highlight of Alfred Hilton's first few months in the war was, very likely, the 4<sup>th</sup>'s involvement in the so-called Wister Expedition. The brainchild of General Benjamin Butler, now commander of the Army of the James, the plan called for a surprise Sunday morning sortie into lightly defended Richmond to free federal prisoners at Libby Prison. The Army of the Potomac was to launch a diversionary attack outside the city while units of Butler's infantry and cavalry troops carried out the main mission.

The 4<sup>th</sup> USCT and several other black infantry regiments, under "heavy marching orders" and carrying seventy rounds per man, left Williamsburg in the morning of February 6 1864. They tramped over 50 miles all through the day and through the "long, weary, toilsome, cold night," stopping very briefly only to eat meals. Some ten miles outside Richmond, as the cavalry moved in advance at approximately 3 A.M. to cross Bottom's Bridge over the Chickahominy River, Confederate forces launched an unanticipated assault and ended Union hopes for a successful raid. Hilton, the 4<sup>th</sup>, and the other regiments withdrew to safety and returned to camp

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<sup>7</sup>John McMurray, *Recollections of a Colored Troop* (Brookville, Pa., 1916; reprint 1994), p. 12. Brief accounts of the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT's service are found in Harold R. Manakee, *Maryland in the Civil War* (Baltimore, 1961), p. 124 and in *History and Roster*, II, 129-130.

the next day, “as tired and disgusted a lot of soldiers as ever marched up and down the peninsula.”<sup>8</sup>....

For Alfred Hilton, even more than for Charles Phelps, the new Union strategy in the spring of 1864 set in motion a series of events and policy changes that transformed the nature of his military service and defined the rest of his life. In March, after months of mostly fatigue duty at Yorktown, the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT moved closer to the front lines with a transfer to Camp Hamilton outside Petersburg, the rail center crucial to Confederate survival. . The following month the unit steamed to Point Lookout, Maryland, for a brief stint guarding CSA prisoners. And on May 4, 1864, the very day the Seventh Maryland left for the Wilderness, Butler’s army with the 4<sup>th</sup> among its several colored regiments sailed up the James River to launch the so-called Bermuda Hundred campaign against Richmond

The objective of this offensive, staged in the triangle formed by the confluence of the James and Appomattox Rivers, was to cut rail lines between Richmond and Petersburg and to exert pressure on Richmond from the south. Hilton’s 4<sup>th</sup> USCT and two other USCT regiments formed Duncan’s Brigade of General Hinck’s Colored Division, whose responsibility was to protect supply lines by seizing a number of strategically important sites along the James.

Landing at City Point, the deep-water port at the mouth of the Appomattox, Duncan’s men quickly took control of the area and began to turn the sleepy village into a massive depot and staging area for Union assaults. They also participated in a number of reconnaissance expeditions, and in mid May moved several miles up the Appomattox to Spring Hill, where they established Fort Converse, a small earthen fort they held in the face of occasional minor attacks by Confederate forces. During these weeks, specifically on May 15, the very day Charles Phelps boarded ship to return home, Alfred Hilton accepted the important but dangerous honor as national color bearer for his regiment. The progressively more active but still restricted duty Hilton and USCT troops performed lasted until mid June.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to 1864, U.S. military authorities, responding to a host of popular prejudices they historically shared, determined a very limited role for African-American troops. A few black soldiers served as scouts and spies. Others were cooks and teamsters charged with driving

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 25. Record of Events for Fourth United States Colored Infantry, July 1863-June 1865, *Supplement to the Official Records*, Part II, Volume 77, 315-337. Ernest B. Furguson, *Ashes of Glory: Richmond at War* (New York, 1996), p. 242.

<sup>9</sup> This account of Hilton’s activities was pieced together from the following sources: McMurray, *Recollections*; Events of the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT in *Supplement to the Official Records*; Christian Fleetwood, Letter to Dr. James Hall, June 8, 1865, accessed at [www.nps.gov/rich/flee~174.htm](http://www.nps.gov/rich/flee~174.htm); United States Colored Troops, 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment Infantry, accessed at [www.nps.gov/rich/4thusct.htm](http://www.nps.gov/rich/4thusct.htm); Hilton’s Compiled Service Record at the National Archives; and Noah Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (Boston, 1998).

wagons and caring for the mules. Most, however, performed garrison duties, digging trenches and canals, felling trees, building a variety of fortifications, and occasionally guarding prisoners. Despite undergoing the same basic training as all other troops, few Black regiments ever saw the intense combat experienced by the fabled 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts. General Butler, a maverick who before the war was a New England abolitionist, resolved to confront the stereotypical belief that Black soldiers would not hold up to the physical and emotional demands of serious combat.

Butler's opportunity came when Grant ordered the Army of the James to lead an all-out assault on Petersburg. As part of a hastily assembled force, Hinck's Colored Division moved west on the City Point Road in the early hours of June 15 until blocked by rebel troops dug in at Baylor's Farm. Ordered to force through the well-sited southern lines, the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT, with Hilton out front with the US flag, led Duncan's Brigade in a double-quick charge out of a wooded area and up a rise in the face of rifle and artillery fire from the front and right. Despite heavy casualties, USCT troops crashed through CSA defenses and continued the drive on Petersburg.

By 11 A.M. Hilton and the colored troops of Hinck's Division confronted the stout earthen fortifications that for miles formed Petersburg's outer defenses. While Union commanders evaluated the situation, Hilton and the men in the ranks lay, for hours, in the hot June sun as Confederates rained artillery fire on them. The order to begin an assault came near sundown. The 4<sup>th</sup> again led Duncan's Brigade and "swept like a tornado" over the outnumbered Confederates, with Hilton's regiment having a direct hand in the taking of batteries 7, 9, and 11. By nightfall US troops held the entire works. But despite their numerical and psychological advantage, Union authorities failed to press the initiative, and within days the campaign settled into a lengthy siege operation. For its efforts on June 15, the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT suffered 135 casualties and was withdrawn to the rear with the rest of Duncan's Brigade. Hilton, although an obvious target while carrying the American flag, apparently emerged unscathed from the day's dramatic events.<sup>10</sup>

For the next several weeks Hilton and the men of Duncan's Brigade were "before Petersburg." They served as pickets, participated in skirmishes, and performed other duties associated with the siege. The 4<sup>th</sup> USCT witnessed but did not engage in the spectacular explosion and assault at the infamous Crater. Soon after the July 30 debacle Hilton accompanied the brigade across the Appomattox to Dutch Gap, below Richmond, where for nearly two months

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<sup>10</sup> *Fox's Regimental Losses—The Colored Troops*, p. 4, accessed at [www.nps.gov/rich/backgroun.htm](http://www.nps.gov/rich/backgroun.htm). Christian A. Fleetwood, *The Negro as a Soldier*, p.14, accessed at [www.nps.gov/rich/negr~htm](http://www.nps.gov/rich/negr~htm). Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, 220-227. Bruce Catton has provided a succinct description of the Confederate defenses in *A Stillness at Appomattox* (New York, 1955), p. 186.

the 4<sup>th</sup> helped dig a canal and pulled picket duty. This tedious but generally safe duty ended with the Battle of New Market Heights.

Histories of the Civil War rarely mention the Battle of New Market Heights. The battlefield is part of no state, county, or national park. Motorists today speed through the site, oblivious to the lone roadside marker that identifies its location. Students routinely confuse New Market Heights with the battle fought the previous May in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Scholars and government records often combine it with a larger engagement referred to as Chaffin's—or even Chapin's--Farm. The average American has never heard of it.

But to Alfred Hilton, the 4th USCT, and African-American troops generally, the combat at New Market Heights on September 29, 1864, was epochal. It advanced U.S. efforts to close out the Confederacy and affirmed Benjamin Butler's supposition: Black troops could be as effective a fighting force as any group of soldiers in the army. Sadly, Hilton would be able to appreciate only for a brief period the significance of what he and his fellow colored troops accomplished during the routinely overlooked but strategically important battle that fall morning.

Ten miles southeast of Richmond, the Battle of New Market Heights was part of General Grant's campaign to subdue Petersburg and cut supplies to Confederate forces defending their embattled capital. Its actual design was the work of General Butler, who convinced Grant that direct assaults against rebel soldiers protecting Richmond would speed the war's end. Additionally, such a plan, Butler believed, afforded the opportunity he sought to test in a major confrontation the fighting ability of the 3000 black soldiers in his command. The battle's initial phase required a dangerous nighttime crossing of the James River and a direct assault against well-entrenched rebel units accustomed to heavy combat.

The plan was set in motion amidst great secrecy on September 28th. Late that evening, following a voyage from Dutch Gap to Deep Bottom and a march overland, Butler's combined white and black forces, including Hilton's 4<sup>th</sup> USCT and eight other black regiments, stole across the James on a series of pontoon bridges. After a bivouac of but a couple hours, the troops rose at 3 A.M. for a breakfast of boiled coffee, and began the move to initiate a pre-dawn assault. Hilton and the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT marched at the head of the small column ordered to lead the rush against CSA defenses.

The task facing Hilton and the U.S. troops was a very formidable one. Twice before in recent weeks Union soldiers had failed to dislodge southern units arrayed at the base and atop New Market Heights, a 40-50 foot, mile-long mass that commanded the main road to Richmond from the east. The part of the new plan that involved Hilton required the attacking forces to cross

an open field, enter a wooded ravine bisected by a stream, and exit into a swampy field adjacent to a small creek. At this point Butler's men were to ford the creek and begin an ascent towards two lines of felled trees that separated them from rebel earthworks at the base of the Heights. Making the assault more difficult for the relatively inexperienced American forces was the presence of over 1800 of the most battle-hardened veterans of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The strapping Hilton, bearing the flag given the unit by the women of Baltimore, was to march conspicuously in the center of the regimental front as the offensive moved forward to inaugurate the attack in the morning mist.<sup>11</sup>

Not unexpectedly, the initial assault involving Hilton and the 350 men of the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT proved disastrous. After clearing the field and passing through the ravine, the vanguard troops slowed greatly on entering the swamp and starting across the creek. The struggling Colored Troops then met a storm of infantry and artillery fire as they began their ascent towards the Confederate emplacements. One of Hilton's fellow 4<sup>th</sup> USCT sergeants, a Baltimore native, characterized the shelling as a torrent of gunfire "sweeping men down as hailstones sweep the leaves from the trees". The brigade commander described the barrage as the "red tempest of death." A captain from an adjacent USCT unit later imagined southern soldiers believing the assaulting troops fools, and thanked God for concealing from him beforehand what he and his men had to endure.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, elements of the assault, Hilton included, continued to surge forward. Soon they became entangled in the abatis line, where subsequent Confederate salvos decimated their units to the point of annihilation. Ordered to withdraw, the surviving remnants of these first black regiments scrambled back from their forty-minute ordeal, as federal authorities launched a second, larger, and more massed assault by other USCT units. This time the Yankee assailants overwhelmed the now-weakened rebel position and carried the Heights for the Union. Their success confirmed General Butler's confidence in the military potential of his Negro troops and brought federal forces one major step closer to Richmond's fall and the end of the war.<sup>13</sup>

The strategic and psychological success of USCT efforts that morning was likely of little concern to Alfred Hilton, who had fought his last battle for his country. Despite having to bear

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Morris Chester, *Thomas Morris Chester, Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Virginia Front* (Baton Rouge, La., 1989), p.140. Readers can find comprehensive accounts of the battle in Trudeau, *Like Men of War* and in Richard J. Sommers, *Richmond Redeemed: The Siege at Petersburg* (New York, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Christian Fleetwood, quoted in Irvin H. Lee, *Negro Medal of Honor Men* (New York, 1969), p.30; Colonel Samuel A. Duncan, quoted in Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, p. 293. McMurray, *Recollections*, p.51.

<sup>13</sup> According to *The Official Records*, Series I, Volume 42, Part 1, p. 136, the 4<sup>th</sup> suffered a total of 178 casualties at New Market Heights.



the weight of the unfurled American flag on the uphill assault and being so conspicuous a target, Sergeant Hilton managed to reach the enemy's inner defenses. Here he encountered the 4<sup>th</sup>'s regimental color bearer about to collapse to the ground. With evident determination and energy Hilton grasped the falling banner and continued forward. Now burdened with both flags and confronted with unrelenting rifle fire, he eventually dropped with a severe leg wound "while trying to cross the second line of abatis." That he was able to reach the "very edge of the breastworks," suffer a debilitating gunshot, and yet return to federal lines with what proved to be a mortal injury was due, no doubt, to a combination of personal courage, good fortune, and aid from his comrades.<sup>14</sup>

Alfred Hilton's situation to this point seems largely reminiscent of that experienced by Colonel Charles Phelps four months earlier. Both had sustained serious leg wounds in headlong charges against heavily fortified Confederate troops, and both had managed to escape to their own lines. Sadly, however, Hilton's fate was far different from that of the commander of the Seventh Maryland, whose wounds led to his quick return home to Baltimore. Taken to the Negro quarters at U.S. General Hospital at Fort Monroe (Va), Hilton underwent amputation of his right leg. Almost immediately his commander expressed fear for his life. The Harford native, however, clung to life for another three weeks, but at length died "from effects of amputation of Right leg" on October 21, 1864.<sup>15</sup>

Alfred Hilton's death occurred in a hastily constructed, segregated army hospital 260 miles from his home and loved ones (brothers Henry and Aaron remained with the 4<sup>th</sup> in the vicinity of Richmond). In his pocket was a wallet, four dollars, some change, and an ambrotype of an unidentified person. He had not been paid for eight weeks and, in fact, was still owed \$100 of the original \$300 bounty he received for enlisting. In a number of ways he had come a long way in the fourteen months since that day in August 1863 when he left the farm in Level to begin his stint in the army. In other ways his lot in life had changed little, and yet was typical of the

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<sup>14</sup> Report of Major Augustus S. Boernstein, Commander, 4<sup>th</sup> USCT, October 4, 1864, to Captain Solon A. Carter in National Archives Microfilm, RG 94, United States Colored Troops, Regimental Books, Letters sent October 1863-April 1866; Chester Morris, *Black Civil War Correspondent*, p. 140. Trudeau in *Like Men of War* on p. 293 relates an incident following the battle that involved either Hilton or the regimental color bearer, in which a lieutenant encountered "the color sergeant of the 4<sup>th</sup>" while scouring the field for fallen soldiers. The sergeant had "both legs shattered by a round shot." When told the attack had succeeded, the sergeant became so animated with excitement that the lieutenant feared he would expire on the spot. The lieutenant moved the stricken color sergeant to the shade and acknowledged that he believed the injury was mortal. The sergeant's response was "Well, I carried my colors up to the works, and I did my duty, didn't I?"

<sup>15</sup> Report of Major Boernstein to Captain Carter, October 4, 1864; Casualty Sheet in Alfred B. Hilton, Compiled Service Record, National Archives.

experiences of many young men, black and white, Union and Confederate, who risked death in support of the cause to which they had pledged themselves.

Alfred Hilton was laid to rest in the hospital cemetery at Hampton, Virginia. A May 1864 article in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* described the process that was followed when soldiers died at Fort Monroe:

When a man dies he is reverently robed for his burial, placed in a military coffin, on his breast there is laid a card with his name, company, and date of death. The same is also painted on the inside of the lid of his coffin and on the outside. Every soldier who dies in the hospital, black or white, is honored with a military funeral. An escort, with trailed arms follows him to the grave; the chaplain performs burial service, and the volley of musketry from his comrades proclaims that the tired soldier sleeps that sleep from which there is no earthly waking.<sup>16</sup>

According to hospital procedures a wooden headboard, painted with Hilton's name, company, and regiment, was placed on the grave. After the end of the war, when the hospital gravesite became part of a national cemetery, government officials installed a more permanent stone marker, possibly containing only Hilton's surname and two initials. In 1983, cemetery authorities erected a new marker, the decorated white stone with complete information that presently designates the grave. This dignified tombstone identifies Sergeant Alfred B. Hilton of Company H, 4<sup>th</sup> USCT as a recipient of the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award.<sup>17</sup>

The Medal of Honor, commonly referred to as the Congressional Medal of Honor, was established during the Civil War to commend officers and enlisted personnel for a "particular deed of most distinguished gallantry in action." First extended to members of the United States Navy and later to the Army, most of the Medals of Honor presented for service during the Civil War went to men who "took risks, who rushed faster and farther for their cause, who explored new limits of human daring." The armed forces eventually extended a total of 1520 of these particularly notable awards to servicemen who performed such deeds of valor between 1861 and

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<sup>16</sup>John S.C. Abbott, "The Military Hospitals at Fortress Monroe," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, Volume XXIX, August 1864, p.315.

<sup>17</sup> Telephone conversation with H. D. Hardamon, Director, Hampton National Cemetery, March 15, 1999. *Hampton National Cemetery, Hampton, Virginia*, n.d., n.p., a typewritten flyer provided by the cemetery, copy in the author's possession. An early reference book, *Alphabetical Index to Places of Internment of Deceased Union Soldiers* (Washington, D.C., 1868; reprint 1994), Volume V, p. 40, mistakenly refers to Hilton as A. J. Hillson. Mr. Hardamon says all cemetery records indicate the name was spelled correctly from the outset and that the new stone was provided only to designate Hilton as a recipient of the Medal of Honor. The actual location of the gravesite is Section E, Row 5, #1231.

1865. Only sixteen of this number went to Black soldiers. The medal for Color Sergeant Alfred B. Hilton, the simple farm hand from Hopewell Cross Roads, Maryland, was presented, posthumously, on April 6, 1865.<sup>18</sup>

The process by which Hilton was designated a medal recipient began with an official report to Captain Solon A. Carter, Assistant Adjutant General, Third Division, Eighteenth Army Corps. Written in the field on October 4, 1864, by Major Augustus S. Boernstein, the white commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> USCT who fought along side his troops at New Market Heights, the document detailed the actions five days earlier of his valiant regiment. Boernstein was particularly praiseworthy of Hilton's extraordinary effort in carrying forward the two color standards, reporting that he shouted, "Boys, save the colors" as he fell gravely injured. The regimental head ended his report with the assertion that Hilton was "a good faithful soldier. A man."<sup>19</sup>

A week later, while Alfred Hilton lay in the hospital, a congratulatory circular to the Army of the James over General Butler's name cited a number of soldiers by name and included praise for Hilton's actions. Butler noted that the sergeant's "thoughts were for the colors and not for himself," and proclaimed that Hilton and a number of others in the same charge would receive a "special medal for gallantry."<sup>20</sup>

The award Butler initially envisioned in 1864 was a personal, Army of the James medal he ordered struck by Tiffany's at his own expense. Butler initiated this award because the War Department had yet to present the congressionally authorized medal to members of the army—and certainly not to Black soldiers. Military officials subsequently disallowed Butler's proposed medal, but his recommendation served as the catalyst for the army's decision to move forward with presenting the Medal to enlisted men in the army.

The following year, on April 6, 1865, three days before Lee's surrender at Appomattox and nearly six months after Hilton's death, the War Department, "upon the recommendation of Major General Butler" extended the Congressional Medal of Honor for "gallantry in action" to fourteen African-American soldiers who fought at New Market Heights. That same day medals

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<sup>18</sup> Sammler Kiabinett, *Above and Beyond: A History of the Medal of Honor from the Civil War to Vietnam* (Boston, 1985), p. 15. This particularly valuable history of the medal includes a complete roster of the 3412 recipients since the award's inception.

<sup>19</sup> Boernstein to Carter.

<sup>20</sup> "Address to Soldiers of the Army of the James," October 11, 1864, in *Official Records*, Series I, Volume 42, Part III, p. 169.

to recipients who were no longer living, Hilton included, were forwarded to the Treasury Department to be delivered “to the next of kin, when claimed.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> E.D.Townsend, Assistant Adjutant General, War Department, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1865, to Major General Ord, Commanding, Virginia Department, Fort Monroe, Virginia; E. D. Townsend to Hon. E.R---, 2<sup>nd</sup> Auditor, U.S. Treasury, April 6, 1865, National Archives Microfilm Publication, RG 94, Letters Sent 1800-1889. Although Townsend’s letter to the Treasury Department requested that receipt of the medal by the family be acknowledged, the author has discovered no evidence to indicate that the medal was ever claimed or delivered. Obituary articles for Harriet Hilton, Alfred’s mother, note that the family was indeed aware of Alfred’s service during the war but make no reference to any award.