

# Puzzling a Life Together - Piece by piece, Westtown's Historical Commission learned the story of an ordinary resident during the Civil War

*by Gail O. Guterl, Westtown Township Historical Commission*

Let me tell you the story of an unsung Westtown resident whose life was pieced together by members of the Westtown Township Historical Commission (WTHC). The life of Isaac J. Winters unfolded one puzzle piece at a time over several years, revealed through newspaper clippings, web searches, and military records.

The project began when a former WTHC commissioner discovered a Civil War veteran, Isaac J. Winters, was among those buried in an abandoned cemetery on Shiloh Road. Others became interested and took up the search.

The hunt got more intriguing when members discovered a Gettysburg College display of an 1863 Springfield rifle, scabbard, bayonet and belt buckle with strong provenance that it belonged to a black Westtown soldier, Private Isaac J. Winters, who had served in the Union Army in the Civil War. "I.J.W. CO. F 43" was carved into the rifle stock.

Isaac's life appears to have been typical of the mid 1800s until 1863 when he was conscripted into the 43rd US Colored Troops (USCT) Infantry "F" Company. He was wounded in the shoulder July 30, 1864 at Cemetery Hill at the Battle of the Crater, Petersburg, VA, hospitalized, returned to service, and mustered out in Brownsville, TX, Oct. 20, 1865. A whole lot happened in between.

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## Simple Facts of Life

This is what the commission knows; taking into account that one record may give one age or year, and another will conflict.

Isaac was born May 30, 1828, the second youngest child of free African-American farmers Jesse and Margaret Winters in West Goshen Township. (Records show an adult Isaac owned land in Westtown.) He and his siblings, Mary Ann, Rebecca Jane, Malinda, Lydia and John received aid for school supplies and fees to attend school in West Goshen according to the 1835 Poor School Children records in the Chester County archives.

The 1850 census says Isaac worked as a farm laborer in Westtown for John Ingram, and later for an African-American resident in the township, Richard Bye. He also worked for Westtown resident Truman Forsythe; and according to a June 28, 1864 local newspaper article, Isaac was boarding with Forsythe when he was drafted. It was in a closet in Forsythe's house that Isaac's weaponry was found years later with receipts bearing his name.

Isaac married Margaret R., who lived near Westtown Station, although members aren't sure when. According

to the 1870 census, his children Eliza 14, Charles 10, Anna 7, Clara 3 and Lewis E. 1, were living at home. By 1880 only Clara and Lewis E were listed.

For 68 years, Isaac served as sexton at Shiloh AME Church on Shiloh road in Westtown. He is buried in the church cemetery next to his wife Margaret, who died in 1897 at age 62, and Amelia Winters, who died in 1889 at age 18. (Was Amelia Isaac's daughter? Her obituary says her wake was at the home of Isaac Winters, but information about Amelia illustrates the challenges of trying to fit together a life from old records. She is not listed on the 1870 census as a child, who would have been 8 years old, living in Isaac's home.)

Isaac died of myocarditis April 7, 1911 at Chester County Hospital, at "82 years, 10 months and 7 days," according to an obituary in the Daily Local News. The Liberty Cornet Band played at his funeral, held at the home of his nephew John Williams in West Chester. Isaac was buried with full fanfare from the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) George F. Smith Post No. 130, whose members were black Civil War veterans.

## Drafted into Union Army

There are still many questions regarding Isaac's life, but the most intriguing information comes from his Civil War service.

African-American men were not allowed to serve in the Union Army until after the Emancipation Proclamation. Enlistment of blacks rose sharply after the Confederate army rampaged through the Gettysburg area in 1863, capturing and enslaving many free black men. However, Isaac was not among those who enlisted.

A document from the National Archives, digitized on Fold3 Military Records ([www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com)), says Isaac, 5'9" tall and 35 years old, was conscripted and failed to report, so he was arrested in April, 1863 by a John Winterbotham. This may explain the gap in records because another document states he joined the 43rd US Colored Troops (USCT) F Company Aug. 8, 1863 and trained at Camp William Penn, in what is now Cheltenham Township. The camp was established in June, 1863 exclusively to train black federal soldiers. Ironically, it was adjacent to the Quaker Lucretia Mott's estate, a major stop on the Underground Railroad. In a camp that trained some 10,500 black soldiers, it is likely a few camp soldiers made their way to freedom by hiding at this stop.

Through May and June of 1864, the 43rd fought with the Ninth Corps in the Wilderness Campaign and at Cold Harbor; then moved to Petersburg, VA.

## Battle of the Crater

The Union Army laid siege to a Rebel fort, Elliott's Salient, in Petersburg to cripple the Confederates' important railhead in the city. The Union planned to tunnel under the fort, set explosives, detonate them creating a huge crater, and in the ensuing chaos, take the fort before the Confederate Army could regroup. It didn't happen that way.

Two brigades of black troops trained to lead the assault. However, the day before the attack, General Ambrose Burnside was ordered not to use these troops in the assault, claiming that if the attack failed, then black soldiers would be killed needlessly, creating political repercussions in the North.

When the explosives detonated, poorly trained white soldiers were sent in and slaughtered. Whatever his role in this battle — black troops were most often used for grunt work like digging ditches, transporting equipment — Isaac was wounded in the shoulder and hospitalized at Satterlee Military Hospital in West Philadelphia. He returned to duty Sept. 23, 1864, which contradicts the September-October unit muster-in roll that states Isaac was "absent without leave since Oct. 27, 1864." Is this a clerical error or accurate? The answer is unknown.

## Aftermath

Isaac continued in the Army until Oct. 20, 1865, when he was mustered out in Brownsville, TX and discharged in Philadelphia. Soldiers were required to hand in their weapons when they mustered out, unless they paid for them. There is proof Isaac paid \$23.42 to keep his equipment — a lot of money in those days.

As far as is known, Isaac did not suffer permanent disability from his shoulder injury because 2 years after the war, on June 1, 1867, he won first prize (\$2) for being the fastest corn husker at the Chester County Fair, held on what is now part of West Chester University.

Isaac Winters was an original, a man who was injured during the Civil War and went on to live a long life in Westtown. Commission members still seek more information about his life. Hopefully new puzzle pieces of his past will soon fall into place.



*This 1863 Springfield rifle musket, bayonet, and belt buckle were found in a closet in an old farm in Westtown Township, with documentation it belonged to Westtown resident Isaac J. Winters. It was purchased by Angelo Scarlato, a Civil War collector of black memorabilia, and was displayed at a special exhibition at Gettysburg College. Carved on the rifle butt is "I.J.W. CO. F 43".*