AFRICAN AMERICAN VETERANS from Kent County

By Bill Leary
Raymond Ringgold
of Big Woods, Air Force, 1949-1950

Corporal John Dudley Shorter
of Big Woods, Army, 1953-1955

Sergeant Samuel G. Tiller, Jr.
of Worton, Army, Korea and Vietnam

Linwood Graham Clarkson, Jr.,
of Georgetown, Air Force, Vietnam

Sergeant Vincent Blake
of Georgetown, Air Force, 1974-1980

Gregory Sparks
of Chestertown, Navy, 1975-1979
Introduction

Legacy Day started nine years ago as an effort to celebrate the rich cultural heritage of African Americans in Kent County, Maryland. Legacy Day 2022, produced by Sumner Hall with the Historical Society of Kent County, honors nearly 1,700 African American men and women from Kent County who have served in the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard. This record of service began during the American Revolution and continues until today.

By joining the armed forces, African American men and women believed they could both better their own lives and make their country truer to its best promises. That happened to a great extent during the Civil War and to some extent during more recent decades following full integration of the armed forces.

For most of American history, however, African Americans in the military have suffered the same discrimination they experienced in civilian life. After a brief experiment with integrated units during the Revolutionary War, it would be another 175 years before Black men served in integrated units – during the Korean War. For the most part, those segregated units were assigned the most menial tasks, such as ditch-digging, rather than combat duty, and until World War II, they were commanded almost exclusively by white officers.

This booklet focuses on the experiences of Kent County servicemen and women in the major conflicts in which they served: the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War, and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Picture galleries on the covers and in the middle of this booklet highlight the careers of 28 African American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who have served since World War I. To find out more about each of the almost 1,700 veterans saluted here, visit the Sumner Hall website.
Killed In Action
Thirty-two African American men from Kent County were killed in action serving their country.

Civil War

George Ambrose
James W. Benton
David Briscoe
John E. Brown
James Davis
J. Henry Diggs
Samuel G. Doman
Perry H. Diggs
James Gordon
James Grinage
John Hackett
Josiah Hurt

William Johns
Lewis Johnson
Frederick Munson
Henry Munson
Perry R. Pierce
Eben Posey
Richard Rasin
George H. Stephens
Richard Walley
Tobias Walley
John Ward
James H. Wilkins

World War I
Waymon Parker

World War II
William Haywood Cann
Leroy Theopilus Wilson

Korean War
Leon Donald Hamilton
Isadore O’Conner Moore
William Albert Tilghman

Vietnam War
Raymond Lester Elliott
Virgil Henry Wilson

We thank you for your service.
The Revolutionary War

Approximately 9,000 African Americans served the rebel cause during the American Revolution, while an estimated 20,000 joined the British forces, who promised freedom to enslaved men who enlisted. An estimated 60 free Black men from Maryland served in the Continental Army, including three from Kent County. **Thomas Bowser**, according to testimony given by his only son in 1846 to the Anne Arundel County Court, served as a Private in the Maryland Line during the Revolution. Bowser was listed in the muster of Captain John Hawkins’ Company of the Maryland regiment, engaged to serve three years. **Matthew Oliver** was a “Mulatto” drafted from Kent County on December 10, 1781, but had not reported for service as of that date.

In a pension application filed in 1818 from his home in Hagerstown, Maryland, **David Wilson** noted that in the summer of 1778 he was a young man of 24 living in Chestertown, Maryland. He enlisted that year in the 5th Maryland Regiment, composed of volunteers from the Eastern Shore, and served until the end of the war in 1783. Wilson’s application included testimony from Captain Philip Reed, who affirmed that he had grown up with Wilson in Chestertown, that he was a particularly “orderly and gallant soldier,” and that he had “enlisted himself” into the Army. He served throughout the southern campaign (1778-1781), including the disastrous and bloody American defeat at the Battle of Camden, where he may have incurred the debilitating shoulder wound that prompted his pension application.1

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1 This sketch of Wilson is based upon the research and writing of Washington College student John F. Dodsworth.
The Civil War

For African Americans, both free and enslaved, the Civil War dramatically changed their lives and ultimately became the great watershed of African American history. Initially Lincoln insisted that the North was fighting a war to preserve the Union, but the escalating shortage of troops, and the readiness of Black men to fight for their freedom, soon persuaded the President that he needed to recruit as many Black troops as possible. That recognition of military necessity led to the Emancipation Proclamation, which led inexorably to arming Black men, both free and enslaved. African American soldiers and sailors thus played a decisive role in transforming the war for the Union into a war to end slavery and ensure the freedom of all African American men and women.

On May 22, 1863, the Bureau of Colored Troops was established to “manage all matters relating to the organization of colored troops.” By the end of the war, nearly 180,000 Black men had fought in the Union army and another

![Troops from the 4th Regiment, United States Colored Infantry.](image)

Note: We have tried to include images that have some connection to Kent County, which is not easy since very few Civil War images identify Black individuals by name. In this case, for example, six men from Kent County served in the 4th Regiment.
20,000 served in the Navy, which constituted about 10 percent of all Federal forces. Approximately 40,000 African American troops died in the war, of which about 10,000 were killed in action, while the remainder died of battle wounds or disease.

In addition to the usual horrors of war, African American troops labored under unique burdens. They served in totally segregated units and were commanded almost exclusively by white officers. Often, they were assigned to menial tasks, such as digging trenches, loading and unloading wagons and ships, cleaning latrines, and serving as cooks or servants. Until mid-1864, they were paid less than half the salary of white troops. Despite these handicaps, they fought ably and bravely in such battles as Port Hudson, Fort Pillow, Fort Wagner, the Crater, and Chaffin’s Farm. General Grant believed that emancipation and the recruiting of Black troops constituted “the heaviest blow yet dealt to the Confederacy.”

Maryland contributed 8,718 African American men to the Union Army and Navy. Five hundred and sixty-seven Black men who were born or lived in Kent County fought in the Union Army and another 68 served in the U.S. Navy. (Fifty-three of these 635 men apparently did not live in Kent County until after the war.) According to the 1860 Census, the number of free African Americans in Kent County totaled 3,411, and the number of enslaved was 2,509. Of that population, 1,325 men were aged 18-45 (565 enslaved and 760 free) and therefore eligible for military service. This means that an impressive 44 percent of the eligible Black men in Kent County (582 of 1325) did serve, compared with a 28 percent rate of service throughout the state of Maryland.

African American soldiers from Kent County served in 35 different regiments of the United States Colored Infantry (USCI), but more than half enlisted in three regiments recruited on the Eastern Shore: the 7th USCI (158), the 19th USCI (88) and the 30th USCI (85). Twenty-four soldiers were killed in action or died later of combat wounds, including nine at the Crater and three at the battle of Ft. Gilmer. Fifty-four soldiers were wounded in action but recovered. Almost 100 troops died during the war of a wide variety of diseases – especially pneumonia, cholera, and chronic diarrhea – or unspecified causes. Four prisoners of war died in Confederate prisons.
At least 259 of Kent County’s African American troops were enslaved when they enlisted, which surely required considerable courage. While they could reasonably expect manumission in exchange for military service, there were no guarantees. In addition, they were leaving their families behind to an unknown fate. The owner of a slave who enlisted would receive a bounty of up to $300.00 in exchange for signing a deed of manumission and demonstrating loyalty to the Union. African American soldiers might or might not receive the more modest enlistment bonus of $100.00 given to many white soldiers.

The recruitment of Black soldiers in Kent County enraged the slaveholding

2 The actual number probably was much larger, but I have documented only 259. Most historians believe that at least half of the 200,000 who served in the Union Army and Navy had been enslaved when they enlisted.

3 The Emancipation Proclamation did not free any enslaved men in Kent County because Maryland never joined the Confederacy.
class. *The Kent County News* of September 26, 1863 described the enlistments as kidnappings, which could and should be punished harshly. The paper reported a week later that Union army recruiters had “carried away” from Eastern Neck Island and Chestertown about 400 “negroes, nearly all of them slaves” leaving many farmers “without a single serviceable hand.” Even Black women and boys reportedly tried to enlist. Of the 582 African Americans who eventually enlisted from Kent County, only about 175 returned to Kent County after the war. Over 130 had died during the war, which means that more than half (about 300) of the African Americans from Kent County who fought in the war appear to have exercised their newly won freedom by starting a new life somewhere outside Kent County.

A Deed of Manumission for Sergeant James H. Berryman signed by Ezekial F. Chambers, a United States Senator from 1826-1834.
Three Soldiers

Frederick Nichols embodied the experiences of Kent County’s Black soldiers in various ways. He was born in Kent County in 1844 enslaved to John F. Ringgold. On December 31, 1863, at the age of 19, he struck for his freedom by enlisting in the Union army for three years. “In consideration of said enlistment,” Ringgold’s heirs received compensation of $300.00 once they filed a deed of manumission for Nichols on May 31, 1864 and demonstrated their loyalty to the Union.

Nichols enlisted in Company D of the 19th Regiment of the United States Colored Infantry (USCI). He was one of 88 African Americans from Kent County who served in the 19th, and one of 13 who served in Company D. As a member of the 19th Regiment, he would have served in siege operations against Petersburg and Richmond from June 1864 to April 1865, and would have been among the first troops to enter Richmond. He may even have witnessed Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9.

Nichols was mustered out of the 19th in Brownsville, Texas in January 1867, at which time he received back pay of $87.61 and reimbursed the Army $.43 for lost ordnance. Shortly after returning to Chestertown, he married Sarah (no maiden name found) with whom he reared six children. Nichols moved around and changed jobs more than once. The 1870 Census listed him as a farmer; by 1880 he was working as a fisherman on Water Street, and in 1900 he was a carter, living on Queen Street.

In the last three decades of his life Nichols became an active civic and political leader. He was a leader of Janes Church and one of the African American veterans who in 1882 founded Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) Post #25 that was named after Charles Sumner. At the first Decoration Day ceremony organized by Post #25, Nichols was a featured speaker.
In the 1890s Nichols became an active leader of the Republican Party, often cited in *The Kent County News*. On August 21, 1897, Nichols spoke at a Republican Convention at Stam’s Hall “on behalf of the 1800 colored voters of Kent County,” at a time when the right to vote was being taken away from African Americans throughout the South. Nichols died in August 1906. On August 11, 1906, *The Kent County News* reported on his passing: “Fred. Nichols, one of the best-known colored citizens, of Chestertown, died on Tuesday. He was 62 years of age and was a good citizen, always taking a liberal position for the advancement of his race and took an active interest and was influential in his church and in politics.”

**Private John C. Bailey** was born in 1841 or 1842; in his pension claim, Bailey recalled his mother telling him he was born on Christmas day. Bailey was born in Queen Anne’s County, where he was enslaved. When he enlisted in the 7th USCI, Company C, on September 26, 1863, he earned an enlistment bonus of $100.00 for himself and a bonus of $300.00 for his owner, John R. Hopper. He served as a drummer during the war and was mustered out at Indianola, Texas, on October 13, 1866. On November 23, 1867, he was married to Jane Johnson by Rev. H. C. Cushing in Centreville.

On February 5, 1877, Bailey re-enlisted in the Army as a private in the 10th United States Cavalry, Company C, the first of six all-Black Army units later celebrated as the Buffalo Soldiers. He served initially under Captain J.B. Van de Wiele. One of his commanding officers was Lt. Henry Flipper, the first Black graduate of the United States Military Academy. Bailey spent most of his time with the 10th Cavalry in Texas fighting the Apache Indians, particularly in the Victorio War of 1879-1880. According to the 1880 Census, he was stationed at Ft. Davis, Texas, where he mustered out in February 1882. Later that year, he became one of the African American veterans of the Civil War to found G.A.R. Post #25, Sumner Hall.

**Private Perry Wallace** was born in Kent County in 1842, enslaved for life to Elizabeth Wilson. Like Bailey, he enlisted for three years on September 26, 1863 in the 7th USCI, Company D. Wallace performed heroically at the attack on Ft. Gilmer near Richmond on September 29, 1864, as described by Lt. Robert M. Spinney:

Capt. Weiss attempted to gain the inside of the fort, but all his storming party were knocked back either killed or wounded into
the ditch. The enemy [were] calling upon us to surrender, which was answered by some of the men in the words “We will show you how to surrender,” at the same time rising and firing into them. One of these men I remember to have been Perry Wallace, Company D.⁴

Wallace was reported missing in action and believed dead, but rejoined his unit on March 6, 1865. Having barely escaped death in combat, he died of epidemic cholera in Indianola, Texas, on September 24, 1866.


A drummer boy in the celebrated 54th Regiment of the United States Colored Infantry featured in the movie “Glory.” Oscar Crozier, one of Sumner Hall’s founders, had been a drummer boy in the 54th Regiment, Co. B.
The Battle of the Crater

The Battle of the Crater on July 30, 1864 involved a bold effort by the Union army to break the siege of Petersburg that would allow General Grant’s troops to march on Richmond and end the war. The battle plan called for a massive explosion of gunpowder beneath Confederate lines that would enable Union troops to quickly capture or bypass the dazed Rebels who had been blocking their path to Richmond. Black troops were trained to lead the assault after the explosion, but at the last minute untrained white troops were put into the lead instead.

The result was a disaster since the white troops marched into the Crater rather than around it, creating what the Confederate general called a “turkey shoot.” Eventually the Black troops were sent to the rescue, but it was too late. The Union army suffered 3,800 casualties, including 504 killed, 1,881 wounded, and the remainder missing in action. General Grant called it the greatest missed opportunity of the war, which “would have been a success” if the Black troops had been put in front.
More than 130 Kent County African American soldiers fought at the Crater. The 30th USCI, which had been scheduled to lead the assault, included about 85 Kent County soldiers, at least 60 of whom fought on July 30. Fifty-four Kent County troops from the 19th Regiment also fought at the Crater. Nine Kent County men were killed that day or died later of wounds suffered at the Crater: Private George Ambrose, Private John E. Brown, Private James Gordon, Private William Johns, Private Henry Diggs, Private Perry Gibbs, Private James W. Benton, Corporal Perry Pierce, and Private John Ward. Twenty-four soldiers were wounded in action, and another three were listed as missing in action.

In 1867, the widow of George Ambrose of the 30th USCI, Co. A, filed a claim for a widow’s pension. In support of her claim, a comrade of Ambrose submitted a letter describing how Ambrose, originally listed as Missing in Action, actually died in action at the Battle of the Crater.
Union veterans founded the G.A.R. as a social and fraternal organization on April 6, 1866. With a national membership of more than 400,000, it became a very effective advocate for pensions and other causes important to veterans. African American veterans formed G.A.R. Post #25 in Kent County in 1882, which they named after Charles Sumner, the fiery abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts. At its height, Sumner Hall had 28 members plus the first Women’s Relief Corps in Maryland, which provided support for the ill and bereaved.

Sumner Hall’s most visible activity was celebrating Decoration Day each May 30th. As the only G.A.R. post in Chestertown the members decorated the graves of both Black and white casualties of the war. A parade led by veterans and including musicians, decorated wagons, and friends would travel first to the principal Black and white cemeteries (Janes and Chester), then through town to fire a musket salute over the Chester River. The festivities ended with a large picnic on a farm across the bridge.

The G.A.R. building on Queen Street was built around 1908 and served as a community center for African Americans for nearly 60 years, even though the last member died in 1928. After falling into disrepair, Sumner Hall was saved from planned demolition and beautifully restored by a broad coalition of citizens and organizations. It reopened in 2014 as one of only two African American G.A.R. posts in the country still operating. Today Sumner Hall sponsors a wide variety of programs and initiatives to honor all Black veterans, promote an understanding of the African American experience, and advocate for social justice and racial equity.

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5 White Union soldiers in Chestertown formed G.A.R. Post #17, but it apparently disbanded shortly after its founding.
Hiram Clarkson
of Georgetown, Army, World War I

Private James Earl Lomax
of Big Woods, Army, World War II

James Oscar Wilson,
Army Air Force, World War II

Clyde Dorsey Freeman
of Worton, Army, 1946-1947

Randolph (Jazz) Johnson
of Chestertown, Army, World War II

William Elwood Ringgold
of Big Woods, Army, Korea
Ralph Deaton of Church Hill, Army, 1959-1962

Chief Petty Officer Clarence Lycurgus Sisco of Rock Hall, Navy, World War II, Korea, Vietnam

Master Sergeant Barbara Johnson of Chestertown, Army, 1973-1995

Christine Hynson Williams of Worton, Army, 1977-1997

Sergeant William Thomas Scott, Jr., of Rock Hall, 1977-1996

Gregory Rochester of Georgetown, Marine Corps, 1979-1999
World War I

The United States entered the brutal conflict in Europe, which had already claimed millions of lives, in April 1917 under the banner of making “the world safe for democracy.” Black Americans recognized the hypocrisy of that slogan given the lack of democracy for African Americans, but enlisted in large numbers. At a time when African Americans constituted 10 percent of the U.S. population, the 380,000 African American inductees made up 13 percent of the total number of troops.

Those who served faced familiar forms of discrimination. They were confined overwhelmingly to segregated Army units, commanded almost exclusively by white officers. Ten thousand served in the Navy, but none were allowed to serve in the Marine Corps or the Air Corps. Nearly 90 percent were assigned to labor, supply, and service units; only 11 percent would see combat.

At least 230 African American men from Kent County served in the Army during the Great War, and at least two served in the Navy. More than three-fifths, or 143, served with the American Expeditionary Force in France. Forty-nine men from Kent County served in the 154th Brigade, which

New arrivals at Camp Meade, Maryland. Camp Meade is where most Black recruits from Kent County were inducted.
trained and equipped recruits on their way to France. Another 41 served in the 351st Field Artillery, the first African American artillery regiment in American history. Forty-three served in one of the Pioneer Infantry regiments that were formed to serve as road maintenance units.

Twenty-three Black men from Kent County served in combat units, including 11 who served in the 371st Infantry Regiment, which received the French Legion of Honor and Croix de Guerre for heroism in combat. One of their bloodiest campaigns, in the Champagne region from September 28 to October 6, 1918, resulted in the loss of 1,025 men out of 2,384 who fought. One of the casualties was Waymon Parker of Chestertown, the only African American from Kent County killed in action during the war. The Black American Legion members in Kent County later named the Parker White post partly in Parker’s memory.
World War II

As America embarked upon war in Europe and the Pacific in December 1941, the American military remained rigidly segregated. African Americans were allowed to serve only in the Army and the Navy, and the Army had only five Black officers, three of whom were chaplains. The escalating demands for manpower led to some changes. The Marines began to accept Black recruits, the Army Air Corps organized segregated units such as the Tuskegee Airmen, and 7,000 Black officers had been commissioned by the end of the war. But segregation and discriminatory treatment prevailed throughout the war.

Despite their extra burdens, over one million Black troops enlisted, including 125,000 who served overseas. Three-fourths went into service and supply units. Many of their assigned duties were menial, but they also performed essential and often dangerous tasks such as building bridges and airfields and loading and unloading ships. As casualties mounted, increasing numbers of African Americans were pushed into combat roles.

Almost 350 African Americans from Kent County enlisted, or about 28 percent of the county’s total, including 22 who joined the Navy and six in the Army Air Corps. Two men were killed in action, both while serving in the Italian campaign. Leroy Theopilus Wilson of Millington, who served with the 371st Infantry, Company B, died December 14, 1944, and was buried at Fountain Cemetery in Big Woods. William Haywood Cann of Chestertown served over three years with the 588th Field Artillery Battalion, 92nd Infantry Division. He was killed on October 17, 1944, and buried.
in the American Cemetery in Florence, Italy. A third soldier, **Leroy Eliston Wilson** of Coleman, died “in the line of duty” of anemia on May 13, 1945, after serving 2 ½ years in the Quartermaster Corps. He was buried at Union United Methodist cemetery.

*The Kent County News* hailed **Arthur E. Brown** of Golts as “one of the heroes” of World War II for his contributions to the “miraculous survival” of his ship, the aircraft carrier USS Franklin. On March 19, 1945, a Japanese dive bomber dropped two 500-pound bombs on the deck of the Franklin. The resulting fires and explosions killed 341 men, wounded 300, and left 431 missing. The Japanese reported sinking the ship, but Brown and the other survivors outfought the fires, patched up the damage, and brought their ship safely home to New York. **Edwin Hackett Wilson** of Still Pond saw action in North Africa, southern France and the Philippines during World War II. He earned three Bronze Stars, which are awarded for heroic or meritorious service in combat.

*The USS Franklin afire and listing after a Japanese bombing attack in March 1945.*
Post-World War II

The role of African Americans in the military changed dramatically following President Truman’s issuance on July 26, 1948 of Executive Order 9981, which integrated the military and mandated equality of treatment. Full integration proceeded slowly, however, and racism and discrimination within the ranks remain a reality. Nevertheless, the military today is the most integrated institution in America, which offers African American men and women genuine opportunities to broaden their horizons, acquire useful skills, and pursue a career relatively free of discrimination.

African Americans, including hundreds from Kent County, have seized those opportunities in ever greater numbers and made notable achievements in all aspects of military life. Today, when African Americans make up a little more than 13 percent of the nation’s population, they constitute 21 percent of all Army troops, 17 percent of the Navy, 15 percent of the Air Force, and 10 percent of the Marine Corps. More than 13 percent of all commissioned officers are now African Americans. Greater integration also means, of course, greater participation in combat and more casualties. More than 460 African Americans from Kent County served in all branches of the military following World War II.

Dozens of those who served received medals recognizing their sacrifice and bravery. The medal winners mentioned here are emblematic of many others. Samuel Tiller of Big Woods served in the Army for over 20 years after joining in 1946. Sergeant Tiller earned a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart while serving as an adviser to the
Army of the Republic of Vietnam. “Tiller exposed himself to hostile fire as he made several trips across an open field carrying the wounded” to safety. James Smith, who received two citations for his service in Vietnam, reported upon his return home that “he didn’t like Vietnam, didn’t like the war and was glad to be home.”

The Cold War. Even when not engaged in a shooting war, the United States maintained a large military establishment to wage the Cold War against the Soviet Union, which lasted from 1947 to 1991. At least 275 Black men and women from Kent County served during the Cold War. Rellie Ringgold was one of thirty-two African American women from Kent County who served in the military after World War II. One of Kent County’s most successful African American politicians, William Pickrum, honed his leadership skills during his 22-year career as an officer in the Coast Guard.

Korea. About 600,000 African Americans served in the Korean War, including 5,000 who were killed in action. Over 90 African Americans from Kent County served during the Korean War, including Leon Donald Hamilton, the county’s first casualty of the war. Hamilton served in the 24th Infantry, one of the Army’s oldest Black regiments, which were still segregated. Sergeant William A. Tilghman was seriously wounded in an

6 The quotations in this paragraph come from the award citations as reported in The Kent County News.
artillery attack in North Korea and died weeks later on January 14, 1951. Isadore O’Connor Moore of Georgetown was killed in action on April 12, 1951.

Corporal Marion V. Cann was seriously wounded in North Korea by a missile attack. Weldon Lively’s service in Korea was in keeping with a family tradition. His brothers Charles Edward Lively and George Abraham Hynson, Sr. served in World War II. Brothers Anthony Lively and Robert Wayne Lively and nephew George Hynson, Jr. served in Vietnam.

Vietnam. The Vietnam War saw the highest proportion of African Americans ever to serve in an American war until that time – 13 percent of all troops at the height of U.S. involvement from 1965-69 – and for the first time they served in fully integrated units. They also suffered 15 percent of all combat fatalities.

Kent County sent almost 100 African American men and women into service during that war, including two men killed in action and one man seriously injured. Private First Class Virgil Henry Wilson, Jr. of Golts, the son and grandson of veterans, was killed in action on October 11, 1968, in Quang Tri province. He received nine service commendations, and is buried in Lee Chapel cemetery. Specialist 4th Class Raymond Lester Elliott of Chestertown, a tactical wire operations specialist, was reported missing in action and declared dead on January 15, 1967.

William (“Billy”) Demby, who was born in nearby Queen Anne’s County and well-known in Kent County, lost both legs below the knee as the result of a 1971 rocket explosion in Vietnam. After his recovery, he set numerous national records for disabled athletes competing in track and field events, played basketball, ran marathons, and talked to students about living with disabilities. He won a national award in 1990 as the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

Cornelius Christy of Golts received the Silver Star, the military’s third highest medal for heroism in combat. He was cited for “extremely valorous actions”
when his camp in Vietnam came under attack. “He refused to leave his exposed position . . . and inflicted heavy casualties on the determined enemy.” Even after he was wounded “he carried wounded comrades from a flaming vehicle and treated them, refusing aid for himself.” Cornelius’s father, Elzie Christy, Jr., served in World War II, and his two sisters also served during the Vietnam War. Sandra Christy served in the Navy and Geneva Christy served in the Air Force.

Post-Vietnam. The advent of the all-volunteer force following Vietnam resulted in even higher proportions of African Americans in the military and their elevation into the top ranks. General Colin Powell became the first African American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989 and commanded all American
forces in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, in which 24 percent of the troops sent to the Middle East were Black. African American women played an important role in breaking down gender barriers in the armed forces; by 1983 women were 20 percent of the total military force.

African American men and women from Kent County have participated in all the recent assignments of the American military. Marchaund Tiller served in the Persian Gulf War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as Panama and Haiti as a Master Sergeant in the Air Force. First Sergeant Danielle Brooks served in the Iraq War as part of her ongoing career in the Army. Jackie Johnson had a varied and impressive career in the Army. He spent 17 years at the White House as a telecommunications and audiovisual specialist working for and with Presidents Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. He also served in the First Gulf War and Afghanistan, where he earned a Bronze Star.
Several Kent County families contributed more than one son or daughter to the military, but the Hamilton family went above and beyond. The household of James and Claudia Hamilton at 102 Prospect Street included seven sons in 1940. All seven brothers served in the military, all in the Army except Calvin who served in the Navy. Four brothers served in World War II: Howard Adam, James Earl, Clarence, and Calvin Milton. The three youngest served in Korea: Luther Rudolph, Leon Donald, and Melvin Jerome. Leon Hamilton was killed in action in North Korea.

Larry Wilson, currently the president of Sumner Hall, had a 20-year career in the Navy, rising to the rank of Chief Petty Officer. He saw duty during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. During Operation Restore Hope in Mogadishu, Somalia, he saw some
terrible things. “It’s hard to fathom why somebody would do that to kids. I let my kids know when I came back, we’ve got problems in the States, but thank God you were born in America.”

Larry holds the record, which may never be broken, for the largest number of close relatives who served in the military. His father, Leo Hackett, served in the Army in Korea and his son, Joaquin Wilson served in the Air Force during the Persian Gulf war. Paternal uncles Clarence, Walter, and Willis Hackett served in the Army during World War II. Maternal uncles William, Perry, and Oscar Wilson served in the Army during World War II; Raymond and Walter Wilson served in the Army during the Korean War; and Philip Wilson served in Vietnam during a 26-year career in the Air Force. Cousins Charles and Louis Wilson served in the Army during World War II, and cousin Louis Wilson, Jr., served in the Army in Vietnam. Quite a record of service!

Military service is a tradition in the Black family of Fairlee. Daniel Black, Sr., served in the Army during World War II and later became a leader of Parker White Post No. 143. His brother Morris Wesley Black enlisted in the Army before Pearl Harbor on May 9, 1941, and served until September 1945, and his nephew Harrison Miffelin Black also served in the Army during World War II. Master Sergeant Daniel Black, Jr., served in the Air Force from 1964 to 1985 as a technician working on fighter jets. He had tours of duty in Vietnam, Thailand, Korea (twice), Germany, Okinawa, and the Philippines. His brother Achibald Black served 21 years in the Air Force, brother Keith Black served 13 years in the Army, brother William Asbury Black served in the National Guard, nephew Dale Cooper served 20 years in the Air Force, and nephew Marcellus Black served in the Navy.
Conclusion

The African American community of Kent County has contributed far more than its fair share to the military requirements of a nation that has rarely acknowledged those contributions. During the Civil War, more than 44 percent of all eligible Black men in Kent County, both free and enslaved, fought to emancipate themselves, their families, and their brethren, and to preserve the Union. African Americans of Kent County enlisted in significant numbers to fight in every major war of the 20th century, despite discriminatory treatment while in service and after they returned home. Since full integration of the armed forces, opportunities for advancement and education have increased the appeal of a career in the military. Many recent Kent County men and women in the service speak very highly of their experience. This booklet is a modest effort to say “Thank you for your service.”
Acknowledgments

This booklet is one of the products of Sumner Hall’s collaboration with Washington College’s Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience to contribute to “Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project.” Our effort to document as many Kent County African American veterans as possible is partially funded by this collaboration, and we very much appreciate the support of the Starr Center. In doing this work, we had the good fortune to start with the prodigious 2017 work of scholarship by George R. Shivers entitled A Study of African American Soldiers from Kent County, Maryland in the American Civil War, which documented nearly 500 African American veterans. Gordon Wallace continued the work by identifying several hundred veterans from World War II to the present and constructing a database to document what became nearly 1,700 veterans. Charley Leary discovered hundreds more – particularly from the Civil War, World War I, and World War II – completed the database, and helped with all aspects of producing this booklet. Francoise Sullivan designed it with her customary efficiency and creativity. Last, but not least, we thank veterans Daniel Black, Jr., Danielle Brooks, Dorothea Briscoe, Emerson Cotton, Ralph Deaton, Kenneth Fenner, George Hynson, Barbara Johnson, Jackie Johnson, Avon Jones, Don Redman, Maureen Sampson, Melvin Shorter, Marchaund Tiller, Christine Hynson Williams, and Larry Wilson, as well as Carolyn Brooks, Jana Carter, Marjorie Chappel, Mary Fisher, Mary Grinnell, Airlee Ringgold Johnson, Joan Phillips, Vanessa Ringgold, Cheryl Saunders, Tina Sparks, and The Kent County News for sharing information, artifacts, and pictures.

Bill Leary, July 2022

Kenneth Fenner of Chestertown, Marine Corps, 1986-1992, including 1st Gulf War

Barry Sparks of Chestertown, Air Force, 1983-1993, including 1st Gulf War

Sergeant Danielle Brooks of Coleman, 2001-present, including Iraq War

Front cover: Private John Thomas Pierce of Georgetown served in the 368th Infantry Regiment during World War I. He is pictured here with his wife Ida Blake Pierce.

To learn more about the Historical Society of Kent County, Inc., 301 High Street, Chestertown, MD 21620, email director@kentcountyhistory.org, call (410) 778-3499, or visit http://www.kentcountyhistory.org

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