

BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE BICENTENNIAL



How many blacks served in Oliver Perry's fleet?

Genealogist Tony Burroughs, a black man who lives in Chicago, always suspected there was a good reason he had an ancestor named Oliver Hazard Perry Smothers.

TOM JACKSON PORT CLINTON SEP 23, 2013



Last year, Burroughs finally uncovered the document he needed to prove one of his ancestors fought with Commodore Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie.

Charles Smothers fought aboard the Niagara, one of Perry's flagships.

Burroughs said he'd like to use the tools of genealogy to identify other blacks who fought with Perry. It's the first project for his "Hidden Heroes" effort to identify blacks who made contributions to American history.

[See full coverage of the Battle of Lake Erie Bicentennial HERE](#)

In turn, "Hidden Heroes" is organized by the Center for Black Genealogy, which Burroughs founded. It's long been known that blacks fought for Oliver Hazard Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie, said Lou Schultz, an Ohio expert on the War of 1812. The U.S. Army was racist and did not admit blacks, but a considerable number of blacks fought for the U.S. Navy, including on Lake Erie.

Some of the black seamen who fought with Perry later worked in merchant shipping on the Great Lakes and helped slaves escaping the South on the Underground Railroad make their way across the lake to Canada, Schultz said.

The best guess is that up to 15 percent of Perry's men were black, but the exact number and many of the names are unknown, Schultz said.

Burroughs hopes to identify more of the blacks who fought for Perry, using some of the same tools he used to find his War of 1812 ancestor.

He had long known he was descended from Oliver Hazard Perry Smothers, a black who fought for the Union Army in the Civil War. And he strongly suspected that Oliver Hazard Perry Smothers' father was Charles Smothers, who served with Perry on the Niagara.

Last year, Burroughs finally found tax records in Pennsylvania that proved the relationship between the two men. He used the information to join the General Society of the War of 1812, which consists of descendants of soldiers and sailors who fought in the war. Burroughs is the first black member to join after providing evidence he's descended from a black who fought for Perry.

Burroughs got an early taste of genealogy when he was a college student at Southern Illinois University and prominent black author Alex Haley was booked to speak. In those days, Haley was best known for "The Autobiography Malcolm X."

Haley talked enthusiastically about tracing his roots back to Africa, a research effort that became Haley's "Roots," his best-known book, Burroughs said.

Burroughs said blacks trying to research their ancestors face hurdles that other genealogy buffs don't have to deal with. For certain periods in the South, records are segregated.

"They have black marriage records, they have white marriage records," he said.

Blacks often assume their ancestors were slaves. Before the Civil War, however, about 500,000 U.S. blacks were free. Tracing their records is similar to tracing the records of white people, Burroughs said.

But plantation records for slaves have scanty information. Typically, slaves were only known by their first names, and a plantation that lists three people named "Bob" is a challenge for researchers, Burroughs said.

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