

"I DRILLED THEM WITH CORNSTALKS:" WILLIAM H. SINGLETON, A BLACK SOLDIER'S STORY

TEACHER TOOL 1: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM HENRY SINGLETON

William Henry Singleton was born enslaved ca. 1843 near New Bern, North Carolina.¹ The son of Lettice, a slave woman, and a white man, William G. Singleton, who worked as a clerk in New Bern, William Henry Singleton was an agricultural worker who resisted slavery in several ways. He was sold at the age of four and taken to a farm near Atlanta, Georgia, perhaps because of friction between his master, John H. Nelson, an affluent planter, and Nelson's brother. At the age of six or seven, after being whipped repeatedly, Singleton decided to run away and return to his family in North Carolina. In his narrative, Singleton describes how he posed as the slave of a white woman, who allowed him to accompany her on a journey by stagecoach from Atlanta to Wilmington, North Carolina, a distance of over four hundred miles. Though only a child, with the aid of black adults, he made his way from Wilmington to the Singleton plantation, 100 miles away. Reunited with his mother, who hid him in a cellar to keep her master from finding him, Singleton learned to hide from patrollers as well as other whites. Although harshly punished for rebellious behavior, he was not deterred from his goal of becoming free. Singleton's narrative provides insight into the ways that slaves resisted their condition and shows how fugitive slaves relied on blacks and sometimes whites to escape from their bondage.

In 1861 Singleton went to war as the servant to a young Confederate officer. A year later, when Federal troops were close enough, Singleton ran away to join the Union cause. Although Singleton was eager to serve in the Union army, an officer informed him that he could never be a full soldier because of his color. Singleton left the army camp with money he had earned there and decided to take matters into his own hands. He notes in his narrative, "I took that five dollars and hired the A. M. E. Zion church at Newbern and commenced to recruit a regiment of colored men. I secured the thousand men and they appointed me as their colonel and I drilled them with cornstalks for guns. We had no way, of course, of getting guns and equipment."

While encamped with General Ambrose E. Burnside after he and his troops had captured New Bern in the spring of 1862, Singleton met President Abraham Lincoln. The President declined Singleton's offer of one thousand local black soldiers ready to fight, but expressed

¹ Katherine Mellon Charron and David S. Cecelski, in their scholarly edition of William Henry Singleton's narrative, make a persuasive argument that Singleton himself was misinformed of his own birth year and parentage. As such, the information about Singleton's birth year and parentage in this Teacher Tool reflect those identified by Charron and Cecelski and are in conflict with those recounted in Singleton's narrative.

optimism for their future involvement in the war. Later, when Lincoln allowed black troops to serve the Northern cause, Singleton enlisted as a sergeant in the First North Carolina Colored Volunteers, serving honorably until 1866. After the Civil War, Singleton moved to the North and became active in the A. M. E. Church and veterans' organizations.

William Henry Singleton was compelled by the conditions of his enslavement to resist. He fought, in many different ways, against the institution of slavery from the time he was a small child, and was ultimately victorious. In addition to running away and fighting in the Union army, Singleton also resisted slavery by pretending to be ignorant and hiding. Singleton's detailed descriptions of his experiences highlight the techniques used by enslaved people to resist.

REFERENCES

Singleton, William Henry. *Recollections of My Slavery Days*. Introduction and Annotation by Katherine Mellen Charron and David S. Cecelski. Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, 1999.

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