

PRIVATE ALFRED GALES

From Slavery to Freedom

FEW PERIODS of American history are more researched, discussed, argued, re-fought, or romanticized than the American Civil War. Most high-school students and many ardent citizens can name the “great” generals and “great” battles. Yet history is found not only in the biographies of generals and descriptions of battles but also in the lives and stories of the individual soldiers who served in the conflict.

The story of how Alfred Gales, a runaway slave from Jackson Township, Monroe County, Arkansas, became Albert Miller of St. Paul, Minnesota, offers one individual’s account of the causes and results of the American Civil War. It is the story of a man who fled servitude, joined the army fighting for his freedom, and emigrated to a new home in a different world where he could live and work as a free man in a free society.

Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Entering Little Rock, an oil painting by Stanley Arthurs that hangs in the Minnesota state capitol building, St. Paul







Madison and Lizzie Bowler on their wedding day, November 30, 1862

THE THIRD MINNESOTA Volunteer Infantry Regiment was organized in November 1861. During the 1863 siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi, the regiment served in the area of Snyder’s Bluff along the Yazoo River, guarding the Union Army’s lines of communication. On Independence Day 1863, Confederate General John Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg to Union General Ulysses S. Grant.¹

The Third Minnesota then moved by steamboat to Helena, Arkansas, where it was under the command of Major General Frederick Steele in the campaign to

“expel the Confederate forces from Arkansas and permanently occupy the state.” The Confederates, commanded by General Sterling Price, had fallen back to the area of Little Rock. In the intense heat of an Arkansas August, Steele’s army began marching and fighting its way from Helena, on the Mississippi, to Little Rock. The Third Regiment left Helena on August 13 and arrived at Clarendon, a distance of approximately 60 miles, on the afternoon of August 17. There it remained for a week. To augment and diversify the soldiers’ diet of hardtack and salt pork, the Third regularly dispatched foraging parties to gather edibles such as wagonloads of “ears of green corn.”

One of the company commanders of the Third Minnesota was James Madison Bowler. Born in 1838 in Lee, Maine, Bowler had moved to Minnesota in 1858, teaching school in Nininger, near Hastings. There, he met and fell in love with Elizabeth Caleff.

Doug Larson, who is researching the Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment, would appreciate hearing from anyone who wishes to share information about the regiment and its soldiers. He may be contacted at douglarson1@juno.com.

On September 27, 1861, he enlisted in the Third Minnesota for a three-year term and was mustered into Company F as a corporal. On October 18, 1862, he was promoted to second lieutenant, and on December 1, to captain of Company F. While on furlough in Minnesota he married Caleff on November 30, 1862.²

Bowler was a prolific correspondent, writing at least one letter per week to his “Dear Lizzie” or “Dear Libby.” When he did not receive regular letters from her, he did not hesitate to complain. He told her the events of his life, giving her—and us—considerable insight into his experiences in the army.

In an August 22, 1863, letter to his “Dear Libby,” Bowler described an encounter with a runaway slave near Lawrenceville, Arkansas. Bowler was in command of a foraging party of 160 men with 25 teams and wagons that had left Clarendon at 3 A.M. and arrived at Lawrenceville five and one-half hours later. Bowler wrote that “two miles further on was the plantation of one Redman [*Redmon*], where I could get plenty of corn, poultry, etc., so we pushed on until we arrived there.”³

After “a short time to empty his corn cribs and depopulate his poultry yard,” Bowler took “five good men and a contraband guide, all mounted on good horses” and struck out to see what he “could find in the country beyond.” Bowler said that his guide “knew the country to perfection, having lived there and run away on his ‘Missus’ horse only a few days before; so we followed bye-paths and visited everybody in the neighborhood.”

Union General Benjamin F. Butler had been the first to call fugitive slaves “contraband.” While Butler was stationed in Hampton Roads, Virginia, in 1861, three fugitive slaves entered his lines. Butler ignored the owner’s demands to return his “property” under the Fugitive Slave Law. According to historian Louis Gerteis, “Butler argued that since the Rebels were using slaves to erect military fortifications in support of the Rebellion, the slave property in his possession was ‘contraband’ liable to confiscation by the laws of war.”⁴ With that, the term entered the military lexicon.

THE AREA AROUND LAWRENCEVILLE had not previously seen federal soldiers. Bowler wrote home that he and his men made “quite a sensation. . . . The ladies flew about almost frantically and what few men were left took their arms and horses and hid from us.” The

country through which Bowler and his party rode was “full of fruit,” and they regularly “started up deer, wild turkeys, quails, etc.”⁵

Bowler and his soldiers expected to find the countryside full of guerrillas, so at likely places they “put on bold faces and dashed forward.” After riding through the area and chasing one guerrilla, Bowler and his foraging party arrived at the “house of one Tom Winston who is in the rebel army.” Mrs. Winston received the party “politely,” invited them to “take some peaches,” and “set the servants to get dinner.” Bowler wrote, “After an hours rest, a pleasant chat and a good dinner (which we paid for) we started for Lawrenceville.

“On the way we stopped at ‘Contraband’s’ home. The ‘Contraband,’ one of the most intelligent I ever saw, got out the Banjo and gave us a tune and a song. His ‘Missus’ affectionately reproved him for running away and asked him to leave the horse he had stolen a few days ago. He told her that he rudder run away dan hab her run him off to Texas, and as for stealing the horse ‘You know, Missus, I had to get away de best way I could, and when you pay me de money I len you den I gib you de hoss.” (The term “run off to Texas” referred to the practice of slaveholders removing their slaves to Texas as a temporary refuge, where the Union Army was not omnipresent.)

The runaway slave not only guided Bowler’s foraging party through the Lawrenceville area but also returned with them to camp. Although Bowler did not identify “Contraband” by name, a variety of other sources lead us to believe that he was a man named Alfred Gales. Minnesota adjutant-general records show that Alfred Gales, 5-feet 10-inches tall with “Black eyes, Black hair, Dark complexion,” enlisted in the Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry in mid-August 1863 and was mustered into federal service as an “under cook of African Decent” [*sic*] on November 6 at Little Rock. He was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, but at the time of his enlistment resided in Clarendon, Arkansas. While these records list his age as 21 or 25, other documents suggest that he may have been as old as 37. He served in Company B and was discharged at Devall’s Bluff, Arkansas, at the close of the war.⁶ This information, combined with the date that Bowler reported meeting the “Contraband,” makes it more than likely that Gales was the man who guided the foraging party.

This theory is further supported by the fact that in 1864, when Bowler was in Little Rock raising a regiment

Books of African De[cent] of Company B, 3rd Regiment Minn. Vol. Troops Commanded by
 [Name] into the Service of the United States by the President (Number out of Company) from the [Date]
 (Musters) for the term of three years or more unless sooner discharged.

Enlisted for duty and enrolled				Transferring		Remarks
W. Coast	Arkansas - Enrolled	Africa				
4	1					Under Cooks of African De[cent]
2	1					Under Cooks of African De[cent]

Must. Roll exhibits the
 of African De[cent] of Company
 Vol. Troops for the period herein
 remarks set opposite the
 Book are accurate and just
 signed B. Cost Capt
 34th Regt Minn. Vol.
 Comd'g Co. B

I certify the Comd that I have carefully examined
 the Under Cooks of African De[cent] of Company B, 3rd
 Regt Minn. Vol. Troops whose names are borne on
 this Roll and have accepted them into the Service of
 the United States for the term of three years or more
 from the 6th day of Nov. 1863 to date here enclosed
 Francis H. Willard
 1st Lieut 3rd U.S. Regt.
 At St. Louis Mo 3rd Dec 1863

Date: Nov. 6th 1863
 Station: Little Rock Ark

Alfred Gales's enlistment paper and his muster-in record in the roll of "under cooks of African De[s]cent," Company B, Third Regiment Minnesota Volunteers. Though some of their data is contradictory (showing Gales as either 21 or 25 years old in 1863), records such as these from the Minnesota Adjutant General's papers provide valuable information about people who left scant written traces of their lives.

details. “One morning . . . an officer [of the Third Regiment] met a colored soldier with a musket on his shoulder, running after a freedman, and asked: ‘What are you chasing that fellow for?’ ‘I want him for to volunteer!’”⁸

WHEN PRIVATE GALES was mustered out of the army on September 2, 1865, he returned with his regiment to Minnesota. The man known to Bowler as Alfred Gales, “Contraband,” and “Uncle Alfred” began his new life in the state of Minnesota as Albert Miller. Gales rejected his past by forsaking his slave name and adopting a new one by which he desired henceforth to be known. According to an affidavit sworn by his long-time friend George W. Perkins after Gales’s death,

“The name of Alfred Gales was that of his former master, [Gales] being a slave just before the war and he was known during the time of his service as Alfred Gales, and that after the war was over [he] assumed the name of his father which was Miller and was known by and called Albert Miller but that Alfred Gales and Albert Miller were one and the same persons.” The St. Paul city directory for 1866 lists a Miller with no first name as a laborer living at the corner of Twelfth and Robert Streets.⁹

On January 26, 1870, Albert Miller obtained a license to marry Narcissa Washington. She did not know the exact date of her birth because she “was born in slavery and the white people where I was born have all since died”; however, she thought that she had been

The Third Minnesota posed in front of the Arkansas capitol, Little Rock, during a dress parade. This is the earliest known photo of the building, now restored as a museum.



born in December 1852 in Georgetown, Scott County, Kentucky. She knew that the name of her father was John Singleton, and she could give the first names of her mother and her siblings but did not know where any of her family were. She had left Kentucky in 1869 for St. Paul, where she worked as a cook. Narcissa would have been approximately 18 years old when she married Albert Miller.¹⁰

The couple married in the all-black Pilgrim Baptist Church on January 30, 1870. Witnesses to the ceremony, led by Andrew M. Torbet, were George Chambers and Robert Hickman. It is interesting to note that Torbet, a white man, had been sent to St. Paul in 1868 by Baptist leaders when the Pilgrim congregation, lacking an ordained minister, requested mission status from First Baptist Church of St. Paul. Hickman, cofounder of the congregation and himself an escaped slave, became pastor in 1878, ending the white ministry.¹¹ Perhaps Miller affiliated with this church because he, like Hickman and other members, saw himself as a pilgrim traveling from a life of enslavement to a life of freedom and self-direction.

No records documenting Miller's active involvement in the church survive, and it may be too great a leap to assume that he was intimately involved in it. Yet, according to St. Paul city directories, both Miller and Hickman were whitewashers, and Hickman witnessed Miller's marriage. Perhaps their faith and their histories closely bound these two men.¹²

SOURCES TO DOCUMENT the life of a humble laborer are few, but it is possible to sketch a picture of Miller's life in St. Paul. According to the city directory for 1873, Miller, still a laborer, had moved to Eighth Street between Minnesota and Robert. His household included two males and one female. The second male must have been the couple's son Charles H. Miller, born on April 21, 1872. According to Charles Miller's news-



Robert Hickman, cofounder and later minister at Pilgrim Baptist Church

paper obituary, Narcissa and Albert later had a daughter as well, named Birdie.¹³

Sometime between 1873 and 1876 Albert Miller and his family moved to 71 West Fourth Street, still in St. Paul. Directories for 1876 through 1883 list his occupation as a whitewasher, a job that entailed applying a liquid lime solution to wood or plaster surfaces. This unskilled occupation was unpleasant and hazardous due to the dust and toxic effects of the lime. By 1890, directories show that Miller had moved his family to the rear of 148 Thirteenth Street and had become a janitor.

In June 1890, the census taker working the downtown St. Paul area for the "Special Schedule—Surviving Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, and Widows, Etc." interviewed a man at this address who had served as a private in Company B of the Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. The census taker noted that the individual's name was Alfred Gales, that he was "Black," and, furthermore, that he had "enlisted by the slave name of Gales, but right name is Miller." Finally, the census enumerator recorded "none" in the column for "Disability Incurred" while serving in the military.¹⁴

While he did not inform the census taker in June of any health problems or illnesses or claim any service-related wounds, on November 14, 1890, an Alfred Gales of St. Paul filed a military pension claim (number 964-739) stating that he suffered from "rheumatism, partial loss of sight and old age." Processing the claim took nearly two years.¹⁵

In pursuit of his claim, Albert Miller was examined by a physician on August 12, 1891. The doctor described him as being 66 years of age, 5-feet 6-inches tall, and 152 pounds. He had black skin, white hair, and good flesh with spare fat. His teeth and gums were good, and he had no atrophy or deformity. His heart was normal. His eyes had a congenital infection, but his pupils were equal, small, and responsive. He had "a pear-shaped enlargement the size of a pea, probably a

paper obituary, Narcissa and Albert later had a daughter as well, named Birdie.¹³

hydrocele [collection of fluid], not a rupture. No other disability found.”¹⁶

On March 14, 1892, Albert Miller swore an affidavit stating that “he contracted hydrocele while on the march from Helena to Little Rock, Ark., while at work helping to get the wagons out of the mud and mire that were stalled. I do not remember exactly what place it was but it was on that march. It did not show itself but little at the time but has gradually grown worse ever since. I believe it to be of a permanent character and it was not due to vicious habits.” On May 27, 1892, Miller was granted a pension of \$6 per month.¹⁷

Barely two months later, on August 3, 1892, Albert Miller of 602 Wabasha Street died of gastritis. He was buried in the Soldier’s Rest section of Elmhurst Cemetery in St. Paul, an area of plots purchased by the State of Minnesota for Civil War veterans.¹⁸ Cemetery records show the exact width of the grave—3.5 feet. According to Jerome Krieger, superintendent at Elmhurst, hand-dug graves were typically 2.5 feet wide; however, if gravediggers had time they dug wider to loosen the soil, which made digging the adjacent grave easier.

ALBERT AND NARCISSA MILLER lived neither in the spotlight nor in the shadows. According to a later affidavit, “In his life he had no property of any kind. He lived in a rented house on Wabasha Street, St. Paul and done days work for a living.”¹⁹ He apparently left nothing to Narcissa except her memories. While we have accumulated certain facts about his residence and



occupation, important information about his family heritage, his habits, his dreams, his community involvement, and his relationships is lost to us. We know where he lived but not how he lived. Unfortunately, it is not possible to flesh out the skeleton of his life with the minimal information available.

Alfred Gales ran away from his owner in 1863. He joined the Union Army and, at the end of the war, accompanied his regiment to Minnesota, where he started a new and entirely different life. He abandoned his slave name and became Albert Miller. He worked, married, and was a part of the St. Paul community for

27 years as Albert Miller. But his headstone, probably paid for by a veterans’ group, is inscribed “Alf’d Gales Co. B, 3rd Minn. Inf.” Albert Miller could never completely abandon the life into which he had been born.

NARCISSA MILLER never remarried. In 1895, when she applied to the federal government for a widow’s pension, her husband’s name change caused much confusion and difficulty. According to affidavits, Narcissa continued to live in St. Paul, supporting herself by “her manual labor which consists of washing and ironing for others” and “what little is brought in by her son who gets work now and then.” In her July 1895 affidavit in pursuit of the pension, Miller swore that she had “no real or personal property whatever of any nature or kind except her wearing apparel” and that “there is no one legally or otherwise bound to support her.” All of her numerous sworn statements over the years are signed only with her mark.²⁰

On August 12, 1895, the Department of the Interior Bureau of Pensions agreed that Alfred Gales and Albert Miller were the same person and that Narcissa was, in fact, the widow of a Civil War soldier, entitled to a pension of \$8 per month. By June 4, 1928, the pension had increased to \$40 per month.²¹

Narcissa Miller, about 77 years old, died December

28, 1929, of bronchial pneumonia and dilation of the heart in St. Peter, Minnesota. Her remains were removed to Oakland Cemetery in St. Paul but, because of the frozen ground, she was not interred until April 12, 1930.²² Not unlike her husband's headstone, inscribed with a name he did not claim, her stone was incorrectly carved "Norcissa Miller." □

NOTES

1. Here and below, C. C. Andrews, "Narrative of the Third Regiment," in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1891), 1: 147, 164-66.

2. Inventory sheet, James M. Bowler and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; James M. Bowler, pension certificate H58913, Records of the Veterans Administration, Record Group 15, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., hereinafter cited as VA Records.

3. Here and below, Madison [James M. Bowler] to My Dear Libby [Elizabeth Bowler], Aug. 22, 1863, Bowler papers.

4. Louis S. Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 13.

5. Here and two paragraphs below, Madison to My Dear Lizzie, Aug. 22, 1863, Bowler papers; "run off to Texas" explained to author by Russell Baker, Arkansas Historical Commission, Little Rock.

6. Alfred Gales, Volunteer Enlistment No. 111, Co. B, Third Minnesota, and Muster-in Roll of Under Cooks of African Decent [*sic*], Co. B, Third Minnesota, both in Minnesota Adjutant General, Military Personnel Records, Civil War, Minnesota State Archives, MHS Library; *Annual Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Minnesota for the Year Ending December 1, 1866, and of the Military Forces of the State from 1861 to 1866* (St. Paul: Pioneer Printing Co., 1866), 130, 168. According to these records, Gales was born in 1838 or 1842; according to the ages listed on his pension claim and death certificate, he would have been born in 1825 or 1826, making him about 37 when he enlisted.

7. Madison to My Dear Lizzie, July 10, 1864, Bowler papers; *Annual Report of the Adjutant General . . . 1861 to 1866*, 126, 130, 136, 140, 145, 150, 155, 163, 167. All companies in the Third except B and H listed "Colored Recruits" separately; Gales is included in Co. B's list entitled "Recruits."

8. Andrews, "Narrative of the Third Regiment," 173.

9. Andrews, "Narrative of the Third Regiment," 181; General Affidavit of George W. Perkins, Feb. 26, 1894, VA Records.

10. General Affidavit for Any Purpose prepared by Narcissa

Miller, July 23, 1928, in the matter of a pension claim, VA Records.

11. Ramsey County Marriage Records, Book F, page 153, Ramsey County Courthouse, St. Paul; *Centennial, 1863-1963, Pilgrim Baptist Church* (St. Paul: F. D. Fredell, 1963); *125th Anniversary Celebration, Pilgrim Baptist Church, 1863-1988* (St. Paul: the church, 1988), 16-17.

12. St. Paul city directories for 1867, 1869-70, 1873, 1874, and 1885-86 show "Robert Hickman, Colored, Whitewasher."

13. Charles H. Miller death certificate, Ramsey County, Minnesota State Department of Health, microfilm copy in MHS Library; *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 5, 1944, p. 7.

14. United States, *Census*, 1890, Special Schedule—Surviving Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, and Widows, Etc., St. Paul, Ramsey County, supervisor's district 3, enumeration district 246, p. 1, microfilm copy, MHS Library.

15. Pension Registers and Indexes, Vol. K, p. 327, Minnesota Adjutant General Records, State Archives, MHS Library.

16. Surgeon's certificate, Aug. 12, 1891, VA Records. According to *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia: W. B. Sanders Co., 1985), a hydrocele is a "circumscribed collection of fluid, especially a collection of fluid in the tunica vaginalis of the testicle or along the spermatic cord."

Gales appears to have lost four inches in height between his 1863 enlistment and 1891 examination. Perhaps he was inaccurately measured when he enlisted or perhaps diet and hard work took their toll on him.

17. General Affidavit of Alfred Gales/Albert Miller, Mar. 14, 1892, VA Records; Pension Registers, vol. K, p. 327.

18. Alfred Gales death certificate, Ramsey County Department of Public Health, St. Paul.

19. General Affidavit of Owens Davis, Dec. 12, 1892, VA Records.

20. Davis affidavit; General Affidavit of Narcissa Miller, July 25, 1895, in the matter of a pension claim, VA Records.

21. Narcissa Miller, widow's pension certificate 566268, VA Records.

22. Narcissa Miller death certificate, Nicollet County, Minnesota State Department of Health, microfilm copy in MHS Library; Oakland Cemetery Records, St. Paul.

The painting on p. 274-275 was photographed by Gary Mortensen; p. 280 is courtesy the Ohio Historical Society; p. 282 is by Nina Ziebarth-Pavlovich. All other images, including Gales's military papers, are from the MHS collections.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).