

Samuel Harrison: A Black Chaplain in the Civil War

as excerpted by Denis Lesieur

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Blacks have remained largely invisible in the traditional histories of Berkshire County. Yet their lives and stories form an important part of the area's history. One of the most important and significant black figures in Berkshire County history is the Rev. Samuel Harrison, ex-slave, minister, author and champion of black rights.

Harrison was born in Philadelphia in 1818 of slave parents; the entire family was later freed. Although apprenticed to a shoemaker at the age of nine, young Harrison decided to enter the ministry nine years later. His formal education ended with his apprenticeship, but he managed to return to school briefly before beginning his preaching career. In 1850, he assumed the first full-time pastorate of the Second Congregational Church, Pittsfield's first black church. Within a few months of his arrival in the city, he was ordained – a very rare distinction for a black man. Except for an interruption of 10 years, 1862-1872, Harrison would remain as pastor at the Second Congregational Church until his death on August 11, 1900.

In addition to his preaching, Harrison also wrote and published several pamphlets on racial justice, as well as his autobiography, REV. SAMUEL HARRISON-HIS LIFE STORY AS TOLD BY HIMSELF.

The following excerpt, dealing with his experiences as chaplain of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first African-American regiment from the state, is from that book, published in 1899. In July of 1863, Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew recruited Harrison, then 45 years old, as chaplain of the 54th Regiment. Accepting the appointment, Harrison journeyed to New York City to embark on a steamer to join the regiment in South Carolina.

“The first difficulty I encountered after I had received my transportation papers was that I could not get subsistence on board the steamer because I was a colored man. I spoke to the captain. He told me that I must provide my subsistence on shore to take with me. I did the best I could under the circumstances. I bought a ham and gave one-half to have the other half cooked, and bought some other things, such as bread, cake and cheese, smoked beef and so on. I embarked a little after noon in the month of August at about 3 o'clock.

It was a beautiful sight to pass from the harbor on the bosom of the great deep on our way to the seat of war. It was not a warship but a transport and she had only one brass cannon on the forward deck. But there was war material on board below deck of which I may speak hereafter. That which marred my feelings was the fact that I could not obtain subsistence on board, the same as

other men, because of my color. The very things which I had procured on shore I had no appetite for. Then, to increase my trouble, I had no decent place to sleep. I had to climb over kegs of powder to reach a bunk. There was scarcely any light. We had been about two hours out from New York when there were indications of a storm and it was not long before it came down in a very hard rain. Those on deck started for shelter. I found a place but was ordered from it. I was not allowed in the cabin. I think the captain was a rebel at heart. His name was Gadsen. The name of the steamer was *Arago*. I found a place which lead to the steerage and I sat on the stairs all night. It afforded shelter from the rain. The only annoyance which I had was from the ship's carpenter; he was drunk. He kept going up and down the narrow passage way. He had no peace himself and he gave me no peace. He said there were ninety tons of powder on the boat and if the lightning struck her we would be blown to the devil. He seemed to be more afraid of the devil than of anything else. Monday morning the sun rose beautifully in the east. I felt that it was incumbent upon me to protest against the treatment which I had received. I went aft and took my seat and began writing in my diary about the treatment I had received the day before. A man came to me and asked if I was taking reckonings. I told that I was not; that I had not been decently treated on the steamer; that I had no place to sleep, and, so far as subsistence was concerned, I could get none. He expressed sympathy in words and left. Then another man came to learn my story. He, like the priest in the parable, passed by and went on. Just at that juncture I began to wish that Col. Higginson was on board with all my heart. I had no reason to suppose that he was. I had not heard of his being a passenger. But he was the last who came to me. I was surprised to see him. He had been commissioned by Governor Andrew to raise a Colored regiment in the south, which he did, and I suppose he was south [sic]. But he was on the steamer and he came to me to learn about the affair. I told him. He went to the captain and I do not know what their talk was, but this I know, that my meals were given me in the cabin and a decent place was given me in which to sleep. I had no further trouble on that voyage. On the fourth day from New York we reached Hilton Head. There we disembarked. I was some seventeen miles from Beaufort, S.C., where were the headquarters of Gen. Saxton commanding the department of the South. I presented my official documents to the general in command. He greeted me most kindly and ordered me to repair the public house. But I did not go. I found in the General's office a Methodist minister who had preached for me in Pittsfield. He made me welcome to his house, which was confiscated property. There were some splendid residences there. I told the commanding general what treatment I had received at the commencement of my voyage from New York. He assured me that I should have better treatment on my return. I found a boarding place with an old colored man and his wife until I returned north, which I did in about six weeks...

While on Morris Island I learned that I was elected chaplain of the regiment. It was the first intimation I had of its consummation. The following week I took steamer for the north. It was the same vessel upon which I came south. I had no trouble about subsistence and, so far as sleeping was concerned, on deck was the most comfortable as the vessel was so crowded. I reached home all right. In due time I started for Boston to see Governor Andrew. He paid my expenses from funds of the Commonwealth, I suppose. I took my leave and was about to proceed to the depot to take

the afternoon train, but finding that I had ample time, I thought I would call and see a minister. While sitting in his home I picked up the afternoon paper and, running over the columns, I found that there was a commission waiting for me in the adjutant's office. I was so surprised at this that I called the attention of my friend to it, for I supposed the adjutant would have notified me. I asked my friend to go with me to the State House to make some investigation. He readily consented. We went to the office and asked for the adjutant. I told what I saw in the paper that afternoon. He said that a commission was issued and had been waiting for some weeks for me. He gave it to me. Then I asked how soon I was to get ready. He replied by saying that when I got ready for duty he would issue orders for me to report to the chief officer of the regiment. When I reached home I showed my commission to my wife and friends. But I had not the money to get my outfit or to buy supplies for my family, so I went to the Hon. Marshall Zenas Crane, father of our present Lieutenant Governor, to ask a loan of twenty-five dollars, which he readily consented to. Another gentleman, Henry Stearns, a manufacturer, advised me not to go with less than one hundred dollars. He offered to give it to me.

I put in for my family one barrel of flour. I had raised a porker and had it slaughtered and salted down and provided myself with a rubber blanket, rubber coat, and some other things such as a chaplain's coat and a blouse, tin pans, cups, and tin plates, and some army blankets which I got from the quartermaster. In a month from the time I received my commission I reported to the adjutant of the Commonwealth that I was ready for orders. He ordered me to report at Morris Island, South Island, to the commander of the regiment. Early in the month of November I embarked on board the *Arago* under different circumstances than before. I was a full-fledged chaplain of the army, recognized by all the officers on board. There was a distinguished general on board who was a gentleman in every fiber of his being. He was for a while a commander of our department. He would occasionally pass by our encampment. The captain of the *Arago* was very different in his bearing toward me. We reached Hilton Head very comfortably and I went to Beaufort to see the friends I had made when I first visited there. When I was there before I told them probably I would return in a few months. They wished to know if I would buy some things for them when I reached home and bring them when I returned. There were two women who gave me twenty dollars. I mention it to show what confidence they had in me, an entire stranger. I got the articles which they wanted. They were very grateful. I stayed only a little while in the city of Beaufort, my regiment being on Morris Island, some seventy or eighty miles up the coast. I had not been mustered into service which was very necessary. On the 12th day of November, 1863, I was placed in the United States Army by being mustered in, making oath to support the government of the United States, to serve three years unless sooner discharged. I did not know but that in all respects I would be treated by the officers of the government the same as other chaplains of a fairer hue. But I did learn it by the time pay day came around. The pay master declined to pay the men of the regiment the same amount paid to white troops because they were men of African descent. I think it was through Secretary Stanton that Gov. Andrew made the promise for equal pay, and Massachusetts raised three regiments with this understanding. But the paymasters decided otherwise.

The first intimation I had of it was when our Col. Hallowell said to me one day, “Mr. Harrison, I do not think that the paymasters will give you the pay which chaplains get.” I said I would like to see the paymaster myself, and I asked him to let me know when he came. I looked anxiously for him. He had come and gone. The other officers got their pay, but the rank and file were neglected. Three months passed and no pay. I knew that my family’s means were nearly used up. What to do I hardly knew, but bore up under it as well as I could. My wife and six children, a debt of three hundred dollars on my house, and grocery bills. I had a hard burden to carry. I grew sick under the pressure. But that promise kept me up, “I will not leave thee nor forsake thee.” God had his way in all this thing, though I did not see it then, and I more and more observe that good Providence.

It seemed to be a settled purpose of paymasters to ignore the rights of the colored soldiers. Over three months I had been without pay while the officers were regularly paid. In February, 1864, our regiment was ordered to break camp and to rendezvous at Hilton Head. It was on Friday night when we started. Early Saturday morning we arrived, disembarked and marched to our camp ground at Morris Island. I had bound my floor boards and nailed them together so that they would be at hand as a floor for my tent, and I saw them when taken from the army wagon and placed on the ground where my tent was to be located. I started to get some food for the day and the next. I had been gone but a very short time, but, as short as it was, when I returned there was not a piece to be seen of a board as large as your hand. All had been appropriated by some of the soldiers. I got along very well, so far as my health was concerned, by care. The water was miserable and produced sickness. But in that I was cautious. I do not think that I drank much of the water, but every twenty-four hours I would drink all of the lemonade I could swallow down. I messed with the officers of the regiment for a short time.

Upon the 1st day of January, 1863, President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation went into force. It was an occasion of jollification for the loyal north, and especially for the colored people north and south, so, upon Morris Island, large preparation was made to celebrate the occasion interesting. After marching and counter-marching they formed around the platform, which was a packing box. After some preliminaries had been gone through with and playing of some national airs by the band, the orator ascended the platform and began his address. In the course of his remarks I saw that he began to sway to and fro and his eyebrows began to knit. I could not account for it. It soon reached my ken that the man was pretty well loaded. He was the body-servant of a distinguished general on the Island. That told the story. While in the midst of his harangue the top of the box caved in, and, as he reached the bottom, he exclaimed, “Gentlemen, I like your principles, but d—m your platform.” It was mortifying to every soldier and officer on the ground. The orator was unable to proceed and the chaplain had to fill up the gap. After some music, the men were dismissed and repaired to their tents.

Editor’s note, 2018: the Rev. Samuel Harrison’s house in Pittsfield has been restored by the Samuel Harrison Society. More biographical information can be found on their website, www.samuelharrison.org.