

Review: W.G.: The Opium-addicted Pistol Toting Preacher Who Raised the First Federal African American Union Troops

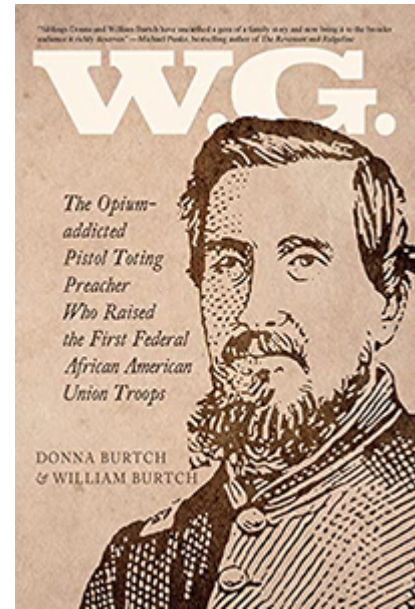
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W.G.: The Opium-addicted Pistol Toting Preacher Who Raised the First Federal African American Troops

By Donna Burtch and William Burtch (Sunbury Press)

The subtitle seems to say it all, but William Gould Raymond was even more multi-faceted. His abolitionist beliefs led Raymond to volunteer with Company H in the 86th New York Infantry, better known as the Steuben Rangers. He commanded the Provost Guard, where he carried out orders to contain the high-stakes gambling, liquor trafficking and prostitution that plagued the District of Columbia and corrupted the military personnel stationed there. He also was chaplain of the hospitals in Washington, D.C.

Sibling authors Donna and William Burtch give most attention to the role of their great-great-great grandfather—alongside fellow chaplain J.D. Turner—in recruiting and serving as initial commanding officers of the First District of Columbia Colored Volunteers. When Secretary of War Edwin Stanton issued the order that established the Bureau of Colored Troops, the unit Reynolds and Turner had mustered at their own expense and with President Abraham Lincoln’s authorization became the heart of the First U.S. Colored Troops. The authors carefully document those contributions through public notices in Washington newspapers of the time and Lincoln’s presidential papers. However, the House Committee on War Claims denied an \$843 invoice for reimbursement, and Reynold’s grave marker in Arlington Cemetery identifies his rank as 1st Lieutenant—the rank he held in the 86th New York Infantry—rather than the rank of Lieutenant Colonel he was granted when Lincoln appointed him as a commanding officer of the African American recruits.



Later in life, Reynolds was a Baptist missionary to Kansas but fell into “worldly pursuits,” such as railroad expansion projects and trafficking in racehorses, and he believed his failure to give full attention to his calling resulted in health problems. Pain caused by ulcers, heart disease, and liver and kidney ailments led a doctor to prescribe opium, and he became addicted to the narcotic. Even after he returned to Washington, he confessed to seeking “diversion in worldly amusements,” such as playing dominoes, croquet and checkers, and in attending theater productions with friends and “even horse shows at fairs.” Filled with guilt, he experienced a mystical vision and spiritual renewal in the woods of Rock Creek near Washington. He spent his final years as a faith healer, first in the Baptist

churches he had served for decades and eventually in nondenominational congregations.

W.G. is a work of military history, religious history and family history. More than that, it offers an intriguing portrait of a complex and fallible—but dedicated—man of God.

Ken Camp, Managing Editor

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