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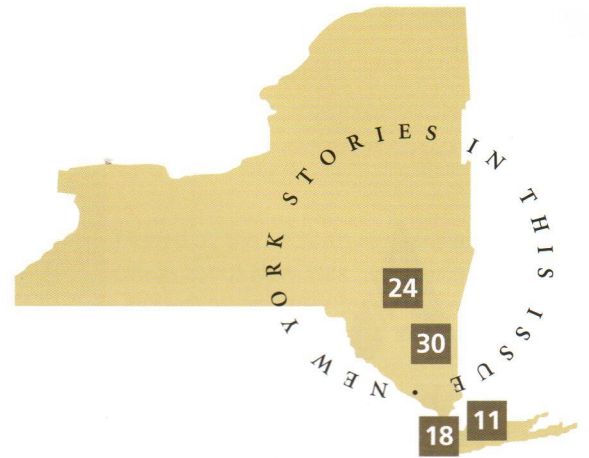
archives



Culper
Spy Ring

ALSO INSIDE:
Miracle on the Hudson
Early Businessman
Harlem Hellfighter's Tale

contents



FEATURES

11

Selah Strong

Mark Sternberg

It's time to rethink this patriot, long overlooked for his heroism during the Revolutionary War.

18

Hudson Heroes

Bruce W. Dearstyne

History in real time, like the "Miracle on the Hudson," produces a paper trail for future historians.

24

Luis Moses Gomez

Alex Prizzintas

The legacy of an early New York State businessman lives on today throughout the Hudson Valley.

30

"My Year in France"

Jeffrey T. Sammons

Harlem Hellfighter Clinton J. Peterson told his own story about his journey from almshouse to military hero.

DEPARTMENTS

- 2 From the State Archivist
- 4 Contributors
- 6 Archives Around New York
- 8 History in the Making
- 36 Genealogy
- 38 Marking History
- 40 Parting Shots

ON THE FRONT COVER

Liss by Lindsey Levine

COURTESY OF CLAIRE BELLERJEAU

contributors



FEATURES

Bruce W. Dearstyne holds a PhD in history from Syracuse University and specializes in New York history. He is the author of the second edition of *The Spirit of New York: Defining Events in the Empire State's History* and *The Crucible of Public Policy: New York Courts in the Progressive Era*, both published by SUNY Press in 2022.

Alex Prizgintas graduated summa cum laude from Marist College as a history major and will pursue a master's degree in public administration from Marist this fall. An essayist on Hudson Valley history, his articles have appeared in the *Hudson River Valley Review*, *Orange County Historical Society Journal*, and *The American Bottle & Glass Collector* magazine.

Jeffrey T. Sammons is professor emeritus of history at New York University. He is the coauthor, with John H. Morrow Jr., of *Harlem's Rattlers and the Great War: The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the*

African American Quest for Equality. Sammons is the principal of a research and publishing company in Monmouth County, NJ, where he also lives.

Mark Sternberg is the Culper Spy Ring historian for the Drowned Meadow Cottage Museum in Port Jefferson, NY. The museum showcases the eighteenth century home of Culper Spy Ring member Phillips Roe.

DEPARTMENTS

Daniella Weiss Ashkenazy ("Genealogy") is a bilingual Israeli journalist and author of *Playing Detective with Family Lore*.

Claire Bellerjeau ("History in the Making") is the co-founder of the non-profit organization Remember Liss and has been researching Liss, the Townsend family, and those they enslaved for over seventeen years, developing educational programs and curriculum to share Liss's story.

Tiffany Yecke Brooks ("History in the Making") holds a PhD from Florida State University and has spoken and published widely on early portrayals of race in trans-Atlantic performance as well as the emerging American identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Jasmine Bumpers ("Parting Shots") is an archivist at the New York State Archives.

Zachary Finn ("Marking History") is a research historian and grants reviewer for The William G. Pomeroy Foundation.

Clare Flemming ("Archives Around New York") is an archivist at the Archives Partnership Trust.

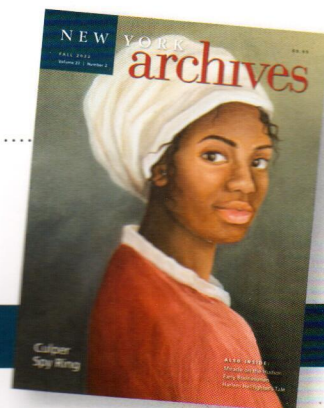
Susan Hughes ("Marking History") is the historian for The William G. Pomeroy Foundation and director of the American Pomeroy Historic Genealogical Association.

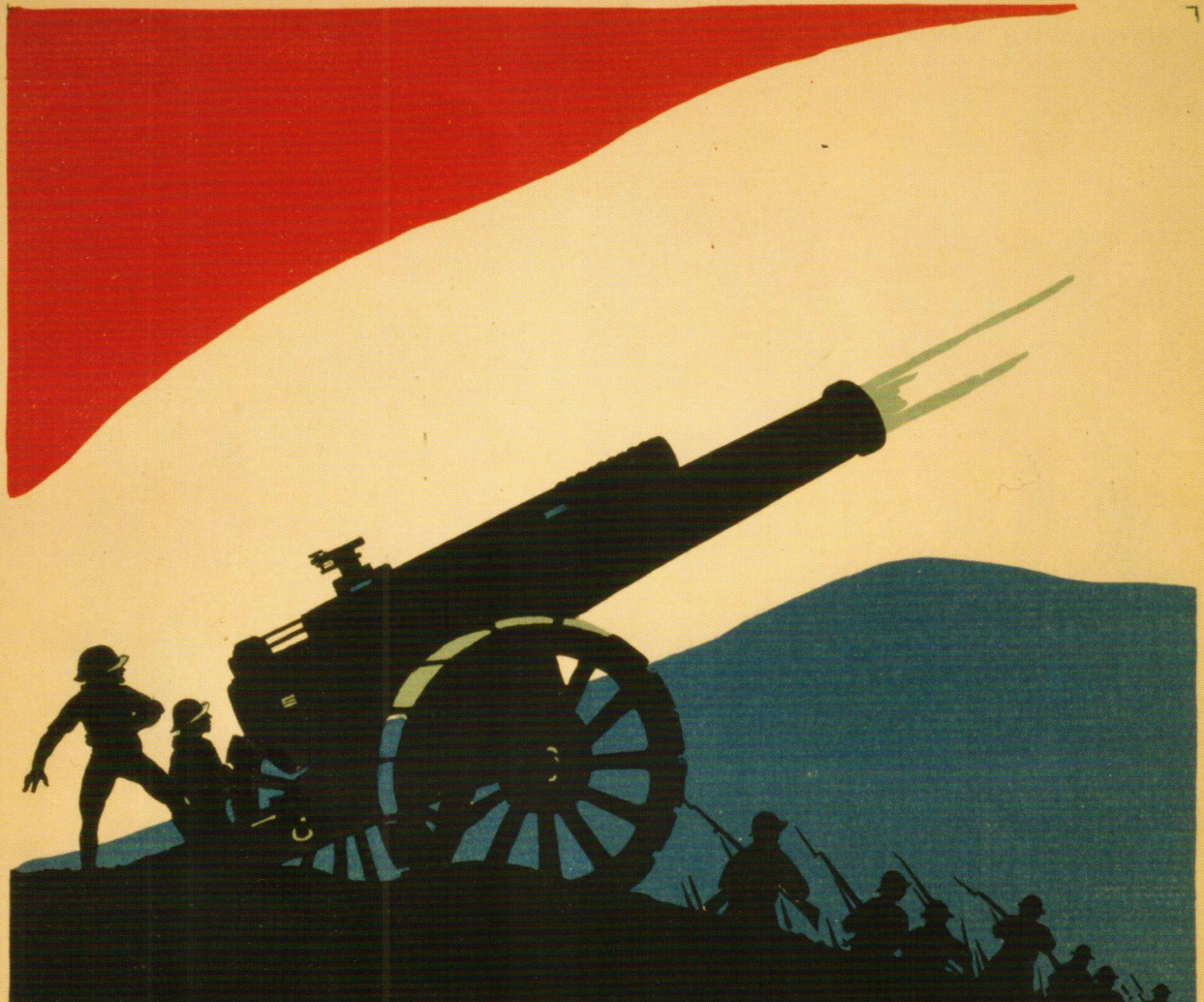
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"MY YEAR IN FRANCE"

The story of Clinton J. Peterson's journey from almshouse to military hero.

BY JEFFREY T. SAMMONS



KERRY

THE HEGEMAN PRINT N.Y.

When the editor of the *Putnam County Courier* sought a “dutiful colored soldier” to write about his WWI experiences, Clinton Peterson, a native son, was the obvious choice. He had served in the 369th Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard, commonly known as the “Harlem Hellfighters,” composed mainly of African Americans.

Clinton Jerome Peterson was born June 7, 1891, in Kent Cliffs, New York, and lived his childhood in poverty, at times as an “inmate” of the Putnam County Almshouse. As a young man, he had worked for US Representative Hamilton Fish Jr. He then served under Fish’s son, Hamilton Fish III, a captain in the 369th. One can assume that Peterson’s close connection to the Fish family before and after the war was part of the reason behind selecting him to write the column in the *Courier*. He also had published letters in the years during the war, revealing some of the themes he would address in the commissioned narrative, “My Year in France.”

Peterson’s writing strongly suggests someone who knew his audience and avoided offensive tone and content, especially as related to racial issues. In fact, Peterson’s serialized war account began with an obligatory nod to humility, an emblematic feature of narratives and autobiographies by enslaved people, a technique that literary scholar John Sekora characterizes as putting a Black message in a white envelope. Peterson prefaced his story by apologizing

“for grammatical errors” and immunizing himself from “criticism in this respect as I am neither student nor writer, but am giving my plain story of the war in plain language.”

Over There

Peterson claimed his writing publicly was a response to a “need of those more or less interested in the recent war and anxious to hear as much as possible about it from someone who has been ‘over there.’” Peterson said that others could tell the story factually but not with “the feelings and thoughts of one” on patrol or on a raid who has had his position exposed by “star shell light” and faced “machine guns sending their messengers of death irritably close to him at the rate of 500 shots per minute.” Nor could they convey the fear of “standing all night in the front-line positions waiting for the ‘zero’ hour and the command, ‘over the top,’ where you must either kill or be killed.” His publisher promised readers that Peterson’s would “be a vivid and accurate account” of “the trying days he spent facing the Huns in the frontline trenches.”



NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

Peterson, Clinton J. 1891-1917

DATE OF COMMISSION OR ENLISTMENT IN STATE SERVICE				MUSTERED			
WHEN				WHEN			
Year	Month	Day	Year	Year	Month	Day	Year
1917	May		1917	1917	July	25	1917
HOME STATION OR COMPANY				GRADE			
New City				Private			
DATE OF APPEARING				EXPLANATION			
15 July 1917				LEFT THE ORGANIZATION			
HOW				IN WHAT GRADE			
Discharged				Private			
REMARKS: Add card from me 10/20/20							
Received commission Nov. 1919 - 2nd Lt.							
Age: 26 years; height: 5 feet 10 inches; complexion: ; eyes: ; hair: ;							
born: ; occupation: ; residence: ;							
married or single; name and address of wife or (if single) of parent or guardian: ; relationship: ;							

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

Almost nothing in Peterson’s account identified him as Black or directly addressed race, even though race was a determining factor throughout the 369th Regiment’s experience in the war. One of the few references to race was on the title page, in which Peterson is identified as “Of the Famous 369th US

Clinton Peterson and his National Guard muster roll abstract



PANORAMIC VIEW OF CAMP DIX NEW JERSEY. UNITED STATES ARMY CANTON

(Colored) Infantry." Peterson repeated the designation in his description of the regiment's origins in the 15th New York Infantry Regiment, but credits Col. William Hayward as the 369th's organizer, with no mention of the difficult and protracted political and racial struggle leading to state and federal authorization of the regiment or the instrumental role that Captain Charles Ward Fillmore, an African American, played in its formation. Even a mention of the 42nd "Rainbow" Division of the US Army merited no reference to race, despite its rejection of the 369th Regiment on the grounds that "Black is not a color of the rainbow." What Peterson chose to emphasize in this rendering was that the 69th, as a member of the Rainbow Division, was the first of New York's National Guard units to go overseas. The 369th, under the flag of the 15th New York National Guard (NYNG), was the second.

Peterson insisted his experience was typical and representative. Only in minor details, such as "going 45 days without a change of socks," did he indicate that his experience was different. Perhaps anticipating a hostile reader response, Peterson refused to place blame, but ascribed the situation to the conditions of battle. Even his

descriptions of the shared experience of months in frontline "trenches, dodging bullets, ducking shells," avoiding poison gases, and "evading the hundred and one other human (so called) methods the treacherous Hun has of putting one's name on the 'casualty list' or 'honor roll'" were devoid of value judgment.

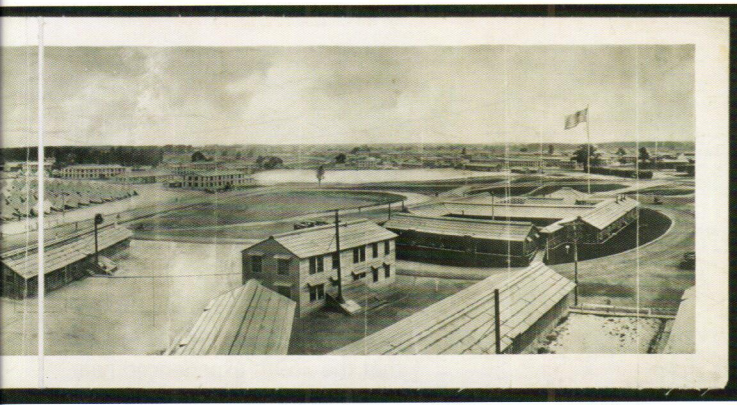
Promoted to Sergeant

Nearly two years before the publication of "My Year in France," Peterson gave clear signs of the kind of story he would tell and that the paper saw fit to publish. In letters to the editor, he described routine training and conditions at Camp Dix in Wrightstown, New Jersey, where neither barracks, sewerage, nor electricity were fully in place. Another letter focused on the National Army draftees who seemingly made National Guard soldiers appear to be seasoned veterans. Ironically, when the 15th NYNG went overseas without knowledge of its new designation as the 369th, it already had been assigned to the National Army, the very organization that Peterson disparaged in relation to the National Guard and Regular Army (standing). Racism determined this outcome and the creation of the Black 93rd Provisional Division to which it belonged. Even more telling of

Peterson's attempt to convey racial impartiality and tolerance was his seeming embrace of camp "cheer-up" ditty "Let's Go" sung to the tune of "Dixie." One has to wonder what his brothers in arms made of his choice of a tune that, no matter the words, conjured up a slave South, the Confederacy, and the Lost Cause, especially when a Jim Crow army was a reminder that Dixie's legacy still affected them.

Never Forget

In August 1918, the *Courier* published a letter from Peterson to a Coleman S. "Colie" Townsend. In it, he mentioned seeing things that he would never forget were "I to live one hundred years," and even the restriction of censors presented no danger to "my forgetting it." One of those mind-searing events was witnessed along with Fish. According to Peterson, a team of stretcher bearers stopped to avoid shells and "a burst of smoke enveloped them, when it blew away, all that could be seen was a tangled mass of what had but a moment before been men." That he later related such an event in "My Year in France" suggests that its inclusion in the letter of 1918 could have been a tease for the main attraction after the war. A clear profit



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

“We had not been in the trenches long before the Germans knew that a strange organization was opposing them, but they did not know who we were nor from where we had come.”

motive was exposed by the pre-publication promotions of the series and a required three-month subscription of fifty cents.

Peterson and his publisher understood that accuracy and even action were not enough to attract readers, as he turned to levity as well as tragedy, sometimes combining both in gallows humor. He joked about using iodine for almost every medical condition, a remedy so ubiquitous that when a vehicle broke down a soldier suggested iodine. Then Peterson revealed how war warps one's perspective, as men become more concerned about splattered food than the splattered bodies of those who were carrying it, as a missed meal in war was never recovered. Peterson described a world turned upside down.

Heroism

Peterson explicitly mentioned race once in the entire account and it appeared under the heading “Colored Troops Excite Hun Curiosity,” a likely editorial intervention. The episode described is one in which fellow Black soldiers Henry Johnson of Albany, New York, and Needom Roberts of Trenton, New Jersey, fended off a German raiding party of up to twenty-four men. As Peterson told it:

“We had not been in the trenches long before the



GETTY IMAGES

Germans knew that a strange organization was opposing them, but they did not know who we were nor from where we had come. They had seen and learned to fear the Black soldier who came from the colonies of Africa and who delighted in cutting off ears, fingers, and noses from their prisoners and tying them around their necks. But here was a regiment of Black soldiers wearing the United States uniform, English gas mask, French helmet and equipment, and who spoke English. There

was only one way. That was to gather a prisoner and let him solve the mystery. This, I think, explains why these men [German raiders] did not kill the two men when they offered resistance, hoping that they might be able to capture them without killing. They were of no use to them dead, and trying to capture them, they suffered so heavily, they were forced to withdraw before reinforcement came and killed all of them.”

It was Johnson's performance in this encounter that led to his

The 369th Infantry in the trenches, 1917

Clinton J. Peterson

F. O. R. F. D. 3
PEEKSKILL, N. Y.

Sign Painter

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YORKTOWN, N. Y.

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Our Motto—"We Strive to Please"

Jan. 23, 1922

W. E. B. Du Bois
70 Fifth Ave.,
New York, N. Y.

B169132

My dear Mr. Du Bois:

In October 1920 I sent you newspaper clippings of a story "My Year in France" which at that time I considered have published in book form. I have not heard anything more from you in regards to these clippings nor your own history of "The Negro in the World War."

Kindly advise me if you have finished with the clippings and how long before the book will be out.

Yours very truly

Clinton J. Peterson

Peterson sent the clippings of his articles to W.E.B. DuBois in 1922.

receiving the Medal of Honor, albeit nearly a century after the fact, only the second Black man from the war so honored.

There is no such downplaying by Peterson of Sgt. William A. Butler's remarkable exploits on the night of August 18, 1918. According to Peterson, the French had relieved the 369th on a regular basis and somehow the Germans knew when it would happen. On one night, a German patrol walked in pretending to be French relief soldiers and encountered a sergeant, whom they briefly caught off guard before he

"succeeded in reaching an automatic rifle and killed the officer and four men." He then rescued his lieutenant and five men held by another party of Germans, an incredible end Peterson considered due to "the courageous fighting of one man." Butler received his Croix de Guerre with Palm, but recently discovered documents show that he also was recommended by his regimental commander for the Medal of Honor along with George S. Robb, a white lieutenant. The latter's recommendation was accepted, but Butler's was downgraded to

the Distinguished Service Cross, still the highest honor awarded to any Black soldier in the war.

Peterson elided one last opportunity to reveal the racism that the 369th experienced near the end of the war and after the armistice. Although he might not have been aware of last-ditch efforts by General Pershing to return the 369th to labor duty or their hasty withdrawal from occupied Germany to prevent the "dangerous" association of the men with French and German women, he certainly knew about, witnessed, and probably experienced the brutal treatment of the men once they returned to the full control of the American Expeditionary Forces. Even Peterson, despite his glowing description of an American train replete with its kitchen car and the prospects of plentiful food on the trip to Brest, admitted that the negative reports of life in the western port city, under American control, were not exaggerated. Yet his own recounting of the difficult conditions, including hard labor, strict discipline, and long hours of waiting for food in cold, wet weather, did not mention racism as its cause.

Peterson revealed that the shoddy treatment of the 369th continued at home when demobilization orders were thwarted, to the loud protests of Colonel Hayward that his men be honored with a parade, which was begrudgingly permitted by authorities who wanted no public display of Black conquering heroes.

Peterson's parting words did suggest the transformative

For his service, he received a Croix de Guerre from the French and a Conspicuous Service Cross from New York State in 1921.

effects of war that so many Blacks hoped for and so many whites feared. He recalled marching to the station and thinking of the new life his comrades and he would enter "and how much different it would seem to us now with our broadened views and bitter knowledge of the world in general." Yet, he did not formally recognize the true racial source of his oppression at home. Disconnectedly or regressively he mused, "[i]t seemed strange to think of having to provide for one's self, after being fed, clothed and housed by Uncle Sam's generosity for so long."

Peterson worked briefly for the Fish family after the war, married and soon became a widower, and ran a sign-painting business. For his military service, he received a Croix de Guerre from the French and a Conspicuous Service Cross from New York State in 1921 (perhaps one of two Black soldiers so honored for service in WWI, Charles Ward Fillmore being the other). In 1934, he rose to the rank of major in

the 369th NYNG, married again, and became a member of the prestigious Reveille Club of New York City—an organization largely composed of the Black officers of the 369th. Peterson died on July 4, 1945, fitting for a patriot, and his final resting place is the Long Island National Cemetery. ■



NEW YORK STATE MILITARY MUSEUM

Peterson was awarded a Conspicuous Service Cross.

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

This story owes its origins to former Putnam County Historian, Dr. Sarah Johnson, asking me at a talk on Hamilton Fish six years ago if I was familiar with Clinton J. Peterson. I answered in the negative, only to discover later that my coauthor and I had afforded him one sentence in *Harlem's Rattlers* announcing his promotion to major in 1934. This prompted additional research into Peterson's history. The New York State Archives holds muster rolls and service abstracts of New Yorkers who served in the 369th during WWI. These records have been digitized and are available at digital collections.archives.nysed.gov. Other documents related to Peterson came from the Putnam County Archives, including the *Putnam County Courier*.



For more about the "Harlem Hellfighters," see

- "The Letters: Voices from the Great War" by Andrea Perdicho and J.M. Cassidy, Spring 2019
- "On Patrol in No Man's Land" by Aaron Noble, Summer 2017
- "Making it Right" by Paul Grondahl, Fall 2015

CONSPICUOUS SERVICE CROSS #1026

PETERSON, CLINTON J.,
1st Sgt. Co. K, 369th U.S. Infantry.

Address: 115 South James St.,
Peekskill, N. Y.

Awarded: Oct. 22, 1921