

# Uncle Ned's Mountain

*An Underground Railroad Station  
and Home of Civil War Soldiers  
from Near and Far*

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by Jack Sanders

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Kept secret from contemporaries and undiscovered by historians, a station on the famous “Underground Railroad” apparently once operated in Ridgefield.

The station’s site went on to be the home of at least five men of color who fought in the Civil War, two of whom died while in the service and two others who were wounded. One young man may have been a citizen of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i who, after serving in the Navy and Army in the Civil War, became a “Buffalo Soldier” in the West.

## Devoted to Freedom for Slaves

“Uncle Ned and Aunt Betsey” Armstrong, a popular African-American couple in the first half of the 19th Century, risked arrest and imprisonment as they sheltered slaves who were fleeing from bondage in the South and seeking freedom in the North. Two of their Ridgefield-born grandchildren went on to fight slavery via the Civil War, and one became among the last victims of the conflict.

The Armstrongs’ “station” was in Ridgebury near the top of a namesake hill still today called Ned’s Mountain. The stop included a well-hidden cave where runaways could elude pursuing slave-catchers.

Uncle Ned was “a man who devoted a life to an idea, the freedom of his colored brothers of the South,” said an 1879 article in *The New York Tribune*. “So well did he plan and execute that, to this day, ... near neighbors only knew ‘Uncle Ned’ and ‘Aunt Betsey’ as good, kind colored people, handy to have around to assist with the house or farm work.”<sup>1</sup>

None of Ridgefield’s many histories even hints that the town may have had an Underground Railroad stop, much less one operated by an African-American couple living in a remote part of Ridgebury. Nor have statewide studies of the Underground Railroad mentioned any Ridgefield activity. That’s not unusual since so many of the stations were kept secret from slave-chasers, authorities and sometimes-unsympathetic neighbors. White men and women who operated stations were at risk of arrest or at least public censure, but a black couple providing shelter faced serious threats from not only law enforcers but also racists.

Little is known about the origins of Edward and Betsey Armstrong. Edward, or “Ned,” was born about 1782 in Ridgefield, according to the 1850 Census. He may have been free at birth, but it’s possible he was a child of an enslaved mother and thus born enslaved. The 1840 Census shows Edward living with his wife in Ridgebury, probably on Ned’s Mountain, with a family that included three boys, one under 10 and two between 10 and 20, and three girls, two under 10 and one between 10 and 20. (Only the name of the head of the household was provided in the 1840 Census.)

Betsey was also said to have been born here; she, too, may have been enslaved. The year of her birth is a bit of a mystery. Her gravestone in Ridgebury Cemetery and her death record in the Ridgefield Town Hall say she was 90 years old when she died in 1857 — that would have made her birth year around 1767. However, the 1850 census-taker said she was 68, a more likely age for a woman with a 70-year-old husband. Since the postmortem information on her age was

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Tribune*, July 7, 1879, p. 8.

probably second hand, the gravestone and death record could easily have been mistaken. She or her husband were probably interviewed in person for the census; they weren't for their deaths.

The Armstrongs were likely living on Ned's Mountain by the 1830s. The exact location of their home is not certain but tradition and one land record suggest it was off the east side of

Ned's Lane, a short, dead-end road running off the southern end of today's Ned's Mountain Road.

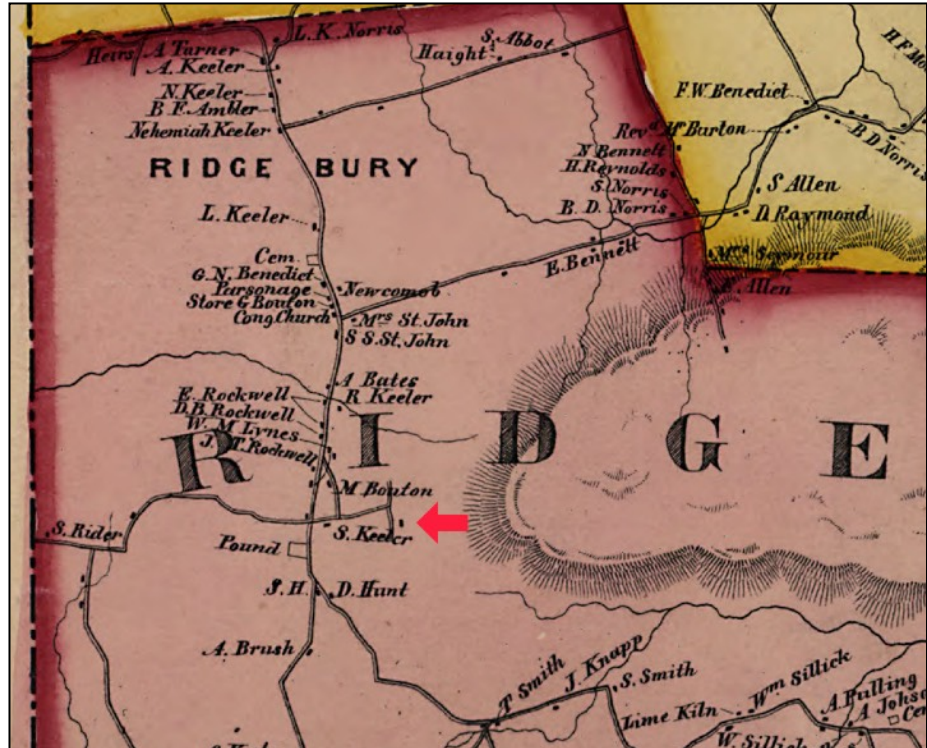
Nearby was the cave where, according to at least two accounts, the slaves escaping from the South could be temporarily hidden and housed on their journey north.

Historian Silvio Bedini knew of Ned, but not of his activities. In his 1958 history, *Ridgefield in Review*, Bedini wrote: "Ned's Mountain derives its name from a Negro man named Ned who lived in the area. Four Negro families made their homes on Ned's Mountain Road during the 19th Century."<sup>2</sup>

By 1850, there appear to have been at least three houses in the Ned's Lane compound, occupied by 13 African Americans, most of them Armstrong grandchildren. Besides Edward and Betsey Armstrong themselves, the compound that year included Betsey Watson, the Armstrongs' 34-year-old daughter, and her four children: Velandar, 18, Mary, 15, George, 13, and John, 9. John Watson went on to serve in the Civil War.

Another Armstrong daughter, Caroline Smalley, 32, and her husband, John Smalley, 45, lived there with children Samuel, 7, Catherine, 6, John S., 4, and Mary E., 3. John S. Smalley became one of the last victims of the Civil War.

The 1879 *New York Tribune* article described the Armstrongs' homesite: "A more interesting 'mountain' is not found in the State. Standing upon its top, you can trace the water



The arrow points to the probable site of the Armstrongs' home off the east side of Ned's Lane. —Clark's map of Fairfield County, 1856

<sup>2</sup> Bedini, Silvio, *Ridgefield in Review*, Ridgefield: 250th Anniversary Committee, 1958, p. 350. Three of those families were the Armstrongs, Watsons and Smalleys.

coursing west across fine dairy farms and through valleys to the Titicus — a branch of the Croton — thus finding its way to our homes in New-York; to the south, kissing the sea at Norwalk, after starting many a wheel to spinning; to the east through Miry Brook, Danbury, Brookfield — joining the Housatonic furnishing power for Birmingham, Danbury and Brookfield. There is no finer view within sixty miles of New-York than from the top of ‘Ned’s Mountain.’”

While this would seem a very visible location, the Armstrongs managed to keep their activities so secret that contemporary neighbors — and later historians — were unaware of the station’s existence.

It is unclear whether the Armstrongs owned their homestead. While their names appear on no deeds of ownership in the land records, it is possible there were deeds that were never filed with the Ridgefield town clerk. They may have built homes on land loaned to them by the nearby Keelers or Boutons in exchange for their work as farm hands. Since they no doubt had little money, their home and other buildings in the compound were probably of basic construction, perhaps not much more than crude cottages. Nonetheless, the Armstrongs were willing to share what little they had with slaves who had much less.

## The Underground Railroad

Although harboring escaped slaves was illegal, local officials in Connecticut often “looked the other way” and sometimes even helped runaways. Nevertheless, legal and illegal slave-catchers were active in Connecticut, often aggressively chasing blacks all the way from the South into and beyond Connecticut.

The Underground Railroad was an elaborate but loosely organized network of “stations” — usually in people’s private homes but sometimes in businesses and churches — where men, women and even children fleeing slavery could find assistance and shelter as they traveled northward. It extended across all the northern states, from the Atlantic shore to Iowa. Many runaways were going to Canada, where slavery was completely illegal and where slave-chasers could not apprehend them. Others headed to northern and western New York or northern New England, where slavery was so unpopular, pursuers had less chance of successfully catching them.

While the Nutmeg State didn’t ban slavery outright until 1848, the practice was extremely rare by then. (When emancipation was declared, only six slaves were left, all of them elderly.) The state had a sizable abolition movement, but partly because of many close trading ties with the South, Connecticut also had a large pro-slavery population, who on more than a few occasions attacked abolitionists and tried to foil their efforts to help fleeing slaves.

Several “tracks” took slaves into and through Connecticut. While some fugitive slaves found permanent homes in Connecticut, most in the 1830s and 40s probably continued on to at least Massachusetts and Vermont, where anti-slavery sentiment was stronger. Massachusetts had banned slavery in 1783, more than a half century before Connecticut.

The Underground Railroad did not involve a map with clearly defined routes and instead was an informal network of stations, whose interconnecting paths changed constantly. No one knows how many stations there were. Because the system was “underground,” it was

clandestine, and each station master usually needed to know only the next stations to the north along the lines so that he or she could provide the directions or transportation to the next destination.

Sometimes, the slaves had to travel to the next stop on their own, but often they were led or carried by a “conductor,” who frequently provided a ride in a wagon. William Wakeman, “Wilton’s foremost abolitionist,” was both a station master and a conductor. Wilton historian Robert H. Russell reports that, “As a conductor, Wakeman was bold and tireless, taking his ‘packages of hardware and dry goods’ to places as distant as Plymouth and Middletown, Connecticut, trips of forty or fifty miles as the crow flies, and much farther by road.”<sup>3</sup>

The Underground Railroad began forming in the early 1800s. From the beginning, New York City was a major hub for the network. “Although reliable statistics do not exist, it is clear that New York in the 1820s remained a destination for fugitive slaves, or a way station as they traveled to upstate New York, New England and Canada,” says historian Eric Foner.<sup>4</sup>

From New York City, many fleeing slaves traveled to Connecticut along the coast. Some who took this southern line into Connecticut then veered north on a route that took them up the Norwalk and Housatonic River Valleys, while others continued on to New Haven, and only then headed northward to Farmington and Hartford, or northeasterly toward northern Rhode Island.

Another “track” from New York City employed the Hudson River Valley. Some fugitives would follow that route all the way to Lake Champlain and on to Montreal while others would veer off to western New York and head for Buffalo. Still others would go “eastward via a number of laterals into Connecticut, Massachusetts or Vermont,” said Horatio T. Strother, the foremost historian of Connecticut’s Underground Railway.<sup>5</sup>

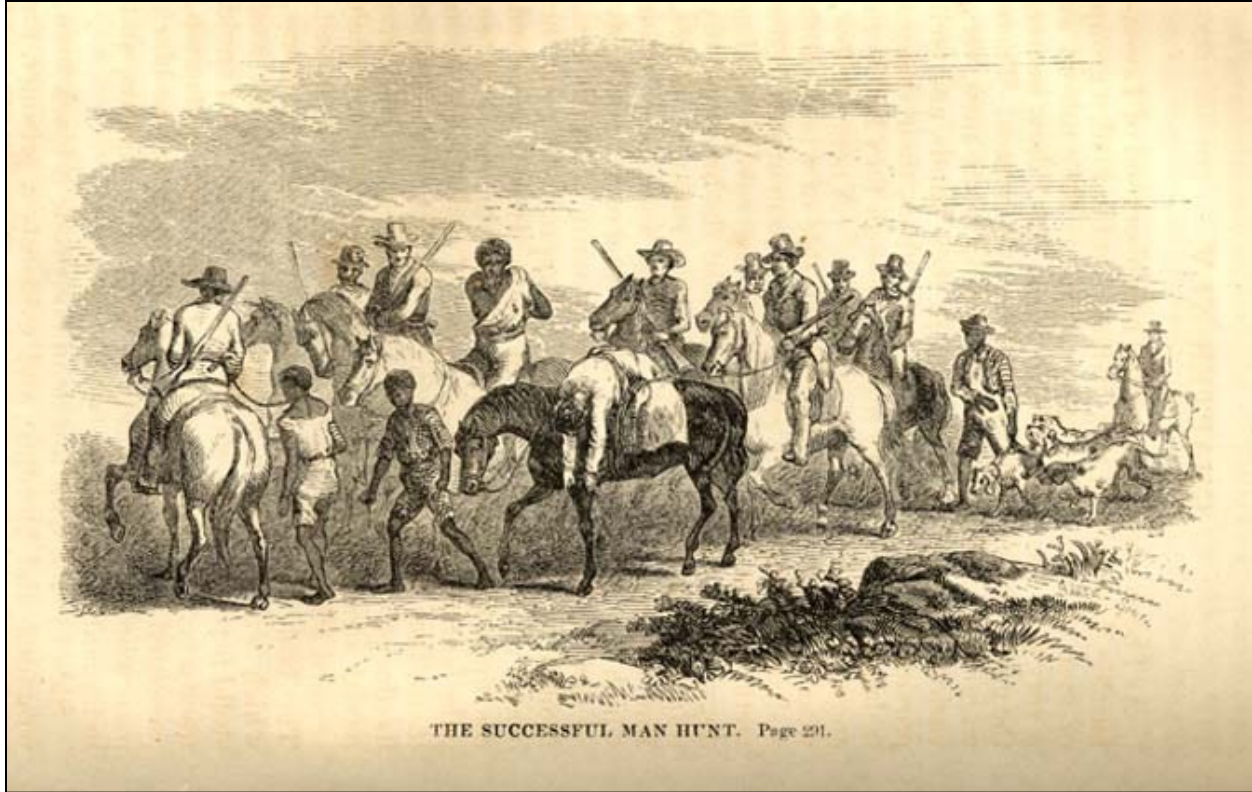


Most Underground Railroad routes followed two major corridors in the Northeast.

<sup>3</sup> Russell, Robert H., *Wilton, Connecticut: Three Centuries of People, Places and Progress*, Wilton Historical Society, 2005, p194.

<sup>4</sup> Foner, Eric, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015, p. 48

<sup>5</sup> Strother, Horatio T., *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1964, p. 120.



This 1852 engraving, called *The Successful Man Hunt*, shows slave-catchers with several “fugitive slaves.”

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Many Connecticut stations remain unknown today because their existence was kept so quiet during and even after their use. Two threats prompted the secrecy. The first, of course, were the many Southern — and some Northern — slave-catchers. But the second threat came from the State of Connecticut itself, which in 1835 enacted a fugitive slave law declaring that any slave escaping from another state would not be considered free in Connecticut and could be apprehended if the owner demanded it. “The fugitives who succeeded in reaching the Nutmeg State could look for no official help in their quest for freedom,” Strother said.<sup>6</sup>

Then, in 1850, Congress passed the federal Fugitive Slave Act, far worse than the state law. Not only slave-catchers, but ordinary citizens were empowered to apprehend suspected fugitives, who were brought before a local official to determine whether they should be freed or sent South. These officials were compensated \$10 per person who was declared a slave and \$5 per person who was set free — not a merciful incentive. What’s more, anyone who helped or sheltered a runaway could be fined \$1,000 and sent to jail for up to six months (but anyone who falsely reported a free black as a slave was not subject to any penalty). It was clear that the law, powered through the Congress by Southern interests, favored Southern slave owners at the expense of the right to a fair trial.

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<sup>6</sup> Strother, p. 39.

The harshness of the Fugitive Slave Act helped to turn Connecticut in the 1850s from a state split between pro- and anti-slavery sentiment to one much more opposed to enslavement. Nonetheless, support for African-Americans rights went only so far, and Fairfield County was perhaps the least supportive. In 1857, a statewide referendum proposition on allowing free black men to vote was defeated 5,553 to 19,148 — 22% for and 78% against. While Windham County had 36% support and Hartford County, 34%, only 10% were in favor in Fairfield County, the lowest percentage in the state.<sup>7</sup>

No one knows how many runaways employed the services of the Underground Railroad. For obvious reasons, few if any stations kept records. However, Strother said, “it has been estimated that in the decade of the 1840s over a thousand fugitives annually escaped from what abolitionists liked to call ‘the land of whips and chains.’”<sup>8</sup> Historian Wilbur Siebert said in 1894 that anywhere from 25,000 to 100,000 slaves had escaped by the time of the Civil War.<sup>9</sup>

Wilton has long been reputed to have two of the stops on the network, foremost of which was Wakeman’s. Another may have been at the Lambert house, now the headquarters of the Wilton Historical Society, although this has been questioned because its antebellum owner was said to have been pro-slavery.

Georgetown, a village that includes land in Wilton, Ridgefield, Redding, and Weston, was active in the abolition movement and efforts to help fugitive slaves. “Underground stations were in Georgetown at the homes of John O. St John and Rev. Main, neither of which are remaining, and also at the old Gilbert & Bennett shop where later the Connery Store was built at the corner of Route 57 and Old Mill Road,”<sup>10</sup> Wilton historian Russell reports. Some “passengers” may have moved up to Uncle Ned and Aunt Betsey’s station.

Thus, the Armstrongs may have hosted guests who had come north not only via the Norwalk River Valley but also across from the Hudson River Valley. If the latter, they may have followed roughly the same route that the American and French troops used in traveling through the region during the Revolution; i.e. entering Ridgefield from North Salem along what is now Mopus Bridge Road.

It is impossible to know where the Armstrongs sent or led their visitors on the next stage of their journey. New Milford to the north was known as a center for Underground Railroad activity<sup>11</sup> and Farmington to the northeast was a major Connecticut hub — what historian Strother called “the Grand Central Station of [Connecticut’s] Underground Railroad towns.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Strother, p. 184

<sup>8</sup> Strother, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Siebert, William H. *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, New York, 1898, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, p. 194-5.

<sup>11</sup> Strother, p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> Strother, p. 168.



Most stations appear to have been operated by whites, including a number of religious leaders, chiefly Congregational or Baptist. The Armstrongs may have been among the relatively few stops run by free African Americans.

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Only two accounts have been found so far reporting the Armstrongs' involvement in the Underground Railroad. The 1879 article in the New York Tribune was contributed by a writer, identified only as S., who lived in Brooklyn, N.Y., but clearly knew Ridgebury and its people.

"Uncle Ned," the writer said, was "a man who devoted a life to an idea, the freedom of his colored brothers of the South, and so well did he plan and execute, that to this day, Captain John Rockwell, Smith Keeler, George Bouton, and other near neighbors only knew 'Uncle Ned' and 'Aunt Betsey' as good, kind colored people, handy to have around to assist with the house or farm work."

Some of these neighbors, the Tribune article said, helped the Armstrongs build their "mansion" near the top of the mountain.

"It was noticed that many colored men came and went, that officers often searched for certain colored men at the mansion, but never found them. No keeper of a railroad station was ever more faithful than were Uncle Ned and Aunt Betsey, the keepers of the 'Ned's Mountain' station of the 'underground' route from the South to Canada."

Behind the house, the writer said, "is a cave that furnished a hiding place and shelter for the weary liberty-seekers, and there Uncle Ned and Aunt Betsey supplied food and clothing until, rested and refreshed, under darkness of night, they would flee from this land of 'freedom' to Canada. Even the existence of the cave — so well did Uncle Ned guard the secret — never became known except to one person, B.D. Norris, until after Mr. Lincoln had made all slaves free."

Today, few people know about the cave. However, Ridgefielder Karen Casagrande reported in 2020 that "I lived on Ned's Mountain many years and as a kid walked in the woods, looking for Old Ned's cave. I thought I found it in the woods on the left about a quarter mile past Ned's Lane... opposite old Mr. Hannom's place."<sup>13</sup>

The Rockwells, Keelers and Boutons, described as "near neighbors," were in fact close to the Armstrong homestead on Ned's Lane. B.D. Norris was a farmer who lived at the eastern end of George Washington Highway, which was a mile away. Why he knew about the station is unknown.

S.'s report to the Tribune was dated June 7, 1879, but appeared in print a month later, and may have been sparked by reports that spring of an unusual finding in Ridgefield. The *New Haven Register* carried a story June 17, 1879:

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<b>A Ridgefield Mystery.</b>	In
The discovery of a skeleton in a cave at Ridgefield, is causing some speculation. Many years ago Uncle Ned and Aunt Betsey, a colored couple, and most diligent agents of the underground railway, lived near by, and many a fugitive slave, traveling from the South to Canada, found a refuge with them. These guests were always hidden in the cave an inclosure about twenty feet square, with a very small opening, and some people think the skeleton may have belonged to one of them.	notid
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The 1879 article in the New Haven Register.

<sup>13</sup> Posting on Old Ridgefield/Facebook, Feb. 8, 2020.

### A RIDGEFIELD MYSTERY

The discovery of a skeleton in a cave at Ridgefield is causing some speculation. Many years ago, Uncle Ned and Aunt Betsey, a colored couple, and most diligent agents of the underground railway, lived nearby, and many a fugitive slave, traveling from the South to Canada, found a refuge with them. These guests were always hidden in the cave, an inclosure about twenty square feet, with a very small opening, and some people think the skeleton may have belonged to one of them.”<sup>14</sup>



The Armstrongs' gravestones in Ridgebury Cemetery.

<sup>14</sup> New Haven (Conn.) Register, June 17, 1879, Vol. 39, No. 140, p. 4

The skeleton's belonging to a runaway slave seems unlikely since the Armstrongs were, by this and the Tribune accounts, devoted to helping slaves and would hardly have left a dead or dying person in their cave. In fact, as will be seen later in this essay, recent discoveries about the subsequent residents at the Ned's Mountain compound may explain the skeleton and actually provide the name of the person whose skeleton it was.

The speculation about the skeleton may have prompted S. to write his account. Nonetheless, the two reports, in separate publications, both provide evidence that the Armstrongs were part of the Underground Railroad.

How long their operation lasted can only be guessed, but the family began disappearing from Ridgefield in the 1850s. Ned Armstrong died in 1851 at the age of 67 of "dropsy of the heart," a term for heart failure. Betsey Armstrong died in 1857 of the "infirmities of age." They are buried together in Ridgebury Cemetery.

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Ned and Betsey Armstrong's son-in-law John Smalley was born in New Jersey around 1800. After apparently spending some time in New York City, he met Caroline Armstrong, Ned and Betsey's daughter, and the two were married April 5, 1840 by the Rev. Nathan Burton, minister of the Ridgebury Congregational Church.

In 1837, when living in New York, Smalley apparently ran afoul of the law. That August the Court of Special Sessions convicted "John Smalley, a black," of stealing "a buffalo skin worth \$12." He was sentenced to six months in a "penitentiary."

While this might not have been Ridgefield's John Smalley, a curious document in the Ridgefield Land Records suggests the two may have been the same man. In 1843, six years after the conviction and five years after Smalley would have been out of the "pen," John Hart of New York City obtained a judgment against John Smalley of Ridgefield for \$8.16, plus 80 cents for the cost of the suit. On Nov. 11, 1843, a justice of the peace named Pierre A. Sutton "levied this execution on the dwelling house of the said debtor." The house was described as in Ridgefield "in the Society of Ridgebury," bounded on the north and east by property of the heirs of Timothy Keeler, south on "Ned Armstrong's land" and west by highway.

This suit may have involved the "buffalo skin" John Smalley was convicted of taking in 1837. For Hart, seeing Smalley sent to prison may not have been enough; he wanted compensation for the skin. While \$8.16 seems a small amount of money for this much effort, it was the equivalent of about \$225 in today's dollars. If the two John Smalleys are the same and Hart was indeed trying to recoup a loss, there may have been more to the case than is evident. For instance, Hart and Smalley may have been somehow associated and had a falling out, and Hart was seeking his revenge.

Whatever happened, the Hart attachment document is the only discovered mention of the Armstrongs in the Ridgefield land records.<sup>15</sup> No deeds were ever filed with the town clerk when the Armstrongs acquired the land, and none when their family left it, yet the attachment says "Ned Armstrong's land."

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<sup>15</sup> Ridgefield Land Records, Vol. 17, p. 332.

5	15-3	15-3	James Parks	25	M		Farmer	1	500	England		
6			Mary "	26	F					"		
7			Sarah E "	10	F					X J	1	
8			Eugenia "	12	F					Ridgefield H		
9			John Conley	24	M		Laborer	x		England		
10	15-4	15-4	Edward Armstrong	71	M	73	"	x		Danbury Ct	1	1
11			Betsy Watson	34	F	73				Ridgefield Ct	1	1
12	15-5	15-5	Betsy Armstrong	18	F	73				"		1
13			Caroline Smalley	31	F	73				"		1
14	15-6	15-6	John "	45	M	73	Laborer	x		X J		
15			Rosalinda Watson	12	F	73	"	x		Ridgefield H		
16			Mary A "	15	F	73				"		
17			Deey E "	13	M	73				"		1
18			John J "	9	M	73				"		1
19			Samuel J Smalley	7	M	73				"		1
20			Catharine E "	6	F	73				"		1
21			John J "	4	M	73				"		1
22			Mary E "	5	F	73				"		
23	15-7	15-7	Smith Heeler	47	M		Farmer	x	5000	"		

The 1850 census shows 13 occupants of three buildings at Ned's Mountain, including Edward 'Ned' and Betsy Armstrong, their two daughters, son-in-law, and eight grandchildren. John Smalley, then 4, and John Watson, 9, would later serve in the Civil War. One did not return.

It also provides hints as to the location of the Armstrong compound, which appears to have been on the east side of Ned's Lane, off Ned's Mountain Road. The 1850 Census indicates there were three buildings close together, occupied by the Armstrongs, Smalleys and Watsons.

John Smalley died in 1852 at the age of 52 and his wife, two years later — she was only 35. The cause of death for both was listed simply as "dropsy," an excess accumulation of water in a person's tissues, brought on by other causes not given.

By the 1860 census, what remained of the Watson and Smalley families had moved to Danbury; no Armstrongs, Watsons or Smalleys were recorded in Ridgefield.

One Smalley became a longtime resident of Redding. Around 1870, Mary E. Smalley, born to John and Caroline in 1847, married Peter Peterson of Redding; he was about 18 and she 23 at their wedding. They had children Jane and Peter. Mary's husband Peter died in 1889 and is buried in Umpawaug Cemetery in Redding. Her son Peter Henry Peterson, born Oct. 18, 1879, lived all his life in Redding and had at least four children. He was still living in Redding in 1942, working for a contractor.

Mary E. Smalley Peterson lived until 1935 dying around the age of 88. She had worked as a laundress and a household staff member. She may have been the last member of the family to have been a part of the Ned's Mountain station on the Underground Railroad, albeit as a small child.



The 29th regiment in New Haven before departing to fight in the South.—Library of Congress

## Civil War: Four Volunteers from Ned’s Mountain

Four young men who had grown up on Ned’s Mountain were among the first to respond to the news that African Americans could finally fight in the Civil War. Two of them wound up dying in the Union Army and a third was wounded in combat.

After the war began in April of 1861, Connecticut and its towns and cities called for volunteers to join the Union Army. But those calls were not directed at black men. While Congress in 1862 passed an act allowing the enlistment of African-American soldiers, many officials in Connecticut — particularly members of the Democratic Party — opposed using blacks in the military.

When Connecticut Gov. William Alfred Buckingham, a friend of Lincoln and an outspoken supporter of emancipation, proposed legislation allowing African Americans to serve, “Connecticut Democrats denounced the bill in unmeasured terms, arguing it would let loose upon the helpless South ‘a horde of African barbarians,’” wrote Connecticut historian Charles Hawley. “They predicted black cowardice, disgrace, and ruin as a result of the experiment.”<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, Gov. Buckingham managed in November 1863 to persuade the General Assembly to allow the creation of a state regiment of black soldiers, called the “29th Regiment (Colored) of Connecticut Volunteers.” Unlike the Revolutionary War, where units were integrated, the Civil War had only segregated regiments; “integration” in the 29th was limited to the officers — all white.

A regiment consisted of about 600 men. So many people of color volunteered that a second regiment — the 30th — had to be formed. Hawley points out that in 1860, 8,726 blacks were living in Connecticut, of which only 2,206 were men between the ages of 15 and 50. War

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<sup>16</sup> Hawley, Charles (Ben), “The Twenty-ninth Regiment Colored Volunteers,” in *African American Connecticut Explored*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013, p. 177.

records indicate 1,764 men of color eventually served from Connecticut — an astounding 78% of those eligible.<sup>17</sup> Of those volunteers 15% died in the service.

The 29th was full of men eager to serve. “All the soldiers of the Twenty-ninth Regiment, although dark-skinned, felt the full responsibility of their mission,” the Rev. Alexander Herritage Newton, commissary sergeant for the 29th, said in his autobiography. “They were in the South to do, to dare, and to die. And while they had not been trained in military tactics at West Point and were backward in their movements, they had been to the armory of God and had received weapons of the heart that made them daring and dangerous foes — men to be really reckoned with. And I am proud to say that the history of the colored man in warfare has been an enviable one. He has always showed his patriotism by action, by deeds of sacrifice, by death itself. We had the same muscle, the same strength, the same heart, the same conscience, the same cause, the same right, the same liberty as the white man.”<sup>18</sup>

Cousins John S. Smalley and John Watson, and brothers George Washington Halsted and Prince Albert Halsted had grown up in an environment that had aided slaves fleeing from the South. They no doubt heard accounts of the horrors of slavery directly from its victims or in stories told by their parents. The work of Ned and Betsey Armstrong may well have influenced their decisions to show up in Bridgeport in late 1863 to volunteer for the fight. They were all assigned to the 29th.

## An 18-Year-Old Orphan Answers the Call

Born around 1846, John S. Smalley was only six years old when his father died. His mother passed away two years later, leaving him an orphan. He was probably cared for by his aunt, Betsy Watson, until he got older. At some point Frederick Starr became John’s “guardian.” Starr, who in 1860 was a 28-year-old butcher with a wife and two small children, lived on Elm Street in Danbury. He later operated a grocery store in that city.

Smalley may have been in training with Starr, perhaps as an indentured servant, to become a butcher. However, when Smalley was only 18 years old and volunteered to join the Union Army, he gave his occupation as “laborer,” a wide-ranging term that could include anything from farming to ditch digging. And he said his residence at that time was Bridgeport.

Since he was not yet an adult, Smalley needed the permission of a parent or guardian to join up. In an affidavit dated Nov. 27, 1863, Frederick Starr stated: “I hereby give consent to have John S. Smally, my ward, enlist in the service of the United States for the term of three years.”

He was assigned to Company B of the new 29th Colored Regiment.

The men of the 29th were often paid less than their white counterparts and suffered other forms of discrimination. They may even have been cheated out of money due to them for their service. In a history of the 29th Regiment, Sgt. Isaac J. Hill described “the inducements held out to men to join this Regiment” including: “They were to receive a bounty of \$310 from the State,

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<sup>17</sup> Hawley, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Newtown, A.H., *Out of the Briars: An Autobiography and Sketch of the 29th Regiment, Connecticut Volunteers*, Philadelphia, 1910, p. 30.

\$75 from the County from which they enlisted, and \$300 from the United States. The \$310 from the State we received, the other bounties we did not receive.”<sup>19</sup> Hill was an African-American who served as a regiment orderly, probably because he could read and write. He was also a minister.

The 29th spent a couple of months training in New Haven — today, a monument to the regiment stands in New Haven’s Criscuolo Park where training took place; it lists on its stones the names of all the members of the regiment.

The 29th left for Beaufort, S.C., in March 1864. “Never did my ears hear, or my eyes perceive, or my heart feel the strong yearnings of nature as they did at that moment,” Hill wrote. “Mothers weeping for their sons, and wives for their husbands, and sisters for their brothers, and friends for their friends, that were then on their way to the scene of conflict. White and colored ladies and gentlemen grasped me by the hand, with tears streaming down their cheeks, and bid me bye, expressing the hope that we might have a safe return.”

After a brief stint at Beaufort and Hilton Head, which had been taken earlier by Union troops, the regiment was sent to Virginia where it participated in the fighting to take Richmond and Petersburg. Like so many engagements in the Civil War, the battles were fierce and the aftermaths ugly. “When I looked upon the dead and wounded, it was awful to see the piles of legs and arms that the surgeons cut off and threw in heaps on the ground,” Hill wrote.

During this fighting on Oct. 27, John Smalley was wounded “while on the skirmish line.” His casualty report said he suffered a “severe” spine injury.

Hill did not think much of the medical attention injured black soldiers were receiving. “Many ... cases could be saved by a little care and attention after the battle, but the complexion

CASUALTY SHEET.	
Name, <i>John Smalley</i>	
Rank, <i>Private</i> , Company <i>B</i> , Regiment, <i>29<sup>th</sup></i>	
Arm, <i>Inftry</i> , State, <i>C.V.</i>	
Place of casualty, <i>Skirmish line</i>	
Nature of casualty, <i>Wounded, Spine, Severe</i>	
Date of casualty, <i>Oct 27<sup>th</sup> 1864</i>	
FROM WHAT SOURCE THIS INFORMATION WAS OBTAINED.	
Report of Killed, Wounded, and Missing of the <i>29<sup>th</sup></i> Regiment,	
<i>C.V.</i> Brigade, Division, Corps, dated <i>Oct 27<sup>th</sup> 1864</i>	
<i>(Sigs) W. H. Brown Act Adj. 29<sup>th</sup> C.V.</i>	
<i>Ind 54d 20 58</i>	
<i>W. F. Thompson</i>	
Clerk.	

John Smalley’s casualty record lists his injury as severe, yet not too long afterward, he returned to service.

<sup>19</sup> Hill, I.J., *A Sketch of the 29th Regiment of Connecticut Colored Troops*, Baltimore, 1867, p. 7.

and rank of a man has a great bearing,” he said. “There was a great distinction made among the wounded, so much so that it would make the heart of any Christian ache to see men treated so like brutes.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite this, Smalley recuperated and was back in service within a few weeks, though he seems to have been reassigned to less stressful work as a company cook instead of a soldier.

Members of the 29th were among the first Union troops to enter Richmond after it was abandoned by the Confederacy. And on April 4 they witnessed a visit by the President. As Abraham Lincoln walked more than a mile from the James River to Jefferson Davis’s former headquarters, many people lined the street cheering. Wrote Hill:

*All could see the President, he was so tall. One woman standing in a doorway as he passed along shouted, “Thank you, dear Jesus, for this sight of the great conqueror.” Another one standing by her side clasped her hands and shouted, “Bless the Lamb — Bless the Lamb.” Another one threw her bonnet in the air, screaming with all her might, “Thank you, Master Lincoln.” A white woman came to a window but turned away, as if it were a disgusting sight. A few white women, looking out of an elegant mansion, waved their handkerchiefs. President Lincoln walked in silence, acknowledging the salute of officers and soldiers, and of the citizens, colored and white. It was a man of the people among the people. It was a great deliverer among the delivered. No wonder tears came to his eyes when he looked on the poor colored people who were once slaves, and heard the blessings uttered from thankful hearts and thanksgiving to God and Jesus. The gratitude and admiration amounting almost to worship, with which the colored people of Richmond received the President must have deeply touched his heart.”*

Five days later Lee surrendered at Appomattox and 11 days later, Lincoln was dead.

Toward the end of April, the 29th sailed from Richmond for Norfolk via the James River. “We left many kind and weeping friends standing on the wharf bidding us God speed, and wishing us a safe return,” Hill reported.

From Norfolk, the regiment sailed for south Texas, with a stop at New Orleans. The troops arrived at Brazos July 7, part of a 50,000-man force along the Gulf Coast and the Rio Grande dealing both with relations with Mexico and with the beginnings of reconstruction in Texas. Only two months earlier, what some have called the last battle of the Civil War took place outside Brownsville — after the Confederate States had ceased to exist. In the skirmish at Palmito Ranch May 12 and 13, the Confederates overcame a Union Army attack.

To reach the military base at Brownsville, the 29th’s troops had to march 20 miles inland through mosquito-infested marshes and waters sometimes waist deep.

“It had not rained in this part of Texas for six weeks, and yet the mud in the roads was in places up to a man’s knees and for miles hub deep,” Hill recalled. “I was astonished to see the many stragglers strewed all along the road. Many of them died and were buried in the forest, with nothing to look at their graves but the wild beasts of prey.”

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<sup>20</sup> Hill. p. 20



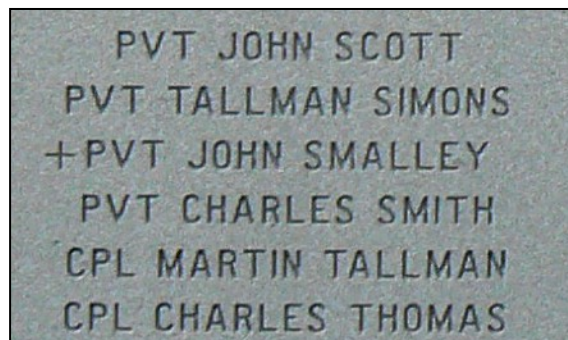


While there is no memorial to John Smalley in his home town of Ridgefield, he is remembered on the Black Soldiers' Monument in Danbury's Wooster Cemetery.

Many members of the regiment became sick and wound up hospitalized, including both John Smalley and Isaac Hill.

It was a nightmare, Hill recalled. "There were seven hundred sick in this hospital, four hundred of that number in the ward with me," he wrote. "The hospital stewards and nurses were men with no human feeling. The poor sick were dying ten per day and before they were cold the hospital stewards would search them, and take anything valuable that they found about them before they reported them dead. It would be impossible for me to tell the many instances of cruelty perpetrated on the poor sick soldiers by the hands of these colored stewards. They acted more like demons than human beings. The fare was also very bad; we had two pieces of bread and a pint of coffee per day."

Hill survived. John S. Smalley didn't — he died of dysentery on Sept. 27 in that hospital.



During its war service, the 29th Regiment lost a total of 198 men, including 45 killed or mortally wounded in battle. More than three times that number — 153 men — died of disease.

Two days after Smalley died, word was received that the regiment was ordered home to Connecticut, where it was disbanded.

Smalley was buried in a national cemetery on the post at Brownsville. However, 1,537 soldiers who had died at Fort Brownsville were moved in 1909 to Alexandria National Cemetery in Pineville, La. Thus, John Smalley's remains lie today in the Deep South, a land whose soldiers he had fought and from which fled slaves his grandparents had assisted.

Although he was born in Ridgefield, the name of John Smalley is not found on any monument or in any history book in his native town. However, it is engraved in stone in Wooster Cemetery in Danbury. There a monument dedicated in 2007 honors African Americans from greater Danbury who served in the Civil War. A year later, a larger multi-stone monument bearing the names of all the men of the 29th Regiment Conn. Volunteer Infantry, was completed in New Haven's Criscuolo Park, the third site.



John Smalley's gravestone in a national cemetery in Louisiana.

## A Cousin Survives and Vanishes

Smalley and his cousin, John J. Watson, grew up together on Ned's Mountain. In 1850, when the census-taker stopped by, Watson was 9 years old and Smalley, 4. Their mothers were sisters.

The two probably traveled together from Danbury to Bridgeport to sign up for the Army. They both enlisted Nov. 27, 1863. Watson was 21 years old and didn't need the permission that Smalley, a minor, had to have from an adult.

Watson was in the same company, B, as his cousin and they no doubt saw much action together, including the Richmond-Petersburg, Va., campaigns. But John Watson escaped injury and was never reported hospitalized with an illness.

He was mustered out of the service in Brownsville, Texas, in October 1865, returned to Connecticut, and seems to have vanished. No record of his life after the war, or of his death, has been found.

His mother, Betsey Ophelia Watson, a daughter of Ned and Betsey Armstrong, had moved to Danbury by 1860. She was working as a laundress, owned a small home, and lived with sons Velandar, George and Tyler, and niece, Elizabeth Smalley. She died in Danbury March 29, 1874.

21	126	1207	Daniel Hunt	45	m		Farmer	10,000	1000	a				21
22			J <sup>d</sup> O'Brien	26	m	✓	Farmlabour			Ireland			1	22
23			Sarah	26	f	✓	Domestic			a			1	23
24			Rich <sup>d</sup> Morison	22	m	✓	Farmlabour			a				24
25	127	1212	Prince Halsted	63	m	B	a			Conn				25
26			Sarah	50	f	B				New York				26
27			Geo Washington	20	m	B	Farmlabour			Conn				27
28			Prince Albert	13	m	B				New York			1	28
29			Mary E	16	f	B				a				29
30	128	1209	Prince Ramorson	23	m	B	Farmlabour			Conn				30
31			Cherry	28	f	B				a				31
32			Charles	6	m	B				a			1	32
33			Lorenzo	5	m	B				a			1	33
34			Unoccupied			✓								34
35	129	1210	Daniel Hunt	77	m	✓	Farmer	2100	500	New York				35
36			Clarissa	71	f					Conn				36

The 1860 census shows the Halsted and Ramorson families living at the Ned's Mountain compound.

## The Two Princes

By 1860, new families had moved into the compound on Ned's Mountain. The census shows Prince Halsted, 63, and his wife, Sarah, 50, along with children, George Washington, 20, Prince Albert, 13, and Mary E., 16, living there. Records spell their name both Halstead and Halsted, but their gravestones in Ridgebury Cemetery use Halsted. (The census actually said "Halstem.")

Living in the same compound were Prince Romorson, 23, "Cherry" or Charity Romorson, 28, Charles Romorson, 6, and Lorenzo Romorson, 5.

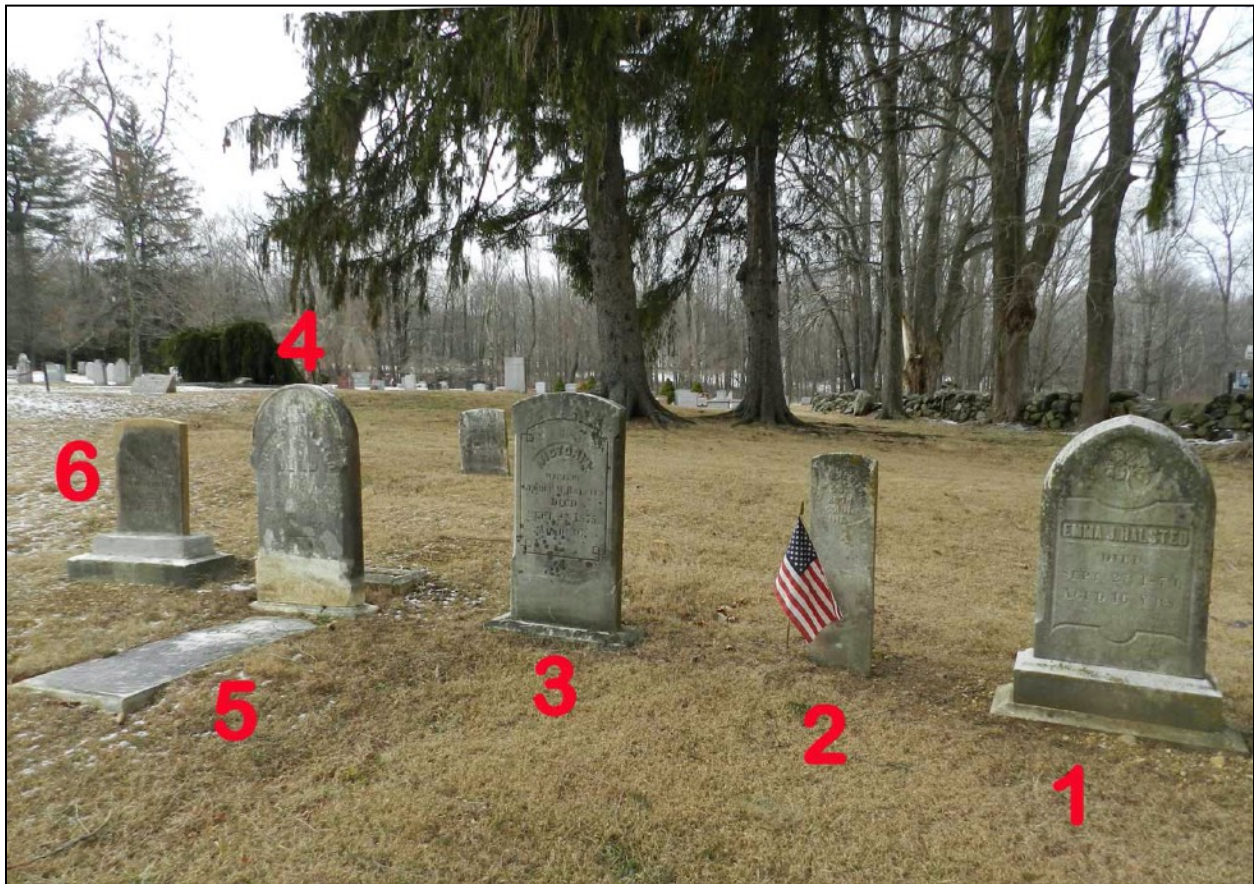
All of them were listed as black and all the men were working as farm hands.

The census suggests that one of the three houses at the Ned's Mountain compound was unoccupied when the census-taker was there.

It is hard to tell just when the Smalleys and Watsons left and the Halsteds and Romorsons arrived. Since there are no deeds on the land records for these families, the censuses provide snapshots of who was living there once every 10 years, leaving to the imagination and a few birth or death records what was happening in between. There may have been points at which some or all of Smalleys, Watsons, Halsteds and Ramorsons were there at the same time.

Prince Halsted was no newcomer to Ridgefield. He shows up in the 1840 Census, living in Ridgebury. Though it's very difficult to pinpoint the location of their home, he and his family do not appear to be living with the Armstrongs at that time. His family then consisted of his wife, and two sons, one under 10 and the other between 10 and 20.

By 1850, Prince Halsted was in North Salem, N.Y., working on Col. Joseph Field's farm on the east side of the lower end of Peach Lake, not far from the Ridgefield line. Everyone got a name in the 1850 Census, so Prince and his wife Sarah are shown living there with three children, Joshua, 8, Prince (Albert), 4, and (Mary) Jane, 6.



Three generations of Halsteds are buried together in Ridgebury Cemetery. 2 is Civil War veteran George W. Halsted, and 3 is Victoria Halsted, his wife. 4 is Prince Halsted, his father, and 5, Sarah E. Halsted, his mother, while 1 is his daughter Emma J. Halsted, who died at age 16. (6 is Jehiel Seymour, who appears to be unrelated.)

The 1860 census shows Prince Halsted and his wife, Sarah E. Halsted, at Ned's Mountain with three children: George Washington Halsted, 20, Mary E. Halsted, 16, and Prince Albert Halsted, 13 (often called just Albert Halsted). "Joshua" has vanished and George Washington appears. Their ages are close; the North Salem census was probably in error.

Described in the 1860 Census as a "farm hand," Prince Halsted was born around 1797 in Connecticut (says the 1860 Census) or New York (says the 1850 Census). The two censuses agree that his wife, Sarah, was a native of New York, born around 1810. Sarah died in 1867 and Prince in 1879. They are buried next to each other in Ridgebury Cemetery.

## Two Sons Serve

Prince and Sarah's sons — George Washington and Prince Albert Halsted — may have envisioned enlisting in the Union Army as a way of fighting slavery, of supporting their country, and even of finding adventure. It wound up a tragedy for Albert.

Both George and Albert enlisted in December 1863, as soon as African-Americans were allowed to join Connecticut's regiments. They were assigned to Company E of the 29th Regiment, and taken to the Draft Rendezvous, a camp in New Haven that provided basic training. Both were almost immediately hospitalized with illnesses.

Albert spent nearly three months in Knight General Hospital, a military facility in New Haven, suffering with typhoid fever. For some reason, he was returned to duty on April 5, 1864. Ten days later, he was dead. His medical record said he had succumbed to "typhoid pneumonia."

His death was tragic, but not unusual. Two thirds of the 620,000 soldiers who died in the Civil War lost their lives to disease, not wounds.

Although there are indications Albert was buried in Wooster Cemetery in Danbury, no gravestone for him exists today. It is possible that a government-sponsored marker was created for him — an order for a marker was reportedly filled, but records show that that stone would have erroneously stated he was with a Massachusetts regiment. Perhaps the stone was rejected because of the error and, somehow, a corrected replacement was never acquired.

"Private Albert Halstead" is, however, listed on the monument in Wooster Cemetery to African Americans who died in the Civil War.



Sgt. Alexander H. Newton wrote of Sgt. George W. Halsted's service in the Richmond-Petersburg campaigns. Newton, commissary sergeant in the 29th, later became a minister.



All members of the 29th Regiment are remembered by name on this monument in Criscuolo Park, New Haven, which was the grounds where the African American troops trained in 1863-64.

At training camp, brother George Washington Halsted came down immediately with measles and mumps and was also sent to Knight General Hospital. George recovered; amazingly, of the 25,340 men treated at Knight between 1862 and 1865, only 185 died.

George Washington Halsted went on to serve with the 29th Regiment in Beaufort, S.C., and the gruesome Richmond-Petersburg campaigns in Virginia. He must have been an outstanding soldier because he was one of the few in the 29th promoted to corporal and then to sergeant.

One of his comrades was the Rev. Alexander Herritage Newton, commissary sergeant for the 29th who noted in his autobiography that Sgt. Halsted was wounded in a “fierce encounter” Sept. 29, 1864, three miles outside Richmond. “This battle was indeed a slaughter pen. The enemy fought like tigers,” Newton said. “These scenes would have made your heart sore. Dear Reader, the wounded and dying scattered over the battlefield thick, the hurrying to and fro of the physicians and the nurses; the prayers and groans and cries of the wounded, the explosion of bombs, the whizzing of bullets, the cracking of rifles; you would have thought that the very forces of hell had been let loose. And, indeed, it was a hell, the horrors of which no one could ever forget.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Newton, p. 55-6.

Sgt. Halsted recovered from his wound and was with the 29th at Brownsville, Texas, after the war ended and the regiment was finally mustered out of service.

After the war, George Halsted returned to farm work. In 1870, he and his family were living in North Salem, probably on the Newman Briggs farm at the very south end of Peach Lake and not far from Colonel Field's farm where his father had worked in 1850. George and his wife Victoria had two daughters, Alagatha (the census-taker said "Allegesh" but Ridgefield Records show Alagatha), 8, and Emma J., 7, living with them then, along with George's father, Prince. A son, George, born in 1858, was apparently living elsewhere.

George Washington Halsted died April 12, 1874, only 31 years old. Victoria died a year later, aged 36. Both are buried in Ridgebury Cemetery, along with their daughter, Emma Halsted, who died in 1879 at the age of 16.

Their son, George, was a 22-year-old laborer living in Danbury in 1880, but what happened to him after that has not been discovered. Nor has Alagatha's whereabouts after 1870 been found.

### A Third Prince — from Hawai'i?

Many mysteries surround the Ned's Mountain compound but perhaps none is as unusual as the identity of "Prince Romorson," described in the 1860 Census as a 23-year-old "farm hand" living in one of the homes with three members of his family.

Prince was a name fairly common among African Americans in the 18th and early 19th Centuries — Prince Halsted and Prince Albert Halsted were living in the same compound. Often it was aimed at reflecting a royal descent from ancestors in Africa. Romorson, however, was a surname that was unusual for persons of any race at that time in this region. There was one notable exception: A Prince *Romerson*, born in the Kingdom of Hawai'i around 1840, came to New York and New England, served in the Union Navy blockading Confederate ports during the Civil War, then joined the Union Army to fight the Confederacy on land, and finally wound up being one of the U.S. Army's "Buffalo Soldiers" in postwar West Texas.

Was the census taker's Prince Romorson the same as Hawaii's Prince Romerson?

A death report in the Ridgefield town hall records adds weight to the possibility that the two were the same. On April 17, 1854, a "laborer" reported as John *Samerson* died in Ridgefield at the age of 60. Like Prince Romerson, Samerson — very close to *Romorson* or *Romerson* — was born in "Owyee," the Sandwich Islands, according to his Ridgefield town hall death record. His race was described as "copper"<sup>22</sup> and he had succumbed to "bilious fever."<sup>23</sup>

Was John "Samerson" the father of "Prince Romorson" who was actually "Prince Romerson"? What are the odds of a native of Hawai'i named John Samerson being in the same small New England town at the same time as someone named Prince Romorson/Romerson, also a native of Hawaii — unless they were connected?

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<sup>22</sup> Ridgefield Vital Records, Vo. 3A, p. 35

<sup>23</sup> Bilious fever has been defined as fever associated with excessive bile or bilirubin in the bloodstream and tissues, causing jaundice. The fever was probably caused by malaria or viral hepatitis.

Sept 19		Charles Smith	50	Male		
Nov 7		Nathan Dow	60	Male		Shoemaker
" 15		Liley				
" 23	Scalded to Death	Mead				
Dec 1	Typhus Fever	David Spuham	49	Male		
Feb 10	Dropsy	Caroline Smalley	55	Black Female	Ridgefield	
→ April 17	Bilious Fever	John Samerson	60	Copper Male	Weymouth	Saborer
July	Misinformation	Ann Eliza Mead		White Female	Ridgefield	
Nov 18 33	Rheumatic Pith	No name		do	do	do
Feb 2	Scarlet Fever	Prudence Enright	11	do Male	do	
" 17	Apoplexy	Azubah Seefield	70	do Female		
"	Old Age	Elmer Mead	85	do		

The 1854 Ridgefield death record for John Samerson, native of 'Owyhee.' Was he John Romerson?

If Romorson, Romerson and Samerson are all the same, how could such variation in the name occur? Several causes may be involved.

The spelling of unfamiliar people's names in official records was often based largely on how they sounded to others, especially when the owners of the names were illiterate. The result was spellings based on interpretation of sounds. For example, the census taker in 1860 recorded the name of Cherry Romorson. Ridgefield vital records indicate she was the same person as Charity Samerson. Someone in the household said "Charity" and the census man heard "Cherry."

The variation of the initial letter — R in Romorson and Romerson and S in Samerson — may be due to another potential source of confusion: Handwriting. The Ridgefield vital records, which consistently use Samerson, were probably based on second-hand information submitted to the town clerk in writing. All of the Samerson/Ramorson people were living in the Ridgebury parish of the town and someone from there, possibly the pastor of the Ridgebury Congregational Church, probably supplied annual reports of births, marriages and deaths.<sup>24</sup> When the Ridgebury records were turned in, the submitter may have written Samerson due to some misunderstanding, or the town clerk may have misinterpreted the submitter's handwriting for Romerson and used Samerson instead during several years of recording the family's name.<sup>25</sup>

Then, too, Romorson/Romerson/Samerson may all be anglicizations of a more complex Hawaiian name and the owners of the name may have varied — or allowed variations in — how the surname was pronounced or spelled. Henry Opukahaia, a young scholar from Hawai'i at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Conn., in the late 1810s, often appeared as Henry

<sup>24</sup> The fact that Ridgebury vitals often appear in the records immediately after the year's worth of Ridgefield parish vitals strongly suggests this

<sup>25</sup> George L. Rockwell, in his *History of Ridgefield*, gives the name of a local American Indian chief as Japorneck. However, he had misread the town clerk's 1727 handwriting. The name was Taporneck.



Obookiah, including on the cover of his posthumously published memoirs.<sup>26</sup> After citing several Hawaiians who served in the Civil War, historians Justin Vance and Anita Manning pointed out the difficulty in tracing the past and future of these soldiers. “Likely there were dozens more Native Hawaiians who served, but it may be impossible to identify them because often names simplified or invented, such as ‘John Boy’ or ‘Joseph Kanaka’ [Hawaiian for ‘man’], were used on official enlistment papers.”<sup>27</sup>

“Prince Romerson was definitely an anglicized name,” Dr. Vance said in an email correspondence.<sup>28</sup> “I’d guess completely made up (or given by the enlisting sea captain authority) vs. a version of a Hawaii name.”

Prince Romerson is well enough known to be the subject of a 1,500-word profile on Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, taken largely from a two-page biography in the 2015 book, *Asians and Pacific Islanders and the Civil War*.<sup>29</sup> He was born around 1840 in Hawai‘i, then a kingdom, which became a U.S. territory in 1900. Very little is known of his early life but according to Wikipedia biographers, he was “living in the American Northeast before the war.”

If the Romersons, Romorsons and Samersons were the same people, at least some of them were in Ridgefield by 1854 when John Samerson died.

The 1860 census and town’s vital records seem to be reporting the same people with names spelled differently:

- The census says that a residence in the Ned’s Mountain compound housed Prince Romorson, 23, Cherry Romorson, 28, Charles Romorson, 6, and Lorenzo Romorson, 5.
- The Ridgefield vital records report that Lorenzo D. Samerson was born April 15, 1856, a child of William and Charity A. Samerson. William was 30 years old, and Charity, 26, at the time.
- In 1859, William Samerson died of consumption in Ridgefield at the age of 33.
- The town’s vital records also note two other deaths: John F. Samerson, 6, who died of consumption Aug. 20, 1860, and Ann M. Samerson, 10 months, who died Feb. 1, 1859, of a “brain disease.”<sup>30</sup> No parents are given, but they were probably children of William and Charity.

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<sup>26</sup> “A Great Hope for Hawaii Dies in Cornwall,” *Today in Connecticut History*, Office of the State Historian and CTHumanities, Feb. 17, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Vance, Justin W. and Anita Manning, The Effects of the American Civil War on Hawai‘i and the Pacific World. *World History Connected* 9.3, (2012): 57 pars. 28 Feb. 2020 <<https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/9.3/vance.html>>.

<sup>28</sup> Feb. 28, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Shively, Carol A., ed.. *Asians and Pacific Islanders and the Civil War*. Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2015. The Romerson profile by Ruthann Lum McCunn appears on p. 142-45

<sup>30</sup> Ridgefield vital records, Vol. 3A, p. 38.

- An Ann M. *Rommerson*, age 8, died of whooping cough on Oct. 31, 1852, according to the only Ridgefield vital record using the R spelling.<sup>31</sup> Ann M. *Samerson*, the infant who died seven years later, may have been named for this girl.

Since John Samerson was 60 years old at his death in 1854, he may have been the father of Prince Romorson as well as of William Samerson. (John may also have been the namesake for the child, John F. Samerson, who died in 1860.) Thus, Charity was probably Prince's sister-in-law.

William's death in 1859 explains why he does not appear in the 1860 census. His death — or John Samerson's five years earlier — may explain something else: The origin of the mysterious skeleton found in 1879 in the secret cave the Armstrongs had earlier used for the Underground Railroad.<sup>32</sup>

Hawaiians are known to have used caves for burials. According to Hawaiian writer Betty Fullard-Leo, "Burial caves have been found on every Hawaiian Island. Unfortunately, by the time many of the caves were catalogued by authorities, they had already been discovered earlier and looted. Most chiefly families are believed to have had their own secret burial caves, the location of which was closely guarded by the kahu, or family retainer. Sometimes stone walls that looked like the surrounding cliffs were cleverly constructed to hide a cave entrance."<sup>33</sup> Other sources say commoners also used caves to inter their dead "well into the Christian period."<sup>34</sup>

What happened to the 1879 skeleton has not been learned, but it probably was interred in an unmarked grave, perhaps in Ridgebury Cemetery.

The births of sons Charles and John, who may have been twins, were not recorded in Ridgefield's vital records, suggesting they occurred when William and Charity lived elsewhere, and adds to evidence that the family may have arrived around 1854 or 1855, possibly just after John Samerson's death.

Perhaps saddened by the death of her husband and two of her children, Charity Romorson/Samerson, along with Lorenzo and Charles, seem to have left town sometime after 1860 and to have vanished from the national records. None of them could be found in any subsequent censuses, military records or cemetery databases. Perhaps Charity remarried.

Prince Romerson of Hawai'i, however, left many records. In January 1863, he was in New York City where he enlisted in the Union Navy. Interestingly, records indicate he had worked as a barber before enlisting. For a year he served aboard the USS *Wamsutta* and USS *Mercedita* as part of the squadrons maintaining the blockade of Confederate ports.

Why would a citizen of the Kingdom of Hawaii living in Ridgefield wind up fighting in the Civil War? "During any war, people join the military from many motives," say Vance and Manning. "In most cases, their service was probably the result of Hawaiians being away from

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<sup>31</sup> Ridgefield vital records, Vol. 3A, p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> See page 7.

<sup>33</sup> Fullard-Leo, Betty, "Sacred Burial Practices," *Coffee Times*, Kauai, Hawaii, February, 1998.

<sup>34</sup> Allen, M. S., and T. L. Hunt, "Descriptive Summary of A North Kona Burial Cave, Island Of Hawaii," paper prepared for the Mauna Loa Field Station, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, 1976.

home, in need of work, and the best choice before them was to enlist. Although gainful employment and adventure played a part, ideological reasons also were a motive. Hawaii missionary descendants mention their interests in preserving the Union and in abolition, but Native Hawaiians who were educated largely in a New England model, may have had similar interests.”<sup>35</sup>

By May 1864, Prince Romerson had left the Navy and was in Boston where he joined the Union Army. He was assigned to the 5th Regiment Massachusetts Colored Volunteer Cavalry. Possibly because of his past experience or an ability to read and write, he was almost immediately promoted to sergeant.

Romerson fought at the Second Battle of Petersburg and, like members of Connecticut’s 29th Regiment, took part in the bitter Richmond-Petersburg Campaign. He also served as a guard for the Union prison camp for Confederates in Maryland.

After the war ended, his regiment, like the 29th, was sent to Texas, but Romerson was taken ill and recuperated in New Orleans, then at a hospital on an island off New Rochelle, N.Y. before being mustered out of the service with his regiment Oct. 9, 1865.

Apparently fond of the military and the adventure it offered, Romerson enlisted in 1867 as a private in what became the 25th United States Infantry Regiment. A racially segregated unit of the United States Army, it was dubbed “Buffalo Soldiers” and included many Civil War veterans from “colored” regiments. Serving at least three years, Romerson fought in the American Indian Wars along the



As if Prince Romerson’s name wasn’t confusing enough, he wound up Rowerson on his federal gravestone at the National Cemetery in San Antonio.

<sup>35</sup> Vance, Justin W. and Anita Manning, *op.cit.*

Texas frontier. When he died on March 30, 1872, of unstated causes, possibly at Fort Griffin, he may have been a discharged veteran, working as a citizen, possibly as a barber, a profession he is believed to have practiced before joining the military.<sup>36</sup>

Romerson is buried in the San Antonio National Cemetery. Perhaps it is no surprise that his gravestone bears yet another version of his name: Prince Rowerson.

How a family from Hawaii wound up as farm workers in a small, rural community in southwestern Connecticut is one of the many mysteries surrounding the Romersons/Samersons. New England in the 19th Century had been a destination for a number of Hawaiians who left their native land aboard whaling vessels that frequently visited the islands' harbors. New York and New Haven were the nearest significant ports. Did these newcomers run into someone from Ridgefield who reported a house was available to a family who would do farmwork? Did John Samerson come first? Was he the father of Prince and William, and did they come with him or later? John's death report says he was married, but there's no other record of a wife; what happened to her?

Perhaps researchers in Hawaii will be able to help in finding the roots of this fascinating family that spent nearly a decade in distant Ridgefield and may have left the bones of one of its members in a Ned's Mountain cave.

• • •

By 1870, no people of color were left at Ned's Mountain and only one of the old cottages on the compound appears to have been in use. It was occupied by Irish immigrants, Pat and Mary Hartell, and their three children, Mary, Maggie and Patrick. Four decades of being a refuge for people fleeing enslavement and a home to people fighting slavery had ended.

Today, nothing visible remains of the Armstrong compound. The east side of the lane is steep and wooded, with a modern house at the summit. The lane itself leads to a back entrance of a large estate, the former McKeon farm more recently called Double H Farm for its owner, the late Hunter Harrison — perhaps ironically, Harrison was a leading North American railroad executive.

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<sup>36</sup> Shively/McCunn, p. 145.