



ARTIST

William Earle Williams

TITLE

Toll Booth Site and Back of Deb's Restaurant, Jerry Rescue Transfer Point, Hastings, New York

DATE

2003

DIMENSIONS

17 in H x 17 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2007.059

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 10

WILLIAM EARLE WILLIAMS

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2003
Main Gallery, 2007

William Earle Williams: *Unsung Heroes: African American Soldiers in the Civil War* Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2016 – 2017
Place: Selections from the Light Work Collection

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 127
Contact Sheet 140
Contact Sheet 173

BIOGRAPHY

For a more recent CV or bio please visit the artist's website, www.williemearlewilliams.com

William "Willie" Williams lives in Haverford, PA and received his BA in History at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY and his MFA in Fine Arts at Yale University School of Art in New Haven, CT. He has been a professor of fine arts at Haverford College in Pennsylvania since 1978, and a curator of photography since 1979. Williams participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program from July 15- August 15 2003.

ESSAYS

It is a dramatic sensation to stand and gaze upon a site, building, or room and "feel" the past—the power of a place conveying an emotional connection to events or persons once there before. This connection is easily experienced when it involves a personal encounter, but the power of a place is harder to grasp without a personal reference, much like events occurring before we were born. While the words of historians can help, Willie Williams firmly believes that contemporary photography can channel that power of place to the viewer. Before securing his graduate degree in fine arts at Yale, Williams' focus of undergraduate study was in history at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY. He blended these two interests by photographing landscapes of Civil War battlefields, and sought to photograph sites evoking the power of human tragedies and triumphs that transpired there. In the 1990s, he began to focus his lens specifically on sites involving the Union's African American troops, men whose military contributions had long been overlooked. Williams wished to communicate their significant role by interpreting the power of the places where blacks fought. He began to focus on a theme of the African American struggle for freedom along the Underground Railroad. Williams started using his photography to explore the expressions of Underground Railroad sites throughout the eastern United States. Upstate New York was a caldron of debate and a crucible for leadership in the cause of anti-slavery. In Syracuse, Jermain Loguen, an escaped Tennessee slave, and Samuel May, among many others, were actively involved in the Underground Railroad. Local abolitionists' boldest moment came on October 1, 1851 following the arrest of William "Jerry" Henry, a former slave from Missouri. Under provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law, Henry was seized by federal authorities. That evening a crowd of abolitionists, including both black and white citizens of Syracuse, broke into the jail and rescued him. Underground Railroad agents eventually spirited Henry away to Canada. The event was electrifying news across the country—cheered in the North and condemned in the South. Williams' opportunity to be a Light Work Artist-in-Residence at Syracuse during the summer of 2003 brought him back to Upstate New York to explore the profound presence of the Underground Railroad. Once there, he was captivated by the amazing story of the Jerry Rescue. Williams researched Jerry's route to freedom, and set out to spend time at key locations to photographically interpret the history invested in those places. He sought to compose the elements present in these everyday spots to stimulate the viewer's imagination. Williams began at Clinton Square where the dramatic rescue occurred. To him, befitting the event, it casts the power of a great civic space. This is embodied in the square's dominant Soldiers and Sailors Monument, a memorial to all local Civil War veterans, both black and white. In one of his images he positions a "One Way" street sign to perhaps suggest the imperative moral direction of great conflict. Unfortunately, the building where the rescue occurred is now long gone, a parking lot stands in its place. But Williams employs the exposed wall of an adjacent building and nearby trees, positioned in his photo like exposed beams, to imply the idea of something torn apart—Jerry's life? Or perhaps the life of a nation? William Henry's escape route ran north through Oswego County. An innocuous diner now stands at the spot of one transfer point in Hastings, NY where random posts dot the grounds. Since both Henry's flight and the efforts of those pursuing him involved horses, could this be an allusion to hitching posts? Inside the diner, Williams portrays a deserted, lonely scene. Surely no one felt lonelier in this space than William Henry 150 years earlier. Finally, Williams takes the viewer to the point at an Oswego harbor where Henry left the country of his birth forever. A period-looking boat helps set a frame of reference. The image points straight to Canada just beyond the low hanging clouds—a promised land of freedom forever. Williams guides us through time, and using his camera, shows us the power of place, making it impossible to look at everyday locations the same way again. Dennis Connors William "Willie" Williams lives in Haverford, PA and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program from July 15-August 15, 2003. Dennis Connors lives in Syracuse, NY and is curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association Museum, which recently opened a major permanent exhibit entitled "Freedom Bound: The Story of the Underground Railroad in Syracuse." In January 2007, Light Work's main gallery featured the exhibition "Unsung Heroes: African American Soldiers in the Civil War" by Willie Williams. Art historian Richard Reed wrote the essay for the exhibition catalogue, Contact Sheet 140, with introduction by Laura A. Guth: Introduction: William Earle Williams has already logged more than 50,000 miles in the pursuit of his current project, 'Unsung Heroes: African American Soldiers in the Civil War.' When he began to look closely at Civil War memorial sites in 1986 with his 'Gettysburg: A Journey in Time' series, he noted a serious deficiency. Though Lincoln delivered his famous address in the hub of important locations holding rich details of African American participation in the struggle for freedom, there are no plaques or statues present to give us the full story. There is no mention of bullet holes in the barn of a black station master on the Underground Railroad, nor the white abolitionist-owned tavern that is also in the immediate area of the Gettysburg Address site. This begs the question whether these landmarks are not an equally important part of the story of our country's history, and why they would not be. There is a notable absence of an equally comprehensive record to commemorate and honor the contribution of more than 180,000 African American soldiers, who trained, fought, and ultimately shaped the outcome of a Union victory in the American Civil War. This disparity is the driving force for Williams' work, as he sets out to create a comprehensive pictorial record of prominent sites where black troops contributed to the final Union victory with distinction and valor. Alan Trachtenberg's essay for Williams' Gettysburg catalogue reminds us how the transformation of land—once battlefield, now national park—is indicative of a nation's need to remember and to forget. (1) Just as monuments symbolize an imperative to remember, Williams' photographs serve to restore forgotten or unmaintained sites to our national memory. Williams is clearly fulfilling a need to commemorate, personally, by describing his found sites with extreme attention to all the highest details of his craft, providing us intimate detail of places we likely have never heard of and may never see in person. Undeniably, the quiet viewing of these intimately sized, tonally rich photographs unlock access for us to meditate a deeper meaning. What is seen cannot be forgotten. Williams' photographs allow us the process of recognizing our own memory within, so that a personal acknowledgement occurs. To contemplate the well-worn path through the wooded area in 'Cabin Creek, Oklahoma, 1999' is to imagine who has walked along the path before. Such images offer quiet reflection to consider the contemporary landscape within its historical context. Other images, such as 'Earthworks, Fort

Pillow, Tennessee, 1999' can stir a more dramatic response from our collective memory. It is as if we are seeing a re-photograph from Mathew B. Brady's series of Civil War battle sites, now long void of bodies, but not of their presence. Walter Benjamin said of Eugène Atget's pictorial record of Paris, "photographs become a standard evidence for historical occurrences and acquire a hidden political significance." (2) The land holds the truth. Though Williams' approach has been one of reverence and commemoration, of listening, finding, looking, and bringing powerful images to light, they too, obtain a political element when placed before the viewer. To raise these questions to the mirror of American cultural remembering is to reflect upon the discriminatory practice by which we did remember and forget. Laura Guth Assistant Director 1. Alan Trachtenberg, "William Earle Williams Gettysburg Photographs" in 'Gettysburg: A Journey in Time' (Philadelphia: Esther M. Klein Art Gallery, University City Science Center, 1997). 2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in 'Écrits Français,' Walter Benjamin and Jean Maurice Monnoyer (Paris: Gallimard, 1991). Essay: In the first months of the Civil War in 1861, as white volunteers surged forwards, young black men in the North who tried to enlist were turned away. Although African Americans had served in both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, authorities used a federal law passed in 1792 to prevent blacks from serving in the United States army. Just two weeks after Fort Sumter surrendered, Secretary of War Simon Cameron announced that "this Department has no intention to call into the service of the Government any colored soldiers." (1) It was to be, most Americans believed, "a white man's war." (2) Abraham Lincoln's position, despite his personal opposition to slavery, was ambiguous and fluid. The need to keep Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri loyal; the belief that the war would be a short struggle; and widespread racial prejudice influenced the administration's decision to recruit only white soldiers. Nevertheless, Northern blacks continued to organize and drill in the expectation that they would be allowed to fight at some point in the future. (3) A year later much had changed. Victory seemed no closer; casualties were mounting; and an increasing number of politicians and civilians had become convinced that there had to be an end, in some form, to Southern slavery. More Americans had come to accept the view of General Ulysses S. Grant that "if it is necessary that slavery should fall that the Republic might continue, let slavery go." (4) Congress, in passing the Second Confiscation Act and the Militia Act during the summer of 1862, authorized greater involvement of blacks in the war. (5) Although Lincoln believed that he had to proceed cautiously, by the early months of 1862 some of his generals began to recruit black soldiers. In Kansas, Brigadier General Jim Lane, a former senator from that state, recruited a regiment of black soldiers despite being twice informed by the War Department that he had no authority for such an act. He simply ignored the notifications. (6) Eventually, in the first weeks of 1863, the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers Regiment was officially mustered into service and could be officially equipped and paid even though many of its men had already experienced battle. (7) In South Carolina, General David Hunter aggressively recruited a regiment of Carolinian ex-slaves, often against their will. (8) His actions triggered an angry debate in the House of Representatives where border politicians warned that arming African Americans was a violation of civilized conduct and could precipitate a servile war. In response, some republicans ridiculed their fears and called for greater use of armed blacks. (9) Lincoln, charting a course between the two extremes, revoked Hunter's proclamation while effectively ignoring his recruiting efforts. It was not until late August that Secretary of War Edwin Stanton officially authorized the arming and equipping of up to 5,000 black soldiers in South Carolina. (10) These generals and another, General Benjamin Butler, were able to take the actions they did because Lincoln had accepted the necessity of utilizing blacks in the war effort. With the failure of Major George B. McClellan's Peninsular Campaign to attack Richmond, Virginia by boat, and the lack of success in the West, an end to the war seemed a long way off. Moreover, the willingness of the United States and of black men to serve stood in sharp contrast to the declining numbers of white volunteers. Despite all of his pragmatic arguments, Lincoln was unable to persuade border state politicians and slaveholders to accept a program of gradual compensated emancipation. As a result, he was willing to overlook the actions of some officers enrolling black troops even as he officially rejected an offer by an Indiana delegation to raise two black regiments from their state. His explanation was that such an act would cost his army 50,000 men from border states. (11) Nevertheless, on July 22, 1862 Lincoln informed his cabinet that he intended to issue a proclamation as commander-in-chief freeing all slaves in states engaged in war against the Union. Secretary of State William H. Seward had persuaded Lincoln to hold off the announcement until after a Union victory. The bloody battle of Antietam provided the opportunity and on September 22, Lincoln announced that as of January 1, 1863, "all persons held as slaves within any state...then...in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." (12) By the time the proclamation went into effect, an additional paragraph had been added to it, authorizing the use of the newly emancipated slaves by the army and navy in a series of ways. (13) As a result, by the start of 1863, the Union government began to authorize the recruitment of black regiments staffed with white officers. (14) Officials estimated that about 40,000 black men of military age could be found in the North and of these, more than seventy percent volunteered. (15) By mid-summer, Northern states were recruiting black soldiers and had established camps such as Camp William Penn in Pennsylvania and Camp Delaware in Ohio to train the new soldiers. Even before then, army recruiters realized that if large numbers of African Americans were going to be added to the army, they would have to be found among Southern blacks. Major recruiting efforts were soon begun with General Daniel Ullmann in Louisiana, in the upper Mississippi valley under Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas, and in eastern North Carolina under Brigadier General Edward A. Wild. In May 1863 the government established the Bureau of Colored Troops to centralize the process by which black regiments would be raised and staffed. Three screening boards were set up by the fall of 1863 in Washington, Cincinnati, and St. Louis to examine and screen officer candidates applying to the bureau. The screening served a useful purpose because, as Stoddard satirized, "it was astonishing how large a number of second lieutenants of volunteers were willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the service as majors and colonels." (16) For most black volunteers, the years after they joined the army would be difficult and dirty, often dangerous, and frequently deadly. They shared the boredom and terror that was common to most Civil War soldiers while they were expected to do much of the army's heavy lifting. Frequently the arms, clothing, tents, and rations given to them were among the poorest in the army. Like all soldiers, they were expected to follow orders without questions and do whatever jobs that they were given. Initially, the jobs most frequently assigned to the black soldiers involved manual labor. Black soldiers built fortifications and earthworks and dug trenches. They man-handled heavy guns into position, built batteries and bombproofs, and often acted as garrison troops in the same forts that they had built. They were used to haul and guard supplies, the task assigned to the black Kansas soldiers when they were attacked at Cabin Creek, Oklahoma. They were used in countless large and small raids, from Darien, Georgia to Honey Hill, South Carolina, and they forged a name for themselves in battles from Port Hudson, Louisiana to Fort Wagner, South Carolina. In a cruel irony, many of the fortifications that the black regiments were ordered to storm had been built by slaves impressed by Confederate authorities. By the time the war was over, almost 180,000 African American soldiers had joined the army, and they left more than 36,000 of their comrades in graves and cemeteries across the South. The black men who enlisted in the Northern army faced greater dangers than other Union soldiers. From the start, Confederate officials threatened to execute captured black soldiers or to sell them into slavery. Lincoln issued General Order 11, threatening to execute or place at hard labor an equal number of Confederate prisoners if black POWs were mistreated. That warning ended any official Confederate policy of treating captured black soldiers any differently from white POWs. It did not, however, prevent individual Confederate soldiers from committing unsanctioned atrocities. At Fort Pillow, Tennessee; the Battle of the Crater, Virginia; Poison Springs, Arkansas; and elsewhere, black soldiers trying to surrender were killed or executed later. They represented some of the most tragic and disturbing episodes in the Civil War. Even in the Union army, black soldiers faced prejudice and discrimination. The issue that most clearly symbolized the unequal treatment was the struggle for equal pay. While a white private earned \$13 per month, the black soldier initially received only \$10 from which \$3 was automatically deducted for clothing. (17) The

protests of the soldiers and their supporters finally forced Congress to grant equal pay to the black soldiers in June 1864 and make this change retroactive for men who had been free when they enlisted. Despite this, the army provided, in many ways, an environment that was less discriminatory than what most blacks had experienced prior to 1860. This was especially true for the Southern ex-slaves and free blacks, but even black recruits from the North left behind a society steeped in prejudice that had drastically restricted their social and political rights. (18) Once the War Department accepted African Americans into the army, it inevitably, if unevenly, extended to them an institutional safeguard and protection that guaranteed them, in theory if not always in practice, equality of treatment for men of equal rank. Of course, the Civil War armies were overwhelmingly made up of volunteers who entered the military with all of the values, expectations, and biases that they had held as civilians and that meant that implementation of any color-blind policy was a contested event. Black soldiers everywhere would have understood and shared the feelings of one soldier in the 4th USCT who was among the first to enter Wilmington, North Carolina. His moment of triumph in reuniting with his family was summarized by a black comrade, who wrote, "He had left his home a slave, but had returned in the garb of a Union soldier, free, a man." (19) Richard Reid Richard Reid is a professor of history at the University of Guelph and the director of the Tri-University graduate program in History. He has published extensively in both Canadian and American history and his latest book, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers in the Civil War*, published by the University of North Carolina Press, is due out in the fall of 2007. 1. Noah Andre Trudeau, "Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862-1865" (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 8. 2. See note 1 above, 8; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, "In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 269. 3. In the early stages of the war, black petitioners raised arguments about the value of black troops that would resonate in the months ahead. Some of the groups offering their services, such as the Fort Pitt Cadets, had been drilling for two years and could take over auxiliary duties and occupying forts almost immediately. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., "The Black Military Experience" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 78-86. 4. John Y. Simon, ed., "The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant" (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), IV, 227. 5. Passed in July, 1862, the Second Confiscation Act freed the slaves of all disloyal citizens and gave the President wide powers on how they could be used. The Militia Act, passed at the same time, allowed African Americans to be used by the federal government "for...any military or naval service for which they may be found competent." Significantly, the Militia Act established a pay rate for blacks hired by the army of ten dollars per month and one ration. It also specified that three dollars of the pay could be in clothing. 6. See Dudley T. Cornish, "The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865" (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 69-78, for a full discussion of Lane's actions. 7. Joseph T. Glatthaar, "Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers" (New York: Free Press, 1990), 122. 8. General Hunter also declared all slaves in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida forever free. William K. Klingaman, "Abraham Lincoln and the Road to Emancipation, 1861-1865" (New York: Viking, 2001), 25-27; Edward Miller, "Lincoln's Abolitionist General: The Biography of David Hunter" (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 112-114. 9. John David Smith, ed., "Let Us All Be Grateful That We Have Colored Troops That Will Fight" in "Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era" (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 10-11. 10. Phillip Paludan, "The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln" (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 130, 152-153; Edward Miller, "Lincoln's Abolitionist General: The Biography of David Hunter" (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 107-115. 11. Roy P. Basler, "The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln," vol. 5 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 356-357, 423. 12. See note 11 above, 434. 13. The new authorization envisioned that the newly freed slaves would garrison forts and military establishments and man a range of naval vessels. See note 3 above, 82-83, 85. 14. Initially, it was expected that Northern blacks would join New England regiments because the pool of potential recruits was limited. See note 3 above, 9. 15. By the end of the war, 32,671, or seventy-one percent, of the service eligible black men had enlisted. See note 3 above, 12, 87-88. 16. William Stoddard, "Inside the White House in War Times" (New York: CL Webster & Co., 1880), 174. 17. The War Department was advised to use the level of pay established by the Militia Act of 1862. 18. Although conditions varied considerably across the North, most states restricted the rights of black residents. Ten of the Northern states prevented blacks from voting while another three had severe restrictions on that right. Midwestern states such as Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana banned interracial marriages while many of the school systems were segregated. See note 2 above, 168-170; Jacque Voegeli, "Free but Not Equal: the Midwest and the Negro during the Civil War" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 172; Robert Cook, "The Fight for Black Suffrage in the War of the Rebellion" in "The American Civil War: Explorations and Reconsiderations," eds. SUnited Statesn-Mary Grant and Brian Holden Reid (New York: Longman, 2000), 218-221. 19. Edwin S. Redkey, ed. "A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861-1865" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 167.