

Martin Delany: Pittsburgh's Forgotten Hero of the Underground Railroad and Civil War

*By Samuel W. Black
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Courtesy of Senator John Heinz History Center*

There are many famous heroes of the Quest for Freedom, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, but one of the most important figures has gone relatively unheard of: Pittsburgh's own Martin Delany. Delany was the first African American field officer in the United States Army, serving in the Civil War. He was also considered "the chief superintendent" of the Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania.

Delany started his life in Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia) in 1812. His father, Samuel, was enslaved, but the parents of his mother, Pati, were from Africa, which meant Pati was free. When Martin was only a few years old, attempts were made to enslave Pati, Martin, and his siblings. Pati carried her two youngest children to a court house in Winchester 20 miles away to successfully argue for her family's freedom.

In 1822, it was discovered that Pati had been teaching her five children how to read and write, breaking a Virginia law that prohibited Blacks from learning to read and write. Pati moved her family to Chambersburg, PA to escape punishment. Samuel, initially had to stay behind as an enslaved person, but a year later he rejoined his family after buying his freedom.

When Delany turned 19 he moved to Pittsburgh where he began attending Jefferson College and became an apprentice for various abolitionist doctors throughout the city. It was here in Pittsburgh in 1843 that Delany founded and began to write for *The Mystery*, a Black-controlled newspaper, although many of his articles were widely published in other publications including William Lloyd Garrison's *the Liberator*. In 1847, Delany met Frederick Douglass and together with Garrison created the *North Star*, one of the most influential newspapers advocating emancipation.

In 1863, after President Lincoln instituted the draft for the Civil War, Delany traveled all over the country to recruit Black men to enlist in the army. His efforts raised thousands of troops. In 1865, Delany convinced Lincoln to create a corps of Black men in the United States Army that would be led by Black officers, which would serve as an inspiration to Southern Blacks. Frederick Douglass had approached Lincoln with this idea before, only to have the idea rejected. Delany, however, succeeded and also greatly impressed Lincoln. In a letter to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Lincoln wrote: "Do not fail to meet this most extraordinary and intelligent Black man."

After the war, Delany was very active in helping African American farmers learn skills of business and negotiation to get better prices for their cotton crops. He was also very active in politics and outspoken on public matters. He died of consumption in 1885. W.E.B. DuBois once said of Martin Delany in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1936: "His was a magnificent life, and yet, how many of us have heard of him?" While largely obscured by history, Martin Delany's legacy lives on in both his writings and his work for creating a better life for African Americans.

For more information about Delany, visit <http://www.questforfreedom.org> and check out the Freedom Journeys. Or, for even more information, why not come out and meet him in person? Experience history come to life April 4th and 5th at Pittsburgh's Quest for Freedom Live and Learn Weekend featuring Martin Delany, hosted by the Heinz History Center and Visit Pittsburgh. For access to a collection of writings by Delany, visit <http://www.libraries.wvu.edu/delany/home.htm>.

The impact of Martin Delany will also be featured Thursday April 3rd on 860AM WAMO on the Bev Smith Show, which starts at 7pm. Ms. Smith will be hosting Harold Holzer, world-renowned Lincoln expert, and Joseph Certaine, past President of the United States Colored Troops Living History Association and descendant of a USCT soldier, to discuss African American soldiers in the Civil War.

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