

IN THEIR WORDS



“I dont get fair play here”: A Black Vermonter Writes Home

Edited by JANE WILLIAMSON

The following letter is one of thousands in the Robinson family correspondence collection at Rokeby Museum. The Rokeby collection is known primarily for antebellum era letters to abolitionists Rowland Thomas and Rachel Gilpin Robinson that document fugitive slaves sheltered by the family. But this letter is of possibly greater interest because it was written *by* a black Vermonter, not about him. It provides the rare opportunity—especially so in Vermont—to hear an African American voice unmediated by white interpreters.

Born in Charlotte, Vermont, in 1828 or 1829,¹ Aaron N. Freeman enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in 1864. He was one of several black Vermonters who helped to refill the ranks of the 54th after the losses incurred at Battery Wagner in 1863.² The letter was addressed to George G. Robinson, son of the abolitionists, whom Freeman had known since his late teens when they worked together on the Robinson’s Ferrisburgh farm.³

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April

JacksonVill Florida the 5 1864

Mr. George Robinson i thaught that i wood infarm you how we are treated here i hav work all night and then had to drill all day they make them that have got on boots go out in thair bair feet in the thistl and dril then they set on thair horses and laf at us that ant right i hant had but one shirt for more then a month when i git my shirt wash i hafto tak it of and let it ~~dr~~ dry then put it on a gain sum times i hafto catch lise sum times they are as thick as the hair on a dog and flease with them to boot cant get eny thing that is fit to eat here then i have had a cold evry sens

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i have ben here i think that we shant get eny money from the govern-ment they say that they ant pay but 7 dolars a month that what the Cournal said to they paid to colard troops and he said that we had beter right home and see about it he said that he could not do eny thing a boutit ~~than~~ then i thaught i had beter right home and see what could be done a boutit i dont wanto stay down here and git knathing for it and be killd or git my limes brake then git nothing to help my self with then com on the town i dont want any such i want to hav my pay or get home i dont wan to i dont want wark far nothing

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i want to get home as soon as i can for i dont get fair play here they dont treat this rigment as they do the others rigment they are the poores off far things they dont pay them eny thing they dont want to pay them eny thing i cant stand that i want my pay and i know i shant get it they say it is a fraid under a falce patence that they have got us down here i think ~~if~~ that they cant hold us thair can they i want sum one to find out whather they can or not and get us a way or get our pay i can ~~get~~ sum things then that will make me beter off if i should be sick i should hafter suffer i hafter sufer a nuf know i hant had eny thing fit to eat sense i come down here yours truly Aaron Fr

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please excuse this scribling it is a hard place to right

Aaron N Freeman⁴

Freeman was irate, and for good reason: Living conditions were terrible, the white officers used their authority to ridicule and humiliate the black soldiers, and, to top it all off, they were not receiving their pay. This seemed to gall him above all; one expects to endure harsh conditions as a soldier in wartime, but not to be paid—or to be paid less than others—was not part of the bargain he had made. Freeman was particularly alarmed at the prospect of being injured, rendered unable to work, and having to “com on the town.”

Of course, Aaron Freeman was not the only African American soldier to write a letter of complaint, nor for that matter, the only black Vermonter.⁵ Loudon S. Langley, a fellow member of the 54th Massachusetts, also registered his dissatisfaction, but he did so publicly by writing to both *The Weekly Anglo-African* (New York) and *The Burlington Free Press*.⁶ The letters make an interesting contrast: Freeman was lodging a personal complaint, and Langley was taking a position. Freeman's letter shows the rudimentary mastery of English that was probably typical of a Vermont district school education, and Langley was eloquent. Freeman also seemed to be following the colonel's suggestion that the men write home to "see what could be done" about their pay and may have written to George Robinson in his capacity as Ferrisburgh town clerk. No record of Robinson's response or other action remains in the Museum collection.

George and Aaron had known each other for nearly twenty years when this letter was written, and this was not the first time they had corresponded. George included a message for Aaron in an 1847 letter to his brother Thomas. George was in Savannah, Georgia, and asked Thomas to "Tell Aaron I could get him a very nice wife, either a little black, a good deal black, or as black as tar, as we have all varieties."⁷ This passage suggests that these young men—all in their late teens and early twenties at the time—talked of women, courting, sex, and marriage. George, who did not share his parents' radical views, frequently displayed openly racist attitudes in his letters. (The next sentence in this one describes a "nigger" George found particularly offensive.) George's attitudes notwithstanding, it seems clear that Aaron's poor marriage prospects—given the tiny African American population in Vermont—had been a topic of conversation among them.

Aaron did find a wife. He married Rachel Williams in the Charlotte Congregational Church in August 1857.⁸ At 28, he was older than the usual groom, and at 17, she was younger than most brides. They had a son, who died in infancy, and a daughter, and Aaron returned to them when he was discharged in 1865. They lived for a time with her father, Edwin Williams, on his farm, first in Hinesburg and then on land Williams purchased in South Burlington. But Aaron Freeman apparently had ambitions beyond Vermont farm life. He was in New York City looking for work when he died suddenly and unexpectedly of an aortic aneurysm in September 1869.⁹

NOTES

¹ I have found no record of Aaron Freeman's birth; this is based on the 1850 Census, which listed him as 22 years old, and a marriage record, which gave his age as 28 in 1857.

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²See the brief history of Vermonters in the 54th in James Fuller, *Men of Color, To Arms!* (Lincoln: iUniversity Press, 2001), 120–123.

³Transactions with Aaron were recorded in account books from 1847 to 1849, when he worked as a farm hand, and again in 1858. Robinson Family Papers, Farm and Household Accounts, Volume 5, 1833–1892.

⁴Aaron N. Freeman to George G. Robinson, April 5, 1864.

⁵*The Black Military Experience*, edited by Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, series 2 of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) presents several hundred letters written by soldiers and their families, officers, and eyewitnesses.

⁶Fuller, *Men of Color*, 169–173; James Fuller, “The Letters of Loudon S. Langley,” *Vermont History* 67 (Fall 1999): 85–91. Although the two men shared a rural Vermont background and probably knew each other (Freeman’s wife Rachel and Langley lived near each other), their letters show a marked contrast in worldview and command of English.

⁷George G. Robinson to Thomas Robinson, March 7, 1847.

⁸Their marriage is recorded in the Charlotte Congregational Church Records, Volume 3, begun May 22, 1834, page 228.

⁹Fuller, *Men of Color*, 134.