

We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber

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Introduction

On Friday, May 28, 1886, at ten o'clock in the morning, Amos Webber strode to the podium at the front of the hall of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR, the Civil War veterans' organization) in Worcester, Massachusetts. At five feet four inches and approximately 130 pounds, this sixty-year-old light-skinned Negro still looked trim and fit, the more so because he was dressed that day in the blue Federal uniform he had worn twenty-one years before as a soldier in the United States Army. The morning had already been full, greeting old comrades in arms, exchanging news, remembering a shared past. But now the moment Webber had worked toward for almost a year was at hand, as he opened the first business meeting of the Massachusetts Colored Veterans Association of Worcester.

More than 125 veterans awaited Webber's gavel. Mostly black, with but a handful of white officers who had served with black troops, the veterans came primarily from the New England and Middle Atlantic states. They represented various units that had seen action in the Civil War, although the bulk of the veterans had served in one of Massachusetts' three colored regiments: the 54th Infantry, the 55th Infantry, and Webber's own Fifth Cavalry. Webber opened the proceedings, introduced the dignitaries on the dais, and guided the rather short business meeting. The men agreed to hold a national reunion of black veterans the following year in Boston, and endorsed a motion to establish a permanent state organization for all soldiers once members of Massachusetts' Negro regiments. Former Quartermaster Sergeant Webber, former Lieutenants William H. Dupree and James Monroe Trotter of Boston, and former Sergeant William H. Carney of New Bedford, who held the congressional Medal of Honor, were among those elected to the executive committee to organize both the reunion and the state organization.

Following the business meeting these middle-aged veterans, many also in their military blues, gradually formed ranks on the street outside the hall. Their assembly was slowed by the frequent greeting of former comrades, often following years of silence, encounters that produced, the Boston *Advocate* reported, "tears [trickling] down the cheeks of men as they met." Finally, the veterans approximated their former military discipline and at one o'clock, accompanied by two bands and a cohort of aides-de-camp, Chief Marshal Amos Webber stepped off the veterans' parade through Worcester's streets. From the GAR hall on Pearl Street their line of march moved west, through a neighborhood of both well-appointed single-family homes and the stylish multiple-family dwellings ("triple-deckers" in the parlance of Worcester) of the city's skilled workers and white-collar employees. The veterans veered north to Highland Street, east to Lincoln Square, and then back down Main Street to City Hall, where the mayor formally welcomed them to the city. By the time they returned to the GAR hall some

two hours later, it had been transformed into a dining hall by the caterers of the midafternoon repast.

As the veterans finished their meal, Webber again stepped to the podium, this time to introduce former Sergeant Burrill Smith, the toastmaster for the occasion. Smith, in turn, introduced the evening's main speaker, Norwood R Hollowell, the white former colonel of the 55th Massachusetts Infantry. Following Hollowell, a number of black veterans also addressed the meeting, and Webber closed this portion of the day's activities by expressing, in the words of a local reporter, how glad he was "to have met so many of his old comrades." After the dinner, with the dishes cleared and the tables rearranged, the veterans were "tendered a promenade concert and social by their lady friends."¹

Who was this Amos Webber who assumed such a prominent role in this public, regional celebration of the black presence in American life? That he was a veteran was clear, but that alone did not account for his prominent position in that day's events. Certainly James Monroe Trotter, the eminent musician, author, and politician, William H. Carney, and William Dupree were all more widely known in the black North. How did a man such as Amos Webber, unknown beyond his own circle, the recipient of no awards or editorials in the local or national press, achieve such prominence in May 1886? Was this an extraordinary moment whose shining aura all but obliterated the previous sixty years of common routines? Or did his involvement that May reflect a singular role, but one that emerged from and reflected a lifetime of organizational activism and public political commitment?

Webber himself was anything but forthcoming about the meaning of this veterans' reunion. In his chronicle entry for May 28, he reported that it was partly cloudy, in the mid-sixties with winds from the northwest, and then added: "Reunion of Colored Veteran, 54, 55th Regiment & 5th Cavalry."² There was no further discussion and of his own role he remained silent. His sparse words, offered as if each were laboriously chiseled from granite and thus could be expended only with great effort, characterized many of his chronicle entries. Yet on this occasion, and on many others, Webber left a richer set of clues about his life than perhaps he ever imagined.

In the biography that follows, I have tried to explore as many of those clues as possible. In the process I have come to see that, for all of his lack of national renown, Amos Webber was a lifelong activist among the black residents he lived with in both Philadelphia and Worcester. His public commitments reflected a moral vision that insisted on both individual rectitude and social justice. Over time he claimed as his own a very specific understanding of what it meant to be an American. With fellow blacks he rescued fugitives, fought Confederates, and demanded full civil and political rights. With them he built institutions designed to provide internal structure and direction for a black population confronted with frequent, intense antagonism from whites. It was also in this collective setting that Webber struggled to understand the persistent, complex pain inherent in being both black and American.

As he matured, gained experience in the military, and resettled in Worcester, Webber emerged as a leader as well as an activist in numerous organizations central to black collective life. In this fashion his prominent role in the first meeting of the Massachusetts Colored Veterans Association was a notable but not an exceptional one. It occurred within a web of

associations—fraternal, political, military, and religious—that by 1886 were more than a half century in the making. Following the clues this chronicler left reveals not only the life of this man but also the lattice-like structures that crisscrossed northern black America in the nineteenth century. Largely invisible to white Americans, these dense, intermeshed collective relations provided concrete support and spiritual comfort to a significant number of individual black Americans. To understand them, and to understand the life of Amos Webber, we must go back to the beginning.

¹ Boston *Advocate*, June 5, 1886; New York *Freeman*, June 5, 1886; Worcester *Daily Telegram*, May 28,29,1886; Worcester *Evening Gazette*, May 27, 28,29, 1886.

² AWT, 5:35 (May 28, 1886).