

Lee, Frank

(1842–25 July 1907)

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was born into slavery in Charlottesville, Virginia. He worked as a farm laborer, and his owner may have moved or sold him to Buchanan, Virginia, sometime before the war. The tumult of the Civil War provided him with a chance to flee from Virginia and lay claim to freedom. In 1862, he later recalled, he “escaped from my master and followed the Union army.” In the process, he reported, he “became separated from my people.” He had reached Boston, Massachusetts by 1864, and enlisted as a private in the Union Army there on 16 March 1864.

A month later, on 12 April, Lee mustered into Company K of the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry Regiment. His service records describe him as five feet, inches tall, with black hair, black eyes, and a black complexion. A man named Henry Lee, who was also born near Charlottesville and who may have been his brother, mustered into the regiment soon afterward. The army stationed the regiment in central Virginia, where Lee and his comrades took part in the Siege of Petersburg. Their colonel, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., grandson of President John Quincy Adams, observed that the men “greatly distinguished themselves” and “fought fiercely” in the initial assault.

The soldiers spent the winter of 1864–1865 guarding prisoners of war at Point Lookout, Maryland, and they returned to Virginia in March 1865. The Confederate government abandoned Richmond on 2 April, and the following day, Lee and his comrades were among the first Union forces to enter the captured city. As Major General Godfrey Weitzel explained, “Colonel Adams asked as a special favor to be allowed to march his regiment through the city, and I granted it...this fine regiment of colored men made a very great impression on those citizens who saw it.” One of Lee’s comrades reported passing “thousands of citizens, colored and white, who cheered and cheered us as we rode in triumph along the streets.”

As Confederate forces surrendered, the army transferred the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry to Texas. As General Ulysses S. Grant explained, their duty was to “restore Texas...to the Union in the shortest practicable time, in a way most effectual for securing peace.” They served as an occupying force, maintaining law and order and keeping an eye on the French in nearby Mexico. In August and September 1865 Frank and Henry Lee performed detached duty on the United States Military Railroad near Brazos, Texas. The men mustered out in Clarksville, Texas on 31 October 1865.

After leaving the army, Lee settled in Cleveland, Ohio, where he worked as a janitor. He reunited with his mother after the war, and she remained in Cleveland for the rest of her life. Lee got married to an unknown woman, who died sometime before 1900. In the late 1800s, as southern states began codifying segregation, Lee became a champion of equal rights. In 1898, for instance, a white mob in Wilmington, North Carolina, overthrew the biracial city government, murdered dozens of Black men and women, and destroyed Black homes and businesses. Lee helped organize a meeting in Cleveland to protest the Wilmington coup, and he

founded the Brotherhood of African Descent to “bring about united political action” for civil rights. They corresponded with Black leaders across the North, hoping to form a “national organization of colored citizens.”

He also became an active member of the Grand Army of the Republic, helping keep alive the memory of African American wartime service. In 1900 he gave a powerful Memorial Day speech at the St. John’s AME Sunday School—a speech so stirring that church leaders still quoted it fifteen years later. As southern states denied African Americans the rights of citizenship, Lee defiantly declared that they were “part of this great United States of America.” African Americans, he insisted, were “gaining strength each day to force opportunities into our possession.” As they fought for justice, he urged them to “Learn from the deeds of valor of the men of ’61 and ’65...Through our lives and characters, each in his proper place can be a monument to truth.”

Lee’s health deteriorated later in life, and he suffered from defective eyesight, heart and kidney disease, weakness of the back, and “senile debility.” The pension office denied his first application in 1900, but he began receiving an eight-dollar monthly pension four years later. Officials increased the amount to twelve dollars per month the following year. Lee died of valvular insufficiency at his home in Cleveland on 25 July 1907, and was buried in Woodland Cemetery. In his will, in a final gesture of support for Cleveland’s African American community, he placed his property in a trust benefiting the Home for the Aged Colored People Association and the local AME Church.

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