

Churchwell, Peter

(Mar. 1826–14 Jan. 1902) United States Colored Troops soldier and shoemaker,
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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.80364>

Published online: 28 January 2022

was born into slavery in Albemarle County, Virginia, to William and Dicey Churchwell. His owner was lawyer Reuben L. Gordon, who probably brought him to Orange County, Virginia sometime before 1840. On 25 December 1857, he married Maria Grey, who was probably also enslaved. Their daughter Harriet was born soon afterward, and Maria died in childbirth around 1859.

Churchwell escaped from slavery in August 1862 and made his way to Washington, D.C., where he spent the next two years working as a coachman. He enlisted in the Union army there on 13 July 1864, as a substitute for German lumber worker Jacob Leonhardt. He mustered in as a private in Company H of the 23rd USCT Infantry Regiment later that day. His enlistment records describe him as five feet, two and a half inches tall, with black hair, black eyes, and a black complexion. After briefly training at Camp Casey in northern Virginia, the regiment marched south to take part in the Petersburg campaign.

In combat near Cemetery Hill on 30 July, Churchwell received gunshot wounds to his right foot and his left side. The Union army reported him missing in action and presumed him to be dead. In 1868 the pension office even awarded his “orphaned” daughter Harriet an eight-dollar monthly pension. In reality, however, Confederates had captured him during the battle and returned him to slavery. They forced him to spend four days burying dead soldiers before marching him to a prison in Danville, Virginia. As Churchwell later recounted, Reuben Gordon “came there and claimed me as his slave” and sold him to a slave trader in Richmond (Testimony of Peter Churchwell, 4 Oct. 1900). A quick series of sales brought him to Wilmington, North Carolina, where shoemaker George French forced him to work in his shop. French, in turn, sold him to farmer Patrick Murphy, who moved him to Raleigh and commanded him to make shoes and boots.

After about six months Churchwell escaped to Wilmington, North Carolina, which Union forces had captured in February 1865. He spent the next few years there, opening a small shop on the corner of 4th Street and Chestnut Street and training several apprentices. He cohabited with Susannah Dean, and they had two children together: Nancy Ann and Hetty Ann. Around 1870, however, a domestic dispute prompted Churchwell to leave Susannah and their children and return to Washington, D.C. He reunited with his parents and his daughter Harriet, and his unexpected reappearance caused her to lose her government pension. He also reconnected with Julia Weaver, a woman he had known before the war. They got married on 25 March 1874, and remained together until her death in 1890.

Churchwell earned a modest living as a shoemaker, and he applied for a federal pension in 1890. The pension office eventually awarded him six dollars per month for rheumatism, heart disease, and “senile debility,” and by 1898 officials had increased it to twelve dollars per month. Churchwell died in Washington on 14 January 1902, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

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Bibliography

“Peter Churchwell (23rd USCT).” *Black Virginians in Blue* website.

“Testimony of Peter Churchwell, 4 October 1900.” *Black Virginians in Blue* website.