

Diary of a

by Mike Hoffer

This isn't just the story of William B. Gould. It's the story of how his story became a story. It's the story of a man who found his great-grandfather's diaries in an attic and turned them into an inspirational book. It's a classic American tale of how a hard-working slave in Wilmington, North Carolina escaped to start a new life and how three generations later his great-grandson would rise to be a respected Professor of Law, a high-level government official and a prolific writer.

Editor's note: Some passages in this story are directly quoted from the book *Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Sailor* by William B Gould IV. They appear in italics. Hereafter William B. Gould is referred to as WBG.

William B. Gould IV was careful to publish the diary, letters and articles exactly as they were written. You'll notice some misspellings but keep in mind that 1) many spellings were different back then and 2) he wasn't working with an eraser or spell check.

Contraband



William B. Gould, Jr. served as a sergeant in the Massachusetts Infantry during the Spanish-American War. He worked as a clerk in Boston and was the only one of WBG's eight sons and daughters to have children.



William B. Gould III served in the U.S. Naval Reserve and on active duty from 1925-1939. He was a passionate supporter of the U.S. military.



William B. Gould IV is a Professor of Law at Stanford University. He served as Chairman of the National Labor Relations Board during the Clinton administration, has written nine books and over 60 law review articles. His oldest son, William B. Gould V, helped him put together the book. He is employed as a social worker in Los Angeles.

The Great Escape

Sunday night, September 21, 1862, Wilmington, North Carolina...The evening is both dark and rainy when eight men take possession of a boat and embark on the Cape Fear River, four blocks from where William B. Gould resides on Chestnut Street. It is twenty-eight nautical miles from Orange Street to the mouth of the river as it flows into the Atlantic Ocean. And ahead lies heavily armed Fort Caswell, where the Confederate presence denies the US Navy access to Wilmington's busy harbor.

As the boat silently sets out from Orange Street, the men know that they must move quickly in the cover of darkness, for the alarm will soon be sounded for eight missing slaves. The word will go out promptly to the sentries posted along the Cape Fear River to be on the watch for these fugitives.

Down the river they descend southward toward the Atlantic, bending ever so slightly to the west at Smithville before the final dash down toward the cape itself. Though their boat possesses a sail, they dare not hoist it until they are in the Atlantic's swell. Thus, the eight men must take turns at the oars on this journey to "leave the land of chivalry and seek protection under the banner of the free." It will take the entire night of September 21-22 to proceed beyond the river and avoid inevitable detection at daybreak...

According to local historian Jack Fryar, the men would have to pass no less than 11 Confederate fortifications before they reached the open sea. It's impossible to imagine how terrified they must have been, because none of them could know what their fate would be if caught.

That morning, the eight men were picked up by the U.S.S. Cambridge. The ship's log noted "Saw a sail SWS and signaled same to other vessels. Stood for strange sail and at 10:30 picked up a boat with 8 contrabands from Wilmington, NC"

On the same day, two other boatloads with 14 "contrabands" were picked up. We can't be certain that these men acted in concert with WBG's group, but it's likely. The others would

have been under strict supervision (or worse) once word of the escape got out.

The fact that these men were considered "contrabands" reflects the prevailing attitudes toward slaves at the time. Contraband is generally defined as goods that are being traded illegally, specifically during a time of war. During the early part of the Civil War, slaves were still considered by most to be the legal property of slave holders. In fact, Lincoln himself was inclined to return fugitive slaves or compensate their owners, because he didn't want to antagonize the border states.

In an interesting example of historical synchronicity, two hours after WBG was picked up (and declared contraband) Abraham Lincoln called together his cabinet to announce that he would soon issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

A Sailor's Diary

WBG and his comrades were picked up by the right ship. Just days before, the commander of the Cambridge had sent to his commanding officer a proposal to make use of any "contrabands" that he might encounter, because he was 18 men short of a full complement of sailors.

WBG promptly enlisted (along with 18 of the 22 men picked up that day) and began to keep a diary chronicling his life in the Navy. The fact that WBG served in the Navy is not in of itself extraordinary. An estimated 17,000 black men served in the Navy during the Civil War and roughly 8,000 of them were from confederate states.

What was extraordinary was WBG's diary. There are two other known Civil War diaries written by former slaves, but the elegance of his writing, his fine penmanship and his understanding of Shakespeare, French and Spanish shatter the stereotype of the illiterate slave.

It is truly a mystery how a 24 year-old slave became so eloquent. His father was originally from England, but it's doubtful that he tutored his son. The most common theory is that he was taught at Saint John's Episcopal Church that both blacks and whites attended. WBG's master attended the church and WBG would later be a founder of an Episcopal church in Dedham, MA where he settled after the war, so it was likely that he attended the church in his youth.

It's also worth noting that slaves in Wilmington had a considerable degree of freedom

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Military service was clearly important to William B. Gould. He sat for this picture in 1917 when all six of his sons were in uniform. All but one were World War I veterans except WBJ Jr. (far right), who served in the Spanish-American War.



The piece of plaster with William B. Gould's initials is displayed at the Bellamy Mansion.

Snow's Cut Monthly would like to thank William B. Gould IV and Stanford University Press for graciously allowing us to use the words and images from the book. We are humbled by the story. If you're interested in reading the book in its entirety, it can be purchased at the Snow's Cut Book Shop in Carolina Beach.

(compared to other slaves that is). Many were not field hands, but often skilled artisans and craftsmen who were allowed to live on their own and work for themselves for extra money (after their obligations to their owners were fulfilled of course). WBG was a skilled plasterer and mason and helped to build the Bellamy Mansion, which is the most famous of Wilmington's antebellum landmarks.

WBG's kept his diary for most of his naval career, which lasted from September 27, 1862 to September 29, 1865. Aboard the *Cambridge* and the *Niagara*, he would serve as a part of the Union Blockade and travel to Nova Scotia, Portugal, Spain, England and Ireland.

The Diary

WBG wrote prolifically during the war—not only in his diary, but also as a contributor to the *Anglo-African*, an abolitionist newspaper based out of New York. He wrote about everything; the drudgery of life at sea, his political views, national events, storms, battles, observances, etc... His style was alternately understated, passionate and direct. WBG IV described it well in this passage from his book:

...More often, WBG is prone to understate-ment, particularly during the period when he is assigned to blockade duties aboard the U.S.S. Cambridge. Of the shots coming from Fort Fisher...he says merely that they are 'too close to be at all agreeable'...on the fire his ship takes from the fort a few days earlier is that the rebels had 'done some verry close shooting. Show'd that they knew their work.'

When, in mid-November, the Cambridge happens on a Confederate ship, he laconically writes, 'we told them good morning in the shape of a shot'...

On his thoughts about the war:

"... [Heard] of the departure of one battalion of the 5th Regiment Massachusetts Cavalry... May God protect them while defending the holi-est of all causes, Liberty and Union..."

On his feelings about a proposal to colonize blacks outside of the country:

"... We see by the papers that that the Presi-dent in a speech intimates Colonization for the collard people of the United States. This move of his must and shall be resisted. We were born under the Flag of the Union and we never will know no other. My sentiment is the sentiment of the people of the States..."

When he hears of the surrender at Appomattox:

"...While we honor the living soldiers who have done so much we must not forget to whis-per for fear of disterbeing the Glorious sleep of the many who have fallen. Mayrters to the cause of Right and Equality..."

It's hard to believe that those words came from the hand of an "uneducated" slave who was only 27 years old.

The Great-grandson

WBG was discharged from the Navy at the end of the war and settled in Dedham, Massachusetts. He proceeded to become a respected citizen and a family man.

He and his wife would have eight children—six sons and two daughters, but somehow the diary would slip into obscurity.

It's unlikely that anyone in the family knew about it when he died in 1923.

WBG IV tells the story:

...No one in my immediate family in New Jersey had heard of this diary until 1958, when my great-uncle Lawrence Gould died and be-queathed his property to my father. On arriving in Dedham, Massachusetts, the Boston suburb where many family members have lived since WBG chose it as his home, my father discovered that many papers and books were being thrown out. It was at this point that my father found the diary in the attic...

...I well recall seeing my father read the diary in our living room in New Jersey and discussing it with him. My impression was that this written work gave my father a new and more profound appreciation for the greatness of William Benjamin Gould and his achievements under the most difficult of circumstances...

During a speech in 1998 WBG IV reminisced about an interesting discovery at Bellamy Man-sion:

...The most recent page in the story of his work is to be found in a telephone call that I re-ceived from the curator of the Bellamy Mansion, Jonathan Noffke, here in Wilmington just three months ago, informing me of the fact that he had found my great-grandfather's initials, along with that of other workman, apparently both slave and free, in the plaster of the mansion itself. The fact that I had been in this very mansion at a reception just eighteen months earlier added to the waves of excitement that ran through me when I heard this news! In a number of major aspects, I feel close to this gentleman whose death preceded my birth by only 13 years...

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WBG IV remarked that even though he was only 22 at the time of his great uncle's death in 1958, it was understood that he would someday write a book about it. He began to research his great-grandfather's life in 1971 and over the next 30 years he slowly gained enough knowledge about WBG to write the book that was published in 2002.

WBG IV has a family that he deserves to be proud of. Perhaps his only regret is the fact that he did not work on the project while his father was alive, because, in his words, "William B. Gould, III was the greatest man that I ever knew." SCM

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11:30	12:15 pm
1:00	1:45
1:45	2:30
2:30	3:15
3:15	4:00
4:00	4:45
4:45	5:30
6:15	7:00

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