

ABRAM B. BRANT:
"THE MAN FROM MANHATTAN"
PETER RUSSELL

I have been following the fascinating story of Private Abram B. Brant, Company D, 7th U.S. Cavalry, with great interest and congratulate everyone involved in the placing of the "In Memory of" stone for him in Fort Meade National Cemetery, Sturgis, South Dakota.

The fine photograph that graced the front cover of the November 2008 *Newsletter* rekindled happy memories of a recent trip to this beautiful part of the country but it is the series of intriguing similarities between Brant and Private James Pym, Company B, that most caught my attention. For example, both men were awarded the Medal of Honor for bringing water to the wounded at the Battle of the Little Big Horn; both met violent deaths as a result of having been being shot at point-blank range; each of their headstones depict what is almost certainly an incorrect year of birth; and whereas the inscription on Pym's stone displays an extraneous initial 'J', Brant's ever present second initial 'B' has been omitted altogether. As I had already researched Pym's extraordinary life I was curious to learn more about Brant's pre-7th Cavalry days and, in particular, if 'Abram' or 'Abraham' was his given name, was he really born 1849, and why the traditional Christian cross was not engraved on his headstone.¹

My first point of contact was John Saul, the best-selling author of suspense and horror novels, who is a direct descendent of Brant's elder sister, Mary, and her second husband, the Reverend John Sargon Saul, a minister in the Swedenborgian Church. Apparently Mary graduated from the Dutch Reformed School, New York, in the same class as the fabulously rich Cornelius Vanderbilt II (1843-99), which suggests the Brants were fairly well heeled themselves.

Saul was quick to tell me that the exact date of his great-granduncle's birth has never been established, which confirmed my suspicion that the year 1849 emblazoned on the headstone was perhaps based on the age given at enlistment; regrettably, all too often an unreliable source. He also informed me that his Brant ancestors were members of the Protestant Church, thus dismissing the slight possibility that the cross motif had deliberately not been included on the headstone on religious grounds.

My next course of action was to study the three decennial censuses that covered the greater part of this trooper's short life in the hope that they would provide the answers I was looking for and I was not to be disappointed. The first, for Ward 17, on Manhattan's lower east side, taken July 29, 1850, lists him as "Abraham Brant, age 3 years," the youngest of five children born to John C. Brant,² a (stone) mason from New Jersey, and his wife, Mary H. Brant, from New York.³ Long experience has taught me to treat all census returns with the utmost caution but, in this instance, I saw no reason to doubt its veracity. After all, what possible motive could a highly respectable family like the Brants have had to intentionally mislead the census enumerator? Why would they say that their youngest child was called 'Abraham' if his name was 'Abram,' and also claim that the boy was three years old if, in fact, he was more than three times less that age; it just doesn't make sense.

By the time of the next census - June 14, 1860 - the family had moved to District 4, Ward 9, a more fashionable neighborhood on Manhattan's lower west side, and on this occasion we find "Abram B. Brant, age 12," which gives credence to the information contained in the earlier survey. Alas, what the initial 'B' stood for continues to remain a mystery to this writer but, as his army records consistently

show, it clearly was very important to the man himself.

The third and last census of interest, taken September 19, 1870, records "Abr^m B. Brant, age 22 - Engineer Civil - born New Jersey," lodging with Jacob and Elizabeth Beardslee at the Temperance House, Sparta Township, Sussex County, NJ. Again it flies in the face of reason to think that the census enumerator would omit just one letter, i.e. an 'a', when there was more than enough room on the page to write 'Abram' in full, which further convinces me that it was simply an abbreviation of 'Abraham.' Admittedly it is sheer speculation on my part but the information was likely to have been extracted from the lodging house's register, which Brant may have signed two or three months before when he was still 22 and the Beardslees had no way of knowing (or caring) that he had since passed his 23rd birthday. We know he was born in the state of New York, not New Jersey, which makes this particular source somewhat less reliable than the previous two.

While I would argue strongly that the above evidence fully supports my claim that Brant's given name was 'Abraham' and he was 'born in 1847' (most probably in June or July), I have absolutely no problem in accepting John Saul's assertion that his collateral ancestor was universally known as 'Abram'; in much the same way as Private Alfred E. Allen, Company C, was known as 'Fred.'⁴

Unquestionably, he called himself 'Abram B. Brant' and we know he joined the U.S. Army under that name at St Louis, Missouri, on September 27, 1875.⁵ By my reckoning he would then be in his 29th year - comparatively ancient for a first enlistment - and it should come as no surprise to discover that like so many of his contemporaries he felt the need to reduce his age to be more in line with of the majority of his fellow new recruits.⁶

Finally, Section 2 of the 'Application for Standard Government Headstone or Marker,' dated September 17, 2008, and submitted to the Department of Veterans Affairs, plainly shows "*Abram B Brant*" as the 'name of deceased to be inscribed on headstone or marker,' which makes it all the more disappointing that the initial 'B' - such an integral part of his name - should be so conspicuous by its absence from the memorial stone.

In the words of Editor Rod Thomas, "this is a wonderful, but as yet incomplete, story," so hopefully at some time in the not too distant future a locally-based Custer enthusiast will track down that elusive entry in a New York City public record or church register which proves beyond doubt the correct date of birth and given name of the private from Company D, 7th U.S. Cavalry, whose mortal remains lie buried in an unmarked grave somewhere within the hallowed ground of Fort Meade National Cemetery, Sturgis, South Dakota.

Notes:

1. Compare with headstones of other 7th U.S. Cavalry LBH Medal of Honor recipients, e.g. Sergeant Benjamin C. Criswell, Company B, Pleasant Hill Cemetery, Harmon County, OK; Private James Pym, Company B, Custer County Cemetery, Miles City, MT; Private (later Sergeant) Charles Windolph, Company H, Black Hills National Cemetery, Sturgis, SD; etc.
2. According to notes from the obituary of one of his grand-daughters, John C. Brant was "a great friend of Horace Greeley, and provided the first capital to begin his paper," i.e. the *New York Tribune*, which was established in 1841. Brant was a director of the Mechanics' Institute, New York City (the *New York Times*, May 11, 1855).
3. The following obituary notice was published in the *New York Times*, September 29, 1869, it reads: "BRANT - At Jersey City, on Tuesday, Sept. 28, MARY H., widow of the late John C. Brant." The date of death of Abram's father is not known.
4. Alfred E. Allen, from Melton Mowbray, England, who enlisted under the name of Fred E. Allan, was killed with Custer's column at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.
5. Brant joined Company D at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, October 21, 1875.
6. According to a collateral descendent, Scots-born Sergeant Alexander Brown, Company G, reduced his age at enlistment by an incredible 16 years!