

History
Forgot
About Us

Micah Renner

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Author's Note

This collection offers a glimpse into the lives of those oft overlooked figures in American history who expand our country's narrative into a greater reflection of our truths. The poems catalog the past through people, in chronological order, with the hope that their stories will expand how we understand the present and carry it into the future.

Prologue

History unfolds, bold and frightening.
Legacy passes out of tragedies
so disquieting.

Sacrifice permits our existence—
we bare witness to those stories
where glory
is placed with familiar faces
but our present
is the product of countless others
who gave all they had
who fall,
unremembered,
when time dismembers
the past with a fast-paced
future.

Liberty is left to the living,
but ignorance is not forgiving.

Who will take on this remembering,
when history forgets us?

In the name of a new start, Amen.

Colonial America

Ships set sail for new land.

Some go for gold,

while others

no longer do

as they're told.

Settlers are scared

but determined,

Though many arrive

ill prepared.

We declare this land our own

but decimate the indigenous population

through disease

and destruction.

“Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.”

Phillis Wheatley wrote.

Seized from West Africa by erroneous liberators,
“a redemption neither sought nor knew,”

She was forced into the slave trade
but became a master of her own education.

Penning and publishing her poems
at 13
while in chains of servitude,
Wheatley traveled to London to print
her first collection
when the colonists refused to support her work.

Emancipated after this book's widespread popularity,
she spent her life speaking out against slavery.

She applauded the new nation
in all it could become,
but came undone through poverty—
bearing three children, all reported to have passed
in infancy
as she pushed for a second volume of poetry she would never see,
She died, sickly and slighted by those who had once sung her praise.

“We must fight!”

The Revolutionary War

Before the settlers insisted
on autonomy,
a land dispute
with the French
had the British
assisting us in a Seven Year War.
We won, but the monarchy
taxed us even more—
to pay the price
of this conflict.

Tired of this interference—
people demanded the chance
to create their own nation;
victory would not come without a fight.

Several indigenous tribes formed a confederacy
as the original inhabitants of this land—
they attempted neutrality when the Revolution spread,
but many, like **Han Yerry**,
were forced to choose between oppressors.

As Oneida nation chief,
he brought his people
to the relief of colonial settlers.

The Oneida marched with the patriots
as the British hid in a ravine, ready to attack,
but the red coats crossed the stream too soon
so portions of the army remained behind.

A Pennsylvania paper reported
the heroics of Han Yerry,
who killed nine of the enemy
as a part of the cavalry.
A musket ball struck his wrist;
unable to load his gun
he swung with his tomahawk,
while his wife and son fought at his side.

In 1779, he received commission
in the army; this is likely
the first you've heard
of him.

Robert Shurtleff raided loyalist homes,
serving 17 months in the infantry.
From digging trenches at Yorktown
to scouting territory,
he was hit by a musket in 1782—
extracted the shrapnel and stayed in the fight,
until he contracted the flu
a few months before the end of the war.

It was then that a doctor
discovered Shurtleff to be a woman,
Deborah Sampson,
who disguised herself as a man to serve.

Overture for a New Government

Post Revolution

The colonies
attempted to sow
the splitting seams
of Britain's regime
with the articles
of confederation,
wrote a letter
to keep the peace—
but we were not
being respected
as our own
governing entities.

The continental congress
convened to create
a constitution
as the union's
weaknesses became clear.

The need to establish
the nation's foundations
became evident
as the end
of the conflict
neared.

Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*

which pushed the people
to declare independence—
he had a dense career,
writing to inspire
Washington's troops,

later, working
as the congressional committee's secretary.

In 1780 he wrote
Pennsylvania's preamble
for an abolition act
which presented the hypocrisy
of condemning England's tyranny,
while a fifth of the population
remained in chains.

When the Revolution ended
Paine lived in poverty,
he sailed to Europe
and spoke in support
of the French Revolution
where he was jailed
for his beliefs.

Age of Reason,
his criticism of organized religion,
was published while he was in prison.
He returned to the states as his health failed
but his reputation had been derailed
by the attacks he made on Christian theology,
he died in relative anonymity.

Prelude to War: 1812-1860

The nation is unprepared
for the differences
its people hold.

Our Antebellum years foreshadow
the fear
that this land is not united—

Several million immigrants arrive,
a religious revival is underway,
and people take a chance
on westward expansion.

The contradictions we face
create friction—
manifest destiny evokes hope
on new frontiers,
but we war against the unprovoked
indigenous population,
as the Trail of Tears
rips a nation from their homes.

There are bludgeonings on the senate floor
that underscore
more than a debate
about states' rights,
as people levy others' lives as property—
a country built by an enslavement
which stains our stake on liberty.

Elizabeth Jennings Graham

stayed on a street car
until she was thrown off
for white folk.

She refused defeat,
taking her plight to court in NY,
where they thought the case would die
and quantify her lack of rights.

The Brooklyn Circuit Court ruled
in her favor,
starting desegregation
of the city's public transportation—
with some limitations lifted,
by a strong-willed woman.

A descendant of northern Paiute chiefs,
Sarah Winnemucca became bound between
protecting her people
and appeasing those
who monopolized their land.

When the Bannock war broke out, her father was taken
so she helped the army cover a hundred miles—
Idaho through Oregon—until she rescued him.
She served as a scout
until the conflict desisted.

Winnemucca later spoke without reservation
of her tribe's exile to Washington, until
the government made a false promise
to her people, of homes on an allotment of land.

She would not win this restoration
before she died, despite
her service and the cruelty
of keeping stolen soil.

The Perilous Fight

Civil War

A history of hatred
plagues us,
pretending
an ending to this past
can come without cost.

As the divisions of a nation
raid the complacency
we tried to maintain,
tensions rise
until compromise
becomes
impossible.

Awarded the Medal of Honor after serving in the Civil War,
Mary Edwards Walker worked as an unpaid nurse
until the Army recognized her medical degree
and allowed her to perform surgeries.

She crossed battle lines
to care for the wounded
until Confederates captured her.
Released after four months,
she served throughout the war.

Walker rejected the idea
that women could be refused
the right to vote so she ran
for the Senate, and later Congress
instead.

Turned down for both—
the recognition she gained for valor was later revoked,
as they never allowed her to commission officially.

Walker's pride was undeterred,
she would wear this prestigious star and cluster of laurel leaves
around her neck
until her death in 1919.

In 1862 **Robert Smalls** used the Planter,
a cotton steamer and its enslaved crew,
to pick up their families and escape the south.
He had studied Confederate signals
to pass checkpoints in the dark of night
and raised a white flag when they reached the Union.
The Navy purchased the ship
and paid Smalls enough
for him to buy his former master's home.

The story of his heroics spread,
an inspiration which is said to have helped him grow
the number of soldiers enlisting in the war
to nearly 5,000 on his own.

He continued to fight in military engagements,
taking command of the Planter once again
when the ship's white captain hid
amidst an intense conflict.

Smalls served
in South Carolina's
state assembly and senate,
completing five terms
in the House of Representatives
before post-war oppression gave birth
to Jim Crow.

To bind the nation's wounds

Reconstruction

The war ends
in 1865,
with some people
ready to reconcile.

Reconstruction is met with resistance
as bigotry outlasts our promises
to protect the rights of Black Americans.
Jim Crow laws bolster racist brutality,
as we fail to make reparations.

Before the violent reactions to integration,
folks like **Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback**
fought to rise above their station.

A Union captain in the Civil War
and freeborn Black man,
he ran a Confederate blockade
and braved undue discrimination,
until he left the military.

As a delegate for the convention
which created a new constitution in Louisiana,
he would later be elected to the state senate
and serve as governor for a time.

He had run for a place in Congress
but was barred by opponents
who flagrantly contested the election
and postponed the process
of swearing him in
until his seat was taken.

Unfazed by the ways whites tried to subdue his ambition,
he entered law school at the age of fifty,
serving as a U.S. Marshall,
maintaining involvement in politics for the rest of his life.

Much given, much expected

The Gilded Age

The country comes to a point
of even greater industry,
as the postwar boom benefits
manufacturing. We develop
a national currency
while the railway pushes west,
businesses drive competition
vying to be the best.

Tenements house immigrants
while improved transportation
drives residential segregation.

Low paid workers
take on dangerous labour,
and the desire for wealth
puts profit over people.

We continue targeting those
we don't understand.

Jacob Riis released

How The Other Half Lives

in 1890, inspired by flash photography,

he wanted to illuminate

the horrors

of how the poor

scramble to survive—

showing society

the realities

of New York City's slums.

After emigrating to the U.S.,

Riis struggled to find employment

and slept in police stations.

He worked as a crime beat writer

and advocated for urban reform,

Riis used a camera

to capture

inhumane conditions

in the Lower East Side—

showing the rich

how poverty ate the poor

and tore apart families

like bread.

Jane Addams formed Hull House in Chicago
to give immigrants and industrial workers a chance.

This center housed and provided services
to the city's East End,
from daycare to job training.

Addams also played a pivotal role in the passage
of a Federal Child Labor Law
and lobbied for equality,
establishing allyship with the NAACP
and heading the Women's Peace Party in 1915.

The first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize,
she suffered a heart attack
but would push through failing health
as a public servant
until she passed.

Grace Humiston attained her law degree in 1903,
opening a legal clinic for low income clients.
The sign on her door read:
'Justice for those of limited means for moderate fees.'

She became a sensation
after she solved a case
the NYPD gave up on:

When eighteen year old Ruth Cruger went missing
the police suggested she had run away.
Humiston helped the girl's father
find the body and catch the man who murdered her,
a criminal who had been let off
by officers who had worked with him
to compromise cases
for profit in the past.

Humiston discovered labor camps
using debt slavery in the south,
investigating an island in Arkansas
where a plantation had enslaved people.

Eventually she became a consulting detective
and would go on to work
as the first female District Attorney—
a woman who set the truth free.

O'er the ramparts we watched

World War I

We sold munitions to Britain
when World War I broke out,
Brokered loans to both sides
But ultimately sided with the allies.

Henry Johnson fought as a Harlem Hellfighter
in this segregated regiment of the all-Black national guard.
They spent 191 days in combat,
more than any other American unit.

The men dealt with prejudice
from fellow soldiers
until the government sent them
to work alongside the French.

In May of 1918, Johnson served on sentry duty
at the edge of the Argonne Forest
with Needham Roberts,
when the two were attacked
by German snipers.

Grenades and gunfire rained all around,
until Roberts was taken down,
so Johnson stood alone.
Seriously wounded,
he wielded a knife
and continued to fight
until the enemy retreated.

Returning from the war, marred by injuries
and forgotten by his country,
Johnson was left destitute
and died at thirty-two.

During his life,
he was recognized by France's highest military decoration
but would not garner the rightfully earned Medal of Honor
until 2015.

Emigrating from Mexico to the US at 20,
Marcelino Serna settled in Texas,
working illegally
until he was detained by authorities
who wanted to verify his status
for the draft.

He begged to stay and offered to enlist.
While in Europe,
the Army realized he was not a citizen
but he insisted on staying to serve.

Throughout his service,
Serna risked his life to scout ahead
and spot enemy positions.
He once went after a German sniper
and snuck into their trench,
laying down fire until their surrender.
He killed twenty-six soldiers
and took another twenty-four as prisoners.
Acting as a dissenter,
when the reinforcements
wanted to play executioner,
he reminded them of the rules
of war.

Contradictions continued

Between the wars

The world is at the frayed end of a brutal war
as this magnitude of destruction
had never been seen before.

America is a mess
of contradictions.

We try to close our doors
but rely on immigrants for labor,
women continue speaking out
while postwar pride sparks a desire for tradition,
celebrity worship rises
and consumption creates large national debt.

Groups advocate for tolerance
but white protestants want to protect their place,
leveraging racist mobs to end lives
through lynchings and persecution,
while the cowards hide their face.

Mary Burnett Talbert graduated
from Oberlin college in Ohio
and became the assistant principal
of Little Rock's Union High School,

the highest position held
by a woman in Arkansas.

A founding member of the Phillis Wheatley club,
she formed the NAACP's national chapter in 1910.

From serving as a Red Cross nurse in France,
to financing the military through bonds—
she served with distinction in World War I,
teaching classes to Black soldiers
when the conflict ended.

She advocated for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill,
an attempt at passing federal legislation

to prosecute the mass mobs and lynchings,
though it was defeated in the 1920s by filibuster,
as southern white senators spoke
until they choked its passage.

A. Philip Randolph knew the nation required equity
to allow for the dignity
of those long-denied equal rights.

He created the first successful Black trade union
when the federation of labor excluded them from membership,
and gave notice to the government
that he'd lead a march on D.C. in 1941,
unless they addressed discrimination
in the defense industry.

His work resulted in the signing of Executive order 8802,
barring the unjust barriers which had existed
and creating a Fair Employment Practices Committee.

Randolph later formed a league for non-violent civil disobedience
against the military's racial separation—
a contributing factor
to the order for desegregation in 1948.

His activism continued into the sixties,
he provided opening remarks for the March on Washington
for Jobs and Freedom—sharing the ways Jesus led the multitude
through the streets of Judaea,
like those who gathered at the capital that day,
reminding the nation of the need for economic justice:

"We shall settle for nothing less,
and may God grant that we may have the courage,
the strength,
and faith
in this hour of trial by fire never to falter."

In the early 1930's the Pack Horse Initiative
launched a series of traveling libraries—

With women like **May Stafford**
who pioneered this project,
bringing books
via horseback
to isolated communities
hit hard by the depression.

This New Deal program prospered
through librarians lending
to those who lacked resources
for literacy

Despite treacherous terrain,
they trekked the Appalachians,
fighting to help these rural areas
stay afloat through education.

Bombs bursting in air

World War II

The depression and a damaged
economy lean the country
toward neutrality, but with a fireside
draft, we are prepared to declare
war when our troops are hit
at home.

The color of **Doris Miller's** skin
confined him to cooking
aboard the USS West Virginia.

He rushed to rescue the injured
without hesitation,
when his ship was struck
while stationed at Pearl Harbor,

Miller began firing at enemy planes
with a machine gun—

remaining onboard
until ordered
to abandon ship.

This heroic script
made him the first African American
to earn the Navy Cross.

Of the women who flew
aircraft on the homefront
while men fought overseas,
Mabel Rawlinson was one of the thirty-eight
who died.

In August of 1943,
one of her fellow pilots had yet
to eat dinner,
so Rawlinson took her training slot.
During night flight drills
she climbed into an A-24
with an instructor sitting at the gunner's seat,

as she prepared to land,
the plane erupted in flames
and split in two when it touched down.

A broken latch on the pilot's hatch
would prevent her from escaping,
her fellow pilots helpless
as her screaming carried through the airfield.

They would go on to honor her legacy
by paying to send her body home,
knowing the government would refuse—
as they used women for military missions
but classified them as civilians.

Counterculture and customs clash

Post War

The masses are met with a stint
of more peaceful days—
from Levittown suburbia
to the baby boom craze.

But the hint at more conflict came
when we insisted on containing communism,
the cataclysms of World War II
thrust us forward as a global superpower—
and our people felt empowered
to challenge the purity we claimed

as freedom remained limited
to a privileged majority.

Assigned male at birth and drafted to the Army in 1945,
Christine Jorgenson knew at any early age
she was a girl—
so she made a trip to Denmark after her service,
to begin the transition with a team
willing to help with the experimental procedure for free.

When she returned, the publicity
ran rampant,
and she saw this as
“an important step in the eyes of the world,”
using the nation’s curiosity
to propel her career
in the performance industry.

A singer, dancer, and spokesperson
who won the hearts of many—
she was denied the right to marry
when the American courts refused to let her be
a woman on paper.

As a baby, **Judith Heumann** contracted polio
and adapted to life in a wheelchair.

But New York tried to exclude her from teaching,
comparing her disability to a fire hazard,
so she fought back.

In 1970, her plea was victorious,
the city's first wheelchair user allowed to teach.

But this discrimination was not unique to her,
she wanted these changes to reach
a national level.

Heumann led 150 activists with disabilities
in a sit-in
which lasted 28 days,
until a greater consciousness
was raised
of Section 504,
which held programs with federal funding
accountable for equity and accessibility.

Heumann's work would continue
in presidential administrations
and lawmaking,
lobbying for a future
where everyone could have access.

"If they don't give you a seat at the table,
bring a folding chair,"

Shirley Chisholm famously shared.

The first African American woman in Congress
and the first to declare a run for president,

she went against expectations
from senior congressmen
to sit quietly,
serving on the committees of education and labor,
and veteran's affairs.

"Fighting Shirley" would introduce
fifty pieces of legislation—
championing equality
and calling for an end to the Vietnam War.

She co-founded
the National Women's Political Caucus,
but the color of her skin was unjust cause
for even more discrimination:
when seeking the Democratic Party presidential nomination
they blocked her participation in televised primaries.

In spite of this exclusion,
Chisholm defined her legacy as a "catalyst of change,"
a leader whose determination
could not be contained.

Our flag was still there

The Korean Conflict

The nuance of a forgotten conflict restricts
how much we dare to know—glanced over
by its precedent, with only three years of fighting,
it is the first of many attempts
to show dominance over the USSR.

Russia and the US left their respective occupations
of Korean land
until the north began
attempts to take over the south
and United Nations troops took to defending the line.

Captain **Leonard LaRue** served in World War II
and, the skipper for the SS Meredith Victory,
a ship which saved lives in 1950—
when the cargo vessel
saw refugees
stranded in North Korea.

He and his men helped to load people
stuck on a dock, seeking escape.

14,000 boarded
the 455-foot boat
as folks were stored
in cargo holds.

Sailing for 500 miles, through dangerous seas,
they avoided enemy submarines
and made it to safety after three days,
arriving at the island of Koje Do on Christmas.

Five babies were born
while the ship was underway,
and LaRue went without losing a single passenger.

He commanded this same ship
until it was decommissioned,
living out the rest of his life in a monastery.

Does that star-spangled banner yet wave

Vietnam War

Another attempt at combating
communism ends
with over two decades
of bloodshed.

The public yearns for closure,
but the deceased demand burial
the survivors desire healing
and the victims remain,
slowly dying.

Dickey Chapelle knew well enough
the fight she had ahead of her
as a woman in a man's profession.

Her obsession with capturing war
through a camera lens,
brought her to Hungary
in 1956
where she photographed refugees
and was held in solitary for almost two months.

She stayed in a foxhole amidst the action
at Iwo Jima and Okinawa during WWII.

Parachuting with troops
in Vietnam,
Chapelle accompanied a unit's patrol in 1965,
where tripwire shrapnel ended her life.

An honor guard escorted her body home
because the military regarded her as one of their own—
recognized by the Commandant in 2016
and made an honorary Marine.

A Melting Pot of Innovation

1980-2000

Global manufacturing competition
and conservatism
control cultural influences
as the Cold War ends.

The struggle for equal opportunity continues,
as silence multiplies the headstones
produced by our government's apathy
to the AIDs epidemic.

Cable becomes mainstream
as electronic innovation rises—
from web pages to cellular technology.

There are tax cuts
for the upper class
while the government
wages war on drugs.

Fervent social advocate **Kiyoshi Kuromiya**
was born into a Japanese internment camp
during World War II.

An assistant to Martin Luther King Jr.
he was brutally clubbed by state troops at Selma
and hospitalized after a peaceful protest.

A founder of Philadelphia's Gay Liberation Front,
he organized rallies
and strategized ways to help those with AIDs.

Diagnosed in 1988,
he founded
one of the earliest informational newsletters about HIV,
ensuring that even incarcerated individuals
could stay informed.

He helped win a lawsuit
protecting free speech on the internet
and was the lead plaintiff in a Supreme Court case
calling for the legalization of medical marijuana.

Kuromiya's activism only ceased
when the disease killed him
the day after he turned fifty-seven.

The New Millenium

2000's to Present

The millennium shows us turmoil
which has only just begun.

Who's to say what the nation
will become?

We fill our homes with technology,
while the wars we fight on every front
reveal democracy-disguised greed,
and keep us questioning
what it means
to be free.

Tragedy strikes Americans at home
in ways we'd never known to be possible.

We continue war
with the Middle East
attack Afghanistan and invade Iraq,
in sacrilegious crusades
against terrorism.

Welles Crowther worked
as an equities trader in the south tower.

He had begun carrying a red bandana as a kid,
and it was with him that day
as he delayed his own escape
to organize rescue efforts
when a plane
crashed into the building where he worked.

His heroics remained a mystery
to his mourning family
until a story broke
about an unnamed man
and the cloth he carried.

Crowther took it upon himself
to triage and transport the injured
down 17 flights of stairs
until the building collapsed,
and his body was found with the firefighters
who had also died so others could survive.

Army Sergeant First Class **Paul Smith** was in a courtyard
with his troops outside of Baghdad
when a hundred of Hussein's guards
attacked.

Pinned down and outnumbered,
they fought to protect
the aid station up the road.

He commanded with authority,
taking position at a machine gun
atop a damaged armored vehicle.

He killed as many as fifty enemy soldiers,
saving the lives of his men.
Fatally injured as the fighting reached an end,
his courage earned him a posthumous Medal of Honor.

Peter Wang attended Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School,
a JROTC student with dreams
of attending West Point.

He was 15 when
an armed assailant shot
at innocents.

He held a door open
for classmates, teachers, and staff
to escape,
but was one of the 17 who died that day.

Wang is survived by friends
who won't forget his heroism
and was granted honorary admission
to the college
he'd always wanted to attend.

Epilogue

We purify the past
to qualify the present,

but we cannot erase the parts
of our history
where we have yet
to see change.

The future is maintained
by complacency
but we sustain
a resolve to do better
when we make the commitment
to remember.