Kate Ault Fribey Snyder

By MARY L. SIEGEL
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Lycoming County men who served in the Civil War have had monuments erected in their honor. They are memorialized in written histories, remembered in battle re-enactments and featured in the Civil War sections of local historical societies.

Last week's column remembered about the women—women who stayed home, managed the farms while their husbands were away, the mothers, the sisters, the aunts, and even the wives of the officers.

Catherine "Kate" Ault is one of many Lycoming County women who participated fully in the war. What we know about Kate is pieced together from just a few sources—but, perhaps, by putting her story into writing, we will inspire others who know her story come forward and we will have a more complete narrative of one young woman's contributions.

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Col. Charles W. Fribey, a Civil War hero who was the commander of the 8th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops and was killed in the Battle of Chotae, near Jacksonvile, Fla. There is a handsome portrait of Col. Fribey hanging in the Thompson House, Museum of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

Kate was 20 years old and Charles 26 when they were married on Dec. 10, 1861. Kate Ault was the daughter of Adam Ault and Mary Briggs. Charles was a widower with two children of un-known local families. Ault family members had fought in the Revolutionary War.

The Fribey family, originally from Germany, had lived in the Muncy area for two generations. When Kate and Charles were married, Charles was just beginning his second enlistment as a sergeant with Company "F" 48th PA, a company of white soldiers.

The photographs of Kate and Charles taken on their wedding day seems somber, although it is typical of the photography of the period. Charles is in his uniform—he looks tall, dark-haired, bearded and very serious.

Kate has her straight hair pulled back with a single braid and looks tiny beside him. Sitting for the portrait, she does not even come up to his shoulders. In her voluminous dark-colored gown, she looks like she is dressing up in her mother's clothes.

We know very little about Kate and her family. She grew up in Newberry, where her father was a carpenter. She had a brother and two sisters.

At least two of Kate's brothers had enlisted in the Union Army, as had three of Charles' brothers.

We know more about Charles—he grew up on a farm in Muncy and attended Dickinson Academy (now Lycoming College). He was a man of the world—he had gone west to seek his fortune, experienced life in "Boothill at Cripple Creek," made two trips down and back on the Santa Fe Railroad before returning to Muncy as a schoolteacher.

Charles and Kate seem to have been deeply committed to each other during their short marriage. Charles faithfully kept a diary, and Kate is mentioned in almost every entry.

He carried an ambrotype (a early type of photograph) of Kate with him wherever he went during the war. Kate often accompanied Charles when he was with the 48th Infantry. She supported him when he decided to ask for the command of a regiment of "colored" troops. Charles passed the required exam, attained the rank of colonel, and on Nov. 23, 1883, was appointed commander of the newly formed 8th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops.

Kate and Charles surely knew the risk that he was taking when he asked for the assignment.

The colored troops were all new recruits, often ill-trained and ill-equipped for battle. The Confederate Congress had approved the death penalty for any captured white commanders of African-American troops.

Kate stayed with Charles at Camp William Penn, just northwest of Philadelphia, where the local African-American troops were trained. The camp was located near the home of noted abolitionist Lucretia Mott and on the Underground Railroad. The camp attracted well-known abolitionists and Underground Railroad conductors such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and William Still.

Living there was surely a new and interesting experience for the young lady from Muncy and its environs.

When the Regiment was ordered to the Front, in January 1864, Kate went with Charles, the 84th men, and 81 officers as far as Hilton Head, S.C.

In February, Col. Fribey and the troops were ordered to participate in the Florida Expedition under Gen. Trammell Seymour. Charles was shot and killed very early in the bloody battle, along with 87 of the new recruits.

Although the Confederates would usually have treated the body of officers killed in battle with respect, the officers of regiments of colored soldiers were so despised that Charles' body was never positively identified.

Some say that he was buried in a mass grave along with his troops, but there is no proof of that. Kate herself bravely made the journey to Florida later in February and tried to retrieve his body, but the Confederate commanders refused her request.

Years later, her watch, a letter, his diary and the ambrotype of Kate that he had carried with him were recovered and sent to Kate.

Kate returned home to her family in Newberry. She had been married less than three years and, at 20, was a widow, but she was not finished with her war work.

Kate honored Charles by joining the Pennsylvania Freedman's Relief Association, one of many regional groups established after the Civil War with the aim of assisting freed African-Americans. Kate, along with her sister, Anna Ault, and friend Lizzie Shoenmaker from Muncy, traveled to Nashville, Tenn., where the three young women taught in a school for the newly freed slaves.

Their school was called the William Penn School, W.P. Mitchell of the Freedmen's Association noted that Kate and Lizzie gave students a real chance to learn and to teach, the first time they had had a school where they could be taught.

In June 1888 at the age of 42, Kate, Jesse and the two children were buried in Wildwood Cemetery.

These snippets from Kate's life—in Newberry and Muncy, at Camp William Penn, Hilton Head, in Florida in a desperate attempt to retrieve her husband's body, in Nashville teaching school while her county was still at war—provide us with a small window into the life of one young woman during those difficult times.

The commitment of these Lycoming County women and men—who Kate, her husband, friends and family—to the preservation of the Union, the abolitionist cause, and the advancement of the newly emancipated African-American slaves is truly notable and their stories should be told.

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