



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

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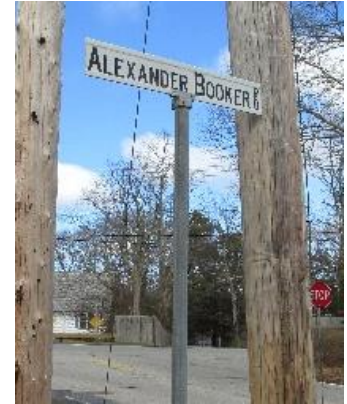
Alexander's Forgotten War

by Meg Costello

If you venture into the far reaches of Waquoit, near the air park at the end of Fresh Pond Road, you will find a street called “Alexander Booker Road.” This area was once the home of two notable men of that name, a grandfather and grandson whose life stories are a microcosm of American history, and a testament to their own bravery and endurance.

The first Alexander was born enslaved in Virginia in 1856. He moved to Massachusetts at age 18, worked for a while in Boston, then, in 1891, married Lucia Hicks, the daughter of Wampanoags Elizabeth Amos and Thomas Hicks. Blind Joe Amos, the famous preacher and fighter for Wampanoag rights, was Lucia's great-uncle.ⁱ

Alexander and Lucia eventually settled on a farm in Waquoit and raised eight children, including a son named Murat.ⁱⁱ Alexander's name appears with regularity in the *Falmouth Enterprise* and annual town reports. To supplement his farming income, Alexander worked for the town as a prototypical DPW employee. Between 1892 and 1928 he cleared snow and repaired roads. He also was paid for fire watching, firefighting, and transporting children to school. On one occasion, Alexander received medical aid of \$10.00 from the Overseers of the Poor.ⁱⁱⁱ



In June 1905, a “thunderstorm of unusual severity” killed a hog belonging to Alexander Booker of “Ashumet,” as well as a horse belonging to John Emerald of East Falmouth.^{iv}

Alexander's neck of the woods was popular with hunters. One year, the *Enterprise* reported that hunters were bagging a lot of ducks at the Johns Pond gunning camp, and that Alexander Booker was shipping a great quantity of furs. Where he was shipping

them was not stated. At an Agricultural and Home Garden Exhibit held at town hall in 1918, Alexander won third prize in the category of “best selection of 10 vegetables.”^v

Scandal touched the remote Booker farm in 1913. Falmouth's school superintendent, John H. Swain, told his wife he planned to go hunting near Waquoit Bay. The next day, a Sunday, Mrs. Swain received a phone call informing her that her husband was missing. His car had been found abandoned in Alexander Booker's yard. Volunteers combed the woods for a day and half, until it became obvious that Swain had eloped with Mrs. Florence Souther, until recently a teacher at Fresh Pond School.^{vi}

In 1932, Alexander Booker, then aged 75, showed up at his polling station to vote for President and was told that he wasn't registered. Election warden Charles B. Fisher vouched for his identity, however, and Alexander was allowed to vote, casting his ballot for the Republican Herbert Hoover. The *Enterprise* proclaimed it would have been a "tragedy" to see "a man[,] for whom a Nation fought a Civil War to secure a ballot[,] turned away from the polls if his name had not been on a voting list."^{vii}



Alexander died in November 1936, having been a resident of Waquoit for 62 years. His funeral was held at the Old Indian Church in Mashpee, and he was buried in the cemetery there.

The old man left behind a grandson to carry on his name. Little Alexander was the son of Murat Booker and his wife Frances Spencer. Murat died of a chronic lung ailment when young Alexander was two, and Frances eventually married her late husband's brother, Lindsay Booker. Alexander grew up with twelve siblings and half-siblings.

Alexander was a Boy Scout and achieved many years of perfect attendance at East Falmouth Elementary School and Henry Hall School. Although he attended Lawrence High, he doesn't appear in his senior yearbook. Possibly he dropped out to work at the Coonamessett Ranch. Shortly after enlisting in the Army in August 1949, he was granted a furlough to come home and visit his mother Frances, who was gravely ill and died six months later.^{viii}



2nd Infantry Division, north of the Chongchon River. Sgt. 1st Class Major Cleveland, weapons squad leader, points out a North Korean position to his integrated machine-gun crew, Nov. 20, 1950. Photo by James Cox. Downloaded from Wikimedia Commons.

In June 1950 the Korean War broke out. That July, Alexander's unit, Company I, 31st Infantry, was sent to Korea. After making an amphibious landing at Inchon, they saw action at Suwon airfield and the village of Osan. Alexander's sister, Mura Johnson, stopped getting letters from him in late October. Around this time, the 31st Infantry was sent to Iwon, North Korea, where the terrain was rugged and the weather bitterly cold. On November 27, an overwhelming Chinese force attacked them at the Chosin Reservoir, sparking a battle that raged for days. The 31st Infantry suffered shockingly high casualties, but their actions probably saved the 1st Marine Division from being cut off and annihilated.^{ix}

Mura Johnson received a dreaded telegram in mid-January 1951, listing Alexander as missing in action, and six months later she received a package of his personal effects. A list of POWs was released just before Christmas, but Alexander's name wasn't on it. His extended network of siblings still clung to hope, but in January 1954, the Army declared that Alexander was presumed to have died on December 3, 1950. He was nineteen years old.^x

It's unclear whether his remains ever came home, but in September of 1955, military committal services were held for Corporal Alexander Booker at the Old Indian Cemetery in Mashpee. Earlier that year, Falmouth's planning board had voted to change the name of Blacksmith Shop Road in Waquoit to Alexander Booker Road.^{xi}

Alexander was a pioneer. When he enlisted in 1949, the U.S. armed forces had been racially integrated for only a year, following a 1948 executive order by President Harry Truman. National Guard units were supposed to be integrated, too, but some were slow to comply. In 1951, during the long months when Alexander's family waited for news of his fate, an Alabama National Guard unit was stationed at Camp Edwards, preparing for deployment in Korea.



MISSING IN ACTION—Alexander Booker of Fresh Pond, whose family has been notified he is missing in Korea. He was serving in the 31st Infantry regiment, and had been in the Army since August, 1949.—photo by Edwin Gray.

Many of the white Alabamans harassed black fellow soldiers and black civilians in Falmouth, pushing them off sidewalks, trying to bar them from stores and theaters, and looking to start fights. After many days of provocation, tempers boiled over. Police were called to break up altercations at John's Sun-Dial Shoe Store and Candy Kitchen on Main Street. They found about 15-25 men in each group, and both sides "seemed equally ready for trouble." The mob drifted towards Iris Drug Store and gathered near the Walker Street intersection.^{xii}



"Soldiers protested the Negroes were armed with knives. Sgt. Mogardo says he searched eight of the most aggressive and found no weapons...A glass flew across the street from the corner in front of Malchman's [now Bellezza Day Spa], where Negroes had gathered. Another scuffle developed on the sidewalk near the Wigwam restaurant. Soldiers stuck their heads in the restaurant door and yelled to their buddies inside to come out and help. Some soldiers sat. Others grabbed up their beer bottles and started out. Mrs. Elizabeth Klein, who was behind the bar, made them leave the bottles.



"Lieut. Joseph R. Carvotta, military police duty officer, was informed of a 'belligerent situation' on Main street that looked as though it might develop into a race riot. A truckload of military police reserves was rushed to town. Camp Edwards buses [helped] empty the town of soldiers. Falmouth police dispersed the Negro civilians with the threat of mass arrest."^{xiii}

The tense situation had lasted for three hours. Next day, the commanding officer of the 336th AAA battalion, Alabama National Guard, restricted his men to camp. Amazingly, officials at Camp Edwards praised the battalion for its training record and fine esprit de corps. Anybody caught inciting a riot "would be drastically disciplined," they promised. The overly praised unit of troublemakers was soon shipped out to Korea.^{xiv}

Main St, c1950. Iris Drug, Malchman's, and the Elizabeth Theater (now Maxwell's) were all hotspots in the near riot.



Alexander's plaque is the nearest one on the left.

When this ugly spectacle unfolded on Main Street in the fall of 1951, Falmouth resident Alexander Booker, grandson of a slave and kinsman of a Native American freedom fighter, had already made the ultimate sacrifice for his country. Today, his plaque on the library's Memorial Walk is hardly more than a bottle's throw from where the race riot almost broke out.

The Korean War is sometimes called the Forgotten War. It began as a U.N. police action, and it has never officially ended. While that war was being waged overseas, the moral battle for civil rights was heating up at home. Alexander's battles, at home and abroad, deserve to be remembered.

ⁱ See Familysearch.org, family trees and group sheets for Lucia Hicks LZLJ-SW1, Elizabeth Amos LZLJ-S78, Daniel Babcock Amos KHYW-MJC, and Joseph Babcock "Blind Joe" Amos KHWH-P9S.

ⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise* 11/12/1936.

ⁱⁱⁱ Annual Report . . . of the Town of Falmouth, volumes issued 1892-1928. "Received medical aid" noted in Annual Report, 1905.

^{iv} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 6/24/1905.

^v *Falmouth Enterprise*, 11/18/1905; 9/28/1918.

^{vi} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 11/22/1913.

^{vii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 11/10/1932.

^{viii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 11/11/1949; 5/5/1950.

^{ix} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 1/26/1951; <https://armyhistory.org/31st-infantry-regiment/>

^x *Falmouth Enterprise*, 1/26/1951; 12/28/1951; 1/8/1954.

^{xi} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 5/20/1955; 9/9/1955.

^{xii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 9/21/1951.

^{xiii} *Falmouth Enterprise*, 9/21/1951.

^{xiv} Perhaps some of its members survived and were still serving back at home in 1963, when President Kennedy took control of the Alabama National Guard from Governor George Wallace. Kennedy then ordered the Guard to allow African American students to register at the University of Alabama.