

## FEATURE

# Chinese in the American Civil War

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July 3rd honors the third and decisive day of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863 that turned the course of the American Civil War. It also honors the life of Union soldier John Tommy who lost his life that day.

Everyone knows whites and African Americans fought and died in the Civil War but few know about those that didn't fit into this standard mold of the Civil War soldier or sailor. Military records and photographic evidence discovered by historians such as Ruthanne Lum McCunn and numerous Civil War buffs including Gordon Kwok, webmaster of the "Association to Commemorate the Chinese Serving in the American Civil War" provide rare glimpses of these forgotten men. So who were some of these men that served the Union and the Confederacy?

Edward Day Cohata was adopted in China by sea captain, Sergeant S. Day and his wife when he was around five-years-old. His last name was adopted from Cohata, the name of the ship that Captain Day commanded at the time. After Captain Day retired in 1857, young Edward was raised and educated in Gloucester, Massachusetts. He joined the 23rd Regiment Massachusetts Voluntary Infantry and fought his first battle at Drury's Bluff in Virginia on May 16, 1864, one of the battles in the Siege of Petersburg. Although unwounded in the battle he was described as having picked up seven bullet holes through his clothes. At the brutal Battle of



Cold Harbor when seven thousand Union soldiers died in just half an hour on June 3, 1864 he had an even luckier escape when a bullet grazed his scalp and permanently parted his hair.

Edward Cohata distinguished himself by saving the life of fellow soldier William E. Low. Severely wounded and helpless after taking a bullet through the jaw, Low was taken to safety from stray bullets and shrapnel behind some sheltering rocks and trees and was later retrieved and taken to the hospital by

Cohata. Low continued to express his gratitude even at their last meeting in 1928 when nearly blind and completely deaf he still somehow managed to recognize his old Civil War rescuer.

Cohata rejoined the US Army after his regiment disbanded after the Civil War. He was stationed at Fort Randall in Dakota Territory where he met and married a Norwegian immigrant with whom he had six children. Among his other duties he guarded the captured Sioux chieftain Sitting Bull, whom he described as "friendly" and "kind." It was only after he'd retired and tried to claim a homestead in 1912 that he discovered that he wasn't considered an American citizen entitled to a homestead. Because he'd thought his Civil War service and honorable discharge had made him a citizen already he'd voted in every American election since then with no objections. The problem was that he hadn't filed the papers needed to claim

citizenship before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that specifically forbade Chinese from becoming US citizens. This was the only American law ever passed by Congress to specifically deny naturalized citizenship to any group because of openly expressed racism. To add further insult to injury Cohata was also deemed ineligible for the Army and Civil War veteran pensions that he'd earned in his thirty years of military service. Edward Cohata unsuccessfully fought the battle to gain US citizenship until his death in 1935, writing letters to many prominent people on behalf of his case. It is through these letters that we know many of the details of his life story.

The eldest sons of Chang and Eng Bunker, the famous "Siamese Twins" served in the Confederate Army. Chang and Eng were ethnic Chinese from what is now Thailand. After their stint with P.T. Barnum's circus and exhibitions where their status as conjoined twins was shown to the paying public they'd become wealthy enough to buy farmland in North Carolina and became naturalized US citizens. The twins married two white sisters much to the horror of the women's parents and the local community but they eventually had 22 children between them. At the start of the Civil War the Bunker family owned 20 slaves and were staunchly Confederate. Christopher Wren Bunker, the eldest son of Chang, joined the Virginia cavalry in September 1863. He participated in Confederate cavalry raids into Pennsylvania and West Virginia where he was wounded and captured in the summer of 1864. The treatment of prisoners of war was poor on both sides and at least once Christopher was reduced to eating a rat. He was exchanged for a Union prisoner of war in March 1865 and finally made it home in April 1865 just a couple of weeks after General Lee surrendered.

Stephen Decatur Bunker, the eldest son of Eng Bunker, enlisted in the same Virginia cavalry regiment as his cousin in July 1864. He escaped the battle in West Virginia where Christopher was captured but was wounded in a

battle in Virginia in September 1864. Despite his wounds he continued fighting and was reported by family lore to have been wounded a second time before being captured shortly before the war ended. The cousins continued to farm their family land after the war. Christopher Wren Bunker's papers, kept by the University of North Carolina, include the only known letters written by a Chinese American veteran during the Civil War.

Nobody knows the Chinese name of John Tommy or John Tomney as he was also known but he was mentioned in several newspapers in both North and South because he became a Confederate prisoner of war in 1862. He'd enlisted at the age of 18, a new immigrant not knowing much, if any, English at all, in the 70th Regiment New York Infantry on May 15, 1861, one month to the day after the war started. He must have learned the language fast though because he quickly became known as a great wit in camp.

In May 1862 he was captured by the Confederates in Virginia. The capture of a "Chinaman" was mentioned in both Fredericksburg and Richmond newspapers although they didn't name him. In an additional detail supplied by the chaplain of the 4th Texas Regiment the captured "Celestial" was an uncooperative prisoner and was beaten. If so, the beating had remarkably little effect on Tommy. As the New York World of July 9, 1863 reported, "He was brought before Gen. Magruder who, surprised at his appearance and color, asked him was he a mulatto, Indian, or what? When Tommy told him he was from China, Magruder was very much amused, and asked him how much he would take to join the Confederate army. "Not unless you would make me a Brigadier General," said Tommy, to the great delight of the secesh officers, who treated him very kindly and sent him to Fredericksburg. He was eventually transferred to the notorious Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia where overcrowding and unsanitary conditions led to high death rates among the prisoners. Tommy was eventually paroled and spent his recovery time in New York

City caring for sick and wounded soldiers and keeping their spirits up.

John Tommy later rejoined his regiment and quite remarkably in an otherwise all-white regiment was promoted to corporal; a measure of the respect he must have earned from his fellow soldiers and their officers. He fought in the bloody Battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and finally at the most famous battle of the Civil War, Gettysburg. His company, with a normal paper strength of around 80-100 men, went into action already reduced to just 28 men, 20 of whom ended up dead or wounded at Gettysburg. Among the dead was Corporal John Tommy after he'd lost both his legs to cannon fire and bled to death on July 3rd. President Lincoln

later dedicated his Gettysburg Address to soldiers such as John Tommy who gave their lives that their nation might live, and famously resolved, "...that these dead shall not have died in vain- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

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For additional information about Chinese American heroes, please visit the Chinese American Heroes website at [www.chineseamericanheroes.org](http://www.chineseamericanheroes.org).

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