



## Tracing history at Dickinson College

By Greg Gross, Sentinel Reporter | Posted: Sunday, September 12, 2010 10:31 pm  
Original Link – [http://cumberlink.com/news/local/article\\_eba536b8-bedf-11df-880c-001cc4c002e0.html](http://cumberlink.com/news/local/article_eba536b8-bedf-11df-880c-001cc4c002e0.html)

A few months after the second order of the Emancipation Proclamation was issued at the start of 1863, a young Cumberland County man joined the ranks of the Union Army.

John Shirk, who was born in 1843, became one of approximately 180,000 African-American men who fought for the North during the Civil War.

On Sunday, one of his descendants, Linda Bonaparte of Harrisburg, was part of a group of amateur researchers who attended a gathering at Dickinson College's Waidner-Spahr Library to exchange information with a group of students and faculty.

All told, 20 students, faculty members, and participants attended the event, said Matthew Pinsker, a history professor at the college and the co-director of the college's House Divided Project.

The gathering was meant to educate attendees on how to research their ancestors but also proved educational for college officials.

"We corrected six mistakes in our database, so we're happy," Pinsker said.

The gathering was hosted by the House Divided Project and held for the White Carnation League, an alliance of descendants of United State Colored Troops (USCT) soldiers and scholars, humanists, interpreters and supporters.

The project aims to create a teacher's resource that brings Civil War-era history to life.

At the gathering, students and faculty were on hand to meet participants and share information about how to research stories of USCT soldiers. Staff also



provided participants with other resources and selected free scanning and digital photography to help them preserve any artifacts or manuscripts they hold.

"It was interesting seeing college students interact with descendants," Pinsker said.

### **19 and ready to serve**

A lot of the people who attended the gathering were trying to put together their family history, said Christine Bombaro, associate director of Dickinson's library.

Boneparte went to the gathering armed with Shirk's family Bible that gave faculty further insight into his life and her history.

Shirk's name was already in the project's online database and some of his time in the military is already known.

He joined the army when he was 19 and served with the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, a regiment of only African-American troops. The regiment went on to achieve fame on battlefields and was featured in the 1989 film "Glory."

Shirk, who's brother James Shirk served with the 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, was injured while moving a cannon and was discharged from the service in 1865.

John Shirk lived to the age of 69 and was buried at Locust Grove Cemetery in Shippensburg in 1913.

Stories like John Shirk's are being compiled in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Grand Review.

The review is a year-long commemoration of the November 1865 event of the same name organized by the women of Harrisburg to honor the USCT from 25 states who were not permitted to participate in the Grand Review of the Armies,



a military procession and celebration held in 1865 in Washington, D.C., following the end of the Civil War.

Soldiers who made up USCT were from Union and Confederate states, as well as from Canada and other British territories in North America.

The 2010 inception of the review culminates with a series of events and activities that will honor the African-American troops planned for Nov. 4-7 in Harrisburg.

For some time, the USCT soldiers' contributions during the Civil War hadn't been a main topic during most history lessons in schools.

But all that is changing with the House Divided Project and descendants' efforts to keep history alive.

"It used to be something everybody ignored," Pinsker said.