

Ceremonial Induction Into Freedom
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Jerry Harvey, Robert Lambert, Israel Walker, and Samuel Woods were Haywood County men who were infantrymen in the 59th Infantry, USCT (United States Colored Troops) during the American Civil War.

Before the war broke out in 1861, all four men were enslaved in either Haywood or Fayette counties. Jerry Harvey was enslaved on a plantation in the area where Fayette, Haywood and Tipton counties intersect. This plantation was in the vicinity of Exit 42 on I-40W. Robert Lambert, at age 50 the oldest of the quartet, was born in South Carolina and was a carpenter on the plantation of Nathan and Grace Stanton Adams in Stanton. Israel Walker was held captive on a farm in Fayette County near Dancyville. Walker and his mother were sold by William Pewett of Haywood County to Robert Walker of Fayette during the late 1840s or early 1850s. Samuel Woods, later known as Samuel Starks, was enslaved on the Nathan and Grace Stanton Adams plantation in Stanton. Harvey, Walker and Woods were young single men. Lambert was married and a father.

These four men, human property who owned nothing not even themselves, joined the U. S. Army because doing so afforded them freedom for themselves and their families.

At their arrival at LaGrange in Fayette County where the 59th was based, they like all ex-slave recruits stripped off their tattered, ragged slave clothes. These clothes, a symbol of their previous state of involuntary servitude, were burned and after which the men donned the blue uniform of the US Army. According to Douglas R. Egerton in his book, The Wars of Reconstruction, "To don a uniform worn by thousands of other free men, and to hold a weapon banned by southern law, constituted physical evidence of freedom and membership in a national cause to bring freedom to those still enslaved. As one white soldier who witnessed the transformation observed, "Put a United States uniform on his back and the chattel is a man."

This taking on the mantle of freedom ceremony was performed with each new batch of slave runaways who chose to cast their lot , for better or worse, with the 59th Infantry, USCT.

