



BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE

# BLACK SOLDIERS

## IN THE CIVIL WAR & THEIR PATHS TO ANOKA

### TWO SOLDIERS, TWO PATHS

At the heart of Anoka's history, two Black men – James W. Wells and James Shepherd – left their mark. Their connection remains a mystery, but their shared service and presence in the historical record suggest a bond forged in the aftermath of war.

## James Shepherd

b. 1850 - Virginia or Kentucky  
d. 1913 - Minneapolis, buried in Oakwood cemetery, Anoka

Research suggests James Shepherd enlisted in the **50th Colored Regiment (USCT)** as an early teenager. According to his obituary (*Anoka Union* 12-24-13) this enlistment put him at risk for being executed.

Shepherd's fate changed when Captain Lucien Martin of 4th MN Infantry intervened and brought him to Minnesota, where he finished his journey to Anoka with Mr. Cooper (*Herald* 12-23-13).

The 1870 census lists Shepherd as sharing a house with several other people in Anoka, but within five years, he married Mary and started a family. They moved to Township 33 and settled in the town of Burns where they made a life for themselves. Shepherd died in 1913 in Minneapolis, survived only by Mary.



## James W. Wells

b. 8/15/1847 - Kentucky  
d. 12/11/1919 - Anoka, buried in Oakwood cemetery, Anoka

J.W. Wells enlisted on August 15, 1862 in the **1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry**, which became the **79th US Colored Infantry** in June of 1863. Wells served until November 1865 and made his way to Minnesota.

In 1870 he was married to his wife Nora (also known as Sarah or Rachael) records suggest she used both first and middle names interchangeably.

Wells opened a barber shop in Anoka in 1874, and was a loved member of the community.

He worked here until he died in 1919, survived only by his wife.

### WHERE DID THEIR PATHS CROSS?

Although it's not clear how their friendship began, both men served in the USCT and made their home in Anoka County. As a GAR member at Anoka's Post #2, Wells may have encountered Shepherd at events or found his way into Wells's barbershop for a trim. Both men navigated a post-war America still rife with racial barriers, yet their presence in Anoka's records speaks to their resilience and the evolving history of Black Americans in Minnesota.



Kansas in 1861  
Union Territory



Kentucky & Virginia in 1861  
Confederate Territory



The **United States Colored Troops (USCT)** was the designation given to the approximately 175 regiments of non-white soldiers that served during the Civil War.

At the start of the Civil War, Black men were barred from enlisting. That changed with the Emancipation Proclamation (Jan 1, 1863), allowing them to join what had previously been regarded as a white man's war. Initially called Corps d'Afrique or African Descent regiments, they would later become the United States Colored Troops (USCT). More than 94,000 formerly enslaved people served as Union soldiers. Black men could not become captains and faced brutal consequences if captured: suffering re-enslavement, execution, or other punishments decreed by the Confederate Congress in Richmond Virginia.

### THE COST OF SERVICE FORT PILLOW MASSACRE

Although not connected to Wells or Shepherd directly, the Fort Pillow Massacre exemplifies the unique risks faced by Black soldiers.

Confederates under Nathan Bedford Forrest slaughtered besieged Union troops at Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864. Acting commander William Bradford, following the death of his superior, refused to give in:

**"I WILL NOT SURRENDER."**

The Confederates showed no mercy. The massacre became a rallying cry for Black soldiers and intensified the Union's commitment to the cause.

Captain William Matthews (pictured right) lived as a free Black man, business owner, and Underground Railroad stationmaster.

Matthews recruited former slaves into the **1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry** at Fort Scott as early as 1862 (*Kansas State Historical Society*)



**DID YOU NOTICE?**

WE WONDER  
DID MATTHEWS RECRUIT WELLS?



VISIT US ONLINE  
[ANOKACOUNTYHISTORY.ORG](http://ANOKACOUNTYHISTORY.ORG)

