

THOMAS CARNEY
AN UNSUNG PATRIOT HERO

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It was a surprisingly warm, sunny date in February as the noisy school bus dropped Levi and Willie off at the corner at First and Market Street that Friday afternoon. Levi Montgomery and Willie Baxley were so happy to be out of school early since it was a half day due to teachers' professional development day and a Friday, which meant no homework for the weekend. Usually, the boys stayed in the aftercare program at school because both of their mothers worked. Even though they were both in fifth grade, their mothers didn't want them staying home alone all afternoon. Levi's mom was a nursery nurse at the hospital in Queenstown, Maryland and Willie's mom was an Administrative Assistant at an attorney's office in nearby Easton, Maryland. But today, both boys were given permission to go into town to do some research at the library for their Black History Project. The only reason they were allowed to go to town was that Levi's Aunt Sarah worked as the head librarian at the library and she'd be there that day. After the library closed, the boys were supposed to go to the Benton Restaurant across the street from the library for dinner where their mothers planned to join them along with Aunt Sarah. "Are you sure your Aunt Sarah is working today?" asked Willie. Levi answered, "I'm pretty sure because my mom would have told me if she wasn't."

As they crossed the street from the bus stop, they were greeted by the crossing guard, Miss Agnes, an elderly lady with gray hair and bundled up like an Eskimo in her down jacket, a grey wool scarf that blended with her hair and green rubber knee high boots. She didn't care what the weather was like, this was her winter uniform. She was holding the octagonal red stop sign in her right hand as she waved them through the cross walk to the other side of the street. "Hello Mr. Willie and Mr. Levi," called out Miss Agnes. She knew everyone in town and the entire county. She was a retired high school math teacher and taught both of Willie's parents and his older siblings. Levi thought she was somehow related to him because she not only knew his

name, but she was also always invited to his family parties and holiday celebrations. “Hey, Miss Agnes, how are you?” called out Levi. He knew if he wasn’t polite and friendly to Miss Agnes, his mother would know about it by dessert.

It was nice living in this small town of 4,700 people because everyone who passed Miss Agnes waved and smiled at her. They hopped up on the curb and continued their walk to the library. In front of the courthouse they noticed a state highway crew fussing with a large metal sign they were installing on the front lawn. “Oh, oh,” sighed Levi. “That looks like another history lesson for Mrs. Sharp.” This was her first year as a teacher and she loved her fifth-grade class and always came up with interesting history lessons and projects for her class. Actually, she was the Social Studies teacher, but Levi’s dad always called it history. “Back in my day, we called it history, not Social Studies.” grumbled Mr. Montgomery. Anyway, the work crew was finishing up the installation of that sign, which looked like it weighed a ton. Then they covered it up with a black tarp. Willie questioned Levi, “I wonder why we can’t see what it says on that sign!” Willie was an honor roll student in school and his favorite subject was history, especially Early American history. Levi liked school; he liked playing soccer with his friends at recess and his favorite subject was math. Willie said, “I bet you that your Aunt Sarah will know something about that sign!” Levi shrugged his shoulders stating, “Who cares, let’s get to the library and pick out a book on a famous African American in history so we write that darn book report! I want to get to the restaurant before our moms get there so we can order what we want, not something that’s green and leafy or healthy.”

After they walked through the metal detectors at the library, secretly hopping it would beep, they strolled passed the main librarian’s desk and searched for the computers to look up famous African American biographies in the card catalog. They didn’t see her at first, but as she tipped

toed up to the boys, they didn't have to turn around to know who it was. Levi smelled her Youth Dew perfume a mile away because she was marinated in it. He knew it was Aunt Sarah. She adjusted her green flowered eyeglasses on her nose and started tapping her small dark fingers with her bright red nails quickly on the computer's keyboard. Aunt Sarah was helping one of their classmates look for a book on a famous African American. "Hello Levi, hello Willie. What brings you here on a beautiful warm February Friday?" whispered Aunt Sarah. "Same as her!" the boys answered in harmony. "We need a book about a famous African American. I don't want one that's a thousand pages, Aunt Sarah." explained Willie. Aunt Sarah helped both boys find books that she thought each of them would enjoy. Willie chose a book on Michael Jordan and Levi chose a book about Kobe Bryant.

They were getting hungry, but it wasn't time to go to the restaurant. Aunt Sarah gave them some of her loose change and led them to the library's employee lunchroom where they could get some snacks from the vending machines. They couldn't go anywhere until it was time for dinner and Aunt Sarah was doing a darn good job of keeping her librarian eye on them so they didn't goof off or get into some off limits website on the computer. With not much else left to do, they plopped themselves on two huge green leather library chairs and started to read their books. Every time she walked passed them, Aunt Sarah smiled and nodded at them.

It was 5:30 and they had spent the whole afternoon in the library, eating snacks in the lunchroom and reading the local posters plastered all over the library bulletin board. The boys were ready for dinner and as Aunt Sarah locked up the front door, Levi suddenly realized he had left his backpack under the green chair where he was sitting. He ran back to the chair, scooped up the backpack, threw the strap over his right shoulder and raced to the front door. Suddenly one of the posters caught his eye. He could only make out something about a man named

Thomas Carney and some sort of celebration that was scheduled for that Sunday on the courthouse front lawn.

Dinner at the Benton Restaurant was always fun. The boys would always see a classmate or friend and their families there. It was trivia night and the questions popped up on the big-screened television. The boys kept busy playing the game and when the history category appeared, Willie's eye lit up and a big smile appeared as he said to Levi, "I've got this." The boys sat across from each other in the big wooden bench that was once a pew in the Benton United African Episcopal Methodist. Wearing her nurses' scrubs, Mrs. Montgomery finally arrived, slid into the booth and sat next to Levi. Aunt Sarah was trying to figure out how to send a text message to Mrs. Montgomery on her brand new I-phone. She smiled when Mrs. Montgomery arrived. She was thankful that she didn't have to send the text. Aunt Sarah drank her herbal tea and was enjoying watching the boys playing the trivia game. The ladies were busy chatting about their day at work, and then ordering dinner. Somehow, they hadn't noticed the boys both order the deluxe hamburger and fries platter. When they did notice, they didn't make a fuss of it. They figured the green leafy stuff could wait until another time.

The trivia game took an intermission and now the boys knew they'd be stuck in conversation with the ladies. They tried not to get involved in their conversation, but when the subject turned to that new marker across the street, Levi's mom asked, "Hey, what is that sign over there and why is it covered with that black tarp?" Willie's ears perked up because he and Levi wanted to know that too. "Oh," said Aunt Sarah, "that's an historical marker to honor an African American Revolutionary War patriot named Thomas Carney from our town. He was a hero by saving General Perry Benson's life in the Battle of Ninety-Six in the war. He and General Benson were lifelong friends and served in the Battle of Saint Michaels in the War of

1812, saving that town from the British. Willie was intensely listening to Aunt Sarah and tried to recall if he had ever heard about a Mr. Thomas Carney in his class. Levi's ears perked up because he remembered the poster about Thomas Carney on the library bulletin board.

Mrs. Montgomery had graduated with a history minor degree before she went to nursing school. She asked Aunt Sarah questions about what time the ceremony would be. Both Willie and Levi looked at each other and thought, "Oh boy, I hope we will go there." So both ladies planned to meet on the courthouse at 1:00 on Sunday afternoon. Aunt Sarah reminded everyone to bring their own chairs and said, "I'll see you there. By the way, the boys were very well behaved in the library today." Mrs. Montgomery always loved getting complements on Levi's behavior.

When they arrived home, the phone was ringing, and it was Mrs. Baxley asking to pick up Willie. When she arrived, Willie was excitedly telling his mother about the ceremony, "Mom. Can we go? Can we go? I really want to go." As she was trying to shush him, Levi was cautiously waiting her reply. He wanted to go too and hang out with Willie.

So, Sunday arrived, and Levi's mom decided they'd go the ceremony. Since they lived close to the courthouse they decided to walk there. They met Aunt Sarah along the way. There were brightly colored flags—the American flag and the Maryland flag and a Revolutionary War flag flapping in the cool breeze. So many people, all dressed in their Sunday best were standing and talking to each other. Levi tugged at his mom's sleeve and said, "Come on, Mom. Let's get a good spot. I don't want to miss anything." Willie showed up with his mom and wanted to sit next to the refreshment table with cookies and lemonade, but his mom dragged him to the front where the Montgomerys were.

There were local dignitaries present such as the mayor, the county commissioners, the fire chief, even the school superintendent and the local ministers. Willie's mom pointed out the State Senator, the local state politicians and even Governor Brogan and Deputy Governor Brothers were present. It really looked like a big deal. There was a group of men present dressed in Revolutionary War uniforms carrying muskets. The boys were not sure what they would do, but they had seen pictures and YouTube videos in school about soldiers in that war. They secretly hoped the men would shoot the muskets, just to scare the girl classmates who were present. When Mrs. Sharp, their social teacher spotted them, the boys tried their best to look invisible. But teachers have keen eyesight, and she meandered right over them and said hello to them and their mothers. Willie and Levi both said at the same time to each other, "Ugh, I hope we don't have to write an essay on this ceremony in class tomorrow!"

As the ceremony was beginning, everyone stood for the Pledge of Allegiance and the singing of The Star Spangled Banner. The boys noticed there was a group of women sitting near the podium wearing red jackets with blue and white ribbons with gold medal pins on the left side of their jackets. "Hmm," Willie thought, "They must have won a lot of prizes to have so many medals!" Willie poked Levi and pointed to the ladies and Mrs. Montgomery looked over to Levi giving him her best "look." He had seen that look many times and decided to pay attention to the ceremony. So, they sat quietly waving the little flags the ladies had handed out.

The Methodist archbishop followed the opening pledge and song with a prayer called an invocation, thanking God for the beautiful weather and the gathering of people at the ceremony. Then one of the red jacket ladies with a ribbon and pins wearing a beautiful red shiny quill pin on her right side took to the podium and introduced herself as the Regent of the local Daughters of the American Revolution chapter in nearby St. Michaels, Maryland. After she adjusted her

microphone, she began by thanking everyone for coming, made some introductions and spoke about Thomas Carney, who he was, where he was born, who he married, where he lived and how he served in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, and his special friendship with a Perry Benson who lived on a plantation called Wheatland in Talbot County, Maryland. Levi wondered how an African American free man could even have served in the Revolutionary War because he had never learned that from his social studies books.

By now, the courthouse lawn was crowded with so many people of different ages and a large group of African American men, women and children were present as well. They were dressed in their Sunday best clothes. One woman named Wilma Forest was wearing a bright red wool coat, but no blue ribbons or gold medal pins. Willie guessed she wasn't with the group of other red jacket ladies. She was introduced as the President of the local chapter of the NAACP, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that was celebrating its chapter's 75th anniversary in Caroline County. She walked to the podium and introduced herself and thanked the red jacket lady Regent for inviting her to participate in the ceremony. Mrs. Forest explained that many of the attendees were African Americans who belong to the local NAACP chapter and lived in surrounding communities. She continued to explain the history of African Americans in Caroline County, Maryland and explained how Thomas Carney was an unsung hero of the Revolutionary War.

During the war Mr. Carney, a strong man and fierce fighter, along with Mr. Benson served with the famous Maryland Continental Brigade. They served in many battles together from Valley Forge, Germantown and Brandywine in Pennsylvania and in the Siege of Ninety-Six in South Carolina in 1781. During the latter battle, Company Commander General Benson was seriously wounded in his right arm by British gunfire. Benson was losing so much blood that the

officer in charge ordered Thomas Carney to get Benson to the medical tent immediately. While carrying Benson in his arms in the intense summer heat, Carney was determined to reach the medical doctors even though he was exhausted, sweating and probably very dehydrated.

Fortunately, Carney's efforts saved Benson's life and he was forever grateful to Carney for his heroic act. After the war, whenever Benson was in Carney's hometown, he visited Carney on his farm in Denton, Maryland. History books do not include the story of Thomas Carney's heroism, but Mrs. Forest reminded the crowd that he was an unsung hero, and it is an honor to African American people and other members of the community to honor him with this historic marker.

The Regent lady thanked Mrs. Forest for her participation that day and further explained Mr. Carney and Mr. Benson's friendship. As both men continued their friendship, they were joined again when they served in the War of 1812 and fought to save St. Michaels, Maryland from falling to the British. Willie and Levi thought all this was interesting, but they were more interested in getting to the refreshment table. All this happened so long ago, they couldn't really relate to the story. They were both worried that their social studies teacher was going to give the class an assignment about this event. Then Willie's interest in the ceremony perked up when he heard the lady in the red jacket introduce two gentlemen whose last names were Carney. Willie watched them being introduced and as they were given the microphone. The Carney men introduced themselves and each took turns telling about their journey to the town to do some genealogical research at the local historical society and at the local courthouse. They weren't too sure if they were actual great, great, great grandsons of Thomas Carney or perhaps they were great, great, great nephews of him. But they knew from their ancestors' family stories that Thomas Carney was their relative and was a very brave man.

The boys wondered why this ceremony wasn't being held at Mr. Carney's grave. Then a nice little lady named Miss Betty, wearing a red jacket and medals, maneuvered her wheelchair over to the podium, took the microphone to explain all her hard work over the past five years researching Thomas Carney. She researched the local historical society, newspapers, local courthouses, genealogical websites on the internet and archive records in Annapolis about Thomas Carney to determine where he lived in the county and where he might have been buried. Once it was determined that his gravesite was lost to history, Miss Betty applied to the Maryland Historic Trust for a grant to obtain this historic marker to be placed downtown where everyone would see it and stop and pay their respects to Thomas Carney for many years to come. The television reporters, newspaper reporters and photographers interviewed the Carney men and even one of the red jacket ladies. Even Aunt Sarah managed to get interviewed and photographed.

After all the speeches were finished, Reverend Brown offered the benediction as a final prayer. Willie and Levi raced over to the refreshment table where their mothers caught up with them. They wanted to take the boys' pictures standing by the historic marker after it was unveiled. When the tarp came off, the crowd of people applauded and the Revolutionary War reenactors stood to the far side of the green and shot a twenty one gun salute to honor the occasion.

Everyone took turns getting their photos taken standing by the marker honoring Mr. Carney. After the boys and their mothers and Aunt Sarah were photographed they were allowed to get a cookie and lemonade. They noticed that Aunt Sarah had been carrying a little journal during the ceremony and watched her stroll over to the two Mr. Carneys and chat with them. They seemed to really enjoy themselves and then Aunt Sarah waved at us to come over. She was smiling broadly and had a twinkle in her eye. The boys knew she was up to something and weren't sure

they wanted to be a part of it. But Mrs. Montgomery scooted them toward Aunt Sarah. “Guess what?” exclaimed Aunt Sarah. We knew Aunt Sarah loved family history, but the boys couldn’t believe their ears when she stated that she had been researching the Carney family history for many years. To their surprise, she mentioned that the two Mr. Carneys standing right before us, were actually related to Levi and that Thomas Carney was their ancestor. Poor Levi didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when he heard this. All he thought about was not to tell Mrs. Sharp because he’d probably have to dress up like Thomas Carney and give the class a talk on his new-found ancestor.

Luckily, Mrs. Sharp was deep in conversation with the school superintendent who had also been invited to the ceremony, so Levi was sure he was off the hook.

Levi and Willie grew up as best friends and often remembered the day the historic marker was placed on their town county courthouse. They remembered how embarrassed Levi was when he learned about being related to Mr. Carney. They further remembered that Mrs. Sharp never learned about Levi’s relationship to Mr. Carney. Levi still gave his Black History Report on Kobe Bryant and Willie gave his report on Michael Jordan. They remembered too with pride Aunt Sarah and that she had her own marker inside the library lobby wall honoring her for her forty years service as head librarian. Levi continued to share the events of that day and his pride in his African American family’s history with his own children to this day.