

## Borders, Battles and Bigotry: The Trials of Dr. Alexander and Mary Augusta

*Frontières, combats et préjudice : les épreuves du docteur Alexandre Augusta et  
de Mary Augusta*

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## **Borders, Battles and Bigotry: The Trials of Dr. Alexander and Mary Augusta**

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Alexander and Mary Augusta were free-born black Americans who came to British North America in the 1850s because Alexander was barred from pursuing a medical degree in the United States. While he completed his degree at Trinity College and became a successful doctor and community leader, Mary ran a dressmaking shop. Despite their professional success in Canada West, the Augustas returned to the United States during the Civil War, where Alexander became the first black field doctor for the Union army. What Toronto lost in community leaders, the United States gained in much needed medical support for the Union army and a great contribution to American medicine. The Augustas fought racism on both sides of the border, while pushing the boundaries of racial acceptance.

Alexander et Mary Augusta sont deux Afro-américains nés libres, qui vinrent en Amérique du Nord britannique dans les années 1850 car Alexander n'avait pas le droit de poursuivre des études de médecine aux États-Unis. Tandis qu'il préparait son diplôme de médecine à Trinity College, puis devenait un médecin réputé et un dirigeant de sa communauté locale, Mary ouvrait un magasin de couture. Malgré leur succès professionnel au Canada ouest, les Augusta retournèrent aux États-Unis pendant la guerre de Sécession, et Alexander devint le premier médecin de campagne noir de l'armée de l'Union. Si Toronto y perdit des membres importants de sa communauté, les États-Unis y gagnèrent un soutien médical dont l'armée avait grand besoin. Les Augusta combattirent le racisme des deux côtés de la frontière et contribuèrent au processus d'acceptation raciale.

In the mid-1800s it was illegal for African American people to learn to read in Virginia, whether they were slaves or free Blacks. When Alexander Augusta was a young man in Norfolk, VA, he defied the law and secretly learned to read. He was a tenacious young man who did not let the happenstance of the colour of his skin negatively affect his chance of achieving success. Likewise, his future wife, Mary Burgoin, did not let the happenstance of gender affect her aspirations as a business owner. Alexander's story as a military hero in the American Civil War, and his contributions to American medical education, as well as the furthering of black men in the field, has been examined in military and medical history journals, but few have considered the relationship between his time in Canada, then British North America, and his military service. They also hardly mention his wife, Mary, or provide a broader picture of their lives on both sides of the border. This article will tell the story of a couple who came to Canada West to pursue opportunities not afforded to them in the United States due to race. North of the border they became successful community leaders and members of Toronto's black elite, and this article argues that the politics of the Civil War, a

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sense of home and duty, and the fluidity<sup>1</sup> of the border in the nineteenth century all affected the repatriation of the Augustas. When they left Toronto, the city lost community leaders, but the United States gained much needed medical support for the Union army, and after the war, a leader of the medical community. His accomplishments were achieved in a racist climate, a systemic malady that Alexander fought against on both sides of the border, despite the laws which banned slavery in British North America and made it seem like a “promised land” for African Americans. This article will also attempt to answer why he and Mary chose to return to the racially tense United States, when British North America offered them greater opportunities for advancement, some protection against racial violence, and safety from capture and slavery. For the Augustas, as well as many others, Canada West, while certainly not exempt of racism, still was a refuge from the barbaric treatment of African American peoples south of the border.

The research for this article largely comes from secondary sources. In instances when these sources present conflicting information, I chose to use primary source documents such as censuses, directories, contemporary newspaper articles, and letters to verify and confirm facts. This article begins by examining why many black Americans came to British North America, before exploring the early lives of the Augustas, their move to Toronto, and finally their experiences upon returning to the United States, contextualized through the experience of African American soldiers in the Civil War.

### **African-American migration to British North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Many African Americans came to Canada West in the mid-1800s as was known as a place where “blacks were truly free and equal” (BORDERWICH 2005, 114). Many escaped bondage, and after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, many escaped the fear of bondage.<sup>2</sup> Though this was not the first act or law of its kind, the Northern States were no longer a safe haven, as formerly enslaved peoples were legally required to be returned to their masters, with the promise of a large reward for their capture or strict punishment for helping their escape (BORDEWICH 2005, 328). Though Alexander and Mary were both free-

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<sup>1</sup> The term “fluid frontier” was coined by Afua Cooper in her 2001 article “Fluid Frontier: Blacks and the Detroit River Region, A Focus on Henry Bibb”. Here she uses “fluid” literally to refer to the Detroit River (for my purposes, Lake Ontario is a stand-in), and metaphorically to represent the “shifting and multiple nature of identities, which are constantly negotiated in border zones” (COOPER 2001, 131)

<sup>2</sup> Estimates vary on exactly how many people escaped to Canada during this time, but if every slave who escaped bondage arrived in Canada, the numbers would be 30,000 for the years between 1830 to 1860 (WINKS 1997, 235).

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born, it was not unknown for free black Americans to be abducted and sold into slavery.<sup>3</sup>

British North America, as it was called at the time, is widely known as the terminus of the Underground Railroad because of its lack of slavery; however the history is more complicated than this. Colonial Canada indeed supported legal slavery, as part of the French and then the British empires. In 1807, the British Parliament abolished the Transatlantic slave trade but did not outlaw slavery itself. It was not until 1833 that slavery was fully illegal in the British Empire (TRUDEL 2013, 253). This total abolition contributed to the myth that Canada was a haven for formerly enslaved peoples. Toronto was among several places in Canada West that acted as a landing point for many people feeling American oppression (HILL 1981, 28). Ferry services across Lake Ontario were often used as the final transport along the Underground Railroad, and Toronto was one of the port cities receiving refugees this way. (HILL 1981, 28). It was also a rapidly growing city in the mid-nineteenth century, and had an active, albeit small, Anti-Slavery Society, founded by newspaper editor George Brown. Because of this, many of the newspaper articles cited here about Alexander and Mary come from Brown's newspaper, *The Globe*. This society, as well as their Women's Auxiliary, and the Toronto Ladies' Association for the Relief of Destitute Coloured Fugitives (HENDRICK 2010, 164), assisted newcomers in finding homes, jobs, and education, while they adjusted to their new lives (HILL 1981, 20). Though Canada was considered a place of freedom, Toronto was unique in that the schools were integrated (DREW 2008, 104), and the population was large enough (and growing) that the influx of black citizens was less noticeable than in smaller communities who felt threatened by the refugees (HILL 1981, 158). In spite of these steps toward equality, Toronto was not a paradise. There was still unofficial, casual segregation, with black populations mostly relegated to "the least valuable corners of the towns" (WINKS 1997, 148). Tales of the difficulties faced by the black population in Canada West were told along the Underground Railroad by Northern Abolitionists to encourage those who escaped bondage to stay in the Northern States (SMALLWOOD 2000, 63). Though some of these claims may have been unfounded, prejudice against black populations did exist. It was a common assumption among citizens of Canada West that any member of the black population was formerly enslaved (WINKS 1997, 241), and indeed that the prisons and asylums held a disproportionate number of black inmates under the belief that uneducated former slaves are more prone to petty crime (WINKS 1997,

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<sup>3</sup> The most famous example of a free-born man being kidnapped and sold into slavery is Solomon Northup, author of *12 Years a Slave*.

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249), both of which were simply untrue. The laws of Britain which made all men free and equal were a beautiful utopian idea on paper, but the minds of men are difficult to change. British North America provided freedom from bondage, and theoretical equality, but the reality may explain why two thirds of those who fled the antebellum United States returned during or after the war (WAYNE 1998, 62).

### **The Augustas' move to British North America**

#### *The Early Lives of the Augustas*

Alexander was born to free parents on March 8, 1825, in Norfolk, Virginia (BUTTS 2005, 106). Despite his status as free, his opportunities were limited. It was illegal in Virginia for black people to be educated, nevertheless Alexander learned to read in secret under the tutelage of Daniel Payne, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and president of Wilberforce University (HENIG 2013, 23). Alexander moved to Baltimore in the 1840s and continued his education while he worked as a barber (BUTTS 2005, 106). The progression from barber to doctor is logical, as barbers were trained in minor surgery, tooth extraction and other medical procedures, among the more standard services that barbers offer today (BRISTOL 2004, 599). He applied to medical schools, including at the University of Pennsylvania (HENIG 2013, 23) and Chicago (HENDRICK 2010, 107), but was turned down by both. According to Civil War historian Gerald Henig, Augusta was “denied admission because of ‘prejudice of color,’ (...) though it is also possible that he lacked the necessary prerequisites” (HENIG 2013, 23). This statement disregards the fact that it was illegal for Alexander to earn any education, therefore he obviously did not have the necessary requirements; neither did he have proof of his education, nor a statement from a school. His lack of prerequisites is evidenced by the fact that even as he hoped to gain admission to the University of Pennsylvania, a professor sympathetic to his struggles allowed Alexander to secretly study in his office (HENDRICK 2010, 107).

In 1847 he returned to Baltimore and married Mary. Born in 1824 in Baltimore (Census of Canada 1861, 45), Mary Burgoin's life story has largely been overlooked in the shadow of her accomplished husband, and little information is available about her early life. Two online blogs wrongly claim that she was Native American (JENKINS 2018; FENISON nd); however, the census notes that she was indeed “coloured”, per the language on the census.<sup>4</sup> It is

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<sup>4</sup> The census of Canada West included a column indicating if residents were “coloured, mulatto or Indian”, and on Mary's line there is a distinct “c”.

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possible that the original error in claiming she was Native American was due to misunderstanding a description of Mary as a Baltimore native.

Before moving to British North America, Mary and Alexander appeared in the 1852 census for El Dorado County in California, in the heart of gold country, where he worked as a barber (HENIG 2013, 23), though it has been speculated that he went to California to find his fortune (BUTTS 2005, 106). This move to California highlights their willingness to pursue success, regardless of the travels involved. After California, they briefly returned to the Northern States before making their way to Canada.

*Life and Success in Toronto*

The Augustas arrived in Toronto in 1853, at which time Alexander enrolled in the Trinity Medical College (REID 2014, 153). Once settled, Alexander established himself as a business man with medical acumen. In 1855 his pharmacy on Yonge St. was advertised in the *Toronto Globe*. This advertisement begins with the bold heading “NEW DRUG STORE” and continues:

A.T. Augusta begs to announce to his friends and the public general, that he has opened the store on Yonge Street, one door south of Elm Street, with a new and choice selection of DRUGS, MEDICINES, PATENT MEDICINES, PERFUMERY, dyestuff &c., ... Physicians' prescriptions accurately prepared. Leeches applied, Cupping, Bleeding and teeth extracted. (*Globe* 1855, 4).

Alexander would have learned these listed skills during his time as a barber.

Alexander completed his medical education in 1856 (REID 2014, 254), an accomplishment that prompted school president John McCaul to boast that Alexander was “one of his most brilliant students” (HENIG 2013, 24). Alexander ran his pharmacy while he was completing his education, and once completed, he enjoyed many professional successes. In the 1861 *Toronto City Directory*, Alexander is listed at a Yonge St. location, across the street from his previous pharmacy as “surgeon” and is listed in the business directory under “surgeons” thus placing him as a full member of Toronto’s medical community (*Brown’s Toronto General Directory*, 328). 1861 is also a census year for Canada West. In this census, Alexander is enumerated as “surgeon” and “batchelor of medicine (sic)” (Census of Canada 1861, 45), while Mary’s professional accomplishments are conspicuously absent. In addition to his surgical practice and pharmacy,

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Alexander served as head of the General Hospital, and as physician for the local poor house (HENIG 2013, 24). Alexander also served as a mentor to Anderson Ruffin Abbott<sup>5</sup>, who also joined the Union army as a surgeon, and who was a lifelong friend of the Augustas (HENDRICK 2010, 107). Though barred from even a basic education in the United States, Alexander became a leader of Toronto's medical community in a few short years.

Alexander's career in medicine, and his role as an activist, was matched by Mary's career as a successful dressmaker, owning her own shop. This was noteworthy because "prior to the 1940s, very few black women were employed outside of farm work and domestic service" (BONNER 2014, 91), let alone acting as business owners. The shop was announced in an article that appeared in *The Globe* in November 1854, which indicated that Mary had taken over the business of Miss Styles at a York St. shop (*Globe* 1854, 3). York St. was located near the fashionable shopping district of King St. (SCADDING 1966, 52), and the City Directories for this period also show that the area of York St., Richmond St. and Adelaide St. were peppered with dressmaking establishments which provided Toronto residents with made-to-order dresses, often from patterns ordered from Paris and London (McKNIGHT 2018, 60). Mary's shop was no different in this regard, offering Toronto residents "London and Paris fashions... all of which will be made to order on the shortest notice by the most competent hands" (*Globe* 1854, 3). It was also located directly south of McCauley town, which later became The Ward, Toronto's first working-class suburb, where many newcomers to Toronto resided, including a large population of formerly enslaved peoples (SMARDZ-FROST 2007, 260). Mary also advertised in the *Provincial Freeman*<sup>6</sup> in October 1854 (*Provincial Freeman* 1854). In both advertisements, Mary states that she was looking for a good milliner and "several apprentices." Based on her proximity to McCauley town, and her advertisements for staff in the *Provincial Freeman*, it is likely that she provided new Canadians with employment and opportunity in a new city. The *Provincial Freeman* was committed to ending discrimination and encouraged opportunities and education, particularly for those who had recently arrived in Canada (HENDRICK 2010, 64). This apparent desire to provide employment and self-reliance for people who may have escaped bondage reflects a commitment by Mary to supporting their community.

In the year following the first advertisement, 1855, an announcement appeared in *The Globe* that Mary's shop had moved from York St. to Yonge St

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5 Anderson Ruffin Abbott (1837-1913) was the first black doctor in Toronto and served in the American Civil War.

6 *The Provincial Freeman* was a newspaper created by Mary-Ann Shadd in 1853 for the black populations of Upper Canada, with the tag line "Self-reliance is the True Road to Independence" (HENDRICK 2010, 64), a statement which certainly reflected the lives of the Augustas.

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“First door below Elm” (*Globe* 1855, 3), indicating Elm St, located between College and Dundas streets. Yonge St. was also a fashionable shopping district. In this publication, she went from the moniker, “Mrs. A. O. Augusta” as in her previous advertisement, to the more sophisticated name “Madame Augusta,” which gave her an affectation of a great and fashionable dressmaker. Also included in this new advertisement was the description of New York fashions, as well as the usual mention of London and Paris, which ensured her customers had a range of dresses from the most fashionable cities and indicates a cross-border exchange of cultural ideas (i.e.: New York style in Toronto). This location was in the same building as the pharmacy Alexander opened in the same year. Interestingly, in the 1856 *City Directory*, the listings for businesses in what is called the Elm Buildings does not include Mary or her dressmaking business. The only businesses are an upholsterer, cabinet polisher, Alexander and his “Central Medical” establishment, and a piano forte tuner (*Brown’s Toronto General Directory* 1856, 92). Nor is she included in the business listings for Dressmakers in the Directory. This bureaucratic erasure is possibly reflective of both her gender and her race, but her location on Yonge St. and the advertisements in newspapers made her visible to customers regardless.

Alexander’s experience of being a second-class citizen in the United States, and the systemic discrimination and disadvantage of the black citizens of Canada,<sup>7</sup> motivated him to use his position as one of Toronto’s black elites for the furthering of philanthropic pursuits. Among these pursuits was his work as the president of the Association for the Education of the Coloured People of Canada, an organization that helped black youth secure funds and supplies for schools (HENIG 2013, 24). He also drafted a resolution opposing an anti-black candidate for Canada West’s Legislature (HENIG 2013, 24). In spring 1857, Conservative candidate John Prince put forth the suggestion that Canada West’s black population be kept separate and proposed a segregated colony on Manitoulin Island as a solution (RIPLEY ed 1986, 382). In response to this outrageous suggestion, Alexander drafted a list of resolutions in which he admonishes Prince as a “petty counsellor” during a period of enlightenment, an outlier in a country where black men have all the rights and privileges of a free citizen. He posits an American agenda in that

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<sup>7</sup> Historians of African Canadian history often address the myth of Canada as a haven. Afua Cooper, for example notes that “on coming to Canada, many blacks found that the only difference between the new country and old was that in the new country, the law protected ex-fugitives from re-enslavement.” (COOPER 1994, 153).



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blood-stained southern gold is doing its work of corruption and bribery with the men of this province in high places, to carry out this new scheme of colonization, degradation and kidnapping, to deter coloured men from emigrating to this province (RIPLEY ed 1986, 383).

As a community leader Alexander used his position as a respected and educated voice of the citizenry to speak on behalf of those less privileged and presented a petition with 400 signatures calling for Prince's resignation. His participation in community activism was also reported in local newspapers. On February 5, 1863, mere months before Alexander joined the Union army, *The Globe* reported on the 12th Annual Meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society. Various members of Toronto's black community spoke about the importance of the cause as a humanitarian issue, with Alexander speaking at the end of the night. He again drew attention to the fact that "the South had many friends in this country, and even emissaries in this very city" and hoped that soon those friends would see the inequities that they perpetuate between citizens who under the law were equal. He expressed relief that the United States was finally in a place where the humanity and rights of black men were recognized. Alexander concluded his address by praising the active work of the anti-slavery movement in Canada (*Globe* 1863a, 1). Through his community work, Alexander exposed the dangers of racist ideologies of the Southern States present in Canada West as a reaction to immigration north.

With the concession of the Union army to enlist black soldiers, The Bureau of Coloured Troops was created in May 1863 (KYNOCH 1987, 108). Alexander had the sentiment that "The coloured people have a duty to perform at this present time" (*Globe* 1863a, 1) and felt compelled to write to President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton, on January 7, to offer his services as a surgeon for the Union army, using skills he acquired in a more hospitable environment than his home country. Alexander's time in Toronto had come to an end, and he would never return to the city in which he thrived.

### **The Augustas' Return to the United States**

The American Civil War (1861-1865) was waged between the Northern States' Union Army and the Southern States' Confederate Army. The causes of the war were complex enough to warrant volumes dedicated to them, but among the causes was the North's desire to abolish slavery, and the South's desire to maintain that part of the economy, politics and social fabric, and to sustain the wealth of the elite gained from bonded labour. At the beginning of the war, black men were not permitted to enlist as anything beyond servants, and white soldiers, despite fighting for the freedom of black men, did not want to fight beside them

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(REID 2014, 83). By the second year of the war, white enlistment waned, the body count rose, and the desperation for more soldiers grew, yet still black men were not welcome to enlist. In March 1863, Congress issued the Conscription Act, which stated that “all obvious manpower had to be utilised” for the war effort (KYNOCH 1987, 107).

The Bureau of Colored Troops was created in May of 1863 with the goal of recruiting black soldiers. Approximately 180,000 black men between the ages of 18 and 45 enlisted in the Northern States, even though their fight to end slavery meant surrendering themselves to white authority, with no chance of advancement in the ranks (KYNOCH 1987, 104). These troops were joined by a further 18,000 men from Canada (WINKS 1997, 288). Leaders of the black community encouraged men to join, and black newspapers published missives encouraging the same. The New-York-based *Anglo-African Magazine*, for example, wrote “The South must be subjugated, or we shall be enslaved. In aiding the federal government in whatever way we can, we are aiding to secure our own liberty” (KYNOCH 1987, 108). As a reflection of broader societal norms, black soldiers were not treated equally once they did join. Not only were they subjected to harassment and discrimination by white soldiers, they were also paid less. Initially, the Union Army promised equal pay for black soldiers, which was \$13.00 per month plus \$3.50 for clothing allowance. However, this was reduced to \$10.00 per month with \$3 deducted for clothing (KYNOCH 1987, 109). Many of the black men who enlisted, were drafted, or impressed, never saw battle, because they were systematically put to work as labourers by their white officers. Alexander Augusta fought this ingrained racism and unfair restrictions, providing medical support for the Union, as soon as black men were allowed to enlist.

Alexander and Mary returned to the United States in 1863. The number of American black soldiers who voluntarily enlisted was initially slow, as even the Union army had policies preventing black enlistment, but by 1863 Lincoln gave permission to all Northern States to recruit regiments of black troops (KYNOCH 1987, 108). It was in response to this change in policy that Alexander wrote to President Abraham Lincoln and the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, seeking “an appointment as surgeon to some of the coloured regiments, or as a physician to some of the depots of freedmen” (quoted in HENIG 2013, 25). His letter outlined that he had been forced to leave the United States due to prejudice that prevented him from studying medicine, that he had since obtained his degree and had practiced medicine for six years. Alexander saw an opportunity to help the Union army while simultaneously supporting black soldiers and being an early example of a black man in a position of power and authority. Two weeks after his communication, Alexander received a reply from the Assistant Secretary of War,

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directing him to arrange an examination with the US Surgeon General, which was set for March 25, 1863 in Washington, D.C. (PRINCE 2015, 122). Two days before the exam, the Surgeon General wrote to the Secretary of War stating, “I believe there has been a mistake in this case, and I respectfully ask the within invitation be recalled” based on the fact that Augusta was a “person of colour” (PRINCE 2015, 122). They also claimed that his military service would violate Great Britain’s proclamation of neutrality, even though thousands of British subjects served. They claimed that even though he was born and raised in the United States, his ten years spent living in British North America technically made him a British subject (HENIG 2013, 25). On March 30, 1863, the *New York Times* reported on Alexander’s case, stating that the Medical Department had received an application from a Canadian doctor wishing to be examined in Washington, DC. The application required a permit endorsed by a senior doctor prior to examination. A doctor at the Department signed the permit, which was presented by a “respectable looking coloured man, whom he supposed was the would-be-doctor’s servant, never dreaming that the coloured gentleman was himself the candidate” (quoted in PRINCE 2015, 123). Upon discovering Alexander’s true identity, he asked Stanton that the permission be revoked. Alexander did not accept this rejection, and again wrote to the President and the members of the army’s medical board, “I have come nearly a thousand miles at great expense and sacrifice, hoping to be of some use to the country and to my race at this eventful period” as the rate of death from illness and disease among black servicemen was nearly twice as high as their white counterparts (quoted in HENIG 2013, 25). On April 1, the Medical Board recommended that he be appointed as a surgeon for one of the black regiments (PRINCE 2015, 124). On April 14, 1863, at age 38, Augusta was commissioned as a surgeon with the rank of Major in the Union Army (KYNOCH 1987, 25).

Even before he reached his first post in service at Camp Stanton in Maryland, Alexander experienced racial hostility and violence. In May 1863, as Alexander boarded a train at President St. Station in Baltimore, in full uniform, a teenaged boy swore at him, and tore the epaulettes off his uniform. When he rebuffed the boy, a group of eight to ten men surrounded him. Train guards came to his aid, but he was, in his words,

determined... to have the parties punished, knowing full well the same thing might occur again, unless a stop was put to it at once. (He) therefore went up to the Provost Marshal’s office with one of the guards and reported the facts to the Lieut. Col. Fish. (HENIG 2013, 26)

Though they failed to find the mob, a man did emerge from the market and further assaulted Alexander. The man was subdued and brought to the Provost

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Marshall. Soon a crowd of 200 people were outside the office. When Alexander attempted to continue his trip, one of the assailants from the train blocked his path. Alexander threw a punch that made the man bleed, causing the crowd to erupt with cries to lynch and hang Alexander. He was escorted for the rest of his journey by cavalrymen (HENIG 2013, 25). On May 15, 1863, Alexander wrote about his experience in the *National Republican* newspaper in Washington, DC, stating that he was not surprised by this mob treatment, as it was a “virtue to mob coloured people” in Baltimore (HENIG 2013, 26). What disturbed him, instead, was that the mob could only see his colour, not that he was a doctor for the Union army, whose job it was to care for the sick and wounded. He responded to the situation by stating:

My position as an officer entitles me to wear the insignia of my office, and if I am either afraid or ashamed to wear them anywhere, I am not fit to hold my commission, and should resign it at once. (quoted in HENIG 2013, 27)

This attack was reported in an article in the *Globe* in Toronto, a re-print of an article in the *New York Tribune* in May 1863. This article notes that white men in Maryland fear giving black men “white men’s work, or offices” for fear of “starving them to death, when free” (*Globe* 1863b, 1). The article was prefaced by the *Globe*’s editor who deplored: “we are sorry to see the following in the *New York Tribune*, that Dr. Augusta has been misused by a mob in Baltimore.” This is indicative of the positive impression Augusta had left on the people of Toronto.

Upon his arrival at Camp Stanton, Alexander continued to experience racial discrimination. He was stationed to work with a team of all-white surgeons, all of whom he out-ranked. Even though he was stationed with the 7<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Infantry, the other surgeons wrote to the White House, the War Department and Members of Congress to demand that “this unexpected and unusual, and most unpleasant relationship in which we have been placed may in some way be terminated” (quoted in HENIG 2013, 27). In other words, these surgeons were happy to support the colored troops medically, but did not want to be considered equal to, or even worse in their opinions, rank below a black man. Surgeon Joel Morse went so far as to call working under Alexander “humiliating”, and though he was happy to see black men in positions of power, he felt there should still be segregation in the army (PRINCE 2015, 126). Although Brigadier General William Birney stated that “surgeon Augusta has worked indefatigably while at Camp Stanton,” Alexander was transferred. He was placed in charge of a recently created hospital for African Americans at the site of Camp Barker in Washington. This move, though bending to the complaints of petty white

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surgeons, made him the first African American to serve as the head of a hospital in the United States (HENIG 2013, 28). Alexander was stationed at Camp Barker until the spring of 1864 (BUTTS 2005, 106).

Alexander experienced another racially motivated incident outside of the military camps, when on February 1, 1864, he was on route to testify at a court martial. In attempting to enter a trolley car, the ticketing agent removed him, and told him he needed to sit outside, even though it was raining, as the inside portion was reserved for white riders (HENIG 2013, 28). The ticketing agent ultimately pushed Alexander off the trolley, as the driver was told to carry on, causing Alexander to miss the trial (BUTTS 2005, 107). He wrote to radical Republican Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, who was sponsoring a bill to prohibit street rail companies from segregating passengers based on race. Augusta wrote that “an officer of the United States with the commission of Major, with the uniform of the United States, has been pushed off one of these cars on Pennsylvania Ave. by the conductor for no other offense than that he was black” (quoted in HENIG 2013, 29).

Mary also experienced racially charged violence immediately upon her return to the United States. In July 1863, Mary, accompanied by Alexander’s friend and protégé Anderson Abbott, made the journey from Canada to Washington, DC. While waiting for a connecting train in New York City, Mary was accosted by a man feigning drunkenness. Abbott came to her defense and shoved the man away. The man returned with a larger man, who threatened to kill them both. Mary and Anderson sought the help of a nearby watchman, who ignored their concerns. They were able to escape when their assailant was distracted, and took shelter in an oyster bar on a well-lit, busy street (PRINCE 2015, 129). This assault took place days before the start of the New York City Draft Riots, during which lower-class Irishmen violently protested involuntary drafting, turning their rage toward the black population of New York in a bloody and horrific display, killing upwards of 120 people, and injuring a further 2000 (PRINCE 2015, 190). Anderson hypothesized that he and Mary were intended to be the first victims of the planned riot but were able to escape.

Alexander refused to be intimidated or swayed by the violence enacted toward he and his wife: and it was this tenacity that led him to be the first black man in both Toronto and the United States to achieve a number of prestigious positions. In January 1864, he and Anderson attended a levee at the White House in full uniform. They were eagerly approached by President Lincoln, who shook their hands. This was the first time in United States history that black men had attended such an event (PRINCE 2015, 130). They were also introduced to Mary Todd Lincoln, who was raised in a slave-holding family. The *Washington*

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*Chronicle* reported that they were “of genteel exteriors and with the manners of the gentleman,” sentiments which were reprinted in newspapers across the country (PRINCE 2015, 132). The wide publication of this event perpetuated favourable reporting of African Americans of rank.

Shortly after the Civil War ended in July 1865 and two months before the signing 13th Amendment to the Constitution in December, which released almost 4 million men, women and children from slavery, Alexander was sent to Savannah, Georgia, to care for the freedmen who camped out on the land in the Ogeechee district. By September 1, he was appointed head of the Lincoln General Hospital, which operated under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, a department established for constructing a new social order post-war, and more importantly, post-slavery. This bureau’s mandate included providing food, medical care, education and jobs, as well as dealing with the race-related challenges of newly freed people in the United States (PRINCE 2015, 263). The Freedmen’s Bureau also assisted poor white Americans who had been affected by the war (HENIG 2013, 29). Augusta remained in this position of leading the hospital until March 1867 (PRINCE 2015, 263).

Alexander championed for himself as well as members of the community during his military service and after. When he was appointed to his post in the Union army, all enlisted black men, including non-commissioned officers, were paid \$7 per month. As a commissioned officer, he was at first paid \$169 a month, the compensation for an army surgeon major. However, in 1864, the army paymaster in Baltimore refused to pay him more than \$7, due to his race. He joined a protest with other black men to fight the pay. Given his rank and status, this unjust discrepancy was rectified (HENIG 2013, 28). In another instance of him advocating for his community he was interviewed by a Senate committee in March 1868. A black woman named Kate Brown had been forcibly removed from a train in Virginia after refusing to give up her seat in a car designated for white women only. As she was forcibly removed from the train, Mrs. Brown sustained sprains, bruising all over her body, torn ligaments and internal injuries, which required daily medical treatment by Augusta (PRINCE 2015, 263). Because he was familiar with the extent of her injuries as her physician, he was a valuable authority on the topic of racial segregation and could speak to the violence that segregation incites.

After resigning his post at the Lincoln Hospital, Alexander returned to a private practice in Washington, DC, and in 1868, when Howard University was founded as an institution of higher learning for black students, Alexander became the first African American to teach medical science at the university level in the

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United States (HENIG 2013, 29). Considering that a mere twenty years earlier the law had denied him an education, this promotion was ground-breaking. However, despite his many professional accomplishments, he was still excluded from membership in the Medical Association of the District of Columbia. When the American Medical Association failed to intervene, he founded the National Medical Society, which opened its membership to all physicians, regardless of colour (HENIG 2013, 30). He was also one of the founders of the Medico-Chirurgical Society, the first black medical organization in the United States (HENIG 2013, 30). Alexander was a trailblazer in the medical community in the face of adversity.

Alexander died on December 21, 1890, at age 65, and was the first black officer to be interred in Arlington Cemetery (HENIG 2013, 30). Mary's later years are more difficult to uncover, but there is evidence that she applied for a widow's pension with the military in 1891 (*US Civil War Pension Index* 1891, 1922). Well into her late 60s, it is unlikely that she was able to sustain herself through dressmaking, as she had done earlier in her life. In 1893 she applied for financial relief from the government (HICKCOX ed 1893, 263). The exact date of Mary's death could not be ascertained, but as of 1900 she was listed in the US Census for Baltimore, aged 75, living in the St. Francis convent, a religious house and residence for orphans and the poor ("Historic Narrative" 2018). After spending her life supporting her illustrious husband, running her own business, and fighting racial discrimination by his side, she ended her life in poverty, and as a footnote in the scholarship on her husband's life.

### **Conclusion**

Mary and Alexander never returned to Canada, though their friend Anderson Abbott did after the war. The Augusta's decision to return to the United States resulted in harassment, violence, and in the end poverty for Mary. During their decade in Toronto they both experienced fast success and opportunities for advancement. Ever tenacious, even before their time in Toronto, Alexander understood the stakes of the Civil War, and the importance of victory for the Union army for the emancipation of the black population of the United States. As historian Gary Kynoch states, "Black soldiers came to realize that while they might have more to gain in the war than whites, they also had more to lose" (1987, 123). Though staying in Toronto would have been the more comfortable choice for Alexander and Mary, it was imperative for them to do their part in abolishing slavery in the United States and in providing opportunities for newly freed peoples, regardless of the challenges that they personally faced. Anderson Abbott said of Alexander that "even among the shabby field hands, (he) stirred the faintest heart to faith in the new destiny of the race" (HENIG 2013, 30). The war

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effort generated a hope that there would be equal rights for all men, and Alexander, through his medical and philanthropic acts made meaningful progress toward that end. As an advocate and leader in the black community in Toronto and pioneer of black leadership in the medical field in both British North America and the United States, Alexander was the emulating the words of Frederick Douglass “Liberty won by white men would lose half its lustre. Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow” (KYNOCH 1987, 114). By returning to the United States after ten years in Toronto, Alexander used his position of relative privilege in a fight to ensure all black men had equal opportunities.

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