

The 1929 death certificate for Jeremiah Costen hints at stories that should not be lost to history. Obviously, there is Jeremiah's story, a man born in North Carolina on February 14, 1854. North Carolina was a slave state at that time, so Jeremiah was probably a slave child. But he lived most of his life as a free man since the Civil War brought about the abolition of slavery in 1865. What stories Jeremiah could tell us about his childhood in such a tumultuous time! He was only seven when the war began, eleven when it ended. The death certificate identifies his parents as Thomas and Rebecca Costen, both born in North Carolina. They represent another story, one that would have included, in all likelihood, years of enslavement in the antebellum South. Given the agricultural economy of the state, Thomas and Rebecca might have labored on a farm owned by their legal "master." Their son's occupation, as listed on his death certificate a generation later, was that of "farmer." But an adult Jeremiah would have worked the land as a free man. At one point after slavery's abolishment, some of Thomas and Rebecca's descendants came to own their own land. They reserved a section of the Costen farm as a family gravesite. According to Jeremiah's death certificate, he was buried in the "family cemetery." Several relatives would have attended his 1929 burial service, one of whom was probably his namesake, William Jeremiah Powell. His mother, Cora, was Jeremiah's daughter. William's story is another one that should be preserved for history. Born in 1919, William was not quite ten years old when his grandfather died. As a young boy, William had no way of knowing that he would join Jeremiah in the same family cemetery not that many years later. William Jeremiah Powell, a sailor in the United States Navy, was killed at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.¹

That morning, William was on board the *USS Curtiss*. Like the legally, racially segregated world he grew up in, he served in a segregated Navy. As a mess attendant, William was undoubtedly below deck when the enemy planes began their attack just minutes before eight o'clock. His duties would have placed him there. Simply put, messmen waited on officers during their meals, acting as an "officer's servant." The Black messman's assignment conjured scenes from the pre-Civil War Era when enslaved people, assigned to the household, waited on whites who sat at their dining room tables. One historian judged the job of a messman to be "a unique form of servitude." In December 1941, the messman branch was the assigned station for men of color who enlisted in the U.S. Navy, the only assigned station for them. Racism was at the root of that restriction. The prevailing ideology insisted Blacks were intellectually incapable of carrying out anything but the most basic tasks. On December 7, 1941, however, those in the messman branch proved their competency and their courage. Unlike the white enlisted sailors, for example, Blacks received no training on the ship's machine guns. Yet during the attack at Pearl Harbor, a few messman fired their ships' machine guns at enemy planes. William Jeremiah Powell was one of them.²

An Exceptional Family

African Americans lived a disadvantaged life, forcibly brought to the United States and enslaved beginning in the 17th century. The abolishment of slavery in the mid-19th century changed their lives to a large degree, yet racism endured. This remained true in the early 20th century when William was growing up. Some national statistics show, however, that William had some advantages because of his family's accomplishments. In the 1930s, his adolescent

years, 75% of Black Americans lived in the South. In respect to his grandparents and parents, the Powells (his paternal side) and the Costens (his maternal side) were North Carolinians. They stayed in that state after emancipation. As such, they witnessed the beginnings of what became known as the Jim Crow System when, as free people, Blacks lived under legal segregation and disenfranchisement. The Powells and the Costens stayed in North Carolina even when the Great Migration, the movement by millions of African Americans out of the South, began in the 1910s. They may have seen relatives move to the North, the Midwest, or the West, but William's grandparents and parents remained in the state where his great-grandparents, Thomas and Rebecca Costen, had been born in the early 19th century. Somewhere, in their being, they must have had faith that North Carolina offered a future for themselves and their children.³

Perhaps William's parents tied their hopes to the education they insisted their children receive. In 1930, nationally few Blacks had a high school education. Yet according to William's niece, Brenda Powell Costen, William and all nine of his siblings graduated from high school. That would have been an amazing achievement for any average family in the 1930s, white or Black. The United States Federal Census did not begin to gather statistics on how many years of school Americans completed until 1940. By then, William had graduated from T.S. Cooper High School in the small community of Sunbury. The state's educational system was segregated by law. Ten years after slavery had been abolished, North Carolina amended its state constitution to reflect the segregation that became part of the Jim Crow system. The 1875 amendment decreed that "...the children of the white race and the children of the colored race shall be taught in separate public schools; but there shall be no discrimination in favor of, or to the prejudice of, either race..." Still, schools for Black children never equaled those for white children. Beginning in 1917 and continuing for twenty years (the very years of William's attendance in North Carolina's public schools), three national charity groups tried to correct that inequality. They spent over \$2.5 million to better the state's schools for African American children. The Powell children probably benefited from some of that philanthropy. Nationally, based upon the 1940 census for males age 25 and older, 13% of white men had completed high school. For African American men in that same age group, the number was 3.8%. William certainly distinguished himself from his peers with his high school diploma.⁴

The difference in educational attainment between whites and Blacks helps to explain two other telling statistics from 1930--nationally, 90% of Blacks lived in poverty and about 33% of Black men who were employed were sharecroppers or tenant farmers. "Poverty" would probably not accurately describe the economic condition of William's family. Granted, William spent his adolescent years in an America burdened by the Great Depression where manufacturing output drastically declined and unemployment rose. But people in the cities felt the effects of the economic downturn more than those who lived in rural areas. Farmers saw the prices for their crops go down, but they produced their own food, so farmers did not stand in breadlines as did Americans in the cities, looking for handouts of food. William lived in a small, rural community in Gates County where living off the land was the norm. Yet for many Blacks, that meant tenant farming or sharecropping. It appears William's immediate family did neither. They farmed the land, land they owned, and that mitigated one of the worst effects of

the Depression, namely, hunger. Landownership thus distinguished William's family from most other Black families. That gave them some degree of independency.⁵

William's 19th century ancestors--The Costens

English colonists settled North Carolina in the mid-17th century. To work their tobacco fields, they purchased enslaved people, kidnapped and brought to the colonies from Africa. We do not know when William's ancestors arrived. United States Federal Census records do tell us, however, that his mother's forebearers lived in South Carolina in the early 19th century. William's maternal great-grandparents, the previously mentioned Thomas and Rebecca Costen, appear in two late 19th century censuses, the one in 1870 and in 1880. Both, of course, were taken when the Costens were free people. They lived in Hunters Mill, in Gates County. Questions posed in those censuses shed light on Thomas and Rebecca's early life. The censuses asked for the year of the person's birth; Thomas's entry gives 1814 in both censuses and Rebecca's about 1826 in one and 1830 in the other. Additionally, the 1880 census contained a question regarding the person being "counted" --Where were your parents' born? When the census taker (also known as the "enumerator") asked that question of Thomas and Rebecca, both replied that their parents had been born in North Carolina. That places William's great-great-grandparents in the state at least in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In the first federal census in 1790, William's great-great-grandparents were alive. They were probably enslaved. Even then, though, North Carolina had a small number of free Blacks. In 1790, free Blacks in North Carolina numbered close to 5,000. Seventy years later, in 1860, out of an enslaved population of 331,059 in the state, about 10% of that number, or 30,463, were free. The free status was not easy to come by, however. Free Blacks in North Carolina might have immigrated to the state from a free state where there was no slavery. Or, the free person's mother was free, which meant any children she bore were also free. One last way a Black could claim a free status was if their owner freed them. All were rare occurrences. We cannot be absolutely certain if Thomas and Rebecca's parents, or if they themselves, were enslaved or free. The odds favor the former status, though, just because of the numbers involved.⁶

Rebecca's answer to an enumerator's question in the 1900 census supports the assumption that she and Thomas lived their early lives as enslaved people. In that census, Rebecca gave her age as seventy-three and her birth date as May 1827. She was a widow by then. A census question asked the person's year of marriage. Rebecca replied "1866." That is a significant date in the history of enslaved families. The institution of slavery did not recognize marriages between enslaved men and women. Such unions, however, benefited both the Blacks and the white owners. For the former, families were a source of comfort. The later reasoned that enslaved families would be more tied to the farm or plantation, not wanting to run away since that meant abandoning their families. After abolition in 1865, newly freed African Americans registered their marriages with the state, giving legal status to their children. With this history, it makes sense that Rebecca told the enumerator that she married in 1866. She and Thomas probably were married a second time as free people. In the decades after emancipation, though, one clear remnant of slavery affected their daily lives. Neither knew how to read or write. A census taker asked a literacy question in 1870 and again in 1880; each time,

the Costens replied that they did not know how to read or write. This was the same answer Rebecca gave to the question in the 1900 census. One of Thomas and Rebecca's grandchildren, Cora, became William's mother. Again, education was clearly important to William's parents. They ensured their children acquired one that was denied to earlier generations in their family. Cora would have known all too well about the illiteracy of older generations because of her own parents. In spite of an inability to read and write, in 1900 Rebecca owned a farm in Hunters Mill free of a mortgage.⁷

William's 19th century ancestors--The Powells

Like the Costens, William's paternal ancestors, the Powells, were deeply rooted in North Carolina. William's grandparents were George (aka Henderson) and Laura Powell. Based upon their answers to the census taker's questions in 1870 and again in 1880, they were born in the slavery period, George about 1847 and Laura about 1848. Thus, on both sides of his family, William descended from enslaved men and women. Also, like the parents of Thomas and Rebecca Costen, the parents of George and Laura Powell had been born in North Carolina. That means William's paternal great-grandparents were, in all likelihood, also enslaved. Unsurprisingly, George and Laura told the census taker in 1870 and 1880 that they could not read or write. While the Costens lived in small communities in Gates County, the Powells apparently spent their lives in Halifax County, not far from Gates. On both sides of his family, William knew about rural life much more than city life. One of George and Laura's children was William Penn Powell, born on May 30, 1881. He became the father of William Jeremiah Powell, a defender of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.⁸

William's Maternal Grandfather—Jeremiah Costen

Based on the 1870 federal census, Thomas and Rebecca Costen had at least eight children. One of them was Jeremiah, who became William's grandfather. Like his family before him, Jeremiah lived in Gates County. In the 1870 and 1880 federal censuses, he made his home in the small community of Hunters Mill. That is also where he died in March 1929. He worked as a farm laborer in 1870 when he was sixteen years old. Ten years later, Jeremiah was married and worked in a mill. His wife, Lithia, had probably lived her early years as a slave since the 1880 census gives her birth year as 1857. Lithia and her parents had been born in North Carolina. In 1880, she and Jeremiah had two young children, one over a year old and the other only four months. In 1888, Lithia died giving birth to a daughter named Cora. Cora became William's mother. Jeremiah, recall, lived until 1929. His death certificate listed his occupation as "farmer."⁹

William's Parents--Cora Costen Powell and William Penn Powell

Even though Cora grew up without her mother, immediate and extended family members provided her with love and guidance. When she was eleven, for example, she lived with her grandmother, Rebecca Costen, in Hunters Mill. Then seventy-three years old, Rebecca headed a multi-generational household. Aside from her grandmother, Cora was surrounded in the home

by three aunts and six other children related to Rebecca in various ways. A federal census taker once asked Cora the highest grade she completed in her formal education; she replied it was the fifth grade. Perhaps after that, she worked around the family farm her grandmother Rebecca owned. When Cora was nineteen, she married twenty-six-year-old William Penn Powell, a son of George and Laura Powell.¹⁰

As a single man, William Penn Powell had worked on his parent's farm. Two years after he married Cora, the couple lived in Hunters Mill where, at the time of the 1910 federal census, he was employed in a lumber mill. They had their own home then, although it was mortgaged. Two boarders lived with them, bringing in an extra, small income. Ten years later, in 1920, the Powells remained at the same farm, but William had left his mill job and worked their land. The Powells now had five children, and a young nephew lived with them. William and Cora named their youngest child, born on May 5, 1919, after his father and his maternal grandfather-- William Jeremiah Powell. More children followed, ten in all. Recall what William Jeremiah's niece, Brenda Powell Costen, shared--all ten graduated from high school. Based on an answer to a question posed by the 1940 census taker, their father, William Penn Powell, completed his education through the sixth grade. His children would go much further.¹¹



William Penn Powell and Cora Powell

As previously argued, the family of Pearl Harbor Defender William Jeremiah Powell was exceptional. Looking only at William's immediate family, they lived a life that ran counter to the one in 1930 for so many Blacks in the United States. While the Powells lived in the South as did most Blacks, they did not live in poverty, and their children attended high school. William's father was not a sharecropper or a tenant farmer. In the 1930s, when William was growing up, some three million people lived in North Carolina. Blacks constituted 29% of that number, or 918,647 people. In 1935, as the Great Depression continued to impact Americans, 69,373 Blacks in North Carolina owned their own farm. The rest worked in tobacco factories, hosiery mills, or furniture and textile plants. In those two plants, Black men swept the floors, cleaned, and handled freight. William Jeremiah Powell obviously wanted more. After high school, he could have worked the family farm, hired out his labor perhaps at the Costen family farm, or worked in a factory or a mill as his father and grandfather had done. William, though, must have wanted to see more than his small, rural area of North Carolina. Beginning in 1932, the U.S. Navy actively recruited Blacks. Norfolk, a major naval base, was just over thirty miles away from Hunters Mill. Early in 1939, William visited the recruitment office in Norfolk. As the recruitment poster promised, he was going to see the world.¹²

Blacks in the U.S. Navy, an Overview

Since the nation's beginning, Blacks served in the U.S. Navy. During the American Revolution, free and enslaved Blacks constituted more than 10% of the fledgling force. According to the Navy itself, "Blacks maintained a consistent presence in the U.S. Navy throughout the Early Republic and the War of 1812." In the latter conflict, Blacks accounted for one-sixth of the men who served in the Navy. Yet as slavery divided the nation more and more, single digit quotas limited their number. Right before the Civil War began in April 1861, just 2.5% of the Navy was Black. This changed during the Civil War as the North needed additional manpower. By war's end in April 1865, 20% of the Navy was Black. That percentage dramatically decreased to only 9.5% in the 1890s. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1896 legalized racial segregation throughout American society, which resulted in an even greater decrease in the number of Blacks in the Navy. When the U.S. fought in World War I from 1917-1918, they totaled about 1.2%. All served as enlisted men, mostly as messmen, cooks, and shovelers of the coal that ran the ships. After the war ended, few of these men remained in the Navy. Then, beginning in 1919 and continuing throughout the 1920s, the Navy did not allow Blacks to enlist. The Command decided to use Filipinos exclusively in the messman branch. (Before the U.S. acquired the Philippines in an 1898 war with Spain, Chinese and Japanese men worked in the mess. Filipinos came to replace those two ethnic groups.)¹³

The early 1930s changed naval policy towards Black enlistments. Events in Europe as well as the Pacific pressured the United States to increase its strength both in respect to ships and to men. Totalitarian governments in Germany and Japan talked of expanding their borders. That threatened United States allies in Europe and American territories in the Pacific. By 1932, the Navy counted only 441 Blacks in a force of 81,120 men; most of them served in the mess or as musicians. The new administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, inaugurated early in 1933, lifted the ban on Black enlistees. Still, such sailors could only serve in the messman branch. One Black

recruit who arrived in 1933 for naval training as a mess attendant was one of twenty enlistees from six southern states. Years later, he recalled, "We were the first group of blacks to go into the navy since 1919. They recruited only us Southerners because they believed we would be more accepting of the servant role they had in mind for us than would blacks from the North." Even though their duty station was limited to the messman branch, the number of Black sailors increased as the 1930s progressed. By 1939, Black sailors numbered 2,400. In May 1940, Germany invaded France, a major turning point in the European war. At that time, 4,007 Black sailors wore the uniform out of 215,000 men in the U.S. Navy. Put another way, Blacks represented 2.3% of the Navy's force. Whites and Blacks remained segregated, a policy that the Navy rationalized in more than one way. The Command argued that ships functioned more efficiently, racial conflict could more easily be avoided, and morale would not be affected as it would be if the crew was integrated.¹⁴

William enlists, February 7, 1940

We do not know exactly what prompted William's decision to enlist in the Navy, or why he did so when he did, early in February 1940. His nephew, James C. Powell, has copies of William's Navy records. He remembers that somewhere in them is a phrase that reflected what James thinks were three of his uncle's reasons to enlist--"Earn-Learn-Travel." William began his journeys with a short one when he traveled the fifty-some miles from Hunters Mill to Norfolk's naval base. He enlisted there on February 7, 1940, signing up for six years of service. A 1939 enlistee remembered that recruits had to pass "the navy entrance exam," and the enlistee had to have "a good IQ." Once the Navy accepted him, William was sent to the Mess Attendant School. It was located on the grounds of Norfolk's naval training station. By the time William arrived, a shift in the ethnicity of the messmen was apparent. Blacks numbered about 2,400, Filipinos 2,116, and Chamorro Guamanians 226 (Guam was another territory the U.S. took over after the Spanish American War in 1898). This was the first time since 1913 that Black sailors outnumbered the other two ethnicities. William, therefore, did not enlist in a vacuum. He was part of an increase in Black enlistees. From a few pieces of correspondence his family still has, it appears he knew others from North Carolina who had also joined around the time he did.¹⁵

Enlistees underwent twelve weeks of training at the naval base. They lived in segregated barracks in a section of the training station reserved for Black inductees. In their early weeks of training, boot camp instructors concentrated on infantry drill, spending ten hours on it in the first week; by week twelve, it was only one hour. Conversely, training in "pantry duties" increased as the weeks progressed. The curriculum required 6.5 hours on that subject in the first week and 21.5 hours in the last week. Physical drills, which included swimming lessons, took place every week for 5 hours. In addition to those subjects, instructors taught elementary deck seamanship for 38 hours and small arms instruction for 7.5 hours. Liberty was on alternative Wednesdays from 4:30 p.m. to midnight; on weekends, liberty ran from noon on Saturdays to midnight on Sundays. Perhaps William was able to go home on some of those weekends. He would have looked sharp in his uniform, impressing his family and maybe some local girls. Boot camp also introduced the recruits to possible battle station assignments. Some might be needed in gunnery, but if that became their assignment when under fire, messmen

were to act only as ammunition handlers. They were not to assist in the arming or firing of guns. In October 1940, a Black recruit after graduating boot camp received a monthly salary of \$21. His white counterpart received \$36 a month.¹⁶

William's First Ship—The USS Thatcher (DD-162)

William would have finished boot camp in mid-May 1940. One wonders if his parents and perhaps some of his siblings traveled to Norfolk for his graduation ceremony. His first ship assignment, the *USS Thatcher*, put him on a destroyer, but an older one. The *Thatcher* was commissioned in 1919. William joined the crew on May 16, 1940, or, as the Navy would enter into his records, he was “received on board” that day. His rate was Matt3c (mess attendant 3^d class). (The Navy used the word “rate,” not “rank.”) The *Thatcher* became part of a destroyer division that patrolled the Gulf of Mexico and the East Coast, looking out for German ships. William was thus able to visit port cities on the Eastern seaboard. At the end of June, the destroyer arrived in Boston. William sent a postcard to his married sister, Carrie Smith, in Virginia. One sentence on it could be read as implying that he knew some other young North Carolinians who had also enlisted, but they served on different ships. “I haven’t seen anybody that I know from home, neither in New York or in Boston.”¹⁷



France fell to the Germans in June 1940. Roosevelt’s administration increased aid to England, the nation that now, basically, stood alone against Nazi aggression. In September 1940, Roosevelt’s administration entered into an agreement called “Destroyers for Bases.” The terms required the U.S. to turn over to England fifty older destroyers in exchange for long-term leases to seven British bases in the Western Hemisphere. (England desperately needed ships,

and Roosevelt argued that the bases would further America's ability to protect this hemisphere from German aggression.) The Navy chose the *Thatcher* as one of the fifty destroyers; she arrived in Canada at the very end of September, her American crew having been reassigned.¹⁸

The Philadelphia Fifteen

From the *Thatcher*, the Navy sent William to its receiving station in Philadelphia. A muster roll there states he arrived on September 26, 1940. William apparently was still in Philadelphia on October 5th when a major story on Black sailors in the U.S. Navy broke. The article appeared on the front page of a Pennsylvania newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, a prominent Black newspaper in Pittsburgh. The headline caught the attention of readers. The content spread much further--to the national Black community, the White House, and, of course, the Navy Command. The headline read:

USED MEN AS SEAGOING CHAMBERMAIDS, BELLHOPS, DISHWASHERS
Colored Men on U.S.S. Philadelphia Reveal Almost Unbearable Conditions Aboard Ship—
Sign Their Names to Letter

Fifteen sailors on the cruiser *USS Philadelphia*, then stationed at Pearl Harbor, detailed to the newspaper the conditions under which they worked. Congress had passed a draft law a month earlier, one that would have inducted Black as well as white men. Perhaps that influenced "the Philadelphia Fifteen," as they became known, to speak out. The group made it clear they wanted to get a message out to not only Black men who were contemplating enlistment, but also to the parents of those men. "Our main reason," they wrote, "is to let all of our colored mothers and fathers know how their sons are treated after taking an oath and pledging allegiance and loyalty to their flag and country." One major grievance they cited was the discrimination in rate and salary advancement, citing their lower pay. Additionally, the Philadelphia Fifteen stressed the inequities of their jobs. The ship's crew numbered 750, of which 18 were "colored boys, ranging in ages from 18 to 25. They are fresh out of high school and some have a year or two of college education." Yet, the Philadelphia Fifteen wrote, "Their work is limited to waiting on tables and making beds for the officers." Blacks who enlist in the U.S. Navy, the sailors warned, had limited career options— "All they would become is seagoing bell hops, chambermaids and dishwashers."

Even before this letter was written, some Black sailors on the *Philadelphia* were punished. "In the last six months there have been nine mess attendants given solitary confinement on bread and water." The Philadelphia Fifteen did not give specific explanations as to why this happened. But they did add that five of the nine mess attendants received "brig time because of fighting and arguments with other enlisted men." The Fifteen added that the treatment they received on the ship made them "bitter" and ready for a fight. At the end of their letter, the Fifteen acknowledged there would probably be consequences for them. "We only know that it could not possibly surpass the mental cruelty inflicted upon us on this ship." Their names appeared at the very end of the letter. The Navy did punish the Philadelphia Fifteen. Thirteen of them were discharged as "undesirable" for continued naval service. Two sailors, seen as

possible leaders, were given bad conduct discharges. One of them was from New Bern, North Carolina, William's home state.¹⁹

News of the Philadelphia Fifteen's letter must have circulated throughout the Navy, especially among Black sailors. William was on the eastern end of Pennsylvania when the *Pittsburgh Courier* published the letter on the western end of the state. William would have heard about the outspoken mess attendants. What were his feelings on their letter? Did he agree with its messages--the daily discrimination the Black sailors experienced, the anger they felt because of their treatment, and the advice the Philadelphia Fifteen gave to parents of Black men who were still civilians. We will never know William's reaction. But whatever it was, it would have shed light on how he felt about his Navy service up to that time, only nine months after he had enlisted.

William's Second Ship--The USS Curtiss (AV-4)

From the Philadelphia Receiving Station, William reported to the *USS Curtiss*, a "tender." Such ships were classified by the Navy as "auxiliary vessels," or "AVs." They "tended to" the needs of larger ships; for example, they delivered supplies or oversaw repairs. The *Curtiss* was a new tender, having been "launched" on April 20, 1940. William appeared on the *Curtiss'* September 30th muster roll, but the commissioning ceremony did not take place until November 15th. That is the official date when William was "first received on board." By then, he had advanced in his rating. No longer a 3rd class mess attendant, William served on the *Curtiss* as a 2nd class one. The ship traveled south to the naval station at Norfolk, Virginia where William had enlisted earlier in the year. When he had leave, one presumes William visited his family in nearby Gates County, North Carolina. Operating out of Norfolk, the *Curtiss* participated in training and fleet exercises in the Caribbean. She departed for Pearl Harbor on May 26, 1940 where she went on patrols and tended to two patrol bomber squadrons.²⁰

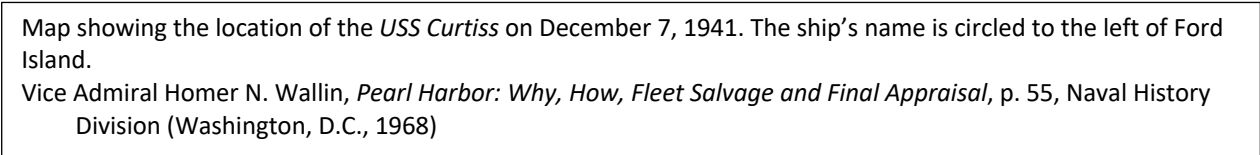
Williams' family today has a letter he wrote in Hawaii on September 10, 1941. He sent it to "Carrie," the same sister to whom he had mailed a postcard in July. It shows how the Navy was fulfilling all three promises it made to him at the time of his enlistment--he would "Earn-Learn-Travel." The letter also gives us insights into William's frame of mind when he was far from home. "I have been in Hawaii for three months now and have seen a few of the Islands. We go on sightseeing trips once in a while. I saw one of the largest volcanoes in the world." Even though William judged it to be "the most exciting thing" he had seen, he was ready to leave. "I will be glad to get back to the states for awhile now. The climate is very mild here, but I still think it's too warm to stay in so long." Unquestionably, the seasons were more varied in North Carolina; the weather alone must have made William think of home. Perhaps he was somewhat homesick--"I will be glad to get back to the states...," William confessed. Much of his letter also supports the conclusion that William was a sociable young man. He asked Carrie for their sister Naomi's address, obviously intending to write her. He also asked Carrie to tell another female friend hello. Then he mentioned another woman. "Also, if the lady wants to know my address that you said asked for it, if you can, write to her and tell her that I would be glad for her to write me." William adds, though, that he is willing to write "the lady" if Carrie will send him her

address. Receiving mail boosted the spirit of servicemen and women. William's letter provides us with evidence that he was anxious to write others back home and receive their letters as well. One wonders if William was able to begin exchanging letters with "the lady" before December 7th.²¹



*December 7, 1941
The USS Curtiss*

Early on the morning of December 7, 1941, the *Curtiss* was one of twenty-seven auxiliary ships on the north side of Ford Island. Among them were repair ships, tugs, store ships, and tenders. The *Curtiss* was at the entrance to Middle Loch in the North Channel, moored in berth Xray 22. William was on board the *Curtiss*, which served then as a seaplane tender. He was not in the group of fifty-five enlisted sailors who were on shore leave, most of whom had probably left the ship the day before.²²



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northern side of Ford Island, too. Around 8:00 a.m., the crew of the *Curtiss* watched as torpedoes hit ships moored nearby; one capsized. The guns on another, the seaplane tender *Tangier*, shot the tail off one dive-bomber and claimed it had helped to bring down two more. One of those dive-bombers crashed into the *Curtiss*' starboard crane.²³

Photo # NH 96660 USS Curtiss after she was hit at Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941



As all of this was happening, William would have gone to his battle station. We do not know exactly where that was. The ship's command assigned every sailor to a General Quarters, or battle station, position and task. On the large battleships, messmen were limited to handling the ammunition below deck, passing it up to those above who fired the guns. On other ships, including destroyers, cruisers, and auxiliary ships like the *Curtiss*, messmen such as William could be assigned to a General Quarters position topside. They might be part of gun crews that loaded the guns. They were not assigned to be part of the crew, however, that fired the guns. The *Curtiss*' after-action report detailed specific times when the crew acted in defense of Pearl

Harbor. The report also specified what damage the enemy inflicted upon the *Curtiss*, both in terms of material damage and in respect to loss of life.²⁴

At 8:03 a.m., approximately thirteen minutes after sailors spotted enemy planes in the skies above them, the *Curtiss* began firing its .50-caliber machine guns. Two minutes later, the ship's 5-inch battery and other guns were "firing continuously." Japanese bombers attacked the *Curtiss* at 8:25 a.m. but with no discernable damage. The attack turned deadly for the tender at 9:05 a.m. when the ship's guns hit one of three enemy planes coming out of a dive over Ford Island. With his aircraft severely damaged, the pilot either purposely targeted the *Curtiss* or he lost control of his plane. It crashed into the starboard side of the tender, causing a fire. Before sailors could get the flames under control, a bombing attack on the *Curtiss* began by other enemy aircraft. One bomb exploded in the hangar, which resulted in more fires. Another bomb hit the starboard side of the boat deck; it passed through the carpentry shop and radio repair shop after which it entered the hangar and exploded on the main deck. As described by the after-action report, "the bomb destroyed bulkheads, decks, equipment, and fixtures within a radius of 30 feet from the point of detonation." The bomb also resulted in several fires. In the conclusion of the after-action report, "All fatalities occurred as a result of this detonation or from fires resulting from this hit."²⁵

Photo # 19-N-26296 Bomb damage in hangar of USS Curtiss, 7 December 1941



At 8:35 a.m., crewmen saw a periscope from a Japanese midget submarine in the waters; it was about seven hundred yards away from the ship. The *Curtiss* opened fire and hit the sub's conning tower at least twice. Another U.S. ship targeted the sub with depth charges; the *Curtiss'* after-action report added that "air bubbles and slick" then appeared on the water's surface. During the Japanese attack, the *Curtiss* downed one Japanese plane, about one thousand yards off the port bow, with machine gun fire. The crew watched it break into pieces in the air. The after-action report claimed that guns from the *Curtiss* hit at least three enemy planes. Crewmen extinguished the fires on the tender within thirty minutes. Twenty sailors died, and fifty-eight were injured in the December 7th attack. Of the twenty, two could not be identified; of the fifty-eight injured, thirty-three were transferred off the ship to the naval hospital, and the injuries of twenty-five others were treated on the ship. One crewmember was missing-in-action.²⁶

December 7, 1941
William Jeremiah Powell on the Gun

William was one of the crewmen who had died in the attack. The *Curtiss'* muster roll for December 28th contains the following phrases next to William's name--"Killed in action December 7, 1941, on board. Body tran. [transferred] to U.S.N.H. [U.S. Naval Hospital] Pearl Harbor. T.H. [Territory of Hawaii] NOT MISCONDUCT." In a larger picture, William was one of 79 Black sailors in the Navy's messman's branch who died on December 7th. Of the 2,403 servicemen killed that morning, 2,008 were members of the Navy. Messmen thus constituted 3.9% of all the Navy crewmen who lost their lives. The percentage reflects how few Black sailors there were on ships in Pearl Harbor. For every 100 enlisted sailors there, nonwhites totaled not more than 3 or 4 of that number. How many were on each ship depended on the size of the vessel. On December 7th, the battleship *USS Arizona* had a crew of over 1,000 men; 24 were Blacks, 6 Guamanians, and 5 were Filipinos. By the end of the war four years later, at least 1,176 messmen had lost their lives in combat.²⁷

Many of those sailors died when the Japanese sunk their ship. William's death was different than those. He may very well have died while directly engaging the enemy. Recall the damaged Japanese plane that crashed into the *Curtiss*. Years after the war, William's family received an account of that moment from a sailor on Ford Island. The story originated with Navy aviation ordnanceman Joe Morgan, a Pearl Harbor Survivor. In his words, "When the gun operator on the crane deck [of the *Curtiss*] spotted the burning plane headed for them, they ran...a black messman grabbed the deserted gun, making eye contact with the pilot and began to fire directly at the plane, bringing it down. The plane plunged into the deck, starting a fire. Of course, he and the pilot died." A crewmember of the *Curtiss* must have shared these details with Morgan. According to Morgan, the "black messman" who fired the machine gun was the only Black sailor killed on the *Curtiss* in the attack. If this account is true, it testifies to William's courage under fire. His nephew, James C. Powell, shared his reaction to Morgan's story. "I felt a sense of pride." James concluded, "He didn't die in vain, not drowned and helpless. He died fighting the enemy..." James also has an explanation for the puzzling phrase that appears on the *Curtiss'* December 28th muster roll, in capital letters, "NOT MISCONDUCT." William's nephew

believes it is a reference to the fact that his uncle fired the gun, which Black messmen were not to do. Recall, too, the phrase from the after-action report on the *Curtiss'* casualties--"All fatalities occurred as a result of this detonation or from fires resulting from this hit." Again, if William fired the machine gun and directly caused his own death, he died because of his heroism, not as the result of indirect actions beyond his control. Even so, one of William's brothers always said, "He should not have jumped on that gun."²⁸

Photo # 19-N-26302 Wreckage of Japanese plane that crashed on USS Curtiss, 7 December 1941



William Comes Home

Burials in Hawaii of the Pearl Harbor Defenders took place within days of the attack. Initially, their caskets came to rest in three nearby cemeteries--Halawa Cemetery, Nuuanu Cemetery, and the Schofield Barracks Cemetery. William was initially buried at Halawa as "body #180." There he remained for at least six years. The attack at Pearl Harbor pulled the United States into a global war that lasted from December 1941 until August 1945. As casualties mounted in the Pacific Theater, more temporary burials took place, many on small islands far from Pearl Harbor. It was not until September 1947 that a ship carrying the first caskets of military personnel who died in the Pacific Theater departed for the United States mainland. Some of the caskets belonged to those who were casualties in the December 1941 enemy attack. We do not know exactly when William came home. His father applied for a U.S. government headstone on November 29, 1947, so perhaps William's casket arrived in Gates County around that time. The marker was, however, never placed over the grave.²⁹

When his casket returned home, it was buried in what government records called the "Costen Cemetery." The cemetery was simply a section of the Costen family farm. William's mother, Cora, had been a Costen before she married, so the family's decision to bury William at the family cemetery was understandable. William's niece, Brenda Powell Costen, was born in 1942, so she never knew her uncle. She does, though, vaguely remember the burial, either late in 1947 or early in 1948, because her grandmother (William's mother) cried. Brenda was too young to understand why. For reasons that are not clear, when the headstone arrived in Gates County early in 1948, no one placed it over William's grave. It is not clear what happened to it, although Brenda remembers that at one point, her grandfather stored it in his barn. Over the years, whatever marker the family had put at William's gravesite was destroyed. Hogs freely roamed the area where the cemetery stood. No one kept up the cemetery's grounds. Eventually, it was difficult to locate most of the gravesites, including William's.³⁰

In the years after World War II, those military personnel who survived the December 7, 1941 attack in Hawaii formed a national organization, the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association (PHSA). One of its purposes, as stated in its Federal charter, was "To shield from neglect the graves, past and future, of those who served at Pearl Harbor on such day." In the 1990s, PHSA members worked to locate the graves of their fellow servicemen who died that December morning. The president of the Virginia chapter, Clark O. Martin, set out on August 31, 1994 to verify the location of William Jeremiah Powell's grave. He later wrote about his findings to a national PHSA officer. All Martin knew was that William's gravesite was located in the Costen Cemetery, with no further information aside from that name. Martin spoke with "three funeral directors" in his area of southern Virginia, Suffolk County. (Suffolk is directly north of Gates County, North Carolina.) But the directors had never heard of Costen Cemetery. Martin knew that William had designated his father as next-of-kin; his father's address had simply been Sunbury, in Gates County. Martin, therefore, drove there on the last day of August, 1994. Once in Sunbury the "local Postmistress" advised Martin that "if I went a few miles further South I would find some Costens." Martin looked at names on the rural mailboxes until he found one that read "Costen." It belonged to one of William's cousins. He directed Martin to the family

cemetery, “which I found to be in very poor condition,” Martin later wrote. “It is located on a hog farm and is shared with three or more other families...It was not possible to establish the exact location of the grave because the area had not been secured against the wandering of the hogs.” A relative could only show Martin “the approximate” location of the gravesite. Martin learned that the local American Legion post had been named after William. Perhaps, Martin thought, it and the North Carolina PHSA state chapter could work together to reinter William in a national cemetery.³¹

The veterans’ groups did so, with one minor change. Instead of a national cemetery, William was reinterred in a state military cemetery. According to an undated newspaper article from Sunbury, veterans’ groups raised over \$3,000 to pay for the exhumation of William’s body. They were American Legion Post 426 and the PHSA’s Virginia and North Carolina state chapters. On March 27, 1996, William was buried at the Coastal Carolina State Veterans Cemetery in Jacksonville. Members of local PHSA chapters came for the service, as did members of local veterans’ groups. William’s niece Brenda attended the service, as she had the one in late 1947 or early 1948. Other relatives were there, including his nephew, James C. Powell. Over fifty-four years had passed since the day William died on his ship. Now, he was again surrounded by others who had worn the uniform. As members of the United States military, those buried at the state cemetery had sworn an oath to defend their country. William Jeremiah Powell did so on that historic Sunday morning early in December 1941.³²





William's sister Carrie Smith and brother Alexander Powell (front row, left) stand with local members of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association (white caps) and other veterans (blue caps) at William's 1996 reburial.



William's family at his reinterment. They pass his story down to younger generations.

Reading left to right, front row, William's siblings: Naomi Goodman, Carrie Smith, Lloyd Powell, and Alexander Powell

Reading left to right, back row: Sharon Zigler (a great-niece), Rosa Powell (Lloyd's wife), and Elaine Armstrong (William's niece)

To Be Remembered

On August 23, 1994, Congress designated December 7th as National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day. By then, fifty-three years had passed since the attack in Hawaii. Members of the United States military who had then been young men and women, were, in 1994, in their seventies, if not older. The PHSA's search for William's grave in the Costen Cemetery took place one week after the passage of the Remembrance Day legislation. It asks communities across the country each December to "Remember Pearl Harbor," a phrase used during World War II to motivate the war effort at home and overseas. With World War II so far behind us now, the phrase takes on new meaning. The principal one is to remember the lives lost that day.

For William Jeremiah Powell, there was never a danger that he and his actions on December 7, 1941 would be forgotten in his small, North Carolina community. His relatives,

who have deep roots in Gates County, still live there as their families had in the 19th and 20th centuries. Nieces, nephews, and cousins, even ones who have moved away, know William's story of military service and heroism during two of the most famous hours in American history. The older generation has passed down William's story to the younger generations. The preceding pages place William's story in a historical context. During this author's research, two senior members of his family shared aspects of their uncle's life. In so doing, they personalized a life that, before their involvement, had been one based merely on books and documents. One of the relatives is his niece, Brenda Powell Costen. She has photographs of William when he was young, when he served in the Navy, and some from the 1996 burial service. Brenda also has hanging in a hallway of her home a picture of the *USS Curtiss*, a testament to how much she still thinks of her uncle on a regular basis, not just on December 7th, Remembrance Day.³³

Another relative who helped shape this story is William's nephew, James C. Powell. He once contacted the Navy, asking for information on his uncle. It mailed him copies of several documents, including William's enlistment papers. Additionally, James knew the government had sent his grandparents a Purple Heart medal. With the help of a few members of Congress, James received eight additional medals William would have been given if he had lived. James mounted them in a shadowbox and presented them to the T.S. Cooper Elementary School in Sunbury. In the 1930s, it had operated as a high school, the one William and his siblings had attended. In that one generous act, the Powells and the Costens ensured that younger generations not related to their family would know William Jeremiah Powell's story. He would be remembered, and his story will not be lost to history.



William's nieces and nephews, the children of Leota Powell, William's sister.

Reading left to right: Sandy, Johnny, Jane, Brenda, Elaine, and James.

Brenda and James helped to make this story possible.

¹ Jeremiah Costen's death certificate is on ancestry.com (accessed October 15, 2022).

² Thomas W. Cutrer and T. Michael Parris, *Doris Miller Pearl Harbor And The Birth Of The Civil Rights Movement* (College Station, 2018), pp. xii, xiii, 6, 8; the quotations are from Richard E. Miller, *The Messman Chronicles, African Americans in the U.S. Navy, 1932-1943* (Annapolis, 2004), pp. 98 and vii respectively.

³ Cutrer, *Doris Miller*, p. 69 for the national statistics on Blacks in the 1930s.

⁴ Cutrer, *Doris Miller*, p. 69; telephone conversation between Brenda Costen Powell and author, November 8, 2022; The Federal Writers' Project of the Federal Works Agency Work Projects Administration, *North Carolina, The WPA Guide to the Old North State* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1939; 1988 edition), p 56; Thomas D. Snyder, editor, *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*, nced.ed.gov/pubs93/93442.pdf (accessed November 18, 2022).

⁵ Cutrer, *Doris Miller*, p. 69 for the national statistics on Blacks in the 1930s.

⁶ The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina*, pp. 51, 52; "Thomas Costen" in the 1870 and 1880 U.S. Federal Censuses; "Rebecca Costen" in the 1870 and 1880 U.S. Federal Censuses (accessed November 18, 2022).

⁷ In the 1900 census, "Rebecca Coston" [sic] told the enumerator that she had been married for thirty-four years. Since she also told him that she married in 1866, perhaps Thomas died early in 1900.

⁸ "George Powell" and "Laura Powell" in the 1870 and 1880 U.S. Federal Censuses (ancestry.com; accessed November 19, 2022); telephone conversation between author and James C. Powell, November 9, 2022; "William Penn Powell" in the North Carolina, U.S. Birth Indexes, 1800-2000 (ancestry.com; accessed November 19, 2022); the full name of William Penn Powell also appears in the U.S., Navy Casualties Books, 1776-1941 (ancestry.com; accessed October 30, 2022).

⁹ "Jeremiah Costen" in the 1870 and 1880 Federal Censuses; "Lithia Costen" in the 1880 Federal Census (ancestry.com; accessed November 8, 2022); the story of Lithia Costen's death in childbirth was shared in a November 8, 2022 telephone conversation between the author and Brenda Powell Costen.

¹⁰ "Rebecca Costen" in the 1900 U.S. Federal Census (ancestry.com; accessed November 19, 2022); "Clora [sic] Costen" in North Carolina, U.S. Marriage Records, 1741-2011 (ancestry.com; accessed November 7, 2022); the middle name of William Jeremiah Powell's father ("Penn") appears in the Virginia, U.S. Death Records, 1912-2014 and in the Navy Casualty Record for William Jeremiah's next-of-kin (ancestry.com; accessed October 30, 2022).

¹¹ "William Powell" in the 1900, 1920 U.S. Federal Census (ancestry.com; accessed November 18, 2022); "William ?Onull [sic]" in the 1910 U.S. Federal Census (ancestry.com; accessed November 18, 2022); the ten children appear on the 1930 and 1940 U.S. Federal Censuses for "William Powell."

¹² The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina*, pp. 51, 55.

¹³ "African American Sailors in the U.S. Navy Chronology," history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/african-americans/chronology (accessed October 31, 2022); Cutrer, *Doris Miller*, pp. 2, 3, 5; Miller, *Messman Chronicles*, pp. 4, 10, 18.

¹⁴ Miller, *Messman Chronicles*, pp. 6, 7, 8, 14-15, 130; Cutrer, *Doris Miller*, pp. 8, 77; "African American Sailors in the U.S. Navy Chronology," history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/african-americans/chronology (accessed October 31, 2022).

¹⁵ James C. Powell quoted in an article by Michelle Mizal-Archer, "Remembering a Hero," *The Virginian-Pilot*, B-1, December 7, 2000; William Jeremiah Powell's enlistment date appears on several U.S. Navy muster rolls, such as the one dated May 31, 1940 ("William Jeremiah Powell" in U.S., World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949 on ancestry.com, accessed October 30, 2022); a February 29, 1940 muster roll for the "Receiving Station" in Norfolk states that William J. Powell "First enlisted for six (6) yrs. at Norva." Miller, *Messman Chronicles*, pp. viii, 79, 89, 125.

¹⁶ Cutrer, *Doris Miller*, pp. 9, 15; Miller, *Messman Chronicles*, p. 15.

¹⁷ "William Jeremiah Powell" in U.S., World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949, May 31, 1940 (ancestry.com; accessed October 30, 2022); Mizal-Archer, "Remembering a Hero," *The Virginia-Pilot*; historyofwar.org/articles/weapons_USS_Thatcher_DD152_HMCS_Niagra (accessed November 22, 2022); William Powell to Mrs. Carrie Smith, July 1, 1940 (copy provided to author by Brenda Powell Costen who identified "Carrie Smith" as William's sister).

¹⁸ historyofwar.org/articles/weapons_USS_Thatcher_DD152_HMCS_Niagra (accessed November 22, 2022).

¹⁹ “Used Men As Seagoing Chambermaids, Bell Hops, Dishwashers,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 5, 1940, p. 1; Miller, *Messman Chronicles*, pp. 120, 122, 124, 133, 143; Bryon C. Johnson was the sailor from Bern, North Carolina (Miller, p. 133).

²⁰ “William J. Powell” in the U.S. World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949 for the September 30, 1940 Receiving Station, Philadelphia muster roll; “William J. Powell” in the U.S. World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949 for October 15, 1941 for the *USS Curtiss* (ancestry.com; accessed November 10, 2022); history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-navy-ships/alphabetical-listing/c/uss-curtiss-av-4-0 (accessed November 23, 2022).

²¹ William Powell to Mrs. Carrie Smith, September 10, 1941 (copy provide to author by Brenda Powell Costen, who also identified Naomi to author as William’s sister).

²² Vice Admiral Homer N. Wallin, USN (Retired), *Pearl Harbor: Why, How, Fleet Salvage and Final Appraisal* (Washington, 1968), pp. 56, 322; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific 1931-April 1942* (Boston, 1948), p. 114; *USS Curtiss (AV-4) Action Report* action report dated December 16, 1941, history.navy.mil/research/archives/digital-exhibits-highlights/action-reports/wwii-pearl-harbor-attack/ships-a-c/uss-curtiss-av-4-action-report (accessed November 10, 2022).

²³ *USS Curtiss Action Report*; Wallin, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 168; Morison, *Rising Sun*, p. 113.

²⁴ Miller, *Messman Chronicles*, p. 183.

²⁵ *USS Curtiss Action Report*; Morison, *Rising Sun*, pp. 115-116; Wallin, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 168.

²⁶ *USS Curtiss Action Report*; Wallin, *Pearl Harbor*, pp. 107, 168.

²⁷ Miller, *Messman Chronicles*, pp. 169, 180, 181, 193; census.gov/history/pdf/pearl-harbor-fact-sheet-1.pdf (accessed November 26, 2022).

²⁸ Joe Morgan’s account of William’s action on December 7, 1941 is quoted in Mizal-Archer, “Remembering a Hero,” *The Virginia-Pilot* which also contains the quote from James C. Powell on his uncle’s actions. For Morgan’s account of that morning (which refers to the *USS Curtiss* but not to the story on William firing the *Curtiss’* gun, see joemorgan.com (accessed November 26, 2022). The quotation from William’s uncle was shared by James C. Powell with the author in a text on November 18, 2022.

²⁹ Pearl Harbor Defender and California State Chaplain in the California PHSA, Glenn Hoyt’s letter to President Bill Clinton, July 4, 1995 identifies the three cemeteries (author has copy). Another letter, dated September 14, 1994, gives Halawa as William’s first burial place and the body’s identification as #180; it was written by Clark O. Martin, president of the Virginia Chapter Four of the national PHSA, to PHSA National Historian Raymond Emory (author has copy). “William Jeremiah Powell,” in the U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1970 (ancestry.com; accessed November 9, 2022).

³⁰ William’s niece and nephew spoke with the author on his burial at the cemetery and the neglect of the grave sites; telephone conversations with Brenda Costen Powell (November 8, 2022) and James C. Powell (November 9, 2022).

³¹ Martin to Emory, September 14, 1994.

³² Undated newspaper article, “Powell’s legacy lives on,” A-1; March 27, 1996 telephone call between author and “Judy” at the Coastal Carolina State Veterans Cemetery.

³³ Telephone conversations with Brenda Costen Powell (November 8, 2022) and James C. Powell (November 9, 2022).