

# African-American Passages: Black Lives in the 19th Century

## Episode 3: Robert Pinn's Left Hand

[0:00:00]

*Adam Rothman:* Greetings from the Library of Congress, and welcome to *African-American Odysseys: Black Lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. This is a podcast that draws from the Library of Congress's manuscript collections to explore African-American history. My name is Adam Rothman. I teach history at Georgetown University, and I'm currently a Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress, which sounds sort of fancy, and I guarantee it's a really good gig. In this episode of *African-American Odysseys*, we will be discussing a very unusual artifact in the manuscript collections of the library. In 1865, a Union soldier named Robert Pinn submitted a brief essay describing his military service to a left-handed penmanship contest sponsored by a newspaper editor in New York,-

[0:01:01]

who championed the cause of disabled Union veterans. Pinn, who was from Ohio and had been born free, served in the 5th United States Colored Troops. He served bravely, winning the Medal of Honor, and losing the use of his right arm in battle. Because of his valor and the recognition he received, he's not unknown to scholars and students of African-American history, but he's not well-known either. He's not exactly a household name like Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman. And as far as I can tell, the essay he wrote for the left-handed penmanship contest has not, until now, ever gotten any attention. This fascinating document will be our springboard into the remarkable world of Robert Pinn, a free man of color, who fought against slavery and for the rights of African-Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

[0:02:00]

Joining me in the studio today to discuss Pinn's essay and his life and times are two of the most knowledgeable people that you'd ever want to participate in a conversation like this. I think you'll enjoy listening to what they have to say. The first is Michelle Krowl, a historian in the manuscript division of the Library of Congress. Michelle was responsible for processing the William Oland Bourne Papers, which includes Pinn's essay, and she's here to talk to us about this powerful collection and what Pinn's essay is

doing here. Our second guest is Chandra Manning, who also happens to be a professor of history at Georgetown, and my dear colleague, a renowned and prize-winning scholar of the Civil War and especially Civil War soldiers. My rule of thumb is that when I wanna learn something about Civil War soldiers, I go talk to Chandra. So thank you both so much for being here.

*Chandra Manning:* Thank you for the invitation.

*Michelle Krowl:* Very happy to be here.

[0:03:00]

*Adam Rothman:* So Michelle, let's start with you, because I think it's important whenever you're discussing an object that you find in archives, you wanna know what it's doing there. Why is it there in the first place? I think archivists call this provenance.

*Michelle Krowl:* Exactly.

*Adam Rothman:* So tell us something about the William Bourne Papers. Who was William Bourne? What was the left-handed penmanship contest? What is Pinn's essay doing here?

*Michelle Krowl:* Well I can tell you in terms of provenance, the library's actually had this collection since 1931 when it was given to the library by a bookseller in New York named Gabriel Wells, and how he got it and gave it to the library, another story, but the collection is essentially – the bulk of the collection are entries that Union veterans submitted to a left-hand penmanship contest that William Oland Bourne, who was the editor of *The Soldier's Friend* newspaper-

[0:04:00]

from about 1864 to about 1869, 1870, sponsored this left-handed penmanship contest. And we can go into some of the details in a moment, but I think what started it is he was a chaplain at Central Park Hospital, and that's where many of these wounded soldiers were, and he kept autograph books that are actually part of the collection as well. And he would ask some of the soldiers to write their recollections or give him some autographs, and often when a soldier had been right-handed but had lost the use of the hand or the arm and wrote left-handed, he would make a note on it that this entry was written with their left hand. So that may have inspired him to go further with that contest.

*Adam Rothman:* That's fascinating. So let me get this straight. So Bourne actually – he would visit the hospital and go from bed to bed, talking to the soldiers who were recuperating there?

*Michelle Krowl:* That's my understanding, that he, since he had a background in religion,-

[0:05:01]

would go and talk to the soldiers or befriend them, give them a little comfort, and he had at least three of these autograph books that were full of autographs and recollections by these soldiers.

*Adam Rothman:* Wow. So he gets – so these hospital visits inspire him to support the cause of soldiers who had the lost the use of their right arm. Now, clearly that's a huge thing, to lose the use of your right arm, but I think in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it might have been even more important maybe than it might be today, because of the way people wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, right?

*Michelle Krowl:* Well, and I would think so. The two things about losing a right arm – or an arm – is that many people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if they weren't naturally right-handed, were very much encouraged to be right-handed, so it's more unusual to see people who are naturally writing with their left hand.

[0:05:59]

So if you had been encouraged to write and be literate with your right hand, then having lost it during the war either through disability or amputation meant that you were having to retrain yourself to write with your left hand. And so two elements come out of that. For example, if you lose either arm, if you're a farmer or a labor and your occupation requires that you be able to use both hands for your occupation, then having lost an arm – either one – is gonna be fairly traumatic. But what Bourne was also looking at – and he's says this quite explicitly in the newspaper – is that good penmanship – if you're a wounded veteran and you can't return to your previous occupation, good penmanship is going to be your key to either a government job or some sort of office work, and so it's a way of encouraging soldiers who had lost their right hands and needed to retrain themselves, a certain amount of inspiration to have them develop their left-handed penmanships.

[0:07:00]

*Adam Rothman:* That's fascinating. I think I read in some of the notes to the collection that this left-handed penmanship contest was actually a pretty big deal. It was popular. It was highly publicized. Could you talk a little bit about the cultural reception of this contest?

*Michelle Krowl:* Well, and one thing that's interesting is even though *The Soldier's Friend* sponsored it, and that was a fairly small newspaper, at least in terms of the larger newspaper culture of the time, that these announcements that were in *The Soldier's Friend* and probably sent out, they were picked up by newspapers across the country. So as the Union veterans went home, they were potentially seeing them in their local newspapers, so *The Soldier's Friend* and the contest had farther-reaching advertisement than just in that one newspaper if you didn't happen to be a subscriber to *The Soldier's Friend*. So that encouraged soldiers from throughout the North and even some who may've still been in the South to contribute to this,-

[0:08:02]

but once the contest was underway, and particularly at the end of the first series – 'cause there were actually two different contests. At the end of the first, there was actually an exhibition of the samples and often the photographs of the soldiers that went along with them. So there was a – it started in New York in a hall, and they laid them out very democratically, as well, so it wasn't the winners got a particular focus. It was in numerical order in which they were received, and that's how the collection is organized. That's how Bourne kept it, so it's a very democratic sort of thing. But people like Ulysses S. Grant attended the exhibition up in New York; then it also came down to Washington, D.C., for a second exhibition. So it was a way of bringing in both the public and notable government military figures to publicize the contest, but also –

[0:09:00]

and again, several soldiers are very explicit about this – that they see this contest as a way of proving that, as the broadside says, they're disabled but not disheartened, that they don't intend to be a burden on society if that's what people are worried about. So there are a lot of messages that come out of what is sort of a nice contest to encourage soldiers to submit left-hand penmanship contest entries and compete for cash prizes as well.

*Adam Rothman:* Nice. And do we have a sense of how many essays were submitted to this contest overall?

*Michelle Krowl:* Overall, between the two of them, there's about 380. So there were more in the first contest that the awards came out in 1866, so there was at least 270 entries there. And in the second contest in 1867 there were about 114. But what's not seen in that number is that some soldiers who contributed essays to the first contest then resubmitted things in the second contest,-

[0:10:04]

and part of the rule was that if you had won a prize in the first contest you were no longer eligible for a prize in the second. But the fact that several men contributed essays again, even though they were ineligible for the money, indicated that it wasn't just the money that every one of them was going for, that some just wanted to get their stories out or they wanted to encourage people to see these disabled veterans in a different light. So it was more the content that was important.

*Adam Rothman:* Yeah. So Pinn's essay is one of several hundred essays that are submitted to this contest, and I think for our purposes his essay really stands out, because he's one of the very few African-American soldiers who submits an essay to this competition. So I think it's worthwhile to really zoom in on his essay and what it tells us about his life experience and also his experience of military service.

[0:11:03]

Michelle, you described this exhibition of the essays in New York and Washington, and one thing that struck me was that in the banners that were on display, they had a lot of different slogans, like the one you mentioned. There was another slogan that was inscribed on one of the banners that said, "We lost our right hand for our rights, and 'tis the left hand now that writes." And I think that aphorism is especially apt for Robert Pinn, who, more than most of the soldiers submitting essays to this competition, really was fighting for his rights and the rights of what he calls his people. So let's focus now on Pinn – where he came from, his military service, what he says in this essay.

[0:12:03]

And I think to help us out with that I'm gonna call on Chandra to join the conversation. We know something – we know quite a bit about Pinn. We know he was born in 1843 in a town called Massillon in Stark County, Ohio. He was born free in Ohio, but we know that at least his father had once been a slave, but somehow got out of slavery and moved to Ohio. So here's young Robert Pinn, growing up in Antebellum Ohio, as a person of African descent. So, Chandra, what can we say about his childhood? What kind of challenges and opportunities would a boy like Robert Pinn have faced?

*Chandra Manning:* Well in Ohio, about three percent of the population was African-American. Ohio being a free state, they were all free, and that's larger than most states.

[0:13:02]

It's the third-largest free-black population in the North, but being three percent of anything is clearly being in a really distinct minority, and the sense of growing up, not only as a minority, but as a marginalized minority really shines through, I think, in Pinn's essay. He did not go to common school he says in his essay, an elementary school. About 25 percent of black children in Ohio did, but he did not, so that tells us immediately that the common schools that his father's paying taxes for he's excluded from, so that's sort of the first thing that we know about him growing up. We also know he was born in 1843. The 1839, 1841 – in both of those years, there were race riots in Ohio. Ohio is also the home of Oberlin College, which has a strong abolitionist bent to it.

[0:14:02]

So he's growing up in a state with fiercely competing impulses where the institution of slavery is concerned, but almost across the board discriminatory policies on race, and those are the policies that really would've shaped him coming up.

*Adam Rothman:* Wow. Quite a world that he entered. Just to reinforce that point, let me read the first paragraph of the essay that Pinn submitted to the contest, 'cause it really captures that challenge that he was up against. He writes, "I was born in the town of Massillon, Stark County, State of Ohio, where I experienced all the disadvantages peculiar to my proscribed race. Being born to labor, I was not permitted to enjoy the blessings of a common school education. It is hardly necessary to say that the very –

[0:14:59]

it is hardly necessary to say that very little can be expected of me, so far as correct composition is concerned.” And I think that’s really interesting, because here he is entering a left-handed writing contest because he actually lost the use of his right arm, but he’s not saying that – he’s not apologizing for the writing of the essay because he’s not writing with his right hand. He’s apologizing because he was denied an education because of racism. And it’s quite striking to see that in the very first paragraph of his essay.

*Chandra Manning:* I agree. I think it’s like he’s coming out and he’s telling us right from the beginning that racism is a harder hurdle to overcome than the loss of my right arm. That’s a powerful statement.

*Adam Rothman:* That is a powerful statement. And it’s not the only powerful statement that Pinn makes in this essay.

[0:15:57]

The very next paragraph he gets to the Civil War, and just listen to what he says in the essay. He says – he writes, “In 1861, when the whole of the loyal North was aroused by reason of the cowardly assault upon Fort Sumter, I was very eager to become a soldier in order to prove, by my feeble efforts, the black man rights to untrammelled manhood. I was denied admission to the ranks of the loyalists on account of my color, not being of that kind, which is considered standard in this country.” Chandra, what is he telling us there?

*Chandra Manning:* He’s telling us there that, like other Northern African-Americans, like other any African-Americans, in 1861 he was denied the right to enlist in the Union Army. Now African-Americans had fought in the U.S. battles and wars all the way back to the Revolution, in the War of 1812, and in other wars, but in the Mexican-American War in the 1840s, they were barred from service.

[0:17:00]

That wasn’t how it always had been, but that was how it became in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That’s how it was in Pinn’s world. And so when war broke out, Pinn and many other African-Americans saw enlisting in this battle to uphold the Union, to uphold the ideals on which the Union claims to be based, as their opportunity to make a claim for the rights that everybody else enjoyed as their rights too. “If we are going to fight to save a Union predicated on the notion

that all men are created equal and we help in that fight, you have to respect us as equal,” is the calculus in many African-Americans’ minds in 1861, and what they find instead is a shut door. This is a white man’s war, and only white men will enlist. Some managed to enlist. There’s a soldier in Iowa who everyone knows is a black man, and he fights in a white regiment anyway, but very, very rare in the first two years of the war, when everybody thinks the war will be short and we aren’t gonna need that many people anyway.

[0:18:01]

*Adam Rothman:* So, but within two years – or, I would say, two years later, Pinn finally gets the opportunity to enlist in the Union Army. So what changes between April 1861 and June 1863, when Pinn actually does enlist?

*Chandra Manning:* Well the war doesn’t turn out to be quite so short after all, and the rush of white volunteers in 1861 dries up. In 1861, when it looks like a short battle, young men can’t wait to join the greatest adventure of their lives. Well they can wait by 1862 and 1863, because as it turns out, war is rotten, and this one’s not gonna be short after all. And so 1861 and 1862, enough men volunteer. By 1863, the Union is looking at having to draft soldiers for the first time, and all of a sudden, if you have to draft soldiers, color doesn’t look quite so important as number of bodies in the ranks.

[0:19:03]

So in 1863 the Union Army begins to enlist black soldiers. Now how they do it at first reinforces as opposed to eradicates the inequality that Pinn writes about. The legislation allowing it actually is passed in 1862, when the Union Army is authorized to use the services of black men in any capacity that commanders might see fit, and most people saw that as hiring black laborers, but that’s the opening that the Army would use to enlist black soldiers. However, that same legislation that allowed for the enlistment of black laborers set the pay for a black laborer at ten dollars a month, minus three dollars for clothing. Union soldiers are paid thirteen dollars a month, and clothing is included.

[0:20:02]

So when Pinn first enlists, he enlists under the stipulations of that 1862 act. He enlists in 1863, but that 1862 act is sort of read onto 1863, so when he first enlists, he is paid less than a white soldier at the same rank.

*Adam Rothman:* So Pinn and the other black soldiers who enlist, they're not just fighting against the confederacy. They're fighting against discrimination within the Union Army and in the larger social and political world of-

*Chandra Manning:* They are, and they're quite overt about that. There are numbers of public meetings in Ohio and elsewhere among African-American men, discussing the merits or demerits of enlisting because of unequal pay and unequal treatment of various sorts. And the debate is whether or not fighting in an unequal institution is a way to fight inequality.

[0:21:01]

Men like Pinn decide yes, it is, but that doesn't mean that they take the inequality lying down, and they'll continue to push against discrimination in the Union ranks as well as against the Confederacy, and they'll succeed. They will succeed in pushing Congress to equalize pay for black soldiers in 1864, so eventually Pinn will get paid at the same rate as white soldiers will, but it was a battle.

*Michelle Krowl:* Well, and if you don't mind me jumping in, we should also make sure that people understand they're fighting in segregated regiments as well, so it's not just that African-Americans are now allowed to enlist and are fighting against the pay. They are – unless they're passing in white regiments, they are fighting in United States Colored Troops or United States Colored Cavalry or something along those lines, and they also can't be officers. They can be non-commissioned officers, but the leadership of those units are also – remains white. So even though they're very much fighting against what they see as inequality, they're, again, having to do this within a very segregated military.

[0:22:04]

*Adam Rothman:* Yeah. One of the interesting things about Pinn's military service is that he does become a non-commissioned officer. He becomes a sergeant in company I of the 5th USCT, and he emphasizes that point in his narrative and then, I think, in his subsequent military service. So even though he can't become an officer, he does have a kind of leadership position within his company, and he seems quite proud of that. And he's – one thing that comes across, to me, anyway, in this narrative is how proud he is of his military service. Most of the narrative is dedicated to explaining his military

experience – the battles he fought in and how they went. So I wanna turn to that now, so what was Pinn’s combat experience?

[0:23:00]

What was the war like for him, and how, ultimately, did he lose his right arm?

*Chandra Manning:* Sure. Well the unit that he was in, the 5<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops, he had every right to be proud. It was a very hard-fighting unit. They stayed in the eastern theater of the war. They were in North Carolina and Virginia. Over the course of the three years that that regiment is in service, 266 men would die. I don’t just mean casualties. That’s a 20 percent death rate, which tells us that this is a hard-fighting unit. Now the majority of those deaths were disease, as with any other unit, but it had a higher-than-usual death-by-wound rate. The very first action that Pinn’s regiment takes comes in December of 1863. They enter the war a few months earlier, but first they have to train, and then they go south. And at first they’re in North Carolina, and the very first thing that they do is they participate in a raid into the North Carolina countryside-

[0:24:00]

that ends up freeing 2,500 – or thereabouts – slaves from the North Carolina countryside. So that’s the very first thing he does as a soldier, and then they’re involved in some other action, but where they become deeply involved is the absolutely pivotal Union campaign for the city of Richmond in 1864 and 1865, and they make their way – along with General Butler, along with the Army of the James, they make their way up the peninsula formed by the James and the York River in Virginia, moving, pressing constantly on Richmond. They’re involved in action in front of Petersburg in July of 1864, and they stay put. They keep pushing. They keep pressing, ever closer to Richmond. And it’s part of this campaign, this very long campaign, the “if it takes all summer” campaign for Richmond in which Pinn would lose his arm in September – pardon me, would lose the use of his arm in September.

[0:25:00]

*Adam Rothman:* Just one point of information for our listeners – I think it’s important to understand that when – at the time that Pinn enlists, and as he fights in 1864, this is after the Emancipation Proclamation has been issued, and at that point, the Union Army

has really been transformed into an Army of abolition and emancipation, wherever it pushes into Confederate territory. And that helps to explain why Pinn and his fellow soldiers would have raided into Confederate territory and liberated the people that they did. So he really is fighting a war against slavery.

*Chandra Manning:* One of his fellow soldiers left a very pithy account of that exact raid, the raid that liberated 2,500 slaves in North Carolina, and if it's okay with, I'd like to read just a snippet of it to give you a taste.

*Adam Rothman:* Yeah, sure, please.

[0:26:00]

*Chandra Manning:* This isn't from Pinn himself, but it is from one of his fellow soldiers, a guy named Milton Holland, and Holland, about that raid, says, "Several of the white cavalry told me that no soldiers have ever done hard marching through swamps and marshes as quickly as we did, and that if they had to follow us for any length of time it would kill their horses. During that raid, thousands of slaves belonging to Rebel masters were liberated." And he goes on to say, "And when I say Rebel masters, we just assumed everybody was a Rebel."

*Adam Rothman:* Yeah. Wow. That's certainly evocative. Another evocative passage is Pinn's own description of getting injured at the Battle of Chaffin Farm. He writes this in his application for a pension after the war, and it takes us just that much closer to his own experience.

[0:26:56]

He writes, in a sworn affidavit I believe, "I was in action and received a musket shot. A Minié ball, having entered the right infraclavicular region and passing through the cavity of the thorax, made its exit through the right scapula near its center." A shot basically through the soldier – through the shoulder. And he writes, "I've entirely lost the use of my right arm. It cannot be moved in any direction whatever by its own muscular power." But that wasn't all, actually. He actually suffered more injuries than that. He goes on to say, "I also received two wounds in the left leg – one above the knee by a musket ball and one below by a piece of shell. I am permanently disabled and unable to perform manual labor." So here's a man who literally gave his right arm for his country, and so he has to use his left arm and his left hand to write the essay for the left-handed penmanship contest.

[0:28:00]

*Chandra Manning:* But that's not all he did that day. He did lose his right arm – or he lost the use of his right arm that day, but he also watched – fought while the commanding officers of his company were all either killed or disabled in action, and he took charge of his company that day and earned a Medal of Honor, which not that many African-American soldiers did. So that was one eventful day for our friend, Robert Pinn. Injured in three places, watched his comrades die around him, took command of his unit in the Battle of New Market, which, again, was part of the campaign to take Richmond in 1864 and 1865.

*Adam Rothman:* So let me ask you this, Chandra. What impact does the valor, the bravery, the courage, and the sacrifice of these black soldiers like Robert Pinn –

[0:29:01]

what broader impact does it have on the war, on the struggle for African-American citizenship and equality? This is not just a story about Pinn losing the use of his right arm. It's also about a broader struggle for rights.

*Chandra Manning:* It is. The image of black Union soldiers in Union uniforms marching into slave states makes an enormous impact in many ways, one on enslaved people living in those states. There are all kinds of accounts of the sight of black Union soldiers' impact on former slaves. There's one former slave who commented that, "It ran through us like lightning." And so the reason why 2,500 run to this regiment is because the vision of-

[0:30:00]

black Americans in Union uniforms is more than symbolic. That is a striking blow at the very institution of slavery in the eyes of those who are enslaved. Meanwhile, the stories of troops at New Market Heights, stories at Fort Wagner in South Carolina, start to be picked up by Northern newspapers, and those stories spread around, and those stories have an impact on white public opinion as well. And they certainly don't immediately erase the racism against which Pinn had been struggling his whole life, but they have an impact on the white public opinion about black men, at least, and their inclusion within the American people,-

[0:31:00]

their importance to the Army, their personal qualities. There was a real debate about whether black men would fight. “Aren’t they all cowards? Aren’t they all too unintelligent? Will they fight?” was a genuine debate in Northern papers, and what actions, like the 5<sup>th</sup> USCT at New Market or black soldiers at Fort Wagner or at Port Hudson in Louisiana – what those actions said is yes, they will fight. And the white North really has to reckon with its own prejudices.

*Michelle Krowl:*

Well, and even Abraham Lincoln will use that logic to try to win people over to emancipation, that when he has to send a letter back to a mass Union meeting in Springfield, he says, with a certain undertone if read correctly, “You say you will not fight to free negroes.

[0:32:00]

Well, they seem willing to fight to free you, but no matter” – or, “Fight on behalf of you. But you know, no matter. You fight for what you want to.” But very pointedly saying that, “All right. You don’t appreciate emancipation or are not willing to have that as a war aim, but these are people who are fighting, literally giving down their lives, for the Union cause and are willing to fight for that.” So you’re absolutely right that these actions by African-American troops very much start to get into the Northern consciousness.

*Adam Rothman:*

All the way up to Lincoln.

*Michelle Krowl:*

All the way up to Lincoln.

*Chandra Manning:*

Yep. There’s a great letter by a white officer who writes to the home newspaper, so he’s purposeful. This is exactly the conversation he’s hoping to ignite, and he says, “I nevermore want to hear the phrase, ‘The negro won’t fight.’ Come with me 100 yards from where I stand, and I will show you the bravest,” and then I forget what he says exactly, but essentially, “One of the bravest men I have ever seen.”

[0:33:00]

He talks about this black soldier who has been wounded and who has continued to fight, and then he goes on to make this one soldier he’s talking about emblematic, not as an exception, but rather as

the rule. And he's pointedly talking to Northern public opinion in that letter.

*Adam Rothman:*

Now if all we knew about Pinn, if the only thing that he did in his life was his military service and writing this essay to the left-handed penmanship contest, I think that would be a good story in itself. But his career, his life doesn't end there. It doesn't end in 1865 with this contest. He lives another 50 years, and I think it's worth exploring a little bit what happens to Pinn. What kind of life does he have after the war, after emancipation, after the overthrow of slavery, after the establishment of black citizenship with the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, black suffrage with the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment?

[0:34:00]

In some ways, Pinn's second life, his life after the Civil War, really exemplifies some of the opportunities that were newly available to at least African-American men after the Civil War. Let me give you a few examples. We know, for instance, that Pinn goes on to get his education. He goes to Oberlin, which Chandra mentioned earlier, in the 1870s and gets his degree. He enters a law office. He works for a man named Robert Folger, who apparently had been allies with his father in the abolitionist movement before the war. And he, himself – Pinn, himself, actually passes the bar in Ohio and becomes a lawyer, which is a remarkable thing. One of his main activities is to serve as a pension agent,-

[0:35:00]

getting government pensions for his fellow union veterans. He serves as the commander of his local post for the Grand Army of the Republic, which is the principal organization of Union Army veterans. He gets married to a woman named Emily Manzilla. They have children. He just seems to live a full life. So what do you make of these opportunities and the way that Pinn takes advantage of them?

*Chandra Manning:*

I would say that Pinn is definitely the best of the success stories. Pinn exemplifies precisely what African-American soldiers and former slaves as well hoped emancipation and abolition would bring. Doors open to him that weren't open before. He couldn't go to school as a child, but he goes to Oberlin College. That's a before and after change. He couldn't vote before the war.

[0:36:00]

He will go on to become a delegate at the Republican State Convention that will nominate William McKinley for the governorship in later life. That's a change brought by war and brought by his service. He will go on to become a lawyer. He will go on to work as a pension agent, as somebody who helps individuals make claims on the United States Government they couldn't have imagined making before the war. So in many ways, he does exemplify the best of what so many hoped emancipation would bring. And yet, he writes this piece in which institutional racism is clearly something he is still battling against, even in later life. Meanwhile, he's also a man who will never be able to cut his own meat or butter his own bread or put on his own coat by himself again, because he has lost the use of his dominant hand.

[0:37:04]

So in many ways, he is at the outer reach of the best that could happen and did happen for him. What happened for him didn't happen for everybody, and even for him, there were limits on what the post-war brought. But I think it is important to see that he was right to think that fighting would matter for him. It really did make things possible that hadn't been for him before the war.

*Adam Rothman:*

One of the other artifacts in the Library of Congress's collections about Pinn or of Pinn is a photograph, a really striking photograph from his – from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I don't know the exact date on it. But we're sitting here looking at this photograph right now. Michelle, what do you see in the photograph of Robert Pinn?

[0:37:59]

*Michelle Krowl:*

Well, what catches my eye first are the three medals he's wearing on his chest, and at least one of which you can identify as the Medal of Honor. And so whether this was something that he was – a photograph for a formal occasion or the circumstances of it I don't know, but it looks like he's probably wearing a Grand Army of the Republic pin and his Medal of Honor. And so that tells you right immediately that he's proud of this service, that this has become a part of his identity in the way that it did for many veterans, that they had served proudly, that they had achieved great things, and that this was something that they were literally wearing on their chest. And one thing that – and you wouldn't have seen this in this photograph anyway, because it's only taken from the chest up, but one thing that Pinn may have been a little different than some of his comrades is – whether white or black – if he had completely lost his arm through amputation.

[0:39:00]

Many of those soldiers took the sleeve and pinned it up, and so for many veterans, the photographs of them, they're literally walking around with these visible scars. But at least for Pinn, he can wear these medals that are going to be very visible immediately.

*Adam Rothman:*

A constant reminder of bravery, service, and sacrifice.

*Michelle Krowl:*

Oh, exactly. And particularly if – depending on when the photograph is taken – again, as Chandra was mentioning that if you're trying to continue to fight for your rights in an era that the initial promise of reconstruction with the amendments and some advances in African-American rights. Of course by the end of the century, many of those are taken away through Jim Crow legislation, but here is a man who, he has these medals and can walk around and visibly show that he had contributed to that war effort and that someone who is still fighting for his rights to be recognized as a full member of society.

[0:40:03]

*Adam Rothman:*

One interesting story about the photograph is that this photograph was actually part of a collection of photographs that none other than W.E.B Du Bois assembled to put on display at an exposition in Paris in 1900 in an effort to represent the full range of African-American experience in the United States at that exhibition. So this photograph is actually part of the Du Bois collection in the Library of Congress, and we'll put it online for you so everybody can see it. But to think about Pinn's written essay along with this photograph really gives you a three-dimensional sense of who he was, and I think that's something that's so unusual when we're talking about African-American figures from the 19<sup>th</sup> century,-

[0:41:00]

to have that kind of depth to his archival presence. So we don't have a whole lot of more time, but I wanna ask Michelle what the Library of Congress is doing with the Bourne Papers. How is the library working to make these incredibly valuable archival treasures more accessible to public and to educators and students and scholars?

*Michelle Krowl:*

Well what we've done is this was a collection that had been available in the original textual form for some years, but we

recently digitized the collection, and it's been online since 2016 I believe. So anyone who has access to a computer or the internet can now go read all of these stories for themselves. And again, with the Bourne Papers, they're in numerical order in which they were received.

[0:41:59]

So they're a wonderful treasure trove of materials, particularly because one thing to think about with these collections is that the pension records that you mentioned for Pinn are incredibly valuable when you have access to them because they tell a lot about these individuals. But depending – they were trying to get pension and prove their disability or what they were going to be rated on for their pension. But here, because Bourne really encouraged soldiers to write about themselves, about their military service, about their amputation or losing their arm, this may be the only place that this soldier ever wrote their life story, and sometimes they're very impressionistic or they're very – a lot about the background of their lives that you might not get anywhere else. And again, these are not necessarily famous military figures, so you're really – when you access these, often you can get a very good sense of what we might refer to as a common soldier's history, regardless of what the background was.

[0:43:03]

So that's a wonderful way of getting access to the back stories for a lot of these soldiers, in terms of what their backgrounds were, what their military service was. They often talk about getting wounded, sometimes their amputations or their post-wounding treatment. Another thing that we're doing with this collection is, in addition to having digitized it, it's also part of our initial crowd-sourcing project, so we're inviting members of the public to go online and help us transcribe these documents for a couple of different purposes. So one is that it makes the collections more keyword-searchable, so if you're looking for, "I want to find the soldiers who had an amputation," or "Discuss chloroform," or something very specific, that allows you to get to it. But also many people don't read cursive handwriting anymore, and it's a skill-

*Adam Rothman:* Yeah, tell us about it. We're teaching students.

[0:44:00]

*Michelle Krowl:* Exactly. Well, and we're starting to see that as well with people who are having more difficulty accessing our handwritten collections, because that's not a skill that they have anymore or is being taught. So with crowd-sourcing, this is a way of helping to bridge that gap that people with cursive skills or, as Chandra has discovered, when students work together, sometimes they can help each other out to puzzle through these things, but it allows the collections to be accessible to people who can't read cursive handwriting.

*Adam Rothman:* That's really exciting. So if you're listening to this podcast right now, not only can you go online and read Pinn's essay and look at his photograph, but you can actually go in and start transcribing the written material that's in the Bourne collection and other collections. So you have an opportunity not just to consume historical knowledge and archival material but actually help contribute to public knowledge, which is a really, really wonderful thing.

[0:45:00]

Chandra, why do you think this material is valuable? Why should people care about it?

*Chandra Manning:* I think that the insight into the war and its aftermath as a lived experience is something that is easy to forget, to lose sight of in our accounts of the war and the aftermath. You and I both give lectures on the Civil War to our students or we assign textbooks, and we and they, for good reason, focus on grand themes and on causes and on effects. But for many people, this was their life, and hearing the impact of this grand event on these 300-odd individual lives I think adds dimension to the war-

[0:46:00]

that is quite unique, that makes people who lived in the past seem more fully-dimensional to our students, but to anybody today, and perhaps even helps keep us a little bit humble in the fact of – or brought face-to-face with real people and not just sort of stock characters that lived through massive events.

*Michelle Krowl:* Well, and also I think one thing that is so striking about this collection is when you read it, it puts it in a grand, longer trajectory of just the physical cost of war, that whether it's Robert Pinn being hit by a Minié ball in the Civil War or a soldier in Afghanistan losing an arm or a leg from an I.E.D., that this is the cost of war.

So it's, in some ways – the library now has a veterans' history project, where they collect the lives of soldiers and kind of see the themes.

[0:47:03]

This is sort of veterans' history before veterans' history, and it puts it in this larger context of what the physical cost of war is on those who serve, and also trying to reintegrate back into civilian society when the war has changed your life in such fundamental ways.

*Adam Rothman:*

That's a very powerful point. It strikes me that this podcast series is really dedicated to African-American history, but Pinn, of course, is not just a figure of African-American history. He's also a figure in the history of the Civil War. He's a history – he's a figure in the history of veterans. He is a figure in the history of people who faced physical challenges in America. So he speaks to so many different histories, and he does so in such a human way. This is not – we're not talking about grand narratives and abstract concepts. We are talking about one man's life.

[0:48:01]

And thanks to this collection, we actually know a little bit about him, and now, hopefully, you do to. So thank you for listening. This has been *African-American Odysseys: Black Lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Chandra, Michelle, thanks for joining me.

*Michelle Krowl:*

Our pleasure.

*Chandra Manning:*

Thanks very much.

*Adam Rothman:*

Okay, that's it.

*Male:*

All right, let me just shut everything down out here. Thank you guys so much.

*Adam Rothman:*

What do you think?

*Chandra Manning:*

Is it okay?

*Adam Rothman:*

Yeah.

*Michelle Krowl:*

You were terrific. I mean both of you were terrific.

[0:48:36]

*[End of Audio]*