

# Grandfather Webster's Words Etched My Fate In Stone

By Sherman N. Miller

I was awakened by the cool spring air of New York City as I rolled over in my squeaky, old, metal bunk. The loud chirping of the birds imbued the air with the sounds of new life. These melodious sounds brought to mind the sweet scent of the peach blossoms that filled Grandfather Perkins' orchards back in Georgia.

I would give my right arm to see Grandfather Perkins standing on the hill overlooking his orchard muttering, "Those bees are fixin' to do us pretty fine." We laughed whenever he made that statement because he continually repeated, "Those critters treated us pretty good," even when he knew his crops were a failure.

Today was Sunday. Sundays were the most exciting day of the week at our house. Mother was constantly driving everyone to get dressed. She pushed us as if the church service was well underway and we might miss the last 5 minutes. I was always the last one dressed. I guess I felt loved when mother prodded me along.

"Matthew, are you ready?"

"Yes, Mama," I poured forth.

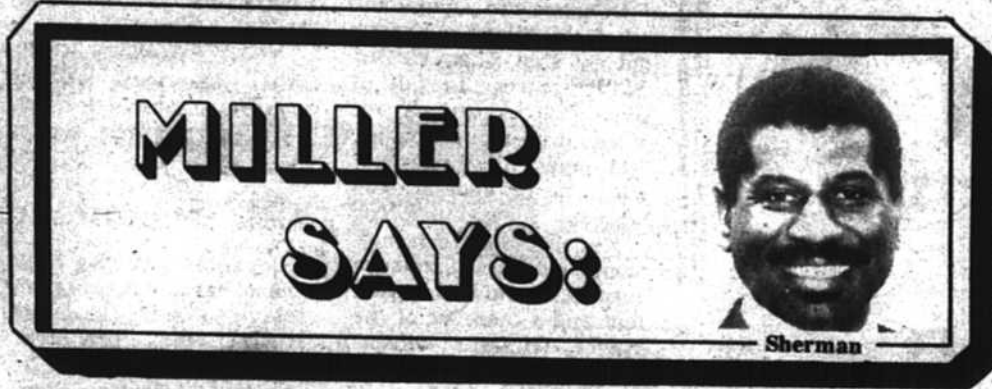
"You hurry out and get in that car."

I scurried out as fast as my little legs would carry me. I felt a bit foolish when I got into the car huffing and puffing because Mother rushed out, and she immediately turned around and ran back into the house. Something was always forgotten every Sunday. If it was not her gloves, then it was her hat.

I would not be caught here in this strange city trying to become a naval officer, if those Japanese had not bombed our ships. I could be walking through Grandfather Perkins' beautiful cotton fields or listening to old Bessie Mae singing Negro spirituals while she worked in our kitchen. She was always singing when we were leaving for church. Some say she went to that colored church over on the other side of the cotton patch, but Bessie Mae was always at the house cooking when we came back from services.

After church Grandfather Perkins often stopped to chat. He sent me off to the Navy with one of his famous monologues:

"Son, you must serve your country well. You come from a fine tradition of southern gentlemen. Your great-grandfather was a cavalry officer in the Confederate Army. He fought those damn



Yankees with every breath in his body. No finer man have I ever had the pleasure to know." I had heard that story a thousand times, but it always seemed like a new story each time it was told.

I cannot forget my other lecture from Grandfather Webster: "Son, the difference between a man and a boy is the man has the guts to handle an assignment when the going is tough. When those Yankees came through Georgia, I was just a young lad. They were grabbing everything in sight. The colonel told me that they must not get our horses. I and another fellow hid those horses deep in the woods where we knew those Yankees would never think to look. They must have looked for us for two days, but they found nothing. Yes, we were scared, but we were ready to die to protect those horses. We expect no less out of you, son, when you fight to protect this nation's honor."

Grandfather Webster's words had etched my fate in stone. I must find

someway to quell this hankering for home. Just realizing that I had a problem calmed me down enough to think a bit. There was but one thing I could do to share in my family's ritualistic Sundays.

I found myself fully dressed in Navy blues before I realized what was happening. When I came to my senses, I had opened the telephone book to churches. I scanned through the Methodist churches, whereupon I came across the name "St. Paul's." That was the same name of our church at home. My anxiety was high because I knew very little about how to get around in New York City. Nevertheless, I was confident that I could find my way. Grandfather Webster's words burned in my ears and I knew I was a man.

The subway car was full of people staring aimlessly out of the windows. I quickly became convinced that they had no idea that I existed. I had heard that New York City people were very cold, but I could not imagine that they had no

emotions for their fellowman. Nonetheless, I saw one little man continually peeking in my direction. I was tempted to speak to him. My hopes were shattered when the little man got off the subway at the first stop. He peered back at me with the strangest expression as the subway pulled off. I would have given my last five dollars to have known his thoughts.

The little man's seat was taken by a heavy-set, dark complexioned, colored lady who immediately pulled out her breast to nurse a baby hidden under a diaper. She looked over at me and she smiled. This lady reminded me of the colored ladies Mama asked to come by to look after my younger brother and sister. Her smile gave me the distinct impression that it contained a hidden message. During our brief exchange of glances, the subway stopped again, and the white man sitting near the colored lady with the baby disappeared.

The subway made six more stops. Each stop saw more and more coloreds

board the subway. They were laughing and joking as if it was one of their church revival meetings. That colored lady with the baby seemed to be related to everyone who got on the subway. Watching the thirty or more of them called to mind the many times that my friend Joe and I crawled quietly up on the big hill out behind the cotton patch to watch those colored preachers stir up the crowd into a religious fervor. Grandfather Webster often said, "Negroes are too spirited for my blood."

The subway finally reached my stop. I hopped off the subway and I started to walk slowly up the street. I carefully looked up at each street sign to get my bearings. The church should be only three blocks from the subway stop. I immediately picked up my pace to avoid being late.

The big stone building in the distance had to be the church. Once I turned the corner and the steps of St. Paul's Church came into view, I saw the choir lined up outside ready to march in. They wore graduation robes. These robes were light blue with white collars. Everyone stood smartly with their hymn books tucked neatly under their arms. This beautiful sight gave me a weird feeling. It was not until they started up the two flights of stone stairs that

led into the church that I understood my predicament. This was a colored church with a white name. What would I do?

A voice deep down inside said, "Matthew, you must serve God no matter where you are."

On the other hand, Grandfather Webster had made it perfectly clear: "We work with Negroes, but we do not socialize with them!" I had watched him and my father constantly argue about those relationships. Father extended credit to the poor Negroes just like he did the poor whites. However, he had lost his shirt from some white gold brickers. Grandfather Webster often called my father a fool for treating Negroes as if they were white people.

I often wondered who was right. This dichotomy crossed my mind as I approached the entrance to the church. I remembered Grandfather Webster telling us how his father once owned many, many slaves. Could I face Grandfather Webster's stern portrait in the hallway at home if I entered? Would the probably all colored congregation want me in their church even in Christian fellowship? Would I be accepted.....or embarrassed?

Yet I had heard father telling us that some day coloreds were going to be doctors and lawyers, and so on, like everyone else.

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