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Henry Ossian Flipper

John Green

DAPG, bb4892@wayne.edu

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Henry Ossian Flipper (1856-1940), the first Black West Point graduate

Henry O. Flipper was born into slavery, March 21, 1856, to Festus and Isabella Flipper, in Thomasville, Georgia, a rich plantation near the Florida border.

In 1873, ten years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and during the Reconstruction era, when Blacks were breaking racial and economical barriers. Republican Representative James C. Freeman of the 5th Georgia Congressional District, appointed Flipper to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Second Lieutenant Flipper graduated in 1877 and immediately was offered the position of Commander of the Liberian Army. The handsome, six-foot-two West Pointer, refused the command, electing to head west and became the first Black officer of the all Black Buffalo Soldiers, reporting to Troop A, 10th Cavalry on 1 January 1878, at Fort Sill (Indian Territory) Oklahoma.

Flipper became the only Black of 2,100 officers on active duty. The United States military academy prepared Lt. Flipper to become a civil engineer, who while at Fort Sill was ordered to construct canals to drain the shallow standing pools of stagnant water which were breeding areas for malaria bearing mosquitoes. Although his white superiors laughed, saying his canals ran up hill, Lt. Flipper knew he was on target.

Today these canals are known as Flipper's Ditches and have been declared a National Historical Landmark. Perhaps, Lt. Flipper's military career would have lasted much longer had a friendship with Capt. Nicholas Nolan, a white, open-minded Irishman never developed. Capt. Nolan's wife had a younger sister, Molly Dwyer, living with them.

Molly chose Henry Flipper, an excellent horseman, as her riding companion, which upset not just a few white officers. In 1881, Lt. Flipper discovered commissary funds were missing from his trunk. He was court-martialed, but was found innocent of embezzlement, but guilty of "conduct unbecoming an officer," which carried a penalty of dishonorable discharge.

Lt. Henry O. Flipper, a fine soldier, who may have become the first Black general in a just society was at age 25, cashiered. The Buffalo Soldiers captured Geronimo, stalked Billy the Kid, took in stride General Custer's refusal to lead them and rescued Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders from San Juan Hill, Cuba. Why?

The army offered equal pay, some education, lots of adventure and yes, there were injustices within the military yet they were slight compared to those offered by society. In 1976, 94 years and nine appeals later, Lt. Henry O. Flipper was exonerated of all charges and issued an honorable discharge. Flipper died 26 April 1940.

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