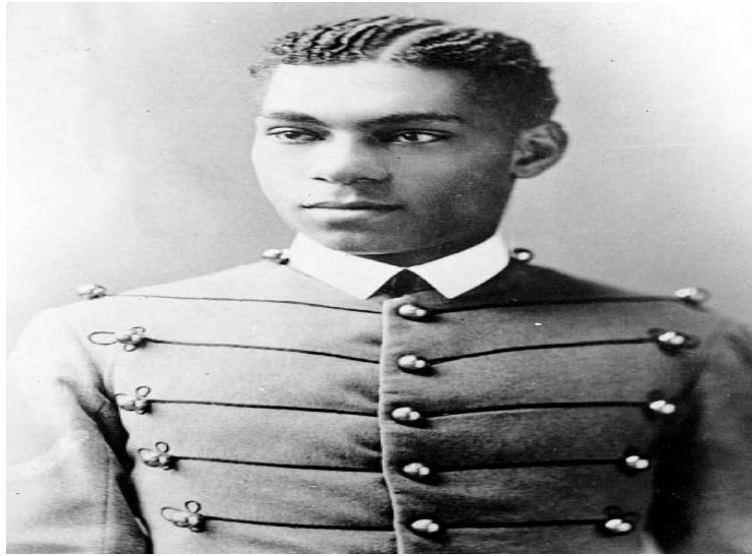


A Moment in Black History

Sources: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-first-african-american-graduate-of-west-point.htm>



Henry Ossian Flipper (March 21, 1856 - April 26, 1940) was born into slavery in Thomasville, Georgia. While not the first African American to be admitted at West Point, Flipper became the first African American cadet to graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point. Flipper attended the American Missionary Association schools and later became the first African American to attend Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University).

In January of 1873 Flipper wrote to James Freeman, a newly elected Congressman from Georgia, requesting an appointment to West Point. Freeman responded that he would recommend Flipper if he proved "worthy and qualified." Flipper and the congressman engaged in a series of correspondence leading to his nomination to the Academy. Flipper later passed the required examinations and officially entered the U.S. Military Academy on July 1, 1873.

Flipper excelled in his academics while at West Point despite being a hostile environment where he was socially ostracized by his white peers and professors. After graduating in 1877, he was commissioned to serve in the all-African American 10th Cavalry as a second lieutenant at Fort Sill in Oklahoma. The 9th and 10th Cavalry were regiments of Black enlisted men who became known as the Buffalo Soldiers. Flipper served in various capacities such as serving as Company G commander and others.

In an effort to combat malaria infections, Flipper was tasked to survey and oversee the construction of a drainage system to eliminate a number of stagnant ponds blamed for causing malaria. His effort to control malaria infection was successful and in 1977, his drainage system was coined "Flipper's Ditch," and was designated a Black Military Heritage Site. Flipper also supervised other numerous projects in the Native American tribes including the building of roads and telegraph lines.

In 1881, Flipper was accused and court martialed for stealing over \$3,000 in commissary funds, though a court-martial exonerated him from embezzlement, he was dishonorably discharged for "unbecoming conduct" in 1882.

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The birth of Civil Rights in the 1950s, prompted the review of the circumstances surrounding his dismissal from the Army. In late 1976, the case was reviewed by the Army Board for Correction of Military Records. While acknowledging that Flipper had fudged reports and lied to his commanding officer, the board concluded that "the continuance of the stigma from a dismissal, which characterizes his entire service as dishonorable, is unduly harsh, and therefore unjust." The board, therefore, recommended that all Flipper's Army records "be corrected to show that he separated from the Army of the United States on a Certificate of Honorable Discharge on 30 June 1882." President Clinton posthumously granted "a full and unconditional pardon to Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper on February 19, 1999, 117 years after his dismissal from the United States Army.

References:

1. First African American graduate of West Point: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-african-american-graduate-of-west-point>
2. The First African American Graduate of West Point: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-first-african-american-graduate-of-west-point.htm>