



Theophilus Gould Steward

Black soldiers served with distinction and honor in the Union Army in the Civil War, so after the end of the war in 1865, the Army created two all-black cavalry units, the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments, to serve on the Western frontier. According to *The Black West* by William Katz, the two regiments made up 20 percent of the U.S. Army cavalry in the American West. Nicknamed the “buffalo soldiers,” some white officers such as George Custer refused to command the units, but General John J. Pershing earned the nickname “Black Jack” when he commanded them. In the Spanish-American War at the Battle of San Juan Hill, Pershing saw the buffalo soldiers save the day for Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, who received all the credit for the victory. Later, Pershing commanded the 10th in his expedition against the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa when Villa raided the United States from Mexico on March 9, 1916.

Serving on the frontier from Texas to Montana, the 9th Cavalry guarded river crossings and the Rio Grande border, protected survey parties and lumber wagons, fought Indians, and chased outlaws. During the Ghost Dance uprising of the 1890s, when the Indians believed if they danced the buffalo would return and the white people would be buried under a layer of new earth, the 9th rode 100 miles to rescue the embattled 7th Cavalry.

The 10th Cavalry was formed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1866 and later adopted a buffalo on their regiment insignia. They patrolled the plains of west Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma, as well as the mountains and deserts of New Mexico and Arizona. They participated in the capture of Bill the Kid and on the campaigns against the Apaches and their chiefs Geronimo, Victorio, and Nana.

Besides the two cavalry units, two black infantry units, the 24th and 25th Regiments, served across the frontier. Interestingly, the Army assigned chaplains to the two units to educate the men. Chaplain George C. Mullins wrote in 1875, “For the most part the soldiers seem to have an enthusiastic interest in the school. They are prompt in attendance, very orderly and cheerful. In learning to read and write many of them have made astonishing progress.” When bandits attacked a detachment of the 24th and the 9th Cavalry in Arizona guarding an army payroll wagon, the bandits got the strongbox, but the soldiers put up such an exceptional fight that the paymaster recommended two of the infantrymen for the Medal of Honor because they continued fighting in spite of their serious wounds.

One famous person who defended the soldiers in print and in his artwork was Frederic Remington. He rode twice with the 10th Cavalry, sketched and painted the men in action, and said in a magazine article they were soldiers “who knew what it is all about, this soldiering” as he described their bravery in battle.

The chaplains for the buffalo soldiers shared the same duties as the white chaplains—evangelism, conducting religious services, visiting the wounded, burying the dead, and caring for the spiritual needs of the men. However, the black chaplains went a step beyond, serving as educators and social advocates. While the white soldier was welcomed into restaurants and given free meals, the black soldier stood outside, not allowed through the door because of the color of his skin. The minority military men fought under the same U.S. flag and risked their lives for their country—yet were mistreated as civilians.

Here are several of those chaplains who took up the fight against these and many other kinds of injustices:

Henry V. Plummer (9th Cavalry, 1884–1894), born a slave, became the first African-American chaplain after the Civil War. After serving faithfully, he was courtmartialed on an unjust charge. The Maryland governor in 2004 signed a document to overturn the charge.

George W. Prioleau (9th Cavalry, 1895–1920) was also born a slave in South Carolina and replaced Chaplain Plummer at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, during the Sioux Indian War. He pastored several African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) churches and later in life started Bethel A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles. The denomination sent him to Wilberforce University in Ohio for more education, and he continued to pastor while also teaching at Wilberforce. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland commissioned Prioleau for chaplaincy in the army as a captain. He took this spiritual mission very seriously. According to the book *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue*, Prioleau exhorted those in the ministry to the soldiers to “carefully study the work before them, adapt themselves to the circumstance, and take the Holy Ghost as their teacher and guide.”

William T. Anderson (10th Cavalry, 1897–1910), also born a slave, eventually earned several degrees. He pastored an A.M.E. church, but he was also a physician with his own private practice. His involvement with the Republican Party secured him a position as a chaplain.

Allen Allensworth (24th Infantry, 1886–1907) focused his attention on the men being educated to move up in rank and help themselves once they became civilians. He too was born a slave, but he ran away and joined the federal forces in the Civil War and was the first African American to become a lieutenant colonel. He is further remembered as the founder of the all-black township of Allensworth, California, now Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park in Tulare County. Sadly, he was killed in a car accident in Monrovia, California, in 1914 on the way to preach in a local church.

Theophilus G. Steward (25th Infantry, 1884–1901) was the only chaplain from the North born a free man. Steward, racially mixed, could have easily passed as a white man but choose to identify himself as black. He joined the A.M.E. church and quickly was called into the ministry. He wrote several books and articles which caused controversy within the denomination. He welcomed the opportunity to become a military chaplain. Like all the other chaplains, Steward found himself in the role of librarian, teacher, and pastor. His wife, Susan McKinney Steward, was the first African-American woman to earn a medical degree in the state of New York and moved with her husband to forts in Montana, Nebraska, and Texas.

Each of the chaplains held up the banner of Jesus Christ and proclaimed the Gospel while also fighting against social injustice. *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue* records that one chaplain wrote, “The prejudice is not so much against the ignorant Negro... as it is against the intelligent, educated tax-paying Negro... who is trying to be a man.” The chaplains thought being a soldier proved to be one of the best opportunities for advancement for a black man in this country. Each of them, with the help of the Lord, viewed their chaplain role as an excellent avenue to aid in this process.



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