

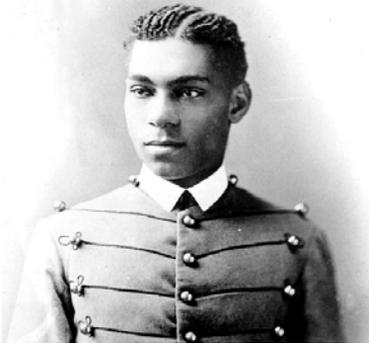
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Henry Ossian Flipper

Flipper's Ditch

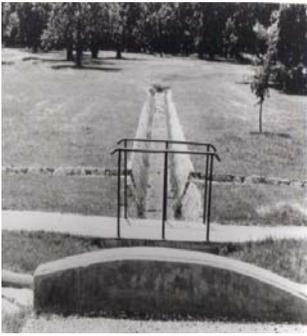
by Greg Brown

Henry Ossian Flipper, was born in Thomasville, Georgia, on March 21, 1856, less than a decade before the surrender of the Confederacy in 1865 brought an end to the Civil War. His father, a skilled shoemaker and carriage trimmer, set up a successful business in Atlanta after the war and was able to afford private tutoring to educate his two sons. In 1866 Flipper enrolled in schools established by the American Missionary Association, and in 1869 he began studying at Atlanta University. Three years later he applied for an appointment to West Point; he was accepted and entered in July of 1873 as the fifth Black cadet to enroll at the academy. In 1878, at age 21, Flipper became the first African American graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. Shortly after he graduated; Flipper wrote an account of his experiences there titled *The Colored Cadet at West Point*. In the book, he describes many sides of life at the academy--the courses of study, the daily schedule, as well as his treatment by and interaction with the officers and other cadets. Flipper went out of his way to report his experiences in a positive way. For any unpleasant treatment he received, he found reasons other than race as its cause. He wrote in his memoir: "Whenever I have been insulted, or anything has been done or said to me which might have been negative, I have endeavored to find some excuse, some

reason for it, which was not founded on prejudice or on baseness of character or any other ungentlemanly attribute; or, in other words, I wanted to prove that it was not done because of my color."

Flipper not only became the first African American to graduate from West Point, but also the first African American to become an officer in the U.S. Army. He requested and received an assignment with the Buffalo Soldiers, one of two African American cavalry regiments. Flipper was respected by his peers and worked successfully in his unit. Flipper was stationed first at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, later served at Forts Elliott, Quitman, and Davis, Texas. He served as a signal officer and quartermaster, fought Apaches, installed telegraph lines, and supervised the building of roads. At Fort Sill, one of his tasks as post engineer was to drain some stagnant pools that had been breeding grounds for malaria for years. The army had tried unsuccessfully to drain them twice before. He succeeded where others had failed. This project, known as Flipper's Ditch, became a National Historic Landmark in 1977.

In 1881, while serving at Fort Davis, Flipper's commanding officer accused him of embezzling \$3,791.77 from commissary funds. A court-martial found him not guilty of embezzlement but convicted him of conduct unbecoming an officer and ordered him dismissed from the Army.



Flipper's Ditch, Fort Sill

After his dishonorable discharge, Flipper fought to clear his name as he pursued a career as an engineer and an expert on Spanish and Mexican land law. In 1898, a bill reinstating him into the Army and restoring his rank was introduced in Congress on his behalf. To bolster his case, he sent Congressman John A. T. Hull, chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs, the letter displayed below along with a brief supporting the bill's passage. Flipper's letter to Hull is an eloquent statement asking Congress for "that justice which every American citizen has the right to ask." The bill and several later ones were tabled, and Flipper died in 1940 without vindication, but in 1976, the Army granted him an honorable discharge, and in 1999, President Bill Clinton issued him a full pardon.

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