

Fort Davis

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Army Chaplains for Black Regiments

Following the Civil War, Congress passed legislation to increase the size of the U. S. Army. The Act of July 28, 1866 stipulated that of the new regiments created, two cavalry and four infantry "shall be composed of colored men." The Act also provided that an army chaplain be assigned to each of the newly-created African-American regiments.



The Chapel at Fort Davis, built in the late 1870s, served as the post school for both the enlisted men and children of the garrison.

This provision was unique because army chaplains normally had been assigned to posts rather than to regiments. Chaplains were stationed with the new regiments specifically to develop education programs for the black enlisted men. During the frontier Indian Wars period, more than thirty chaplains served at various posts throughout the West.

An applicant for an army Chaplaincy had to be ordained, and he needed a recommendation from ecclesiastical, political, or military officials. Commissioned as an officer with the rank of captain, a newly-assigned army chaplain received the pay of first lieutenant. He was responsible for the spiritual well-being and educational development of the enlisted soldier, but like other officers, he often had collateral duties such as supervising the post bakery or garden, or conducting prisoners to military prisons. The primary duty of chaplains assigned to black regiments was to educate enlisted men. Each chaplain had to develop curriculum and operate a school for the men. In 1878, this somewhat unstructured system changed when the army issued General Order No. 24 that dealt with the operation of post schools. For the first time, the army regularly inspected post schools, evaluated courses of instruction, and recommended programs with outstanding value to all chaplains. By the early 1880s, most post school curriculums included reading, writing, basic mathematics, history, and elementary science.

Manuel J. Gonzales, a native of the Portuguese island of Madeira, was one of the first chaplains assigned to a black regiment. Gonzales entered the army in August 1862 as a Hospital Chaplain of Volunteers. He was appointed the chaplain of the Ninth U. S. Cavalry in December of 1868 and served at Fort Davis in that capacity from May 1869 to November 1871.

David E. Barr was rector of St. John's Protestant Episcopal Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana when the Civil War broke out. A Northern sympathizer, he fled to New Orleans where he began ministering to Union troops in camps and hospitals. In 1865-66, he served as the regimental chaplain of the 81st U. S. Colored Infantry Regiment. When the Thirty-ninth U. S. Infantry was established in 1866, Barr became its chaplain. With the consolidation of the Thirty-ninth and Fortieth U. S. Infantry regiments in 1869, Barr became the first chaplain of the newly-formed Twenty-fifth Infantry. Chaplain Barr served at Fort Davis in the spring and summer of 1872. For lack of a schoolroom, the chaplain held classes outside in good weather and during

periods of inclement weather in his own quarters.

George G. Mullins entered on duty at Fort Davis on April 30, 1875 as chaplain of the Twenty-fifth Infantry. Although at first discouraged with the prospect of instructing black soldiers, Mullins persevered, being inspired by their enthusiasm for learning. During the four- and- one- half years that Mullins served at Fort Davis, he made a significant contribution to the education of black enlisted men as well as to army education in general.

Chaplain Mullins soon realized that at the heart of the black enlisted man's desire to learn was the determination to be a free citizen in a free society. Mullins observed a correlation between

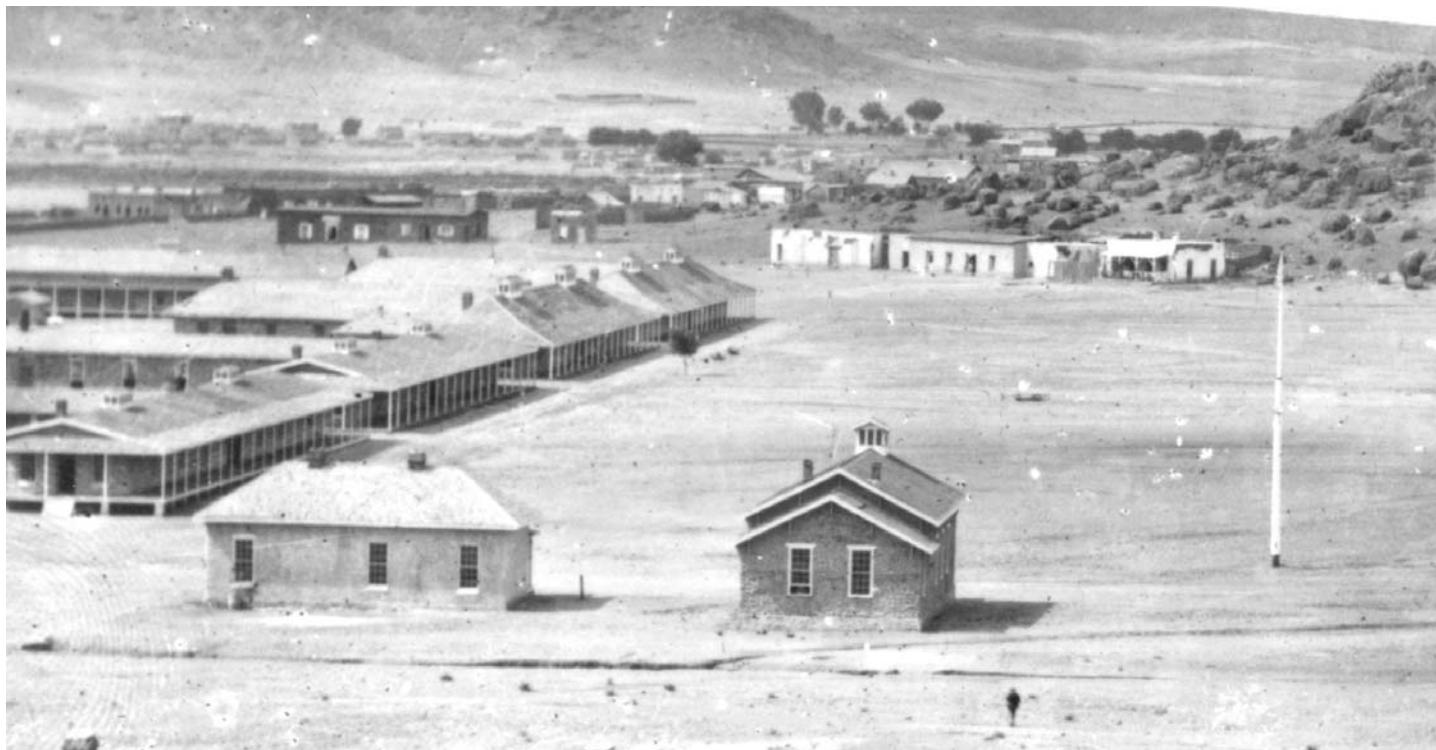
having an education and good discipline. He came to notice a change in the conduct of the men who attended his classes. The chaplain worked tirelessly at Fort Davis to enroll as many enlisted men as possible in school. Under his tutelage, many black soldiers became convinced that education was a key to social equality and acceptance. Mullins's efforts did not go unnoticed, for in April 1881, he was appointed Chief of Education for the U. S. Army.

James Laverty, a chaplain with the Twenty- fourth Infantry was on leave when the regiment's headquarters was transferred to Fort Davis in June 1880. Chaplain Laverty remained on leave for the four months the regiment was headquartered at the post. He served as chaplain of the Twenty-

fourth for ten years, retiring in February 1886.

Francis H. Weaver, a private with the 53rd Pennsylvania Infantry during the Civil War was appointed chaplain of the Tenth Cavalry in June of 1880. Weaver was the last chaplain to serve an African- American regiment at Fort Davis. Well- liked by both officers and enlisted men, Weaver was stationed at the post from August 1882 to April 1885. While at Fort Davis, in addition to his chaplaincy duties, Weaver served as post treasurer.

Henry V. Plummer was the first African American to be commissioned an army chaplain. A charismatic preacher, Plummer was assigned to the Ninth Cavalry in 1884, which at the time was headquartered at Fort Riley,



Post Chapel in center right foreground, circa 1885

Kansas. Plummer quickly became popular with the men and his church services were well attended.

Plummer believed his responsibility went beyond preaching the gospel and educating enlisted men. He was a social activist, especially in the cause of supporting blacks' rights. Chaplain Plummer championed temperance and equality and fought against discrimination. He even went so far as to petition the Adjutant General of the U. S. Army to allow him to establish a colony of African Americans in Africa.



Chaplain Henry Plummer

In the early 1890s, Plummer's attempts to attain moral justice alienated the ranking officers at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. He failed to recognize the social and military parameters within which he must operate. His career survived ten years, but in 1894 he was discharged from the service

for "conduct unbecoming an officer" due to a minor social incident.

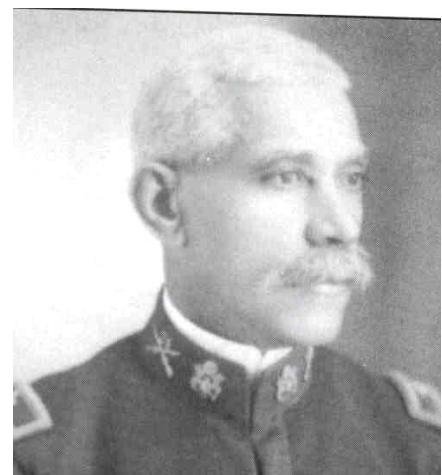
Allen Allensworth was the second African American to be commissioned a chaplain in the Regular Army. An ex-slave, who served in the Union Navy during the Civil War, Allensworth was assigned to the Twenty-fourth Infantry in 1886, inheriting the educational program established by Chaplain Laverty.

Allensworth soon became aware that his greatest strength was that of an educator. He instituted a graded curriculum for both enlisted men and children, sponsored a literary and debating society to stimulate intellectual activity, and advocated vocational programs for the men. In 1891, he was invited by the National Educational Association to present a paper on "The History and Progress of Education in the U. S. Army" at its annual convention.

Allensworth saw education in the army as a means for making soldiers more responsible and useful citizens, yet, unlike Plummer, he was careful not to upset his military supervisors. Outwardly he championed the need to improve education to increase military efficiency, while quietly pursuing a better world of equality for blacks.

When Congress in 1904 authorized the army to promote chaplains of "exceptional efficiency" to the rank of major,

Allensworth was one of those selected. In 1906, Allensworth became the second chaplain and the first black officer to be promoted to lieutenant colonel. When he retired a few months later, having served twenty years with the Twenty-fourth Infantry, he was the highest-ranking black officer in the army.



Chaplain Allen Allensworth

The chaplains who served the African-American regiments made significant contributions to the success of the "Buffalo Soldier" regiments and the men who served in them. These chaplains proved their worth in the frontier Indian Wars Army by providing moral guidance and educational opportunities that clearly had a positive effect on the military performance of the enlisted men. The schooling that they provided enhanced the ability of the African-American troops to earn promotions in the army as well as to find gainful employment after discharge.