

Fort Davis

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



SECOND LIEUTENANT HENRY O. FLIPPER

FIRST BLACK GRADUATE OF WEST POINT

On February 19, 1999, President William J. Clinton posthumously pardoned Second Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper. The event came 59 years after his death and 117 years after the young lieutenant had been dismissed from the United States Army. A short statement penned by President Chester Arthur in June of 1882, upholding the court-martial sentence of dismissal, had signaled the end to his military career.

At age 21, Flipper became the first black graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. His assignment in July 1877 to the Tenth U. S. Cavalry, one of two black cavalry regiments organized after the Civil War, was the realization of a personal dream.



A Youthful Henry Flipper

In the fall of 1880, Lieutenant Flipper was court-martialed for embezzlement of commissary funds in violation of the 60th Article of War, and for “conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman” under Article 61. Flipper pleaded not guilty to both charges. Although the court found him not guilty of embezzlement, he was convicted of the second charge

for making a false statement, for signing financial records he knew to be incorrect, and for writing a check on a nonexistent bank account. By regulations, this conviction carried an automatic sentence of dismissal from the army.

Early Schooling

Born into slavery at Thomasville, Georgia on March 21, 1856, Flipper’s education began when he was eight years old in the wood shop of another slave.

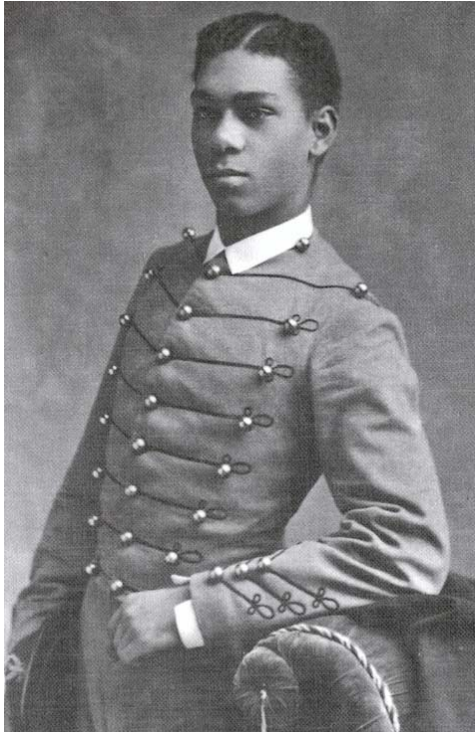
Flipper later attended schools operated by the American Missionary Association and entered Atlanta University when it was established in 1869.

Military Career

The future cavalry officer’s military journey began in January of 1873 when he wrote to James Freeman, newly-elected Georgia congressman, asking to be appointed to West Point. Freeman responded that he would recommend Flipper if he proved “worthy and qualified.” A series of letters exchanged between the two, ultimately resulted in Freeman nominating Flipper to the Academy. Flipper passed the required examinations and officially entered West Point on July 1, 1873.

Flipper’s four years as a cadet were characterized by above average grades earned in an environment of almost total social isolation from his classmates. When he graduated in 1877, he ranked 50th in a class of 76. He was assigned, along with four other graduates, to the Tenth Cavalry and soon found himself stationed on the frontier at Fort Sill, Indian Territory.

Early in 1879, Flipper's Company A transferred to Fort Elliott, Texas. In November, the unit returned to Fort Sill where Flipper served briefly as the commander of Company G.



Cadet Henry O. Flipper

While at Fort Sill, Flipper was detailed as the post's engineer and ordered to survey and supervise the construction of a drainage system to eliminate a number of stagnant ponds blamed for causing malaria. His efforts were successful, and in 1977, what became known as "Flipper's Ditch" was designated a Black Heritage Military Site.

In May, 1880 Company A left Fort Sill taking station at Fort Concho, Texas on June 17th. Two weeks later, the company was one of several in the field pursuing the elusive Apache leader, Victorio, and his small band of warriors who were raiding on both sides of the Rio Grande.

Flipper arrived at Fort Davis on November 29, 1880 and soon was assigned the duties of Acting Assistant Quartermaster and Acting Commissary of Subsistence. He temporarily served as quartermaster until the regimental headquarters of the First U. S. Infantry, with its commander Colonel William R. Shafter, arrived in March 1881.

All seemed to be going well for the only black officer in the army, until some commissary funds he was responsible for turned up missing. Stalling for time and fearing Colonel Shafter, who had the reputation of being a strict disciplinarian, Flipper tried to conceal the loss. These actions resulted in the court-martial. The trial was held in the post chapel at Fort Davis. Flipper was ably defended by Captain Merritt Barber, 16th Infantry, who volunteered to serve as counsel. In reviewing the trial the Judge Advocate General, the army's chief legal officer, recommended a punishment other than dismissal. President Arthur, however, approved the court's sentence.



The chapel at Fort Davis, site of Lt. Flipper's court-martial

Civilian Accomplishments

After leaving the army, Flipper attained recognition and respect as a surveyor. In 1890, he opened a civil and mining engineering office in Arizona.

From 1893 to 1901, he worked for the U. S. Department of Justice as a special agent for the Court of Private Land Claims. In addition to his primary job of translating Spanish documents, he also surveyed land grants and often appeared as a government witness in court cases.

Clearing His Name



Henry Flipper, Nogales, Arizona

Flipper next was employed as a resident engineer with a mining company in Mexico. Following the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, he moved to El Paso. He served as an interpreter and translator in 1919 for a Senate subcommittee on foreign relations, and in 1921, he was appointed a special assistant to the Secretary of the Interior and worked with the Alaskan Engineering Commission. From 1923 to the autumn of 1929, Flipper served as a consultant in South America for a New York-based oil company.

During the years following his dismissal from the army, Flipper maintained his innocence. He sought to clear his name through the only avenue open to him – the passage of a bill by Congress.

His first attempt to restore his former army rank and status occurred in 1898. His ninth and final effort resulted in legislation introduced into the Senate in 1924. None of the bills gained enough support or interest; all died quietly in committees. Henry Flipper died in 1940 at the age of 84, never knowing that his rank would someday be restored.

It was the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and a concerted effort by historians to tell the story of all Americans that brought attention to the circumstances surrounding Flipper's dismissal. The case was reviewed by the Army Board for Correction of Military records. In late 1976, the board changed Flipper's dismissal to an honorable discharge. While acknowledging that Flipper had falsified reports and lied to his commanding officer, the board ruled that the sentence of the court and its approval by the president was "... unduly harsh, and therefore unjust."

In the 1999 Executive Grant of Clemency, President Clinton granted "a full and unconditional pardon to Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper."



Henry Flipper in 1923