

Cathay Williams: First (documented) black woman to serve in U.S. Army

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Image 1. Artist William Jennings' fictional illustration of Cathay Williams. Image by: Wikimedia/Public Domain

In the spring of 1865, Cathay Williams, like many other freed slaves, found herself without a job.

During the American Civil War, Williams had worked as a cook and washer for the Union. The Union army of the North was fighting to end slavery and keep the United States together. When the war ended, Williams disguised herself as a man in order to join the military as a soldier. She became the only woman (that historians know of) to serve with the Buffalo Soldiers. The Buffalo Soldiers were the first African-American army regiment after the Civil War.

Her Father Was A "Free" Man, Mother Was A Slave

Williams was born in 1844 and grew up in Independence, Missouri. Her father was a free man, but since her mother was a slave, local laws said that she was a slave as well. Throughout her childhood, she was forced to work in the house of a rich farmer named William Johnson.

Williams was a teenager when the Civil War broke out in 1861. Union soldiers from the North took over her area and sent her and a group of other slaves and freed persons to Little Rock, Arkansas.

There, she was told she'd cook for the Union soldiers.

Used Fake Name To Join The Army, Buffalo Soldiers

After the war's end, she returned west to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Little is known about what she did next, until November 15, 1866. That was the day that she used the name William Cathay to join the 39th United States Infantry Company A. Her company was one of only a few that were made up of African-American soldiers. Together, they became known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

At the time, women weren't allowed to serve in the U.S. Army, but many women did anyway. They did so for many reasons. One of the most important motivations for Williams was economic. The military provided job security, money, and a way out of poverty. "I wanted to make my own living and not be dependent on relations or friends," Williams said to the St. Louis Daily Times in 1876. A steady paycheck assured her the independence she wanted.

Kept Her Secret From Fellow Male Soldiers

So, Williams took on a fake name, joined the Army, and managed to keep the fact that she was a woman a secret from fellow soldiers. She served on the expanding Western frontier, guarding the border from Native Americans, cattle thieves, and outlaws. The work was extremely intense, and she got sick quite often.

When she was healthy, she marched through Kansas and New Mexico from fort to fort. "I carried my musket and did guard and other duties while in the army," she said in the St. Louis Daily Times interview. In January 1868, her health declined and she was admitted to hospitals five times. Throughout her hospital stays, no one ever figured she was a woman. Historians have noted that this tells us much about the kind of medical treatment that African-American soldiers received at the time. Doctors must not have paid much attention to Williams if they did not even notice she was a woman.

Doctor Discovers Her True Identity

Eventually, a surgeon discovered William Cathay was really Cathay Williams. At that point, Williams was already fed up with the Army, and pretended to be sick. On October 14, 1868, she was discharged, having been dubbed "feeble" and found out to be a woman.

Williams went back to cooking and washing in Pueblo, Colorado. There she got married, but the marriage didn't last. She applied for disability payments in 1891, but her claim was rejected the following year.

Disability Claim Denied

She applied for disability payments in 1891, but her claim was rejected the following year, even though all of her toes had been amputated because of medical conditions.

After that, there's not much recorded about her life. Historians estimate that she died in Trinidad, Colorado, between 1892 and 1900.

It wasn't until almost a century later that historians learned of her tale. When it was discovered, her story became famous, taking on an almost legendary quality. Despite her fame, there is still much that historians do not know about her.

Her Place In History Debated

In the 2002 book "Cathay Williams: From Slave to Female Buffalo Soldier," historian Phillip Thomas Tucker attempted to document Williams' life. He described her as a "pioneer for the thousands of American women serving in today's United States' armed forces."

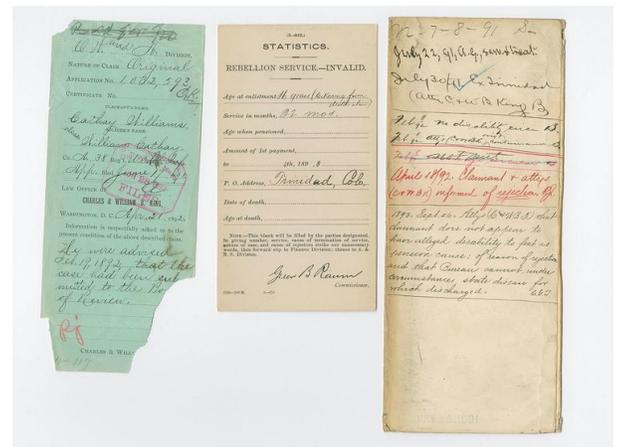
Not everyone shares his view, though.

Military historian Frank Schubert believes Williams' accomplishments have been somewhat exaggerated. "She's extraordinary in a way because she took this great risk of joining the army, but it doesn't make her a hero," he says.

What She Did Called "Extraordinary"

For U.S. National Archivist DeAnne Blanton, it's important to look at changing perspectives as historians. She says, "we all define hero the way we define hero, but we have to look at the context of her time. What would be common for a woman today, to do that then, was extraordinary." In the face of racism, sexism, and more, her simple act was significant for her time.

Williams wasn't intending to be a hero or highlight a cause when she joined the army. As a former slave with no education, she simply wanted "to make her way through the world," as Blanton points out. There were probably more black women like her, whose words were never written down.



Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST summarizes one of the article's CENTRAL ideas?
- (A) During the American Civil War, Williams had worked as a cook and washer for the Union.
 - (B) When the war ended, Williams disguised herself as a man in order to join the military as a soldier.
 - (C) In January 1868, her health declined and she was admitted to hospitals five times.
 - (D) In the 2002 book "Cathay Williams: From Slave to Female Buffalo Soldier," historian Phillip Thomas Tucker attempted to document Williams' life.

- 2 Read the selection from the section "Used Fake Name To Join The Army, Buffalo Soldiers."

"I wanted to make my own living and not be dependent on relations or friends," Williams said to the St. Louis Daily Times in 1876. A steady paycheck assured her the independence she wanted.

HOW does this detail develop one of the article's CENTRAL ideas?

- (A) by highlighting the importance of Williams' escape from slavery
 - (B) by explaining why women were not allowed to join the Army
 - (C) by suggesting the need for African-Americans to serve in the military
 - (D) by demonstrating Williams' motivation to join the Army
- 3 Read the section "Her Place In History Debated."
- What does this section explain that other sections do NOT?
- (A) how Williams was the first woman to serve in the U.S. Army
 - (B) how Williams' background influenced her decisions
 - (C) how experts differ in their opinions about Williams' importance
 - (D) how the Buffalo Soldiers played an important role in the U.S. Army

- 4 Read the section "Her Father Was A Free Man, Mother Was A Slave."

HOW does this section contribute to the article's CENTRAL idea?

- (A) It gives some context about Williams' personal life to show why she joined the Army.
- (B) It details the path that many former slaves took to serve in the Army.
- (C) It explains how Army officials discovered that Williams was a woman.
- (D) It shows what kind of duties were expected of Williams during her time in the Army.