

Alton's Black History: War Heroes

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Joshua Young is preparing for his third annual Buffalo Soldiers walk across the entire State of Illinois.

He does that walk to remember the Buffalo Soldiers - African-American soldiers who fought across the American frontier. Many of them were based in Illinois, as Illinois was a gateway to Western expansion. Young said Buffalo Soldiers were some of the best around, adding General George Custer refused the help of the Buffalo Soldiers when he was defeated at his last stand at Little Big Horn.

The legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers continues through the manifest destiny era of America. In fact, the American armed forces were segregated until President Harry S Truman integrated them in 1948. At that time, the Alton School District was facing integration at the threat of state funding cuts. In fact, Elijah Conley, a man who helped brick all the streets in Alton, was chased from the city with ruined credit and a burnt cross for even suggesting that integration.

So, when the United States poked its nose into World War I following the suspicious sinking of the *Lusitania*, many black men signed into the fray. But, they were not fighting alongside their fellow Americans. Because of the color of their skin, they were forced to fight among the French - who gladly accepted the assistance of the brave men who fought valiantly in the gas-filled trenches among shelling and constant attack.

Young brought a list of brave men from Alton, Illinois, as well as the rest of Madison County, who served in one of the largest conflicts in all of human history. The articles - dated from more than a century ago from *The Alton Evening Telegraph* - list the names of the men who left, and the places they went to serve.

On April 29, 1918, the first contingent of "negro soldiers" were sent from Alton to Camp Grant, located on the outskirts of Rockford, Illinois, for training before being sent to Europe to fight. All but one were described as "eager for the service and ready to go."

That list is as follows: George W. North, Abraham Hickman, Joseph Benevue, Frank Holmes, Ellis L. Martin, Joseph Lucas, Lee Hubbard, Clarence Walker, Ira Wm. Walker, Frank Taylor, Crosby McElroy, Leonard H. Johnson, Harry E. Johnson, Henry Simpson, Earl Payne, Charles Ambrosia, Clarence Howard, Charles Allen, Eugene E. Price, Francis J. Hickman, Robert V. Mosby, John D. Cross, Robert M. Lowry, Cleo H. Taylor, Kaleb Henderson, Arthur Scales, Paul Smith, Joseph I. Bradshaw, Collins C. Poindexter and Arthur Bassett.

These men were given an integrated send-off at a farewell ceremony at Crowe's Hall early that evening. Before leaving for camp, speeches were given for the brave young men by J.J. Brenholt and H.B. Coates.

Between Aug. 1-6, 1918, more black soldiers were sent to training camp from Alton. This time, they numbered 91. Those men included the following: George W. North,

Lincoln S. Briggs, Harrison Perry, Arthur Bassett, Frank Jimerson, Charles Boyce, Arthur Green, George Killion, Ornan Howard, Harrison Hawes, Clifford Curtis, Robert May, Charles Love, George Glass, Henry Hunter, Jesse Cooperwood, Achilles Koontz, Joe Williams, Joseph Colomb, Howard Williams, Samuel Gordon, Ed Hughes, Augustus P. Minor, Charles Stewart, Presley Coates, Lonny Shannon, Walter Walker, Oscar Swanson, Clarence Williams, Leon Smith, Ed Hinkle, Jasper Love, Lawrence Fulbright, George R. Walker, Frank Brown, Clarence Derrick, Fern Williams, Roger Keene, Jack Henderson, Walter Green, John Ball, Leroy Frizell, Louis Galloway, George Washington, Harry DeShields, Benjamin Beecham, Lee Owens, Leonard Howard, Julius Maben, Sylvester Matthews, Harry M. Phillips, Clarence Willis, Baker Price, Ed Woodson, Frederick L. Hamilton, Prentic Moten, Nathaniel Beckley, Andrew Day, Henry Holman, Elmer Williams, Harry McFarland, Hugh Walker, Rollie Norvell, Carl Mickey, Ed Beecham, Jake Phillips, Alvin Fitzgerald, Sol Bass, Robert Meyers, Eddie Bell, Ben Perkins, William Webster, Lindley Brown, Wesley Brown, John Q. Adams Jr., Henry Cross, John Lucas, Lawrence Zeno, Charles Killion, Clarence Keene, Harold Johnson, Silas Williams, Fildon Brown, Percy Brooks, Owen Hamilton, James Simpson, Clinton Baker, Roscoe Beecham, Jesse Stevenson, Richard Sims, Edward Davis, Robert Mallo, Wilber Cooperwood, John Mosby, James Johnson, Roy DeShields, Harry Jordan, Nathaniel Williamson, John Baker, Joe Berry, Ed DeShields, Humphrey Vaughn, Sanford Blanton, Abraham Poindexter, Shelby Wallace, Ans Martin and William Williams.

These men were treated to a celebration at the Alton YMCA before they departed for training, and Dick Wilder of the Labor Department at Alton Glass Works, said the draft of these African American soldiers had nearly crippled the plant's working by taking 32 skilled workers from it.

In September of that year, 13 more young African American soldiers left for Camp Grant. Those included: William Slaughter, Shelby Wallace, Ernest A. Jackson, Lawrence Fulbright, Joe Berry, Oscar Swanson, Wilbert F. Carter, Pete McElroy, Bryon Wm. Johnson, Elmer P. Williams, Clarence R. Graves, Leslie Bass and Charles C. Shaw.

Thanksgiving 1918 saw a letter written from “somewhere in France” from Robert Mosby of Company One in the 366 infantry to *The Alton Evening Telegraph*. In that letter, Mosby said all the men with him from Alton are “in good health,” saying he hoped to see “dear old Alton” the same as when he left it. He said he “had not been lucky enough to see any of the white boys from back home” while stationed in France (where he said “the French talk got his goat”).

Of the 31 African American soldiers who went off to war from Alton, 31 returned home safe and sound after arriving on the front lines in June of 1918, and seeing intense fighting with the French in August. Mosby, who wrote often to the newspaper said the

11 African Americans fighting alongside him had to “shoot and shoot fast to stay alive.” He also brought home a hand grenade to present to the mayor, but lamented at the fact he had to leave his trusty helmet in the trenches.

While many black soldiers fighting alongside the French were celebrated in Europe, many came home to the same racism and segregation they left in the United States. Some across the country were even murdered in riots stemming from white power groups refusing to grant them the same rights as white veterans returning from conflict, despite giving the same sacrifice.

In Alton, returning black soldiers were given a parade downtown in June 1919. The parade was headed by the White Hussar band and started at the intersection of Second and Ridge Streets before making its way into Downtown Alton.