

Cathay Williams, the only African-American female soldier

Cathay Williams or William Cathay (Cathey) Private, Thirty-eighth U.S. Infantry 1866-1868

When she was young, Cathay Williams was a house-girl. When the Civil War broke out, soldiers took her and she became a cook for General Sheridan and learned the ways of the army.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the government was fighting the Indians in the west. It withdrew most of its men and resources from the Indian wars, to concentrate on ending the rebellion. At the end of the Civil War, 186,000 black soldiers had participated in the war, with 38,000 killed in action. They were also afraid of the labor market being flooded with a new source of labor.

When the war ended, she wanted her independence so she wouldn't have to rely on relatives or friends to provide for her. Cathay reversed her name to William Cathay, and joined the 38th U.S. Infantry as a soldier among 100 men. She became the only documented Buffalo Soldier in history.

One advantage (and incentive) to joining the military was that it offered shelter, food, education, steady pay, medical attention, and a pension; and, it was better than civilian unemployment.

She managed to keep her gender a secret for two years as she fought alongside these men, eventually moving to Fort Cummings where troops fought against the Apaches.

When she had to see the military doctor, Williams' secret came out. Cathay was discharged due to her illegal enlistment, lost her pension, and moved west without challenging the decision to withhold her pension. Cathay Williams died at the age of 82.

<http://www.buffalosoldier.net/CathayWilliamsFemaleBuffaloSoldierWithDocuments.htm>

She was assigned to the 38th U.S. Infantry and traveled throughout the west with her unit. During her service, she was hospitalized at least five times, but no one discovered she was a female. After less than two years of service, Cathay was given a disability discharge but little is known of the exact medical reasons.

<http://www.goarmy.com/black-history/profiles-in-courage/profiles-williams.html>

She performed regular duties that others in the company did such as working garrison duty or guarding railroads. In an article about her in the St. Louis Times, Williams was described as "tall and powerfully built."

After serving almost two years, the post surgeon discovered she was a woman and she was discharged. She eventually worked her way out to Colorado hoping she would get a land bounty for her military service. It isn't likely that she ever received one since records indicate that her pension claims were denied in 1891.

http://www.womenscouncil.org/cd_web/Williams.html

Williams was born into slavery in Independence, Missouri in 1842. She worked as a house slave for William Johnson, a wealthy planter in Jefferson City, Missouri. She worked for him until his death. While serving the soldiers, she experienced military life first hand. She served Colonel Benton while he was in Little Rock, Arkansas. She also served General Sheridan and his staff. She was recruited to Washington to serve as a cook and laundress for them. While traveling with them, she witnessed the Shenandoah Valley raids in Virginia. After leaving Virginia, she traveled to Iowa and then went to St. Louis. Throughout her time working for the Army, she also had the opportunity to travel to New Orleans, Savannah, and Macon.

After the war, Williams wanted to be financially independent so she joined the army. In November of 1866, she enlisted as William Cathay in the Thirty-Eighth United States Infantry, Company A. She was able to do so because a medical examination was not required. Only her cousin and a friend were aware of her real identity.

Company A, arrived at Fort Cummings in New Mexico on October 1, 1867. At the fort, Williams and her company protected miners and traveling immigrants from Apache attack. While serving, there was insubordination among some of the troops, but Williams was not involved in the incidents.

In 1868, Williams grew tired of military life so she feigned illness. She was examined by the post surgeon who then discovered that she was a woman. She was discharged October 14, 1868.

<http://www.buffalosoldiers-lawtonftsill.org/williams.htm>

Williams was born in [Independence, Missouri](#) to a [free man of color](#), and a woman in bondage making her legal status also that of a slave. During her adolescence, Williams worked as a house servant on the Johnson plantation on the outskirts of [Jefferson City, Missouri](#).

At age seventeen, Williams was [impressed](#) into serving of 8th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment, commanded by Colonel [William Plummer Benton](#).

a three year engagement, passing herself off as a man. Only two others are known to have been privy to the deception, her cousin and a friend, both of whom were fellow soldiers in her regiment.

Shortly after her enlistment, Williams contracted smallpox, was hospitalized and rejoined her unit, which by then was posted in [New Mexico](#). Possibly due to the effects of smallpox, the New Mexico heat, or the cumulative effects of years of marching, her body began to show signs of strain. She was frequently hospitalized. The post surgeon finally discovered she was a woman and informed the post commander. She was discharged from the Army by her commanding officer, Captain Charles E. Clarke on October 14, 1868.

Williams went to work as a cook at [Fort Union, New Mexico](#), and later moved to [Pueblo, Colorado](#). Williams married, but it ended disastrously when her husband stole her money and a team of horses. Williams had him arrested. She next moved to [Trinidad, Colorado](#), where she made her living as a seamstress. She may also have owned a boarding house. It was at this time that Williams' story first became public. A reporter from St. Louis heard rumors of a female African-American who had served in the army, and came to interview her. Her life and military service narrative was published in *The St. Louis Daily Times* on 2 January 1876.

In September 1891, a doctor employed by the [Pension Bureau](#) examined Williams. Despite the fact that she suffered from [neuralgia](#) and [diabetes](#), had had all her toes amputated, and could only walk with a crutch, the doctor decided she did not qualify for disability payments. Her application was rejected.

The exact date of Williams' death is unknown, but it is assumed she died shortly after being denied a pension, probably sometime in 1892. Her simple grave marker would have been made of wood and deteriorated long ago. Thus her final resting place is now unknown.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathay_Williams