

The Veteran Cathay Williams: Differentiated Text

Read the text.

Introduction

Cathay Williams had many "firsts" in her lifetime. As far as we know, she was the first African American woman to secretly join the United States Army. She joined the military on November 15, 1866. Females were still not allowed to enter the Armed Forces at that time. So, she joined under the fake name William Cathay. She was the first and only woman to fight in the unit nicknamed the Buffalo Soldiers.



Life Before the Civil War

Born in Missouri in 1842, Williams was a slave until the Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861. During the war, slaves were taken and forced to work for the military as support staff. They were nurses or cooks. Williams worked as a cook and washerwoman. She marched with the Army during the Civil War. After the Civil War, she was no longer a slave. She had to find out a way to get money to eat and live.

Life in Service

Joining the Army as a soldier seemed like a good job for Williams. In 1866, after the Civil War ended, a new law started the first units of African American male soldiers in the U.S. Army during peacetime. People called these units the Buffalo Soldiers. These soldiers had great riding skills and participated in long, hard marches. The Buffalo Soldiers participated in wars and peacetime activities in the Great Plains. This new law opened the door for Williams to pretend to be a man and join the Army.

Soon after she joined the military as William Cathay, she got smallpox. Smallpox was a common viral disease at the time. During her many times in hospitals, no one discovered she was female. Then she got sick in New Mexico. In Fort Bayard, the doctor who examined Williams discovered her secret. Once her commanding officer learned she was female, she exited the military service. After her discharge, she stayed in New Mexico and worked odd jobs cooking, doing laundry, and sewing clothes.

Effect on the Military

While Cathay Williams had a lot of "firsts" in her life, she was more than those facts. She was a gutsy woman. She served her country and did all she could to survive after slavery. After Congress passed a law called the Women's Armed Services Integration Act in June 12, 1948, women could finally join the military. They could be full-time service members.

Women like Cathay Williams helped pave the way for future female heroes to serve their country too. Even though Williams served in the Army under a fake name, she is still a person who served in the military and is worthy of appreciation for her service.

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Answer the questions using evidence or quotes from the text.

Sample Answers (Student answers will vary)

1. What obstacle(s) did Cathay Williams face?

Some challenges she faced are:

- Slavery
- Civil war experience
- Being a female and having to support herself
- Getting sick often due to the long marches
- Hiding her identity as a woman

2. Why is the obstacle(s) important in understanding this person's story?

Her most significant challenge was being a female and having to support herself. These challenges are what make her such a noteworthy historical figure. She was a female, former slave who had to figure out a way to support herself after the Civil War. She hid her identity for years while trying to serve her country.

3. Why is it important to know Williams was a female service member in 1866?

In 1866, women were not allowed to serve as military members. She broke the rules and disguised herself to be able to join the military. No one suspected her until she became sick, so she was successfully able to blend in and do the same work as her male counterparts.

4. The author wrote this article most likely to —

inform readers about a forgotten female veteran who may have helped pave the way for future female soldiers.

5. Connect this text to something you have read recently.

Student answers will vary.

Challenge: Research other females who disguised themselves as men in order to be able to serve in the military. How are their stories similar or different from Cathay Williams' story?

Student answers will vary. Other female service members may include Deborah Sampson Gannett and Malinda Blalock.