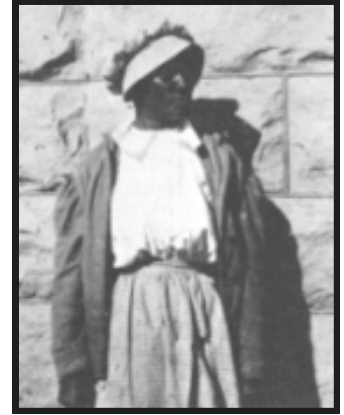


The Veteran Cathay Williams

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 when she enlisted on November 15, 1866. Since females were still not allowed to enter the Armed Forces at that time, 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, captured slaves were forced to work for the military as support staff, like nurses and cooks. Therefore, Williams worked as a cook and washerwoman. She marched with the infantry during the Civil War. After the Civil War, she was no longer a slave. She had to support herself financially.

Life in Service

Joining the Army as a soldier seemed like a good line of work for Williams. In 1866, soon after the Civil War ended, a new law started the first peacetime units of African American male soldiers in the U.S. Army. These units would later be called 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 enlisted as William Cathay, she contracted smallpox, which was a common viral disease at the time. During multiple hospitalizations, no one discovered she was female until she got sick in New Mexico. The surgeon located in Fort Bayard discovered her secret. Once her commanding officer learned she was female, she was honorably discharged due to a disability. After her discharge in New Mexico, she worked odd jobs as a cook, laundress, and seamstress in that same state.

Impact in 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 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, with their competent service, helped pave the way for future female heroes to serve their country as well. Even though Williams served in the Army under a fake name, she is still a veteran worthy of gratitude for her service.



Name: _____

Date: _____

Answer the questions using evidence or quotes from the text.

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

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

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

4. The author wrote this article most likely to —

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

6. 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?
