

ALONE IN THE PROFESSION OF ARMS:  
AMERICA'S FIRST THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN WEST POINT GRADUATES

A Thesis

by

JEREMY WAYNE JAMES

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2007

Major Subject: History

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## ABSTRACT

Alone in the Profession of Arms:

America's First Three African American West Point Graduates. (August 2007)

Jeremy Wayne James, B.S., United States Military Academy

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Following Emancipation, many African Americans came to view military service as a crucial step toward the greater acceptance of blacks into American society and, potentially, toward complete citizenship. Military service demonstrated that the African American community was prepared to take on all of the responsibilities associated with full citizenship and verified that blacks were fully capable of serving as Regular Army soldiers, a role that had historically been reserved for white Americans alone.

In 1866 Congress opened the ranks of the Regular Army to African Americans with the creation of four all-black regiments. These units were manned entirely by black enlisted men under the command of white officers. Although not legally confined to the enlisted ranks, African Americans were not expected or encouraged to pursue positions as commissioned officers. Many white Americans, including senior military and political leaders, did not believe that blacks possessed the competencies required to serve effectively as military commanders.

In the late nineteenth century three exceptional African American men successfully challenged this notion. Henry Flipper, John Alexander and Charles Young became the first three black graduates of the U.S. Military Academy and the first black

men to earn commissions as line officers in the Regular Army. Each of these talented men achieved success where countless others before them had failed.

The middle class values and Protestant work ethic championed by their parents in their childhood homes shaped the way that Flipper, Alexander and Young viewed social issues and provided them with the greatest motivation to pursue careers in the profession of arms. While each of them earned the grudging respect of some of their white contemporaries, in the eyes of many, their race overshadowed their professional successes and weighed heavily upon any assessment or characterization of their service. Despite these challenges, each of these men served as role models for aspiring black youths and their successes helped to instill a sense of pride within other members of their race. These men remain important figures in African American history and continue to be a source of inspiration for many, both inside and outside of the black community.

Dedicated to my wife, Robyn,  
and to my parents, Beth and Gary

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER	
I    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II   THE VIEW FROM WITHIN.....	15
Henry Ossian Flipper.....	16
John Hanks Alexander.....	27
Charles Young.....	35
III  THE VIEW FROM OUTSIDE.....	51
IV   THE VIEW FROM THE BLACK COMMUNITY.....	97
V    CONCLUSION.....	123
REFERENCES.....	133
APPENDIX A.....	147
APPENDIX B.....	148
APPENDIX C.....	149
VITA.....	150

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A study conducted by the Office of Army Demographics in 2005 illustrated that the United States Army was one of the nation's most racially diverse and fully integrated institutions. The report found that in fiscal year 2005 African Americans made up roughly 22 percent of the U. S. Army's total force and were represented in both the enlisted ranks as well as in the officer corps in greater proportion than they were in the United States population as a whole.<sup>1</sup> All branches and career fields within the army remain open to every service member regardless of the color of their skin, and as an institution "the Army has no peer in its broad record of promotions of blacks to positions of influence."<sup>2</sup> The fact that African Americans are represented at every rank from private through general officer is a testament to the success of the U. S. Army's integration efforts, particularly those adopted since 1960.

The acceptance of African Americans as equal members of the American profession of arms, however, is the product of years of institutional change that began in 1948 when President Harry S. Truman mandated the desegregation of the nation's Armed Forces by executive decree. In fact, for much of American history blacks had been either excluded from military service entirely or utilized only when military necessity or political pressures dictated that they be included. Although African Americans established a proud, albeit limited, record of military service to the nation

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<sup>1</sup>This thesis follows the style and format of *The Journal of Military History*.

that dated back to the War for Independence, they were not utilized in large numbers for army service until the Civil War. During that conflict approximately 186,000 black troops served in the Union Army, and almost 37,000 of them gave their lives for the Union cause.<sup>3</sup> In recognition of their faithful service to the nation, Congress reorganized the Regular Army in the years following the Civil War and made provisions to include four new all-black regiments—the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments (Colored) and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments (Colored).<sup>4</sup> These units consisted entirely of black enlisted men and noncommissioned officers almost exclusively under the command of white officers.

Following Emancipation in 1863 many African Americans and their leaders came to view military service as a crucial step toward the greater acceptance of blacks into American society and, potentially, toward complete citizenship. Black military service demonstrated that the African American community was prepared to take on all of the responsibilities associated with full citizenship. It also demonstrated that blacks were fully capable of serving as Regular Army soldiers, a role that had historically been reserved for white Americans alone. In the late nineteenth century, in particular, colored regiments served with distinction throughout the American West where they were instrumental in subjugating Indians and providing security to the sparsely populated frontier. By the end of the nineteenth century most of the Army's senior leaders had either served with colored regiments in some capacity or were aware of their bravery and fighting abilities.



In the decades that followed the Army's post-Civil War reorganization, the existence of all-black regiments gradually became accepted both inside and outside of the military. Within these units, however, blacks remained confined to the enlisted ranks. Many Anglo-Americans, including most senior officers, believed that blacks, as a race, were not far enough removed from primitiveness and slavery to serve competently in positions of leadership, and that the success enjoyed by colored regiments was a result of the close supervision and scrutiny of an all-white officer corps. For example, Lieutenant General Nelson A. Miles, who served as Commanding General of the United States Army from 1895 until 1903, gave voice to the dominant opinion of white officers when he wrote that "ages of slavery had reduced [the black race] to the lowest ebb of manhood." Because of this degradation Miles contended that blacks still had "many generations of growth and development" before they could achieve the same standing as the whites "who now dominate the thought, the inventive genius, the military prowess, and the commercial enterprise of the world."<sup>5</sup>

Miles' racial views were not extreme for the time period in which he lived, and his words reflected the conventional wisdom of nineteenth century natural and social sciences. While some, like Miles, contended that centuries of slavery had socially degraded African Americans and prevented them from achieving the same level of cultural refinement as whites, others argued that physiological and genetic differences between the races meant that blacks were inferior to whites. Historian Ronald T. Takaki describes how many mainstream scholars in the nineteenth century claimed to possess "scientific evidence of black intellectual inferiority" and this ideology "soon found [its]

way into the public consciousness and political rhetoric.” To many in white America, blacks literally did not possess the temperament or the innate abilities required to serve effectively as Regular Army officers.<sup>6</sup>

Black leaders challenged this notion, and a number of talented young African American men actively sought to disprove it. The United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, was the primary source of commissioned officers for the Regular Army in the nineteenth century, and during Reconstruction and the post-Reconstruction era the institution was briefly opened to a number of talented African Americans. Between 1870 and 1889 twenty-two young black men received appointments to the Academy, but only twelve of them passed the entrance exams and were admitted into West Point.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the Academy’s strict disciplinary standards and rigorous engineering-focused academic program, these young men had to endure four years of almost total social ostracism as well as countless other challenges and difficulties heaped upon them because of their race.

Of the twelve black cadets admitted to West Point only three graduated and received commissions as Regular Army officers. Through their service, Henry O. Flipper, class of 1877; John H. Alexander, class of 1887; and Charles Young, class of 1889, sought to disprove the notion that African Americans were unfit for service as Regular Army officers. Although these three men shared the distinction, and the stigma, of being the only black commissioned line officers in the Regular Army during the late nineteenth century, their professional careers differed markedly in both length and character of service.<sup>8</sup> A comparative study of their lives and professional careers reveals

much about the racial climate that existed in America and in the Army in the late nineteenth century as well as the importance that the black community placed upon successful military service.

While no previous studies have focused collectively on the military careers of these three men, a number of works examine various aspects of the African American military experience. Bernard C. Nalty's *Strength for the Fight* presents an informative account of the evolution of black military service from the colonial era through the mid-1980s. Nalty's broad work offers background information that is vital to any analysis of the African American military experience. William H. Leckie's *The Buffalo Soldiers* provides a much more narrowly focused examination of black cavalry units in the American West. Leckie's book offers a useful overview of the all-black 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments (Colored) as well as an excellent narrative account of their combat records during the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century. An even more detailed account of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (Colored) is presented by Charles L. Kenner in *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898*. Both John H. Alexander and Charles Young served in this regiment, and Kenner provides a brief but informative account of their service. Willard B. Gatewood's *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903* analyzes an important aspect of nineteenth century African American military service. Gatewood examines the conflicting opinions that formed within the black community as a result of America's expansionist foreign policies at the turn of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Other historians have specifically studied the obstacles and trials that faced African Americans in their attempts to earn commissions and serve as Regular Army officers. Notable is Marvin E. Fletcher's *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army, 1891-1917*. Concentrating on the years between the end of the Indian Wars and World War I, Fletcher presents an especially rich and detailed account of this time period. Fletcher makes a compelling argument that the transformation that took place within the Army during these years combined with the changing racial attitudes of the American public to negatively influence the treatment of black soldiers and effectively limit their opportunities within the Army.<sup>10</sup>

Gerald W. Patton's *War and Race: The Black Officer in the American Military, 1915-1941* studies how racial attitudes during these years largely prevented black men from receiving Regular Army commissions. Patton also delineates how racism often negatively affected the careers of those African Americans that did serve as either volunteer or Regular Army officers. While this work does not discuss the careers of Flipper, Alexander or Young in detail, it presents an informative description of the trials facing prospective African American army officers in the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

There are also a number of biographical works that treat Flipper, Alexander and Young individually and provide insight into their personal and professional lives. One of the most thorough and critical examinations of Flipper's early life and military career can be found in a dissertation offered by Theodore Harris, titled "Henry Ossian Flipper, The First Negro Graduate of West Point." Harris extensively analyzes Flipper's attitudes concerning race and class in the late nineteenth century and examines how the

environment in which he was raised influenced his beliefs. Another biography is Jane Eppinga's *Henry Ossian Flipper*. While Eppinga offers a detailed account of Flipper's life, in places it is lacking in critical analysis and arguably gives too much weight to Flipper's own explanation of events, particularly with regard to his court-martial in 1881. Unlike most previous biographers, Eppinga focuses a significant portion of her analysis upon Flipper's successes as a professional engineer and government employee in the decades that followed his dismissal from military service. Two other works that deal specifically with Flipper's court-martial and his subsequent dismissal from service are *Flipper's Dismissal* by Barry C. Johnson and *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry Flipper* by Charles M. Robinson. Each of these works present a detailed account and thorough analysis of the events and controversies surrounding the court-martial, but they are limited in scope and are not intended to analyze Flipper's status in the black community and his military career.<sup>12</sup>

The limited amount of primary source material available for John H. Alexander has discouraged a full-length biography. He died unexpectedly early in his career and did not leave behind a significant amount of correspondence or any memoirs. This problem is compounded by the fact that there is no central repository for the few archival materials that do exist for this officer.<sup>13</sup> Despite these limitations, an extensively researched article by Willard Gatewood, "John Hanks Alexander of Arkansas: Second Black Graduate of West Point," provides a useful overview of this officer's background, life, and career.<sup>14</sup>

Of these three exceptional officers, Charles Young has been examined the most extensively. Two biographical works about Young, *For Race and Country* by David P. Kilroy and *Black Cadet in a White Bastion* by Brian Shellum, illuminate the life and accomplishments of West Point's third African American graduate. Kilroy's work is a full-length biography that examines Young's life and career in their entirety. It offers useful insight into Young's outlook on his military service as well as his role in advancing the cause of African Americans. *Black Cadet in a White Bastion*, on the other hand, is much more limited in scope and deals specifically with Young's experiences at the Military Academy. While Shellum's work provides useful background information about Charles Young, it provides little insight into his long military career after graduation.<sup>15</sup>

One study deals in a broader way with blacks admitted as cadets to the U. S. Military Academy. Tom Carhart's doctoral dissertation, "African American West Pointers During the Nineteenth Century," analyzes the experiences of the twelve black cadets that attended the Academy during this time period. Paying particular attention to the four African American cadets that lasted more than a semester at West Point, Carhart's work attempts to highlight the "forces that confronted African Americans generally after emancipation" by examining the experiences of black cadets at the Military Academy from the entrance of the first black cadets in 1870 through the end of the century.<sup>16</sup> Carhart's dissertation is insightful and informative, but it concentrates primarily on the cadet experiences of these individuals and, with the exception of

Flipper's court-martial, provides only a brief summary of the military careers of the three that made it to graduation.

This thesis provides a comparative analysis of the military careers of the first three African American graduates of the U. S. Military Academy. The approach taken in this thesis encompasses three basic perspectives. The first is to view the officers' experiences through the eyes of Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander and Charles Young themselves. Although their personal views are not taken entirely at face value, it is beneficial to know what their individual attitudes were concerning race and class in the late nineteenth century and what factors likely contributed to their outlooks. Published and unpublished documents written by these three men as well as interviews conducted by contemporary journalists illuminate their perspectives with the regard to these subjects. An examination of the early lives of these three men indicates that striking similarities existed in their upbringings and family lives. Their backgrounds greatly influenced their overall attitudes concerning racial and social issues and shaped the way that these men envisioned themselves, both as army officers as well as leaders within the African American community.

The white officers that served with Flipper, Alexander and Young offer a second perspective. Officer evaluation reports represent an important tool in gaining insight into the professional assessments and opinions of their superior officers. Located in Record Group 94 at the National Archives, these documents highlight the achievements and failures of these black officers and also include their commanding officers' judgments of their potential for further service. Newspaper editorials and journal articles

also help to illuminate how other officers viewed these men and their capacities to serve as army leaders. Additionally, journals, correspondence, and published memoirs written by these black officers shed light upon their treatment and acceptance by their fellow, superior, and subordinate officers.

The third perspective examined in this thesis is that of the black community. Flipper, Alexander and Young carried the hopes and dreams of countless African Americans with them throughout their military careers. As the only representatives of their race in the army's officer corps during the late nineteenth century, their successes and failures had ramifications beyond their own professional careers and personal lives. While each of these three men initially served as role models for their race, Flipper's court-martial and Alexander's premature death prevented them from attaining the leadership status that Young eventually enjoyed within the black community. This work examines the parallels that existed between the professional careers of these men and the evolving situation of America's black population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

By analyzing journal and newspaper articles, memoirs, correspondence, speeches, interviews, and other sources, this thesis contends that the middle class values and protestant work ethic championed by their parents in their childhood homes shaped the way that Flipper, Alexander and Young viewed social issues and provided them with the greatest motivation to pursue careers in the profession of arms. While each of them earned the grudging respect of some of their white contemporaries, in the eyes of many, their race overshadowed their professional successes and weighed heavily upon any



assessment or characterization of their service. Despite these challenges, each of these men served as role models for aspiring black youths and their successes helped to instill a sense of pride within other members of their race. These men remain important figures in African American history and continue to be a source of inspiration for many, both inside and outside of the black community.

## Notes

1. Betty D. Maxfield, *Army Profile, FY 05* [online], p. 6, available from <http://www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/demographics/FY05%20Army%20Profile.pdf>; internet; accessed on 13 September 2006.
2. “Racial Integration: What America’s Universities Might Learn From the Success of the United States Army,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 31 (Spring 2001): 35.
3. Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 43; Gerald W. Patton, *War and Race: The Black Officer in the American Military, 1915-1941* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 4.
4. The initial reorganization in 1866 made provisions for six all black regiments—four infantry (38<sup>th</sup>, 39<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup>, and 41<sup>st</sup>) and two cavalry (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>). In 1869 the 38<sup>th</sup>, 39<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiments (Colored) were consolidated to form the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments (Colored) while the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments (Colored) maintained their original unit designations. Therefore, after 1869 there were only four black regiments in the Regular Army. See Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 51.
5. “U.S. Army Commanding Generals” [online], available from <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/faq/CGARMY.htm>; internet; accessed 22 September 2006; Nelson A. Miles, 05 August 1899, quoted in Theophilus G. Steward, *The Colored Regulars in the United States Army 1904* (Philadelphia: A. M. E. Book Concern, 1904; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 5-6.
6. Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 113. In the nineteenth century a number of pseudo-scientific studies claimed to demonstrate the inherent inferiority of African Americans. Franz Boas, considered to be the Father of American Anthropology, discredited many of these theories in the early twentieth century with the publication of *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911). Although some biological and genetic differences do exist between different groups of people, social scientists now consider race to be a social construction because racial identification is often not based solely upon biology or simple ancestry. In fact, modern biological anthropologists argue that there is as much variation within each racial category as there is between them while modern cultural anthropologists contend that racial categories vary across cultures. For an explanation of race as a social construction see Conrad Kottak and Kathryn Kozaitis, *On Being Different: Diversity and Multiculturalism in the North American Mainstream* (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), 84-101. Also see Donal E. Muir, “Race: The Mythic

Root of Racism,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Concept of “Race” in Natural and Social Sciences*, ed. E. Nathaniel Gates (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.: 1997), 93-104. For modern anthropological views of race see “American Anthropological Association Statement on ‘Race,’ 17 May 1998 [online],” available from <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>; internet; accessed 3 May 2007. For a general history of the evolution of anthropological theory see Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), especially 80-107. For the purpose of this thesis, the terms “black” and “African American” will be used to denote all individuals that have African ancestry, regardless of their skin color, and identify themselves as members of the black community. It is important to note, though, that racial labels have changed over time. As some of the quoted materials demonstrate, both black and white Americans in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century used the terms “colored” and “negro” to describe individuals with African ancestry.

7. Monroe L. Billington, *New Mexico’s Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 190.

8. In all, eight African Americans received commissions between 1866 and 1898. However, all of them except for Flipper, Alexander and Young served as chaplains. Unlike the three black West Point graduates mentioned above, chaplains could not command combat units, and therefore could not be placed in command of white officers. See Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 226-27. Two former Regular Army enlisted men, John E. Green and Benjamin O. Davis (the nation’s first black general officer), also became commissioned officers through competitive examination in 1901. See Marvin E. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army, 1891-1917* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 74.

9. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military*; William H. Leckie and Shirley A. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Black Cavalry in the West*, revised edition (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2003); Charles L. Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898: Black and White Together* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Willard B. Gatewood, *Black Americans and the White Man’s Burden, 1898-1903* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), x.

10. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, 27-29.

11. Patton, *War and Race*.

12. Theodore D. Harris, "Henry Ossian Flipper, The First Negro Graduate of West Point" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1971); Jane Eppinga, *Henry Ossian Flipper, West Point's First Black Graduate* (Plano, Tex.: Republic of Texas Press, 1996); Barry C. Johnson, *Flipper's Dismissal: The Ruin of Lt. Henry O. Flipper, U.S.A., First Coloured Graduate of West Point* (London: privately printed, 1980); Charles M. Robinson, *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry Flipper* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, 1994).

13. The National Archives once maintained a large military personnel file for John H. Alexander (file number 3279 ACP 1887). This collection of documents, however, was found to be missing from its proper location on 29 December 1981 and has not yet been relocated and returned. See letter to Mrs. C. M. T. Kirkman of Helena, Arkansas from Navy and Old Army Branch archivist Maida H. Loescher. This letter, dated 29 December 1981, is located in the place of 3279 ACP 1887, Letters Received by the Appointment, Commission, and Personal Branch, Adjutant General's Office, 1871-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

14. Willard B. Gatewood, "John Hanks Alexander of Arkansas: Second Black Graduate of West Point," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41:2 (1982): 103-28.

15. David P. Kilroy, *For Race and Country: The Life and Career of Colonel Charles Young* (Westport: Praeger, 2003); Brian G. Shellum, *Black Cadet in a White Bastion: Charles Young at West Point* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

16. Thomas M. Carhart, "African American West Pointers During the Nineteenth Century," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1998), vii.

## CHAPTER II

### THE VIEW FROM WITHIN

For centuries African Americans have struggled for equality in a world dominated by whites. In its collective struggle against the bonds imposed by racism the African American community achieved many victories but also suffered a number of setbacks. The lives and military careers of the first three African American graduates of the U.S. Military Academy represent both ends of this spectrum. Henry Ossian Flipper, John Hanks Alexander, and Charles Young demonstrated that blacks could, in fact, compete successfully in white-dominated institutions such as West Point, and, to many, their graduations confirmed the inherent equality and innate ability of blacks. The path that these men blazed through the Academy was an exceedingly difficult one, requiring each of them to endure countless trials and personal indignities. To varying degrees, many of these racially based difficulties followed them into their careers as commissioned officers in the Regular Army.

What motivated these three men to choose a career in the profession of arms during the racially charged late nineteenth century? To answer this question one must first understand their personal values as well as their individual attitudes concerning race and class. This chapter examines how these three officers viewed American society in the late nineteenth century and how their outlooks may have informed their decision to choose an army career. The middle class values and protestant work ethic championed by their parents in their childhood homes shaped the way that they viewed social issues

and provided them with the greatest motivation to attend West Point in pursuit of a military career.

### Henry Ossian Flipper

The early life of Henry O. Flipper is a remarkable example of the great heights that can be achieved through personal courage and perseverance. Born into slavery in Thomasville, Georgia, in 1856, Henry was the eldest of the five sons of Festus and Isabella Flipper. Henry and his family moved to Atlanta in 1859 where his father became a successful shoemaker and a respected member of the black community. The Flipper family remained in Atlanta throughout the rest of Henry's childhood, except for a brief period of time during the Civil War when the Union army occupied the city. In 1873 seventeen-year-old Flipper was granted an appointment to West Point by James Crawford Freeman, a white "scalawag" Republican congressman from Georgia's fifth district.<sup>1</sup> Although he was the sixth African American to receive an appointment to the Academy, he became the first to graduate from the institution in 1877.<sup>2</sup> Upon graduating he became the first African American to obtain a Regular Army commission and the only black officer in an otherwise all-white officer corps.

Flipper lived longer and published more than the other two African American men that successfully negotiated the challenges and pitfalls of West Point in the late nineteenth century. When he died in 1940 at the age of eighty-four, he left behind two sets of memoirs as well as a small number of technical and historical pamphlets and articles. These published works outline his beliefs and clarify his views on social issues.

His first publication, *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, primarily analyzes the trials and tribulations that he endured while at the Academy. Compiled, edited and published during his first year of active commissioned service, this work also presents useful biographical data and other details concerning his life prior to his appointment to the U.S. Military Academy. The most important feature of this book is that it provides a unique insight into his views of American society. Much of the book consists of contemporary newspaper articles published during his time at West Point and shortly after his graduation. The extensive commentary that he offered in response to these articles clarified his outlook on race, class, and his own role as a trailblazer and leader within the black community.

A second set of memoirs, written in 1916, recounts Flipper's military and civilian experiences throughout the American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historian Theodore Harris later discovered these unpublished memoirs and included them in a larger compilation of Flipper's papers, which he published in 1963 under the title *Negro Frontiersman*.<sup>3</sup> While this work provides only limited insight into the ideals that initially attracted Flipper to military service and motivated him during his tenure as a Regular Army officer, it offers a detailed narrative account of his military service in the West. Because these memoirs were written well over thirty years after his dismissal from service, some of his recollections appear to be somewhat distorted, particularly with regard to the events surrounding his court-martial. He presented a number of arguments and accusations against some of his fellow officers that either are not supported by the historical record or cannot otherwise be substantiated.

The time period in which Flipper grew up certainly influenced his outlook on societal issues. As a former slave he observed first hand the South's forced transformation into a free society following the Civil War. Coming of age in the postwar years, he shared with other members of his race the hope offered by Reconstruction as well as the despair that accompanied that program's ultimate failure in the South. By the late nineteenth century, American society in general and the South in particular continued to struggle with the social and political ramifications associated with a sizable, free black population.

Deep-rooted racial prejudice continued to infuse much of the nation's populace in the decades that followed the Civil War, and attempts by black Americans to exercise their rights under the Constitution were often met with violence. Flipper was well aware of the terror tactics that were often employed by extremist groups in the South to ensure that political power remained in the hands of the white majority. For this reason he made sure that his trip to West Point in 1873 to begin his cadet career was a quiet affair, even declining an offer by an Atlanta newspaper to print a brief biographical sketch of him in recognition of his notable achievement. In *The Colored Cadet at West Point* he explained that "my chief reason for objecting was merely this: I feared some evil might befall me while passing through Georgia *en route* for West Point, if too great a knowledge ... should precede me."<sup>4</sup>

In Flipper's view, the widespread racial prejudice within the United States was "due solely to non-education and its effects." However, he also maintained that Americans had the right to their own personal ideas and opinions and felt that federal



and state governments possessed neither the authority nor the ability to eradicate prejudice through legislation. “We in free America,” he argued, “... would not be justified in forcing [people] to renounce their views or beliefs on race and color any more than those on religion.” A person’s decision to base their judgments upon skin color alone may be misguided in his view, but he considered it to be an individual’s right to make such assessments.<sup>5</sup>

Like many in the late nineteenth century black community, Flipper held somewhat contradictory views concerning race. Although he considered racial prejudice to be “an unchristian opinion or fancy,” he did place some measure of importance upon skin color.<sup>6</sup> In *The Colored Cadet* he made a special point to assure his readers that he was not a “little bow-legged *grif* of the most darkly coppery hue” as one obviously prejudiced New Orleans newspaper editor reported.<sup>7</sup> He endorsed, instead, a description offered by the *Hudson River Chronicle* that reported he “evidently has a large strain of white blood in his veins. He stands six feet, is well proportioned, has a keen, quick eye, a gentlemanly address, and a soldierly bearing.”<sup>8</sup> If Flipper truly placed no importance at all on skin color he likely would not have gone out of his way to ensure that his audience understood that he was “a bright mulatto” rather than a dark-skinned black man.<sup>9</sup>

This attitude about skin color was not uncommon among African Americans in the late nineteenth century. The upper stratum of many urban black communities was made up of ex-slaves of mixed ancestry. A premium was often placed upon light skin color and was frequently viewed as a criterion for membership within the black upper

class. This was certainly the case in Atlanta during the time of Flipper's youth. He and his family were considered members of Atlanta's black elite and this likely compelled him to defend his light skin color in his memoirs.<sup>10</sup>

Despite his somewhat contradictory views with regard to race, Flipper believed that racial prejudice could be undermined, and even potentially overcome, through perseverance and positive personal example. A self-reliant individual who maintained his resolve in the face of adversity and continually demonstrated his worth through good works and gentlemanly conduct earned the respect of others. In this way the fallacies that underlay racial stereotypes could be revealed and the artificial barriers between the races could be broken down. The following passage offers some insight into the methods that Flipper personally employed to deal with racial prejudice.

We can sometimes, by so living that those who differ from us in opinion respecting any thing can find no fault with us or our creed, influence them to a just consideration of our views, and perhaps persuade them unconsciously to adopt our way of thinking. And just so it is, I think, with prejudice. There is a certain dignity in enduring it which always evokes praise from those who indulge it, and also often discovers to them their error and its injustice.<sup>11</sup>

Flipper likely learned this coping technique from his parents. Despite their status as slaves, his mother and father were highly regarded by the local white population in Thomasville, Georgia, where they lived and worked prior to 1859. A newspaper article

published after Flipper's appointment to West Point declared that his father, Festus, "was the best bootmaker we ever knew" and contended that his "character and deportment were ever those of a sensible, unassuming, gentlemanly white man." His wife, Isabella, also "bore a character equal to that of her husband."<sup>12</sup>

Festus Flipper also evinced what one of Henry's biographers called a "remarkable streak of rugged individualism and zeal for enterprise." A highly skilled shoemaker and carriage trimmer, he earned a reputation for producing high quality work for his white customers. Through a combination of his owner's lenient policies and his own hard work, he acquired a significant measure of financial independence despite his bondage. When his owner prepared to transfer his estate from Thomasville to Atlanta in 1859, Festus faced the possibility of being separated from his family. Flipper and his mother were the property of a different individual and Festus's master did not have the money to purchase them prior to the move. To keep his family together Festus used his own money to buy his wife and son for his master. This example of independence and self-reliance likely left a lasting impression upon his young son.<sup>13</sup>

Although Henry Flipper disdained racial prejudice, he was certainly not a social leveler. "There are different orders or classes of men in every civilized community" he argued, and while these groups may be "politically equal, equal in that they are free men and citizens and have all the rights belonging to such station ... there can be no social equality, for they have nothing socially in common." In Flipper's view, social equality must be the result of shared interests and beliefs, what he called a "natural, and perhaps gradual, outgrowth of a similarity of instincts and qualities" held between individuals

within the same social class. Without these common bonds to unite them, no equality of social status could exist between the various groups.<sup>14</sup>

Flipper contended that innately talented men could be distinguished from the rest of society and that their potential for social advancement could be gauged using substantive and measurable qualities. Morality, intellect and level of education, in his view, were the proper indicators that should be used to establish an individual's place within society. "I have observed that colored men of character and intellectual ability have been treated as men should be by all," he asserts in *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, and that with regard to social class "want of education, want of the proof of equality of intellect, is the obstacle, and not color." Intelligence, in Flipper's estimation, was probably the single most important attribute that a man could possess, and only through education could an individual's intelligence be tested and proven.<sup>15</sup>

He learned the importance of education at a young age. His formal education began during the Civil War under the tutelage of John F. Quarles, who used a Confederate reprint of Webster's *Blueback Speller* to instruct young Flipper in the first of what he called the "three mysterious R's...reading 'riting and 'rithmetic." Although only a slave mechanic at the time of his association with Flipper, Quarles later earned a law degree from Westminster College in Pennsylvania, became the first black man admitted to the Georgia State Bar, and served as the U.S. Consul at Port Mahon and Malaga, Spain.<sup>16</sup>

With the constant encouragement of his mother, Flipper's education continued in the postwar years through a variety of venues, including American Missionary

Association schools and Atlanta University.<sup>17</sup> After his admission into West Point he excelled academically, despite four years of nearly total social ostracism at the hands of his classmates. He graduated fiftieth out of a class of seventy-seven, thereby demonstrating that he possessed both the intellectual capacity and the military prowess required for service as a Regular Army officer.<sup>18</sup> His intellect, verified through his education at the Military Academy, made him, in his view, the social equal of those with whom he worked and associated. “I have this right to social equality,” he argued, “for I and those to whom I claim to be equal are similarly educated. We have much in common, and this fact alone creates my right to social and equal recognition.”<sup>19</sup> In some ways, his choice to attend West Point and to pursue a military career appears to have been, at least in part, an effort to elevate himself to a higher social status.

While he conceded that many African Americans lacked the mental and moral refinement required for high social status, he asserted that this was due almost entirely to their lack of education. He adamantly rejected the idea that skin color alone could serve as an accurate gauge of social class.<sup>20</sup> “But it is color, they say, color only, which determines how the negro must be treated. Color is his misfortune, and his treatment must be his misfortune also. Mistaken idea! [sic] and one of which we should speedily rid ourselves. It may be color in some cases, but in the great majority of instances it is mental and moral condition. Little or no education, little moral refinement, and all their repulsive consequences will never be accepted as equals of education, intellectual or moral.” Flipper concluded that “color is absolutely nothing in consideration of the

question, unless we mean by it not color of skin, but color of character, and I fancy we can find considerable color there.”<sup>21</sup>

His contention that social equality could, in essence, be earned through intellectual and academic achievements was predicated upon the assumption that all men, regardless of color, should be given equal opportunities and access to institutions and programs that allowed them to demonstrate their worth and ability to advance socially. The trend in late nineteenth century America, though, was moving toward a separation of the races rather than increased equality of opportunity. Lawmakers throughout the South enacted statutes that instituted a forced, legal separation between the races and effectively limited the rights of black Americans. These so-called “Jim Crow” laws were meant to disenfranchise blacks and to ensure white hegemony in the South. According to Flipper this created a situation where “whites and blacks may have equal rights, and yet be entirely independent, or estranged from each other.” He counseled that “the two races cannot live in the same country, under the same laws as they now do, and yet be absolutely independent of each other. There must, there should, and there will be a mutual dependence, and any thing that tends to create independence, while it is thus manifestly impossible, can engender strife alone between them.” And anything that “increases their knowledge and appreciation of fellowship and its positive importance, must necessarily tend to remove all prejudices, and all ill-feelings, and bring the two races, and indeed the world, nearer that degree of perfection to which all things show us it is approaching.” Because of this, Flipper argued that he wanted “identical rights, for equal rights may not be sufficient.”<sup>22</sup>

When *The Colored Cadet at West Point* was published in 1878, the transformation of the South's social structure was already underway. Instead of a policy of racial inclusion and equality of opportunity, the Redeemer governments that came to power across the South in the post-Reconstruction era actively sought to exclude blacks from white institutions and facilities. Southern state governments created a system of legal racial segregation that was accepted, though not openly embraced, by Northern politicians weary of further political strife. In the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld this "separate but equal" system and it remained the law of the land until 1954. Even in 1878 Flipper no doubt envisioned the ultimate end of Jim Crow. As he predicted in the above passage, the segregationist policies created and enforced in the American South ultimately led only to racial strife and political upheavals.

Flipper had a clear understanding of the social problems that faced the United States in the late nineteenth century. His personal ideas for dealing with these societal issues were well informed, well developed and, in some ways, anticipated those later advocated by prominent black leaders. Historian Theodore Harris penned a thoroughly researched biography of Flipper in 1971 in which he argues that the racial and social ideologies that Flipper presented in *The Colored Cadet at West Point* share important similarities with those later espoused by Booker T. Washington and other influential African Americans. He contends that Flipper maintained a "well-thought-out concept of personal passive resistance" similar in many ways to the philosophy and methods espoused decades later by civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. This philosophy,

Harris argues, influenced Flipper's decisions and guided his behavior throughout his life.<sup>23</sup>

Although Flipper never attained the leadership status and public recognition that Booker T. Washington later enjoyed, he understood early in his career that his unique position in the military made him an important figure within the African American community. "Remember, my dear friend, that you carry an unusual responsibility," a faculty member from Atlanta University wrote to Flipper during his time at West Point. "The work that you have chosen, and from which you cannot now flinch without dishonor, proves far more than either you or me at first conceived."<sup>24</sup> While he did not consider himself to be a social martyr, he understood that, for his race, his success or failure had ramifications beyond his own military career.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty exactly what motivated Flipper to pursue a military career as an army officer. He certainly believed himself to be equal to any other individual, white or black, and was eager to demonstrate his abilities. In large part, his choice to become an officer was based upon his own desire to elevate himself to a higher social position, though he knew that his success advanced the cause of his own race as well by demonstrating that blacks could compete successfully with whites when afforded the opportunity. Moreover, he thought that his own success would undermine the racial stereotypes that plagued much of American society in the late nineteenth century. To varying degrees, each of these forces helped to motivate Flipper to attend West Point and to endure the challenges that he faced there and throughout his military career.



### John Hanks Alexander

Of the three men that successfully completed the rigorous program of instruction at West Point in the nineteenth century and earned commissions as Regular Army officers, John H. Alexander is the least well known. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that he died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of thirty after less than seven years of military service, and because he left behind no memoirs and very little correspondence. Therefore, piecing together Alexander's views on late nineteenth century American society is more difficult than gaining an understanding of the attitudes held by either Flipper or Young.

Born on January 6, 1864 in Helena, Arkansas, John Hanks Alexander was one of seven children born to James and Fannie Alexander. Although his family had been in bondage prior to Emancipation, they had long occupied a special place within the household of their lenient owners and did not suffer the harsh treatment experienced by many slaves during the antebellum years. Alexander's parents had both been allowed to obtain a rudimentary education that included reading and writing. And, with the blessing of his owners, his father, James, became a successful entrepreneur, opening a barbershop that catered to many of Helena's prominent white citizens before 1861. In the years that followed the war and Emancipation, James entered the mercantile business and, for a time, became quite successful. As with his previous business ventures, he catered to and maintained a good relationship with prominent white citizens of Helena.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from being a successful businessman, James Alexander was also an influential leader within the black community. He was a staunch supporter of the

Fourteenth Amendment and a lifelong member of the Republican Party. He played an active role in Arkansas politics and served in a number of appointed and elected positions, including postmaster of the lower house of the Arkansas legislature and justice of the peace. In 1870 he was elected to serve as a representative in the Arkansas legislature for the eleventh district, but his service was relatively short lived. James Alexander died unexpectedly shortly after the end of the 1871 legislative session.<sup>27</sup>

John Alexander was only seven years old when his father died. And while his father's example of success through hard work and diligence likely left a lasting impression upon him, it was his mother, Fannie, who most significantly influenced his life and outlooks. Fannie believed that education was vital to social advancement and she encouraged her children to complete their secondary education and pursue a college degree.

Alexander credited his mother with his own academic success, arguing that "many a time have I been ready to quit school and plunge into the stormy sea of life, but her hand has stayed me and through hard trials and great tribulations she has kept me in school ... her efforts to elevate me have not been in vain."<sup>28</sup> With his mother's encouragement Alexander completed his high school education, becoming the first graduate of the black high school in Helena. After graduating he taught school for a semester in Alabama before continuing his education at Oberlin College in Ohio. He excelled academically at Oberlin and, through a job as a waiter at a popular local restaurant, he became acquainted with prominent members of the local black community. After reading about Henry O. Flipper and the "other colored boys who have

distinguished themselves there” he decided to pursue an appointment to the Military Academy.<sup>29</sup> In 1883 he won an appointment to the institution from Democratic Congressman George W. Geddes. In 1887, ten years after Flipper’s graduation, Alexander became the second African American graduate of West Point. Like Flipper, he endured four years of nearly total social ostracism while at the Academy.<sup>30</sup> Despite this handicap he finished thirty-second out of a class of sixty-four and was said to have made “a better record than any colored cadet ever admitted.”<sup>31</sup>

The overall paucity of research materials available for Alexander makes it difficult to determine his exact position on race and class. Some documents, however, do shed some light upon his attitudes and views with regard to social advancement within American society. For example, in a speech that he delivered at his high school graduation in 1879 Alexander highlighted key principles that “should conduct us through this life.”<sup>32</sup> This lengthy oratory, delivered when he was only fifteen years old, provides a unique insight into the views maintained by Alexander at a young age and hints at the ways in which these outlooks likely influenced his decisions and career choices.

Intelligence, according to Alexander, “changes the barbarous mind into a civilized state.”<sup>33</sup> In the late nineteenth century many white Americans argued that blacks did not possess the intellectual capabilities attributed to whites. Critics of the black race attempted to justify their claims by pointing to the so-called “primitive” African heritage shared by black Americans. Alexander noted that Africa was, in fact, the cradle of civilization and that as “the seat of the fine arts and sciences ... she changed the barbarous nations from a very low state of degradation to one of happiness

and intelligence.”<sup>34</sup> With these words he effectively denounced the legacy of primitiveness that some Anglo-Americans attempted to assign to members of the black community in the late nineteenth century and, instead, highlighted the proud heritage shared by all African Americans.

Alexander’s upbringing instilled in him a sense of pride both for his family as well as for his race. While he was a cadet at West Point he heard about the Carrollton Massacre that took place in Mississippi in 1886. This conflict, which initially arose between a white man, J. M. Liddell, and a black man, Ed Brown, ultimately resulted in the deaths of twelve black men at the hands of a white mob. This tragic event affected Alexander deeply and, in a letter to a friend, he wrote that “my soul was stirred to the very depths by the massacre of colored people in Carrollton Miss.”<sup>35</sup> The language employed by Alexander in this letter provides a unique insight into his views of race relations in the late nineteenth century and effectively demonstrates the passion with which he approached social issues. “Because a colored man and his friends have the courage to stand up and resist and resent the impertinence of an insolent overbearing white man, the latter’s friends club together and at the trial open fire and coldly murder this colored man with 10 or 12 of his friends and wound several others. It was a damnably perfidious cowardly act worthy only of hellish imps as they are.” Rather than lamenting the loss of this brave black man, Alexander declared “I honor this colored man, Ed Brown, as Irishmen do Robert Emmett [sic] as all men do Spartacus. A man that can thus stand up for his rights his manhood when law, public sentiment, tradition

all conspire to make him a cringing cowardly servile brute I say such a person is more than a man he is a hero. Would to God that such a spirit animated more of us.”<sup>36</sup>

Alexander condemned the frequent degradations or the violence that many members of his race were forced to endure, particularly in the South. He also asserted that black men and women had the right to stand up for themselves and demand equal treatment when whites denied it to them. Alexander further explained his views with regard to black-white relations in a letter to a friend. “I tell you, Squire a halt must be called. We are not living in the middle ages and we are citizens of a country where all men are free and equal. Moral passion is a good thing but a little courageous manhood is now in great demand.” Alexander contended that blacks should actively resist attempts by Anglo-Americans to degrade or humiliate African Americans. “When an arrogant demand or a forcable [sic] attempt is made to have us ride with our wives and daughters in filthy smoking cars or do anything else inconsistent with true manhood I think we should resist such by all the means God and nature have put in our hands even though the consequences be perdition itself. So long as we submit of course they will think that we have no rights that white men are bound to respect.”<sup>37</sup>

These attitudes suggest that Alexander was not a servile individual. By all accounts he was respectful and gentlemanly, but his parents had taught him at a young age that he was the equal of any other man. While assigned to a cavalry post in Wyoming in 1892 he received word that his brother, Titus, had left Oberlin College when he had encountered racial slurs there. Alexander wrote that “it is a matter of gratification to me that an Alexander can not be insulted with impunity any more than

can be a Tappan, a Horner or a Pillow,” all of whom were prominent white families in his hometown of Helena.<sup>38</sup> His mother, Fannie, was apparently upset that her son had chosen to leave school but Alexander told his brother to “be kind to mother and do everything within your power to quiet her,” and he also recommended that he “tell her that she can not blame her children for being as proud and manly as the most aristocratic on earth for that is the way she has reared them.”<sup>39</sup>

As a youth, Alexander argued that “this is a free country, where the chances of life are favorable to all, to the poor as well as the rich.”<sup>40</sup> While this statement highlights an idealism that likely came from his own relatively privileged upbringing, it underscores the way that Alexander viewed the world. He felt that the United States was qualitatively different from other developed nations because of the access to advancement that it offered to men from all social and economic stations. “What other country can produce such a list of illustrious men in as short a space of time as the United States of America has? I do not think there is one.”<sup>41</sup> Black or white, Alexander asserted that in America the tools for betterment and advancement were available to all men if they had the courage and desire to make use of them. He was certainly an idealist, and a patriotic one at that. His idealism and love of country likely influenced his decision to attend West Point and pursue a career as a Regular Army officer.

Like Flipper, Alexander assigned a high level of importance to education. He felt that intellect could not be tested and improved without some type of schooling, which he argued “is one of the most vital parts of mind cultivation.”<sup>42</sup> Like the muscles of the body, the mind cannot grow stronger without frequent use, and Alexander asserted

that “in this grand, glorious, and free country of ours, [education] is within reach of all.”<sup>43</sup> While he recognized the merits of a classical education, he also understood that it was not necessarily the right path for everyone. His approach to education was more of a pragmatic one, and he argued that vocational training could also be extremely important to an individual’s advancement within society. He stated that “the cultivation of the mind mingled with the vocations of life produces most happy results” because it brings “theory into practice, and theory is not worth much without practice.”<sup>44</sup>

Alexander contended that intellect, refined and strengthened through education, was vital to the advancement of blacks within American society. Without the knowledge gained through education, African Americans could not even sufficiently carry out their hard won civic rights and duties. He chastised members of the black community who “go to the polls and vote for or against such and such a thing” without having any real “conception whatever of what you have done, whether it is to elevate or crush you.”<sup>45</sup> Blacks must be sufficiently “intellectually capacitated,” in Alexander’s view, to advance themselves within American society and to help advance American society towards further cultivation and refinement within the civilized world. He encouraged black parents to “keep your children in school for the destiny of the colored race rests in the school room” and counseled black students to “be patient, be subordinate, study hard, keep in school, and success will crown your efforts, for in you not only rests the destiny of your race, but, to some extent, the destiny of this whole country.”<sup>46</sup>

He also recognized that intelligence alone did not guarantee success or social advancement in late nineteenth century America. Alexander argued that “a person might be finely educated, and very intelligent, but if moral principles did not accompany it this life would be a blank, and he would soon plunge into the lowest depth of infamy and degradation.”<sup>47</sup> Individual morality was of the utmost importance to Alexander, and he thought that it included more than simply having the ability to discern right from wrong. In his view, one must also possess the strength of character to choose the proper path, even if that path is a difficult one.

When starting out in life we should determine what course we shall pursue, and then bend all our energies in that direction. ... The best sign of success is perseverance, and where you see an enterprising, industrious, and persevering boy with good morals, you will find a future successful man. Whatever may be our station in this life if we have good morals we shall always be respected, whether it is a bootblack or a lawyer, or a seamstress or a queen. It is the character that makes the man and not the man that makes the character.<sup>48</sup>

Although Alexander wrote these words when he was only fifteen years old, they clearly enumerate the principles that would carry him through West Point a few years later and would guide him throughout the rest of his life. His decision to pursue a military career as a commissioned officer was likely influenced by a number of factors, including a desire to demonstrate his abilities and, no doubt, to advance the cause of his



race. He also loved his country and maintained a deep devotion to the ideals and principles that he believed America represented. Likely all of these considerations factored into Alexander's decision to pursue an appointment to the Academy and a military career. The middle class values given to him by his parents provided him with the foundation that he needed to negotiate the challenges that he faced both at West Point and in the army, and his natural abilities combined with a dogged determination allowed him to achieve success where many other members of his race failed.

### Charles Young

Charles Young was the third and final African American to graduate from the Military Academy during the nineteenth century. After his departure in 1889 the doors to West Point effectively swung closed to black Americans. Although they were not officially barred from the institution, it would be almost fifty years before another African American received a diploma and a commission from the Academy.<sup>49</sup> Young enjoyed greater success than either Henry Flipper or John Alexander previously had been able to achieve. In a career that spanned more than thirty years of active service, Young earned the rank of colonel and commanded cavalry units at both the troop and squadron levels. When he died in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1922 while serving as a military attaché to the American mission to Liberia, he was recognized as the most successful black officer in the nation's history up to that time.

Although Young never wrote a set of memoirs, he did leave behind a sizable collection of papers and correspondence in addition to a book, titled *The Military Morale of Nations and Races*, published in 1912. In this study Young analyzes various groups

of people from around the world and attempts to establish links between their culture and environment on the one hand and their military and political strength on the other.<sup>50</sup> One biographer notes that the use of racial stereotypes in this work make it similar in many ways to the “other pseudoscientific studies that littered the intellectual landscape of the early twentieth century.”<sup>51</sup> Despite its obvious shortcomings, this book offers a unique insight into the mind of Charles Young and helps to clarify his views of race and class in early twentieth century America.

Young’s social attitudes, of course, had their roots in his upbringing, and his early life shared many important similarities as well as some notable differences with the early lives of both Flipper and Alexander. Born into slavery on March 12, 1864 in Mayslick, Kentucky, Charles Young was the first and only child born to Gabriel Young and Arminta Bruen.<sup>52</sup> In the year before his birth President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that all slaves held in Confederate territory were “thenceforth, and forever free.”<sup>53</sup> Because Kentucky had not officially seceded from the Union during the Civil War, the Young family remained in bondage.

In 1864 slaves in Kentucky were given an opportunity to earn their own freedom through military service. The following year the federal government agreed to extend emancipation to the families of black enlistees as well. In February 1865, Gabriel Young enlisted as a private in F Company, Fifth Regiment, U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery. He was certainly not unique in either his desire to serve his nation or in his bid to earn freedom for himself and his family. More than 23,700 black Kentuckians joined the U.S. Colored Troops and fought for the Union cause during the Civil War. Gabriel

Young served his one-year enlistment in garrison at Vicksburg, Mississippi, where his unit primarily performed support roles.<sup>54</sup>

In February 1866 Gabriel Young received his freedom along with an honorable discharge from the army. Shortly after the war, he moved his family from their native Kentucky to the busy river town of Ripley, Ohio. Unlike either the Flippers or the Alexanders, the Youngs had not been favored slaves in lenient households prior to their emancipation, and their owners had not given them the opportunity to learn useful skills or to gain even a rudimentary education. Like countless other freed slaves, they were illiterate and impoverished when they left Kentucky for their new life in Ohio. Despite these handicaps, Gabriel Young was able to enter the livery business in Ripley and earn a sufficient level of financial income to provide for his small family.<sup>55</sup>

Gabriel Young never achieved the business success that Festus Flipper enjoyed and he was never elected to an important public office like James Alexander, but he did maintain an intense love of his country and a devotion to the ideals and principles that he believed the United States represented. The short time that he spent in the military had a profound impact upon his life, and he remained an active member of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a Union veterans organization, in years that followed the war. His faithful service to his nation also left a lasting impression upon his son. Charles Young would later remember his father as “a man whose heart glowed with love of country, liberty and civic duty.” His father taught him about patriotism, which for his family “was no fair weather word,” and inspired in him a desire to serve his nation on behalf of his family and his race.<sup>56</sup>

For Charles Young, dedication to country trumped all other allegiances, and throughout his career he considered himself to be an American soldier first and a black man second. In times of crisis or national emergency, in particular, he argued that “no class of citizen in this country can, with any good to themselves or their native land, speak disparagingly of the flag and all it stands for. But whatever their grievances, in case of their country’s need they must be found trooping to the colors.”<sup>57</sup> Shortly after he retired from active duty in 1917 Young was offered a position on the board of directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an important civil rights organization founded in 1909.<sup>58</sup> Becoming a board member was a prestigious calling that recognized the leadership status that he held within the black community. He eventually joined the board of directors, but only after ensuring that the leadership of the NAACP understood his position with regard to the nation’s involvement in World War I. “I am unwilling to consent to the grasping of any advantage, however great, even should it extend to the complete rehabilitation of my race in the U. S., should it be made to the disadvantage of or tying for one moment the hands of the government by agitation of the Negro people because of discriminations against them.” Rather than using the conflict as leverage in the fight for increased civil and political rights for African Americans, Young stated that “absolute unity of all my people with all other good Americans laying aside all racial differences until after the war is what I favor. In short, duties not rights.”<sup>59</sup>

While Young believed that in time of war the needs of the country must come before the needs of the people, he argued that “in time of peace the order should be

reversed.”<sup>60</sup> Young was an ardent supporter of the civil rights movement and felt that the government should make every effort to uphold the constitutional rights of all of its citizens. “The destiny of the United States,” he once wrote, “is to give liberty and opportunity to all who wish them.”<sup>61</sup> Although his position as an active duty army officer generally precluded his participation in organizations such as the NAACP, he strongly supported its goals.

Throughout Young’s lifetime the plight of America’s black population worsened considerably. He witnessed the rise of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan that intimidated African Americans through the use of terror tactics such as lynching. He asserted that the government’s failure to control this type of lawless behavior that intentionally targeted the nation’s largest minority group was a grave mistake. “No wise rulers ... will countenance the systematic debasement by one class of their country’s citizens by the other; for the most important asset of a country must be the number of its good, happy, and intelligent individuals taking part in the good and effective work of its government and having an interest in its perpetuation.”<sup>62</sup>

For the good of the country, Young asserted, America’s black population must be accepted as equal members of society. Instead of intentionally being kept on the bottom rung of the nation’s socio-economic ladder, African Americans should be encouraged to join the middle class and should be aided in achieving that goal. In this way, the majority of blacks could become productive citizens with a stake in society rather than a large, disenfranchised minority group with no concern for mainstream American society and little loyalty to the government. Young counseled that “wisdom

then suggests that instead of suppressing the desire of the individuals wishing to take part in the things of the government, it should be encouraged, and their minds be prepared by education and intelligently directed to their duties as parts of and shareholders in the nation as good citizens, home-owners, voters, and as liable at any time, in defense of the rights and privileges they enjoy, to be called on as part of the army and navy.” In this way blacks could contribute materially to “the backbone of the patriotism of the nation.”<sup>63</sup>

Young argued that “the Negro displays an eminent capacity for social and civilized life and, when educated, the refinements and amenities of both.”<sup>64</sup> In his view, education was vital to the advancement of the black race within America, and it was the duty of the United States government to provide that education and ensure that “the illiteracy of the nation is destroyed.”<sup>65</sup> Like Flipper and Alexander before him, Charles Young learned the importance of an education from his family. His maternal grandmother, reputed to have been one of the first black teachers in Kentucky, taught him to read and write and watched over his education. He proved himself to be an apt student, particularly with regard to the study of foreign languages and, in 1881, he graduated first in his class academically from the integrated high school in Ripley.<sup>66</sup>

Following graduation Young served as an elementary school teacher and attended a few classes at Xavier University in Cincinnati. The elementary school principal, James T. Whitson, took an interest in Young and, after seeing an advertisement in the local paper concerning the competitive examinations for the Military Academy, encouraged him to take the test. His father heartily supported his

son's bid for an appointment and, after overcoming initial objections from his mother, Young traveled to Hillsboro, Ohio to take the examination. He performed well on the test and earned the nomination of Republican Congressman Alphonso Hart of Ohio's twelfth district.<sup>67</sup>

Charles Young entered West Point in 1884 as a member of the class of 1888. While at the Academy he encountered the same social isolation that his predecessors had endured, but he struggled academically more than either Flipper or Alexander had before him. While he performed well in most of his classes, he consistently had difficulties with mathematics, a subject that was a vital part of the Academy's engineering-focused curriculum. At the end of his first year at West Point Young was found deficient in mathematics and was turned back to the class of 1889.<sup>68</sup>

The difficult academic program at West Point was often a significant obstacle for even the most well prepared cadets, and academic deficiencies were particularly common for cadets in their first year of attendance. The Academy frequently permitted a small number of deficient first year cadets to repeat their fourth class year, giving them an opportunity to overcome their academic difficulties and continue toward a professional military career. Attrition rates remained high at West Point, though, and in the late nineteenth century classes often only graduated between half and two-thirds of their original members.<sup>69</sup>

Young's academic difficulties plagued him throughout his cadet career, however. Four years later, at the conclusion of his first class year, Young was again found deficient at his end of year examinations, this time in Civil and Military Engineering.

Rather than dismiss him after five years at the Academy, however, the Academic Board gave him a unique opportunity. He was allowed to stay at West Point through the summer and retake the Civil and Military Engineering test on or before September 1, 1889.<sup>70</sup> His instructor, Lieutenant George Goethals, who would later earn distinction as the chief engineer of the Panama Canal, noted that Young “had considerable difficulty” with the subject matter and “offered to give him a certain amount of time daily in order to assist him in preparation for the examination.”<sup>71</sup> At the end of the summer Young passed his Civil and Military Engineering course, was graduated last in the class of 1889, and received a commission as an additional lieutenant of cavalry.<sup>72</sup>

In a letter to one of his classmates in 1915 Young admitted that “West Point was pretty hard pulling for me,” but his belief in the benefits of education never wavered and he served as a teacher throughout his life, both as a professional educator as well as an unofficial mentor for countless black youths.<sup>73</sup> In addition to refining one’s intelligence, he argued that education should also instill in African American students other traits that were vital to the elevation of their race. He held that “good and useful, intelligent and disciplined, solidarized and moralized numbers are meant as constituting the essential element of strength of a race ...the reverse element constitutes a diluting weakness.”<sup>74</sup>

Arguably, Charles Young maintained a deeper connection to his race than either Flipper or Alexander had before him. His duty as an army officer was always to his country first, but he understood that his service and continued advancement within the military provided countless black Americans with an example of the success that could be achieved through education, hard work and perseverance. He took his position as a



role model and mentor seriously and did all that he could while in uniform to advance the cause of black Americans.

\* \* \*

In the late nineteenth century, many influential African Americans counseled that if blacks could attain a moderate level of economic independence through education, racial solidarity and self-help then increased civil and political rights would eventually follow.<sup>75</sup> The military careers and lives of Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander and Charles Young served as practical examples of this philosophy in action. To some extent, the successes and failures that these men encountered as cadets and as commissioned army officers also highlight the strengths and weaknesses of this ideology.

In some ways, these men followed the examples set by their fathers in their professional lives. The fathers of Henry Flipper and John Alexander were well-regarded, successful, and upwardly mobile members of the communities in which they lived. Both of them had significant ties to the white population where they lived and both had achieved success in their businesses by catering to whites as well as blacks. While Gabriel Young was never a successful businessman, he was a proud veteran who instilled in his son a patriotic love for his country and a desire to uplift his race. Through their own personal examples, each of these men demonstrated to their sons the importance of hard work, self-reliance and perseverance in the face of adversity.

The environment in which these three officers were born and raised seems to have had the most lasting and profound influence upon their personal values as well as

their individual attitudes concerning race and class. Each of them were raised in stable, two parent homes that embraced middle class values, encouraged education as a means of social advancement, and inspired within these three men a sense of duty to both race and country. Their individual ideals and outlooks informed their understanding of nineteenth century American society, influenced their decisions to pursue careers as commissioned army officers, and guided them throughout their lives.

## Notes

1. Henry O. Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point* (New York: Homer Lee & Company, 1878; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 7, 12, 20; U.S. Military Academy, *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy; 1877* [online], p. 13, available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/archives/archives.asp>; internet; accessed on 05 October 2006.

2. Charles M. Robinson, *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry Flipper* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso Press, 1994), 3.

3. Theodore D. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman: The Memoirs of Henry O. Flipper, First Black Graduate of West Point* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1997), 15. Harris originally published Flipper's western memoirs under the title of *Negro Frontiersman* in 1963. In 1997 he published a revised copy of this work that included numerous additional explanatory notes under the title of *Black Frontiersman*.

4. Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 27.

5. *Ibid.*, 153 (first quotation), 151 (second quotation).

6. *Ibid.*, 139, 150-51.

7. Unnamed and undated New Orleans, Louisiana newspaper article; quoted in Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 275.

8. Undated newspaper article from Sing Sing, New York's *Hudson River Chronicle*; quoted in Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 252.

9. Unnamed and undated Houston, Texas newspaper article; quoted in Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 276.

10. August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 153-54; August Meier and David Lewis, "History of the Negro Upper Class in Atlanta, Georgia, 1890-1958," *Journal of Negro Education* 28, no. 2 (Spring, 1959): 128, 135. This article discusses the makeup and evolution of Atlanta's black upper class as well as the continuing importance of skin color well into the twentieth century.

11. Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 151.

12. Thomasville, Georgia newspaper article published in June, 1874; quoted in Flipper, *The Colored Cadet*, 13-14.
13. Theodore Harris, "Henry Ossian Flipper, The First Negro Graduate of West Point" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1971), 14; Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 8.
14. Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 179-80.
15. Ibid., 152, 184.
16. Ibid., 11; Jane Eppinga, *Henry Ossian Flipper, West Point's First Black Graduate* (Plano, Tex.: Republic of Texas Press, 1996), 8-9.
17. Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 11-13.
18. U.S. Military Academy, *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy; 1877, 1887 & 1889* [online], 13, available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/archives/archives.asp>; internet; accessed on 05 October 2006.
19. Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 181.
20. Ibid., 179-80.
21. Ibid., 181.
22. Ibid., 184-85.
23. Harris, "Henry Ossian Flipper," 106.
24. Letter quoted in Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 182.
25. Harris, *Black Frontiersman*, 75.
26. Willard B. Gatewood, "John Hanks Alexander of Arkansas: Second Black Graduate of West Point," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41:2 (Summer, 1982): 104-115.
27. Ibid.

28. John Hanks Alexander, "Principles of Life," 19 December 1879, p. 16, Alexander Family Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California (hereafter cited as Alexander Papers).

29. Alexander interview, Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette*, 2 July 1887, quoted in Gatewood, "John Hanks Alexander," 116.

30. There are some sources that claim Alexander was more popular at West Point than other black cadets and that he was more accepted by his classmates than either Flipper or Young were with their respective classes. While Alexander generally downplayed his isolation in newspaper interviews, he intimated in letters to his friends that he was, indeed, socially ostracized at the Academy and that it took a psychological toll upon him.

31. "West Point Academy," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 19 January 1884, 1, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=14087>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007; U.S. Military Academy, *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1887* [online], 10, available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/archives/archives.asp>; internet; accessed on 05 October 2006; New York *Globe*, January 26, 1884; quoted in Gatewood, "John Hanks Alexander," 119.

32. Alexander, "Principles of Life," 1, Alexander Papers.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Letter from John H. Alexander to John P. Green, 27 March 1886, John P. Green Papers, 1845-1940, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio (hereafter cited as Green Papers). For contemporary description of the Carrollton Massacre see "A Terrible Affair" Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 27 March 1886, 1, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=14871>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007. For contemporary reaction to the Carrollton Massacre see "Carrollton Massacre," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 17 April 1886, 2, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=14899>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007. Also see Ruston L. Cole, "'Is There a God in Israel: The Carrollton, Mississippi, Lynching, March 1886,'" M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1980.

36. Letter from John H. Alexander to John P. Green, 27 March 1886, Green Papers.

37. Ibid.

38. Letter from John H. Alexander to Mark W. Alexander, 10 August 1892, Alexander Papers.

39. Ibid; Gatewood, "John Hanks Alexander," 113.

40. Alexander, "Principles of Life," 7, Alexander Papers.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 2.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 3.

45. Ibid., 5.

46. Ibid., 15.

47. Ibid., 9.

48. Ibid., 9-11.

49. Marvin E. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army, 1891-1917* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 74. The next black officer to graduate from the Academy was Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., class of 1936. Davis, the son of the first black general officer, brigadier general Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., would eventually earn the three stars of a lieutenant general and become the highest-ranking African American officer in the Armed Forces. See Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

50. David P. Kilroy, *For Race and Country: The Life and Career of Colonel Charles Young* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 70.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 2.

53. National Archives and Records Administration, *Featured Documents; The Emancipation Proclamation* [online], 1, available from

[http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/emancipation\\_proclamation/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/index.html); internet; accessed 21 December 2006.

54. Kilroy, *For Race and Country*, 3.

55. *Ibid.*, 4-5.

56. Letter from Charles Young to Atlee Pomerene, 30 August 1918; quoted in Kilroy, *For Race and Country*, 4.

57. Charles Young, *Military Morale of Nations and Races* (Kansas City, Mo: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1912), 93.

58. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *Timeline* [online], available from <http://www.naacp.org/about/history/timeline>; internet; accessed on 16 January 2006.

59. Letter from Charles Young to Arthur B. Spingarn, 5 November 1917, Charles Young Papers, 1897-1931 [internet], National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/mss/831.cfm>; internet; accessed on 13 September 2006.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Young, *Military Morale*, 213.

62. *Ibid.*, 20.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, 209.

65. *Ibid.*, 101.

66. Kilroy, *For Race and Country*, 5.

67. Robert E. Greene, *The Early Life of Colonel Charles Young: 1864-1889* (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1973), 10. Young actually received the second highest score on the West Point exams in his congressional district. There are conflicting reports about what happened to the individual that received the highest score. The first story alleges that the candidate with the highest in the district failed the

entrance exams at West Point and was sent back to Ohio. The second story contends that the individual in the district that received the highest score, Oswin Wells Lowry, chose to attend the U.S. Naval Academy and, therefore, declined an appointment to West Point. See Kilroy, *For Race and Country*, 6-7.

68. U.S. Military Academy, *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1885* [online], 19, available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/archives/archives.asp>; internet; accessed on 05 October 2006.

69. At the end of their first year at the Academy Henry Flipper's class (USMA 1877) had 100 members, but only 77 graduated on time. John Alexander's class (USMA 1887) had 100 members at the end of their first year, but only graduated 64. Charles Young's original class, USMA 1888, had 82 members at the end of their first year but only graduated 44. His second class (USMA 1889) had 75 members at the end of their first year at the Academy, but only 49 graduated on time. See U.S. Military Academy, *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1874, 1877, 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1889* [online], available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/archives/archives.asp>; internet; accessed on 18 January 2006. Therefore, it is notable that Flipper, Alexander and Young completed the rigorous course of study at West Point when many of their white classmates did not.

70. U.S. Military Academy, *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1889* [online], 11, available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/archives/archives.asp>; internet; accessed on 05 October 2006

71. Letter from George L. Goethals to Mrs. Ada M. Young, 8 May 1922; quoted in Patricia W. Romero, ed., *I Too Am American, Documents from 1619 to Present* (New York: Publisher's Company, 1969), 190.

72. Charles Young's Oath of Office, 14 September 1889, Letters Received by the Appointment, Commission, and Personal Branch, Adjutant General's Office, 1871-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington D.C.

73. Ibid.

74. Young, *Military Morale*, 23.

75. Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 5.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

By the end of the nineteenth century the four all-black regiments of the Regular Army had compiled enviable service records and had demonstrated that African American men were capable and effective soldiers. In combat operations that ranged across the American West, Cuba and the Philippines, the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments (Colored) and the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments (Colored) faithfully and honorably served their nation. In both war and peace, these units ably performed their assigned missions and helped to expand the American government's power and influence within its own territories and elsewhere in the world.

The congressionally mandated reorganization of the Regular Army in 1866 established the conditions that made the success of these regiments possible. The creation of racially segregated units, in particular, guaranteed that blacks would have a permanent and meaningful place in the nation's armed forces. Recruiters were required to enlist qualified African American men to fill vacancies within these new units where they would have otherwise only selected white men for enlistment. The organization and enlisted rank structure of the segregated regiments also ensured that blacks had the opportunity to advance in rank and pay. African American troops filled every enlisted rank and position within these units and competed only against other members of their race for promotions and jobs. This provided black soldiers with equal access to positions of increased responsibility and higher pay without being hindered by their commanders' racial biases.

However, the War Department did not provide African Americans the same access to the officer corps of the Regular Army as they were given to the enlisted ranks. While no law or policy strictly prohibited them from becoming officers, there was also no program put into place to ensure that gifted members of the race could attain commissions. The four all-black regiments were commanded and led almost exclusively by white men and none of the officer positions within these units were reserved specifically for African Americans. The few black men that attained commissions competed directly against their white colleagues for promotions and jobs at a time when racial prejudice pervaded American society and the Regular Army.

The three African American men that earned commissions from West Point in the nineteenth century did so in the face of great adversity and their superiors and colleagues viewed them as anomalies in a system normally reserved for whites. Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander, and Charles Young each achieved varying levels of success during their military careers. While they earned the grudging respect of some of their white contemporaries, in the eyes of many, their race consistently overshadowed their professional successes and weighed heavily upon any assessment or characterization of their service. Despite their many achievements, these men were often considered to be black men first and commissioned officers second.

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Widespread racial prejudice and discrimination existed throughout American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The prevailing social attitudes of the time were reflected in the nation's political and military leadership and

significantly influenced the creation and implementation of domestic and military policies. The congressional debates that preceded the reorganization of the Regular Army in 1866 showcased the dominant racial viewpoints embraced by many of the nation's leading lawmakers and highlighted their views with regard to black military service in general. These men, along with military leaders, helped shape the social environment in which black military members served.

Senator Willard Saulsbury, a Democrat from Delaware, strongly opposed African American military service. He warned that black troops "riding up and down the streets ... dressed in a little brief authority" would be "a stench in the nostrils of the people from whom I come." Saulsbury insinuated that these soldiers would be more likely to "brandish their swords and exhibit their pistols and their guns" than white soldiers and that their very presence would likely "engender strife, and in all probability would lead to bloodshed." America, he contended, was created by white men and had been protected by them throughout its history. Saulsbury saw no reason to use black men as soldiers during peacetime, particularly when "hundreds and thousands of white men ... would gladly accept the place of soldiers in the regular Army."<sup>1</sup> A Democratic Senator from California, James A. McDougall, asserted that "Soldiers are men of arms, as are their officers and commanders. They must belong to the ruling forces," he declared, and any "...undertaking to place a lower, inferior, different race upon a level with the white man's race, in arms, is against the laws that lie at the foundation of true republicanism."<sup>2</sup>

Not all of the senators present for the debate believed that blacks were inherently less capable of military service than whites. Ohio Republican Senator Benjamin F. Wade explained to his colleagues that experiences in the Civil War had demonstrated that black soldiers were “quite as efficient as the white troops, as well disciplined, as formidable in the field, as effective in any service that they were put to.”<sup>3</sup> Indiana Republican Senator Henry S. Lane contended, “It is, then, one of two things, either a burden or a privilege to serve in the Army, and if it is either, the colored people are equally bound to bear the burden or equally entitled to participate in the privilege.”<sup>4</sup>

Although racial attitudes varied somewhat among the army’s senior leadership, they generally refused to support the addition of black troops to the Regular Army. Commanding General of the Army and future president Ulysses S. Grant, recommended that black troops not be utilized for military service. He conceded that African American troops could likely “be obtained more readily than white ones,” but he believed that a peacetime army should be small and efficient which, in his view, was best achieved through the use of white soldiers. But if Congress chose to include all-black regiments as part of the Regular Army, he recommended “that the promotion of officers of colored troops be confined to colored troops of their arm of service, and the promotion of officers of white troops be confined to white troops of their arm.” Grant held a relatively enlightened position with regard to the use of black officers in the newly formed regiments that was not apparently shared by many of his contemporaries.<sup>5</sup>

Some within the army’s senior leadership doubted the capacity of blacks to serve effectively as soldiers. General William T. Sherman, who succeeded Grant as the

Commanding General of the Army, believed that African Americans were inherently less fit for military service than Anglo Americans. Responding to a letter in 1877 from politician and former volunteer general Benjamin F. Butler urging continued support for all-black regiments, Sherman wrote, “General Butler pronounces the Blacks a docile, temperate, rugged race peculiarly qualified for being soldiers. Now if soldiers were, as some presume, an idle, lazy set, contented to eat their rations and do nothing he might be right. But our soldiers are not of that sort.” Sherman asserted that “we want and must have men of muscle, endurance, will, courage, and that wildness of nature that is liable unless properly directed to result in violence and crime, to combat the enemies of civilization, with whom we have to contend. I honestly think the white race the best for this ....”<sup>6</sup>

Sherman served as the Commanding General from 1869 to 1883 and exerted immense influence upon the Regular Army. While it is difficult to determine the extent to which his racial views shaped the actions of his subordinate commanders, it is safe to assume that the overall command climate that Sherman established for the army was not supportive of African American military service. An incident involving a black cadet at the U.S. Military Academy in 1880 highlighted the poor social environment in which African American service members were forced to work and compelled Sherman to answer charges of racial intolerance and the alleged abuse. In April 1880 Academy officers found an African American cadet, Johnson Chestnut Whittaker, bleeding and unconscious in his barracks room. He reported that he had been tied up and beaten by three masked men, but Academy officials investigating the incident contended that

Whittaker had inflicted the wounds upon himself and fabricated the story in an attempt to draw attention away from his academic deficiencies. The black cadet was subsequently charged and convicted of perjury and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman at a court-martial. Although President Chester A. Arthur overturned the ruling, Whittaker was separated from West Point due to an academic failure. This event caused a national outcry from black leaders as well as many Northern politicians who pointed to this case as an example of the mistreatment that African Americans were forced to endure at the Military Academy.<sup>7</sup>

Sherman answered these charges by declaring that “a more democratic body never existed on earth than is the corps of cadets.” He argued that “prejudice of race is the most difficult thing to contend against of any in this world” but asserted that “there is no more prejudice at West Point than in the community at large.” In fact, he believed that “the practice of equality at West Point is in advance of the rest of the country.” Sherman’s argument that the social attitudes of cadets were consistent with those found in mainstream America is valid. The U.S. Military Academy was a truly national institution that accepted and trained cadets from every congressional district across the country. The corps of cadets represented a diverse cross section of middle class America and the attitudes of its members largely reflected those that were dominant in the area or section of the country from which they came.<sup>8</sup>

Although Sherman pledged to “enforce faithfully every part of the Constitution of the United States and every law made in pursuance thereof,” he implied that admitting black cadets to West Point represented a poorly conceived and fundamentally flawed

social experiment.<sup>9</sup> The military was not the proper vehicle, in Sherman's view, for African Americans to seek social uplift, and he argued that "...the army is not and should not be construed a charitable organization."<sup>10</sup> He maintained that blacks should not be afforded any special consideration or social protections because "to discriminate in favor of a colored boy by reason of his color is as much a violation of the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution as to discriminate against him." Sherman claimed, however, that "no body of men on earth have more reverence for the Constitution and the laws than the Army" and vowed that African Americans at the Academy would be treated fairly. By most accounts, the staff and faculty of West Point treated black cadets in a professional manner. African American cadets could, in most cases, rely upon Academy officials to strictly enforce the letter of the law or applicable regulation.<sup>11</sup>

Major General John M. Schofield served as the Superintendent of West Point from 1876 to 1881. A highly successful and influential officer, Schofield served briefly as the interim Secretary of War shortly after the Civil War and became the Commanding General of the Army in 1888. Schofield contended that the staff and faculty at the Military Academy treated black cadets fairly and upheld their duties "toward those persons of the newly enfranchised race who have been placed under their care." He asserted that "every lawful right of the colored cadets has been fully secured to them, and their official treatment has been not only just but very kind and indulgent."<sup>12</sup>

Schofield argued that the forced association of black and white cadets effectively deprived white cadets of their social liberty, "which, no less than civil or religious liberty, is a right enjoyed and prized by every citizen of the United States." Like

Sherman, he believed that the inclusion of black cadets at West Point was a social experiment best suited for some other institution. "Military discipline," he claimed, "is not an effective means of promoting social intercourse or of overcoming social prejudice." In fact, he felt that "the enforced association of the white cadets with their colored companions" had a deleterious effect upon social relations and effectively "destroyed any disposition which before existed to indulge in such association." He asserted that the poor relations between black and white cadets was the result of "the bad personal character of some of the young colored men sent to West Point" and the "natural reaction against an attempt to govern social intercourse by military regulations."<sup>13</sup>

The Superintendent of the Military Academy doubted the ability of African Americans to serve as officers in the Regular Army. "It does not seem a reasonable expectation that young men of a race so recently emerged from a state of slavery could compete successfully with those who have inherited the strength gained in the many generations of freedom enjoyed by their ancestors." Schofield declared that "To send to West Point for four years' competition a young man who was born in slavery is to assume that half a generation has been sufficient to raise a colored man to the social, moral, and intellectual level which the average white man has reached in several hundred years. As well might the common farm-horse be entered in a four-mile race against the best blood inherited from a long line of English racers." Believing that "it was an act of doubtful kindness to the colored race to force them into such unequal competition," Schofield contended that "unless the African race is naturally superior to



the Caucasian, and slavery a better school for race development than freedom, it cannot be hoped that many colored boys will succeed where two-thirds of all the white boys now selected habitually fail.”<sup>14</sup>

While Schofield’s words appear extreme by modern standards, they reflected the mainstream attitudes and ideals of the time period in which he lived. Most Anglo-Americans in the late nineteenth century literally believed that blacks were naturally inferior to them in both physical and mental abilities. Numerous pseudo-scientific studies, produced by well-respected and renowned scientists, supported these beliefs, and often served as the rationale for withholding full citizenship rights from African Americans.<sup>15</sup>

As the foregoing statements by army leaders indicate, West Point had established a hostile social environment for African American cadets. All of the black cadets that attended the Military Academy in the nineteenth century encountered social isolation and varying levels of harassment from their classmates. Henry Flipper was the first of his race to successfully negotiate the challenges of West Point, graduating from the institution in 1877. His example provided a blueprint, of sorts, for the few African American men who would follow him into the profession of arms.

Throughout his long and lonely ordeal at the Academy, Flipper remained positive, professional, and courteous towards everyone with whom he came into contact. One of his classmates, Charles Crane, recounted in his memoirs that Flipper “behaved himself very well indeed, and was generally liked by his classmates” although he admitted that “no one openly associated with him.” No one associated with the black

cadet for fear of being “cut” or “silenced,” terms used to describe the complete social ostracism of a cadet by his classmates. This practice was not officially approved by the Academy, but rather was “part of an unwritten code by which cadets adjust their internal affairs” which involved “having absolutely nothing to do with another cadet, and on all unavoidable occasions addressing the unfortunate fellow as ‘Mister.’” Crane declared that “this was a cruel punishment, and sometimes administered without sufficient reason or provocation.” This type of punishment was extremely effective at West Point because it intensified the institution’s already high level of the social isolation. Cadets had almost no contact with the world outside of the military reservation, and being socially rejected by one’s classmates meant that the difficulty associated with the Academy’s rigorous program was compounded by loneliness. Except for the black cadets, Flipper’s classmate insisted that he did not take part in this type of peer-imposed punishment. Crane concludes that “taken as a whole [being ‘cut’], or the fear of it, does as much good as harm.” The fact that this punishment was imposed upon all black cadets, regardless of their actions, certainly can be qualified as an undeserved penalty.<sup>16</sup>

Flipper’s perception of his own acceptance within the profession of arms changed throughout his military career. In his memoirs he acknowledges the social isolation that was forced upon him during his four years at the Academy and lamented “what a trial it is to be socially ostracized, to live in the very midst of life and yet be lonely, to pass day after day without saying perhaps a single word other than those used in the section-room during recitation.” After graduating, however, he maintained that his colleagues treated him much differently. In fact, he asserted that his former

tormentors had “atoned for past conduct and welcomed me as one of them as well as one among them.” According to Flipper, this new and positive relationship with his fellow officers continued at his first duty station. “From the moment I reached [Fort] Sill I haven’t experienced anything but happiness. I am not isolated. I am not ostracized by a single officer.” Responding to a *New York Herald* article that reported that he continued to be socially isolated, Flipper replied that newspapers failed to realize “that the army is officered by men who are presumably gentlemen. Those who are will treat me as become gentlemen, as they do, and those who are not I will thank if they will ‘ostracize’ me, for if they don’t I will certainly ‘ostracize’ them.”<sup>17</sup>

The newfound camaraderie between Flipper and his former classmates apparently was not isolated to Fort Sill. In a letter that he wrote from Fort Elliot, Texas, in 1879 he observed that his Academy classmates, now “removed from the influences that hedge West Point, have since treated me not simply as a brother officer, but as a classmate, and have asked my cooperation in measures adopted and undertaken by the class.” Although formerly isolated and treated like an outsider, Flipper claimed that he was now “invited to share responsibilities and benefits at the Academy, I am now welcomed by direct and special invitation into them all.”<sup>18</sup>

Assigned to the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (Colored) under the command of Colonel Benjamin Grierson, Flipper quickly showed himself to be a diligent and capable small unit leader. He performed well in numerous engagements against Indians, including the campaign against Victorio and his band of Mescalero Apaches. In this operation he gained the respect of Colonel Grierson, who later praised “his efficiency and gallantry in

the field.” Grierson also observed that “being, as an officer, the only representative of his race in the Army, [Flipper] has, under circumstances and surroundings the most unfavorable and discouraging, steadily won his way by sterling worth and ability, by manly and soldierly bearing, to the confidence, respect and esteem of all with whom he has served or come in contact.” His company commander, an Irishman named Captain Nicholas Nolan, also praised Flipper’s abilities, stating that he found the black officer to be “all that West Point turns out.” Furthermore, Nolan observed that “Mr. Flipper’s standing with the officers is of the most friendly nature, and the more he comes in contact with them the better he proves the worthiness of his position. He is a universal favorite in the garrison.”<sup>19</sup>

Flipper’s acceptance among his peers did not last. When his unit transferred to Fort Davis, Texas in the spring of 1880 he became increasingly isolated from his fellow officers, who he later described as “hyenas,” and he grew suspicious of their intentions. For services in the field Flipper was assigned as the Acting Assistant Quartermaster and Post Quartermaster and Acting Commissary of Subsistence (A.C.S.) and Post Commissary. In effect he was “in charge of the entire military reservation, houses, water and fuel supply, transportation, feed, clothing, and equipment for troops and the food supply.” Serving as the A.C.S. also placed him in charge of a substantial amount of money. In this capacity he became responsible for overseeing the selling of goods from the post’s stores to the officers and enlisted men of Fort Davis. Flipper had to maintain and account for this money while ensuring that the balance was transmitted to the Chief Commissary in San Antonio each month.<sup>20</sup>

In the spring of 1881 the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment's Headquarters was reassigned to Fort Davis. As the senior officer on the post, the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry's commander, Colonel William R. Shafter, assumed command of Fort Davis. Described by historian Robert Utley as "coarse, profane [and] afflicted with a barely concealed racism," Shafter was, nonetheless, an effective and proven Army leader. Nicknamed "Pecos Bill," he was also known to be a difficult commander who played favorites and was especially harsh towards subordinates that he disliked.<sup>21</sup>

Colonel Shafter immediately relieved Flipper of his duties as Quartermaster and informed him that he would replace him as Acting Commissary of Subsistence (A.C.S.) as soon as he could identify a replacement. In memoirs published after his death Flipper suggested that his relief of duty as Quartermaster was the beginning of a conspiracy between Shafter and two of his subordinates, Lieutenants Charles E. Nordstrom and Louis Wilhelmi, to "persecute me and lay traps for me...never did a man walk the path of uprightness straighter than I did, but the trap was cunningly laid and I was sacrificed...."<sup>22</sup>

Routine military procedure may have explained Flipper's relief as Quartermaster. The staff organization of Fort Davis closely resembled that of a normal regimental command, and the duties of each of the individual post staff positions, for the most part, were the same as those normally performed by a regimental staff. Since the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Headquarters was now assigned to Fort Davis, it made sense that the duties previously assigned to the post staff would simply be reassigned to the regimental staff rather than duplicate functions. Flipper initially retained his position as A.C.S because there were

no regimental commissary officers. It was also a common practice for new commanders to assign officers to their staff that they were familiar with and had worked with before. Since Shafter had not previously worked with Flipper and was not familiar with his abilities, the decision to replace him as A.C.S was not necessarily racially motivated or a part of a larger conspiracy.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Shafter's stated intention to relieve Flipper of his duties as A.C.S., the black lieutenant continued to serve in that capacity for five more months. The fact that the colonel kept Flipper on his staff for so long seems to indicate that he found him to be a competent officer and believed that he was capable of discharging the duties and responsibilities required of his important position. In that period of time, however, a sequence of events occurred that ultimately led to Flipper's arrest at Fort Davis and his subsequent indictment on charges of embezzling public funds and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.

The facts of the case are relatively straightforward. In May 1881 Major Michael P. Small, the Chief Commissary of Subsistence in San Antonio, informed Flipper that he would be out of the office until early June (his leave of absence was later extended until the end of June). He advised Flipper not to submit the funds from Fort Davis until he returned. Through the end of May Flipper maintained positive accountability of all public funds in his possession.

Colonel Shafter used weekly inspections of Flipper's account books to confirm that all of the post's commissary funds were in order. These inspections were a vital oversight tool through which commanding officers ensured that their subordinate

officers were properly handling public funds. It was not an unusual occurrence for commissary funds to be in disarray at frontier Army posts. The young officers that generally served as post commissaries often received no formal training for their positions and had to learn their duties through on the job training under the supervision of more experienced officers. Without careful guidance and oversight these inexperienced officers could easily get themselves into trouble. For some reason Colonel Shafter's weekly inspections of Flipper's account books appears to have ended at the end of May, with the last signed inspection completed on 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>24</sup>

At the end of June Major Small requested that all funds be submitted to his office. At the beginning of July Shafter ordered Flipper to present the funds for his inspection prior to transmittal. Flipper realized at that time that he was missing a significant amount of money. Not being able to account for the loss, he included a personal check for \$1,440.43 to make up for the shortage even though he did not have a bank account to cover that amount. Colonel Shafter commented on the large size of the check, but was satisfied by Flipper's explanation and ordered him to send the funds to Major Small. Thereafter, Flipper advised Colonel Shafter that the funds were in transit to the Chief Commissary in San Antonio while, in fact, part of them were unaccounted for and part of them remained in his possession.<sup>25</sup>

Major Small telegraphed Flipper on 5 August to inquire about the overdue funds. Receiving no response, Small telegraphed Colonel Shafter. Shafter inspected Flipper's account books and found that his records indicated that \$3,791.77 was in transit to San Antonio. Flipper had failed to make copies of the checks or of the transmittal slip,

however, and had no way to verify that the funds had, in fact, been sent. Colonel Shafter relieved him immediately of his duties as A.C.S. for this apparent gross negligence. He advised Major Small of the change, stating “Lieut. Flipper has been a very good and attentive officer but his carelessness in this transaction is inexcusable.”<sup>26</sup>

When the funds still failed to arrive in San Antonio by 13 August, Colonel Shafter began to suspect that there was more to the matter than Flipper had admitted to up to that point. He called Flipper into his office and informed him that he was beginning to doubt that the funds had been mailed at all. By Shafter’s account, Flipper replied “Colonel, you are doing me a very great injustice as I did mail those checks just as I have told you” to which the colonel replied “very well, I hope you did and I shall be found to be in the wrong in the matter.”<sup>27</sup>

Shafter ordered a search of Flipper’s quarters. The two officers conducting the search found \$300 as well as letters of transmittal and weekly reports that had never been mailed. Flipper’s African American housemaid, Lucy Smith, was found to be in possession of the checks that Flipper claimed were in transit to San Antonio, totaling \$2,853.56. Flipper was arrested and placed in confinement. Although members of the local community came forward and made up the amount lost, a remarkable show of support considering that “racial prejudice...permeated post society,” a court-martial convened on 15 September 1881 to try Flipper on charges of embezzlement and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.<sup>28</sup>

The court-martial lasted for almost three months and at its conclusion Flipper was acquitted of embezzling public funds, but was found guilty of conduct unbecoming



an officer and a gentleman. For his actions, Flipper was dismissed from service, a punishment that appears to have been overly harsh when compared to white officers in similar situations. President Chester Arthur approved the sentence and, on 30 June 1882, Flipper was quietly separated from military service.<sup>29</sup>

The true whereabouts of the missing public funds remains a mystery. Some historians contend that Flipper's maid, Lucy Smith, likely stole the money. For reasons never satisfactorily explained, Flipper kept the commissary funds in a trunk inside of his personal quarters rather than in the large safe provided by the government for that purpose. (During the court-martial he stated that he maintained the funds in his trunk because he felt more comfortable having them in his personal possession, but many years later he contended that Colonel Shafter had ordered him to keep the funds in his trunk rather than in the safe). Lucy Smith had access to this trunk and, therefore, would have been in a position to take the money if she had been inclined to do so. The fact that the checks that Flipper had told Colonel Shafter were in transit to San Antonio were found to be in her possession also seems to incriminate her.<sup>30</sup>

However, when asked by Colonel Shafter during his confinement if he believed that Smith had stolen the missing funds Flipper stated that he did not. This could indicate that she had taken the checks that the colonel later found on her with Flipper's knowledge, perhaps in an effort to prevent the officers conducting the search of his quarters from finding them. Whether Flipper and Smith conspired to deceive Colonel Shafter by removing evidence from his quarters, however, still does not explain what happened to the funds that were never recovered. Smith certainly could have taken that

money as well, but one must wonder why Flipper continued to believe her to be innocent throughout the court-martial.<sup>31</sup>

Despite his conviction at court-martial, Flipper continued to profess his innocence throughout the rest of his life. In the late nineteenth century there was no way to appeal a sentence imposed by a court-martial once the president had approved it. The only way an unduly harsh sentence could be overturned was through an act of Congress, signed by the president. Between 1898 and 1924 Flipper made numerous attempts to be reinstated and to have his record cleared through congressional legislation.<sup>32</sup> He appealed to black leaders in an attempt to win their support for this legislation. In a personal letter to Booker T. Washington, Flipper asked him to urge the black community to send “a flood of letters” to congressional leaders “in the interest of Race, to right the wrong done me and through me every member of the Race.” However, he informed Washington, “I do not favor public agitation of the matter in the press or otherwise” because he feared that it might unite the Army bureaucracy against his case.<sup>33</sup> As time went by and the passage of the legislation in his favor seemed less likely, Flipper asked the black leader to approach President William McKinley over the matter and, amazingly, even recommended that Washington talk to Shafter, now a major general, to “feel him [out]” and see if he could win his support.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Flipper’s best efforts and the political support of Republican Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, the legislation introduced on his behalf from 1898 to 1924 failed to gain widespread support among lawmakers and, ultimately, his petitions to Congress brought no results. Certainly resistance by the Secretary of the Army

influenced lawmakers, but more than likely the legislation failed because Flipper could not prove that he had been wrongly convicted. As one historian notes, Flipper “had been acquitted of the main charge against him; and, despite his formal plea of ‘not guilty’ to the second charge [of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman], had admitted its substance.”<sup>35</sup> Another factor that likely influenced the legislators was that the briefs that Flipper provided to members of Congress often sharply contrasted with the sworn testimony that he had given during the court-martial proceedings. In the two decades that spanned the time between his court-martial and his appeal to Congress the true facts of the case appear to have become skewed in his own mind and his belief in a conspiracy against him became more pronounced.<sup>36</sup>

Flipper went on to live a full and successful life as an engineer in the American West and Latin America, which one biographer contended earned “him more honor and fame than if he had remained in the military.” Throughout the remainder of his long life, he professed his innocence and maintained that he had been the victim of racial prejudice and discrimination. The historical record, however, indicates that Flipper did, indeed, knowingly lie and attempt to mislead his commander. This behavior certainly qualifies as conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman. One must wonder if he had been honest and forthcoming from the beginning if he would have been dismissed at all. The charge for which he was convicted and dismissed from service, after all, was a direct result of his initial dishonesty. Even if he had been dismissed from service he most likely would have been able to present a stronger case to members of Congress for his reinstatement if he had been truthful throughout.<sup>37</sup>

His conviction in 1881, however, in no way detracts from the great accomplishments that he achieved during his lifetime. He was a racial trailblazer who achieved success at West Point where many others before and after him failed. The dignity and quiet resolve that he carried through that ordeal, in particular, earned him the respect, if not the full acceptance, of his white classmates.

\* \* \*

John Alexander entered the Military Academy in 1884, three years after Flipper's forced dismissal from service. A newspaper article published during his first semester at West Point assured readers that he "occupies a very different position in the Academy from that of Flipper and Whittaker. Alexander is treated as an equal by the boys of his class in their work and their play. No difference is made between him and any other boy by his comrades. All this without constraint on the part of the authorities of the Academy, and in the most natural way possible."<sup>38</sup> Although some accounts appear to indicate that Alexander was more accepted by his classmates than other black cadets had previously been, he largely remained a social outcast. In a letter to a friend in 1885 he stated that "you can not realize to what extent I have been shut off from all refining influences (social) ... it would seem that I had spent the last year or two in the confines of the highest and most secluded peak of the Himalaya mountains."<sup>39</sup>

The social environment at West Point was restricted for all cadets, particularly when compared to other colleges and universities. White cadets, however, were able to attend formal dances, called hops, and could interact socially with the white officers assigned to the Academy and their families. As a black cadet, Alexander acknowledged

that such “advantages are closed to me.” Although he was shut off socially at West Point he hoped that “the positive wholesome influences at work will render this a very slight offset.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite his isolation, Alexander generally downplayed his situation to the press. When asked about the treatment that he received from his fellow cadets during his second year at the Academy he responded, “They have all been very gentlemanly, friendly, and kind. The boys in my class treat me as well as could be desired, even some of them from the South acting very good-naturedly toward me. Today one of the gentlemen in the Senior class came to me and expressed himself as glad to have me here. He gave me some good advice, and told me he would always be ready to help me if I needed assistance.” Statements like these, no doubt, helped give the false impression that Alexander received markedly better treatment at West Point than other black cadets.<sup>41</sup>

Alexander followed Flipper’s example and acted professionally and courteously towards his white colleagues. One Academy official described Alexander as a “splendid scholar” and stated that the West Point staff had “noticed with feelings of satisfaction that the colored cadet so deported himself as to win the esteem of many of the Corps.”<sup>42</sup> Although his deportment may have grudgingly earned him the respect of some, his acceptance among his classmates was far from universal. For example, one winter day a classmate of his from Maine, Mark L. Hersey, offered Alexander the use of his ice skates. When the black cadet tried to retrieve them from Hersey’s room, however, his roommate, Texas native Robert L. Howze, rebuffed him and turned him away.

According to Hersey, Howze stated “with enthusiastic profanity ... that no colored man could enter his room in any social way, in fact, he said that he would never have come to the damned place if he had known he was going to have a nigger for a classmate.”<sup>43</sup>

By graduation day Alexander apparently had won some esteem from his classmates. Charles D. Rhodes, an 1889 Academy graduate from Ohio, recounted that “such was his popularity that he was applauded by the audience present more than any other graduate.”<sup>44</sup> A newspaper article recorded that “the applause given ... the highest man in the class, was nothing compared with the thunderous hand-clapping awarded colored cadet Alexander.” The paper declared, “If dispatches state the facts then ‘a change of heart’ has been experienced at West Point.” Despite the article’s hopeful declaration of a “change of heart,” the racial and social attitudes of cadets at the Academy changed very little, if at all, during Alexander’s time at West Point. The applause offered by his classmates was not an affirmation of his equality or acceptance, but was rather recognition of his significant and hard fought achievement.<sup>45</sup>

Alexander was assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (Colored) and remained with the unit until his death in 1894. While the difficult social circumstances that he encountered at West Point likely followed him into the army, they may have lessened somewhat. A journal that Alexander kept during a field training exercise in 1888 provides a snapshot of some of his experiences as a junior officer assigned to a frontier cavalry unit. Although most of his journal entries deal with the weather or the mundane events associated with field duty, a few entries also recount his interaction with his fellow officers. Overall, Alexander found the officers of his regiment to be “very genial

men.” Throughout his field training he came into contact with a number of white officers, some of whom he knew from West Point. He made no negative comments about any of these men in his journal and even commented that one of his fellow Academy graduates, a man named Burnett “seem[ed] to be a much more affable man than I had thought him.”<sup>46</sup>

Although his colleagues in the military were likely “very genial men” professionally, they never fully accepted Alexander as a social equal. An officer that served with him at Fort Robinson, Nebraska recalled that throughout his military career Alexander was officially “the equal of every cadet and officer with whom he was thrown into contact” but “socially he was a negro.” This distinction affected all aspects of his professional and personal life. “He had and could have no social intimates whether at West Point or in the garrison. His commission gave him a life-time position as an officer and his shoulder straps and uniform delegated to him authority equal to that of any other officer of his rank. But outside of that the poorest white laborer was more to be envied in some respects than the brainy, soldierly-looking mulatto.” Even though this officer argued that his colleagues did not openly ostracize the black officer, he admitted that “the line was everywhere drawn at official intercourse. [Alexander] made no calls upon the families of brother officers. He was not expected at receptions and balls ... he lived more or less alone. Official etiquette would not permit him to mingle with the enlisted men of his own color” but “his color debarred him from association with his official equals.”<sup>47</sup>

While not accepted as a social equal by his white colleagues, Alexander was respected within his regiment. A white cavalry officer who knew him at West Point wrote in 1894 that he “saw much in his character and behavior to admire and respect.” Although not assigned to the same regiment he said that he had “been told that [Alexander] was well liked and respected by his regiment, and bore the reputation of being capable, efficient, and gentlemanly officer.”<sup>48</sup> A 9th Cavalry officer confirmed this statement when he noted that “his modesty, courtesy and ability commanded respect, and he received it because he deserved it.” Acknowledging that the black officer “served in a very difficult and thankless position” this fellow officer stated that he was “a man who did not disgrace his position; who never whined for sympathy or posed as a martyr; who did his duty cheerfully; and who, by his manners and self-control made his holding of a commission easier for himself and those with whom he was thrown into daily contact.”<sup>49</sup> Alexander’s commanding officers also recognized his outstanding service. Colonel James Biddle, the regimental commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, stated that “[Alexander] can always be depended on to perform his duty and to carry out orders given him.” His commander also acknowledged the difficult circumstances in which the black officer worked and praised his ability to do his job without disturbing the social status quo of the Regular Army. “He is modest and unobtrusive,” Biddle wrote, and “carries himself admirably in a very difficult position.”<sup>50</sup> Historian John Marszalek notes that Alexander’s efficiency reports were generally good with one commander writing that “I look upon this officer as one of the best that I have ever met except at times a little frivolous.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the stereotypical



comment about being frivolous, the Alexander appears to have been well regarded by his superiors and colleagues and, on the whole, was considered to be a capable and competent officer.

Unfortunately Alexander's personnel file is now missing from the National Archives. Without the records contained in this file it is difficult to determine how each of his commanders assessed his performance throughout his relatively short career. It is likely, though, that despite the praise given to Alexander by his white colleagues and superiors, many still considered him to be inherently less capable than his white counterparts. He was widely acknowledged as a remarkable member of his race, but that recognition probably still fell short of full acceptance of professional equality. Alexander's superiors did believe that he was capable of service at higher grades. In November 1893 he was allowed to take the examination for promotion to first lieutenant. He passed the test and wrote to a friend later that month that he expected to pin on the new rank "in about six months."<sup>52</sup>

Two months after his successful promotion board Alexander was detailed to Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio to serve as that school's first professor of military science and tactics. Wilberforce, an all-black university affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, provided a broader curriculum than that offered at the time at other African American institutions such as Hampton Institute in Virginia and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Established in 1856, Wilberforce shared the common goal of uplifting the race through education and training and, according to longtime university president William S. Scarborough, was "the first organized effort of the race

to help itself.”<sup>53</sup> Within a month of his arrival at Wilberforce Alexander was dead. On March 26, 1894 during a weekend trip to Springfield, Ohio he died suddenly in a barber’s chair after complaining of a headache. The official cause of death was apoplexy, which one black newspaper speculated may have been caused by excessive smoking.<sup>54</sup>

The 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry mourned Alexander’s death. A regimental order was published that announced the black lieutenant’s unexpected demise and eulogized his service to the unit. “Devoting ability and energy to the zealous performance of every duty, appreciating the delicate distinctions of social intercourse which the peculiar and oft-times trying positions of his office thrust upon him, Lieutenant Alexander succeeded in winning the respect and admiration of his brother officers, obtaining from all an acknowledgement of his capacity and worth. He was manly, courteous, and honorable; always a gentleman with a high sense of the duties and obligations of an officer.”<sup>55</sup> In death, at least, Alexander was afforded the same honors given to the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry’s fallen white officers. The regimental commander directed that “in respect to his memory the officers of the regiment will wear the usual badge of mourning for thirty days.”<sup>56</sup> In 1918, over twenty-four years after his death, the stevedore cantonments and labor encampments located in Newport News, Virginia, were renamed Camp Alexander in “honor of the late Lieutenant John H. Alexander, 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Cavalry, a colored graduate of the United States Military Academy who served from the time of his graduation until his death as an officer of the army.” The tribute stated that he had been “a man of ability, attainments and energy” who “was a credit to himself, to his race and to the service.”

Although this recognition of Alexander's service was certainly deserved, one must wonder why the honor was not bestowed upon the black lieutenant until almost two-and-a-half decades after his death.<sup>57</sup>

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Charles Young entered service as an active duty Regular Army officer in 1889, only two years after Alexander. He encountered many of the same problems and prejudices that his black predecessors had been forced to deal with. He was the last African American to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy during the nineteenth century, and his long career sheds light upon American society and the social and professional aspects of black officers' military careers.

At West Point from 1885 to 1889, Young experienced the same ostracism and loneliness that Flipper and Alexander had endured. One of his classmates recalled that "it cannot be said that during his first years at the Academy Young was a popular cadet. Left much to himself, he had few opportunities to exhibit likable traits of character, and he made few friends." Young exhibited "dog-like perseverance" at the Academy, though, and "gained ground each year" so that "his own class began to acknowledge and respect his finer traits of character." Like his black predecessors, Young earned the grudging respect of his classmates although he never received their full acceptance.<sup>58</sup>

An event that occurred following Young's graduation from the Academy in 1889 underscored the army's lack of planning for the existence of black officers and the need for rules concerning their assignments within the Regular Army. Because of his low class rank (he graduated last in a class of forty-nine), Young was assigned as an

Additional Second Lieutenant of Cavalry. This meant that he was not placed immediately within a regiment like most of his classmates following graduation but was, instead, an extra second lieutenant that the army could use to fill officer positions as they opened up throughout the army. Theoretically, Young could have been assigned to any of the ten cavalry regiments and not just the two all-black regiments. To ensure that this would not happen, the War Department transferred the black officer from the cavalry to the infantry in hopes that he would be able to fill an opening in the all-black 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. After being informed of the transfer, Young asked for reconsideration because he had already “made arrangements accordingly for outfit and uniforms for that arm [cavalry] ... and any change will be at great expense.” He expressed his belief that he would “be able to do more real good as a cavalryman” and stated that he would “much prefer to remain an additional” officer than accept an immediate appointment to the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. In October 1899 a position came open in the all-black 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment and Young was transferred back to the cavalry to fill that opening.<sup>59</sup>

No one in the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, including the white commanding officer, greeted Young with open arms. Acting Regimental Commander Major Guy Henry informed the Adjutant General’s office that “the transfer of 2<sup>d</sup> Lt Charles Young to the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry will work a serious disadvantage to the regiment” by causing “[white] officers not to apply for assignment to the regiment.” His concern that the black officer’s assignment to the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry would lead white officers to seek out other regiments had merit. Many officers refused assignments to all-black regiments despite the fact that they generally received faster promotions. Henry asked the War Department to “equalize the

assignments of colored officers to the colored cavalry regiments.” His own regiment already contained one African American officer, John H. Alexander, and he urged the War Department to transfer Young to the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment for parity. He even claimed that “Lieutenant Alexander objects to Lieutenant Young’s assignment, as keeping them together gives no breadth to their efforts to advance their race.” Henry pleaded that “for the benefit of the colored race” Young should be transferred to another regiment. The Adjutant General informed him that Young was placed in the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry “to avoid appointing him to a vacancy of 2<sup>d</sup> Lieutenant in a white regiment of cavalry.”<sup>60</sup> He was told that neither the Commanding General, John Schofield, nor the Secretary of War, Redfield Proctor, saw a “valid objection to the assignment” and that the leadership of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry would accept the black officer whether they liked it or not.<sup>61</sup>

Young’s service in the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry got off to a rocky start. On 5 April 1890 the regimental commander, Colonel Joseph Tilford, reprimanded him for “tactical errors committed ... at guard mounting.” These mistakes included failing “to inspect the boxes of the file closet,” giving the “command of execution for change of direction” too early, not saluting “until after arriving within six yards,” and giving the command “‘guide left’ before the rear platoon had passed the Officer of the day.” Speaking for the commander, the post adjutant directed Young to make note of these deficiencies and to correct them in the future.<sup>62</sup> Later that month he was chastised for being late to stable duty. Major James Randlett noted that “there was no officer present at stables of ‘B’ Troop ... until about 10 minutes before grooming ceased when 2<sup>d</sup> Lieut. Young put in an appearance.” Randlett chided that “if this officer is to be given charge of the stable duty of his troop I

would recommend that promptness in attendance be required of him.” Young responded that he thought he had complied with the “spirit of the paragraph which requires commissioned officers to be present for the purpose of seeing that the horses are all safe and that the grooming and feeding are properly done, all of which I did.”<sup>63</sup>

In May 1890 Colonel Tilford noted in an official endorsement to the Adjutant General that Young’s tactical errors had been the result of either “carelessness or ignorance of tactics” and stated that the reason the black officer had given for being late to stable duty constituted a “very insufficient excuse.” He asserted that Young’s troop commanders had often complained about his “habitual lateness at formations and general carelessness in regard to duty” and that “other officers in the Post have frequently remarked on Lieutenant Young’s inattention to duty and apparent indifference thereto.” Tilford contended that Young “has had more consideration shown him in this regard than any white officer would have received” and stated that this official reprimand should serve as “a lesson to this young officer.”<sup>64</sup> Young responded respectfully, stating that the report was “very painful to me, since I hold doing my duty as the sole aim in life.” The black lieutenant maintained that “during my 6 months service in the Army I have always manifested a desire to correct any and everything” and that “if I have failed and have been complained of it has been through no intentional neglect.” He lamented that “I would scorn to draw pay as an officer knowing that I had willfully neglected any duty as one.” Young concluded “that there may have been neglect and errors springing from inexperience and want of practice” but to charges that he had “wilfully [sic] and knowingly” disregarded his duty as an officer he stated that “I must say no.”<sup>65</sup>

Although his first few months at the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were difficult, Young eventually won over some of his superior officers. In 1891 the commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Colonel James Biddle, commented that the black officer “was neat in his uniforms and equipment, his bearing was gentlemanly, and he was highly spoken of by the officers.”<sup>66</sup> One of Young’s former critics, Major Randlett, praised him as an officer that was “exemplary in character” and was well regarded by “all officers and men of the garrison.” While Randlett acknowledged that Young remained “comparatively alone socially” he insisted that “his sterling worth” ensured that the black lieutenant was “respected by all of his associates.”<sup>67</sup> When the Young was transferred out of the regiment in 1894, Major Randlett, thanked him for “his untiring zeal, fidelity and well directed energy” with which he performed his duties. He “commend[ed] Lieut. Young to his new associates as eminently worthy of their confidence and high esteem.”<sup>68</sup>

Young left the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry to fill the position at Wilberforce University left vacant when John Alexander unexpectedly died. He would serve for many years at Wilberforce and eventually made his home in the area surrounding the University. Young enjoyed a social life at Wilberforce that had been denied him throughout his entire professional career. He made a number of influential African American friends at the university, including its president, William Scarborough, and influential civil rights activist, W.E.B. Dubois.

The few black officers that existed in the Regular Army were frequently assigned to positions at black institutions such as Wilberforce or appointed as attachés to predominantly black nations. The War Department used these assignments to minimize

contact between white and black officers and to ensure that African Americans were not placed in situations where they could command white enlisted men or outrank white officers.<sup>69</sup> Since neither Flipper nor Alexander ever wore a rank higher than second lieutenant there was no chance that they could be placed in command of white subordinates within the all-black regiments. As Young was promoted to higher ranks, however, this became a chief concern of the War Department and was a paramount consideration in his assignments. In addition to his numerous tours of duty at Wilberforce University, Young also served as the military attaché to both Haiti and Liberia at various times throughout his career.

It is interesting to note that Young's race does not appear to have affected his promotions. He advanced through the ranks at roughly the same pace as the rest of his classmates that branched into cavalry upon graduation from West Point.<sup>70</sup> And, although his troop assignments were limited by the aforementioned unwritten policy, Young commanded successfully at both the company and the squadron level. As a company commander in the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Young was described as "an energetic cavalry officer, industrious and capable."<sup>71</sup> While in command of I troop, Young deployed with his unit to the Philippines during the Philippine War. His commanding officer observed that during this deployment, in particular, he performed his duties "in an excellent manner."<sup>72</sup>

In 1916 Young commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment during the Punitive Expedition in Mexico. His regimental commander, Colonel William C. Brown, was a classmate of Henry O. Flipper and described Young as "an excellent



officer, handicapped only by the fact that he is a colored man.” Despite this backhanded compliment he presented a rather favorable assessment of the black officer’s performance in command. Brown noted that Young’s “position—a colored officer with white officers under him—was peculiarly trying and called for the exercise of tact and good judgment, but so well did he conduct himself that not a single complaint reached my ears.” He contended that Young “commanded his Squadron well” and “commanded the respect of both officers and men of his command.”<sup>73</sup>

At a time when American involvement in World War I was almost assured, Brown provided a positive assessment of Young’s capacity to command at the next higher level. “As he is undoubtedly the best educated and most capable colored man in the U.S. Army I have no hesitation in recommending him for the Colonelcy of a Colored Volunteer Cavalry regiment. Energy, good judgment and loyalty to his superiors are his striking characteristics.”<sup>74</sup>

It was significant that Brigadier General John J. Pershing, who served as the overall commander of the Punitive Expedition, agreed with Colonel Brown’s assessment of Young’s potential. He included the black officer in a short list of “active, energetic and able” officers that he deemed capable of commanding “brigades of militia in federal service” should they be needed.<sup>75</sup> Pershing would later recall that Young “possessed qualifications which were admired by all men, and which are desired in all members of the Army.”<sup>76</sup> Race, however, factored prominently into Pershing’s evaluation of the black officer. He was “a man of high devotion to duty, an accomplished scholar, and a gifted musician, embodying the highest culture and refinement of the negro race. His

accomplishments as a soldier are worthy of the best traditions of his people and set a most creditable record of attainment for others to emulate.”<sup>77</sup> Assessments such as these were common for Young. Although he was considered an outstanding representative of his race, many still did not believe him to be as capable or competent as most white officers.

Although Young’s evaluations throughout his career were generally good, there were exceptions. In his last efficiency report in 1917, for example, his regimental commander, Colonel Ellwood W. Evans, and the post commander of Fort Huachuca, Colonel DeRosey C. Cabell, indicated that he should not be entrusted with important duties or assignments commensurate with his rank. Evans considered Young a “very intelligent colored officer” but felt that he was “hampered with the characteristic racial trait of loosing [sic] his head in sudden emergencies.” Cabell agreed with this assessment and declared that he would not want the black officer to serve under his immediate command again because he “would become excited in emergencies.” Cabell also contended that Young was “inclined to great prejudice in favor of his race” which “hampers his usefulness.” Even after a successful military career that spanned almost three decades Young was not able to overcome the racial stereotypes that existed in the minds of many senior officers in the Regular Army.<sup>78</sup>

Young compiled a record of successful commands at both the troop and squadron level, but it was not without controversy. The most notable of these involved a Southern officer named Albert B. Dockery who was assigned to Young’s command in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. He found “it not only distasteful but practically impossible to

serve under a colored commander” and asked his U.S. Senator for help with the situation. When the matter was brought to the attention of President Woodrow Wilson he asked Secretary of War Newton D. Baker to look into the matter. A native of the South himself, Wilson feared that “there may be some serious and perhaps even tragical [sic] insubordination on Lieutenant Dockery’s part if he is left under Colonel Young.” The president asked Baker to see about “relieving this situation by transferring Lieutenant Dockery and sending some man in his place who would not have equally intense prejudices?”<sup>79</sup>

Baker responded that several senators had brought up similar complaints from other officers in the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry “who were under the same embarrassment as Lieutenant Dockery.” He informed the president that he could likely transfer Young from his command in the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry to a staff assignment away from white officers. “It seems likely that I will be able to tide over the difficulty in that way,” Newton remarked, “for at least a while.” The Secretary of War also intimated to Wilson that Young had recently failed a medical examination for promotion to colonel and was being monitored at the Letterman Hospital in San Francisco, California. He assured the president that “there does not seem to be any present likelihood of his early return to the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry so that the situation may not develop to which you refer.”<sup>80</sup>

Doctors at the Letterman Hospital diagnosed Young with Bright’s Disease, a kidney ailment also known as chronic nephritis. This condition was a result of damage caused by a disease that he had contracted many years before during his service in Africa. A medical review board rule him unfit for further military service and Young

retired from the Regular Army as a Colonel of Cavalry in 1917. Young believed that his retirement was part of an effort by the government to ensure that he did not rise to the rank of general officer during the First World War. His separation from service certainly was politically beneficial to President Wilson and the Secretary of War Newton, but it is difficult to conclude definitely that he was forced out of the Regular Army for political reasons. The fact remains that he was, indeed, afflicted with a serious ailment that would ultimately claim his life. Despite his illness, he was recalled to active duty as a colonel in 1919 and sent to Liberia to again serve as a military attaché. Young died in Africa on January 8, 1922 from complications associated with chronic nephritis.<sup>81</sup>

Charles D. Rhodes, one of Young's white classmates at West Point, eulogized the black officer in an annual report of the Military Academy's Association of Graduates. "In a career which embraced activities with both the military and the civil officials of our own and of foreign countries, Colonel Young demonstrated qualities of mind and of temperament far above the average; and self-control and force of character which was remarkable in one whose immediate ancestors were born in slavery." Rhodes believed that "In the American army, as at West Point, he succeeded, through the use of tact, self-restraint and what may be call self-effacement, to make steady and permanent headway against racial prejudice."<sup>82</sup>

Rhodes lamented that although "life was often pathetically difficult for him in its problems of environment, he lived up to the best traditions of his Alma Mater, and played the game as a worthy graduate of the greatest of military academies." Young's classmate concluded that "perhaps the best that can be said of him is that in all his

relations with society, both as citizen and soldier, his constructive influence with his people was ever a potent factor along the troublous highway of enlightened progress.”<sup>83</sup>

\* \* \*

For African American officers, the “highway of enlightened progress” was frequently difficult to find in America. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the Regular Army tolerated rather than accepted black officers. While senior leaders did not officially discriminate against these men, they did nothing to improve their treatment or facilitate their acceptance within the officer corps. Black officers were allowed to serve as long as their existence did not disrupt the racial status quo and they openly acknowledged their status as social pariah.<sup>84</sup>

Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander and Charles Young each paid a heavy personal price to wear the shoulder boards of a commissioned officer, and their lonely existence in the Regular Army served as a warning to other prospective black officer candidates. Through diligence and dogged perseverance these three men won the grudging professional respect of some of their white colleagues, who never fully accepted them as equals. Flipper, Alexander and Young continued to be viewed by their fellow officers as aberrations in a system normally reserved for whites and throughout their professional careers their race colored any assessment of their abilities or characterization of their service.

## Notes

1. "Further Senate debate on the Wilson Bill;" quoted in Morris Macgregor and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, vol. 3, *Freedom and Jim Crow, 1865-1917* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1977), 20.

2. *Ibid.*, 17.

3. *Ibid.*, 21.

4. *Ibid.*, 22.

5. Letter from Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant to Republican Senator Henry Wilson, 12 January 1866; quoted in Macgregor and Nalty, eds., *Freedom and Jim Crow, 1865-1917*, 14-15.

6. Letter from General William T. Sherman to the Honorable J. D. Cameron, 21 February 1877; quoted in Macgregor and Nalty, eds., *Freedom and Jim Crow, 1865-1917*, 121.

7. For more information concerning Whittaker's case see John F. Marszalek, Jr., *Court-Martial: A Black Man in America* (New York: Scribner, 1972).

8. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives. *Report of the Secretary of War, 1880*. House Executive Document no. 1, part 2, vol. 2, 46<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> session. Congressional Information System U.S. Serial Set 1952, 6.

9. *Ibid.*

10. General William T. Sherman quoted in letter from J. D. Cameron to Benjamin F. Butler, 6 February 1877; quoted in Macgregor and Nalty, eds., *Freedom and Jim Crow, 1865-1917*, 119.

11. *Report of the Secretary of War, 1880*, 6. Throughout *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, Flipper maintained that West Point's staff and faculty had treated him fairly during his tenure as a cadet. Alexander made similar claims in newspaper articles published in the black press during his cadet years. Historian Theodore Harris argues that Flipper's relatively high class rank supports his statements that he received fair treatment from Academy officials. Harris contends that if Flipper's professors and tactical officers had systematically discriminated him against then he would likely have graduated much lower in his class. This same test could be applied to Alexander, who

graduated thirty-second in a class of sixty-four. See also Theodore Harris, "Henry Ossian Flipper, The First Negro Graduate of West Point" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1971), 111-112. Historian Thomas Carhart notes in a study of black cadets at the Military Academy that "While the officer corps at West Point did require that the individual rights of black cadets were protected, they drew the line social intervention, and repeatedly refused to attempt to interfere with the social lines drawn by cadets." See Thomas M. Carhart, "African American West Pointers During the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1998), 259.

12. Ibid., 228.

13. Ibid., 228-230. Schofield later wrote in his autobiography that he believed African Americans should not be given "privileges in the national institutions for which they had not become either mentally or morally fitted." He also contended that during his tenure as Superintendent of the Military Academy he had "gone beyond the limits of duty, of justice, and of wisdom in his kind treatment of the colored cadets." See John M. Schofield, *Forty-Six Years in the Army* (New York: Century Company, 1897; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 446. Biographer Donald B. Connelly contends that Schofield was blind to his own prejudices and that he was uncharacteristically short sighted and judgmental in the Whittaker case. See also Donald B. Connelly, *John M. Schofield and the Politics of Generalship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 249-268.

14. Ibid., 229-230.

15. In the nineteenth century a number of authoritative and scholarly scientific studies claimed to demonstrate the inherent inferiority of African Americans. A Philadelphia doctor named Samuel Morton published a work entitled *Crania Americana* in 1839, for example, that claimed that Caucasians were more intelligent than other races because they possessed larger craniums and, therefore, larger brains. Franz Boas discredited many of these pseudo-scientific theories in the early twentieth century with his publication of *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911). For a general history of the evolution of scientific thought concerning race in the early nineteenth century see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-1859* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). For a general history of race and culture throughout the nineteenth century see Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

16. Charles J. Crane, *The Experiences of a Colonel of Infantry* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1923), 55-56.

17. Henry O. Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point* (New York: Homer Lee & Company, 1878; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 183 (first quotation), 249 (second quotation), 247-248 (third quotation), 248 (fourth quotation).

18. Theodore D. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman: The Memoirs of Henry O. Flipper, First Black Graduate of West Point* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1997), 75-76.

19. Letter from Benjamin Grierson to Whom it Concerns, 1 November 1881, Exhibit 109 of General Court-Martial Proceedings in "Records Relating to the Army Career of Henry Ossian Flipper," Microfilm Publication T-1027 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.), 109 (hereafter cited as Records Relating to Flipper); Frank N. Schubert, ed., *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier: Records, Reports, and Recollections of Military Life and Service in the West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 90.

20. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman*, 37 (first quotation), 35 (second quotation); Charles M. Robinson, *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry Flipper* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, 1994), 11.

21. Paul H. Carlson, *Pecos Bill: A Military Biography of William R. Shafter* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1989), 126-127; Robert Utley, "'Pecos Bill' on the Texas Frontier" *American West* 6 (January 1969): 6; Bruce J. Dinges, "Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper: An Example of Black-White Relationships in the Army, 1881," *The American West* (January 1972): 14.

22. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman*, 37.

23. Robinson, *Court-Martial*, 12; Carlson, *Pecos Bill*, 122; Barry C. Johnson, *Flipper's Dismissal: The Ruin of Lt. Henry O. Flipper, U.S.A., First Coloured Graduate of West Point* (London: Privately Printed, 1980), 11.

24. William H. Leckie and Shirley A. Leckie, *Unlikely Warriors: General Benjamin H. Grierson and His Family* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 275; Robinson, *Court-Martial*, 14.

25. Robinson, *Court-Martial*, 14-15; Johnson, *Flipper's Dismissal*, 24.

26. Letter from Colonel William R. Shafter to Major Michael P. Small, 3 March 1882, Exhibit 27 of General Court-Martial Proceedings, Records Relating to Flipper, 680.



27. Testimony of Colonel William R. Shafter, General Court-Martial Proceedings, *Ibid.*, 67.
28. Johnson, *Flipper's Dismissal*, 31-34; Robert Wooster, *Fort Davis: Outpost of the Texas Frontier* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1994), 46.
29. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman*, 37; Robinson, *Court-Martial*, 96-97 & 99-100.
30. Johnson, *Flipper's Dismissal*, 74 & 66.
31. Testimony of Colonel William R. Shafter, General Court-Martial Proceedings, Records Relating to Flipper, 51.
32. Jane Eppinga, *Henry Ossian Flipper: West Point's First Black Graduate* (Plano: Republic of Texas Press, 1996), 221-230.
33. Letter from Henry O. Flipper to Booker T. Washington, 23 October 1898; quoted in Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers: Volume 4, 1895-1898* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 497.
34. Letter from Henry O. Flipper to Booker T. Washington, 12 December 1898; quoted in *Ibid.*, 529; Letter from Henry O. Flipper to Booker T. Washington, 28 December 1898; quoted in *ibid.*, 552.
35. Johnson, *Flipper's Dismissal*, 97.
36. Robinson, *Court-Martial*, 104.
37. Eppinga, *Henry Ossian Flipper*, 128.
38. "The Colored Cadet," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 15 September 1883, 1, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=13966>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.
39. Letter from John H. Alexander to John P. Green, 8 February 1885, John P. Green Papers, 1845-1940, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio (hereafter cited as Green Papers).
40. *Ibid.*

41. "Cadet John H. Alexander," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 29 November 1884, 2, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=14436>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.
42. "West Point Academy," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 19 January 1884, 1, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=14087>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.
43. Letter from Major General Mark L. Hersey to Major General William J. Smith, 21 March 1929, Cullum File 3232, Special Collections, USMA; quoted in Charles L. Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898: Black and White Together* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 296.
44. Letter from Second Lieutenant Charles D. Rhodes to Professor William S. Scarborough, 28 March 1894; quoted in Patricia W. Romero, ed., *I Too Am American, Documents from 1619 to Present* (New York: Publisher's Company, 1969), 158.
45. "John H. Alexander," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 18 June 1887, 2, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=15420>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.
46. Diary entry of John H. Alexander, 27 June 1888, Alexander Family Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California (hereafter cited as Alexander Papers).
47. "Lieut. Alexander," Crawford, Nebraska, *Tribune*, 6 April 1894; quoted in Schubert, ed., *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier*, 201.
48. Letter from Second Lieutenant Charles D. Rhodes to Professor William S. Scarborough, 28 March 1894; quoted in Romero, ed., *I Too am American*, 158.
49. "Lieut. Alexander," Crawford, Nebraska, *Tribune*, 6 April 1894; quoted in Schubert, ed., *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier*, 202.
50. *Ibid.*, 200.
51. John F. Marszalek, Jr., "Alexander, John H[anks]" in Rayford W. Logan, ed., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982), 10.
52. Letter from John H. Alexander to John P. Green, 17 November 1893, Green Papers.

53. William S. Scarborough, *An Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 65.

54. "Lieut. John H. Alexander," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 31 March 1894, 1, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=18023>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.

55. Orders No. 20, Headquarters, 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 30 March 1894; quoted in Schubert, ed., *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier*, 203.

56. Scarborough, *An Autobiography*, 133.

57. General Orders No. 294, 15 August 1918, Alexander Papers. Perhaps the renaming of the cantonment in honor of John H. Alexander was an attempt by senior political or military officials to appease a black community angry about the large scale exclusion of blacks from the officer ranks of the Regular Army during World War I.

58. U.S. Military Academy, *Fifty-Third Annual Report of the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy* [online], 152, available from <http://digital-library.usma.edu/libmedia/archives/aogreports/V1922.PDF>; internet; accessed on 05 October 2006.

59. Letter from Charles Young to Adjutant General, 6 October 1889, Officer Personnel Files: Charles Young (fiche 1 of 12), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Young Personnel File, fiche 1 of 12).

60. Letter from Major Guy Henry to Adjutant General, 30 January 1890, Young Personnel File, fiche 1 of 12.

61. Letter from J. C. Kelton, Adjutant General, to Major Guy Henry, 22 January 1890, Young Personnel File, fiche 1 of 12.

62. Letter from Post Adjutant to Second Lieutenant Charles Young, 5 April 1890, Young Personnel File, fiche 1 of 12.

63. Letter from Major James Randlett to Post Adjutant, 24 April 1890 (first quotation), Charles Young response to letter, 24 April 1890 (second quotation), Young Personnel File, fiche 1 of 12.

64. Reprimand of Second Lieutenant Charles Young, 8 May 1890, Young Personnel File, fiche 1 of 12. Unfortunately, only an unsigned portion of this document remains in Young's personnel files. It is presumably from the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry commander, Colonel Joseph Tilford.

65. Letter from Second Lieutenant Charles Young to Post Adjutant, 7 May 1890, Young Personnel File, fiche 1 of 12.

66. Efficiency Report of Second Lieutenant Charles Young, 15 December 1891, Officer Personnel Files: Charles Young (fiche 10 of 12), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Young Personnel File, fiche 10 of 12).

67. Efficiency Reports for Second Lieutenant Charles Young, 6 January 1892 and 1 March 1894, Young Personnel File, fiche 10 of 12.

68. Orders No. 20, Fort Duchesne, Nebraska, 18 May 1894, Officer Personnel Files: Charles Young (fiche 2 of 12), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Young Personnel File, fiche 2 of 12).

69. Two black officers that were brought up from the enlisted ranks through competitive examination in 1901 also served in similar assignments. John Green and Benjamin O. Davis both served as attachés to Liberia. Davis, the first black officer to achieve the rank of general officer, also served numerous tours as professor of military science and tactics at Wilberforce University. His son, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. contended that these "professionally disadvantageous assignments" were considered "'safe' assignments" by the War Department because they removed black officers from assignments where they may be called upon to command white subordinates. See Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991), 4.

70. Until his medical retirement in 1917, Young was promoted on-time with his fellow West Point classmates that branched into the cavalry. See George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point New York Since its Establishment in 1802* [online], vol. 6A, part III, 510-537 available from [http://digital-library.usma.edu/libmedia/archives/cullum/VOL6A\\_PART0003.PDF](http://digital-library.usma.edu/libmedia/archives/cullum/VOL6A_PART0003.PDF); internet; accessed on 20 February 2007.

71. Efficiency report of Captain Charles Young, 18 November 1910, Officer Personnel Files: Charles Young (fiche 11 of 12), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S.

National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Young Personnel File, fiche 11 of 12).

72. Efficiency Report for Captain Charles Young, 14 July 1901, Young Personnel File, fiche 10 of 12.

73. Efficiency report of Major Charles Young, 30 May 1916, Officer Personnel Files: Charles Young (fiche 12 of 12), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Young Personnel File, fiche 12 of 12).

74. Ibid.

75. Memo, Commanding General, Brigadier General John J. Pershing, to Adjutant General of the Army, 21 August 1916, reprinted in Robert E. Greene, *Colonel Charles Young: Soldier and Diplomat* (Washington, D.C.: Robert Ewell Greene, Publisher, 1985), 256.

76. Letter from General John J. Pershing to Charles E. Williams, 17 March 1926, John J. Pershing Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Pershing Papers).

77. Letter from General John J. Pershing to Charlotte Atwood, 21 July 1941 in Pershing Papers.

78. Efficiency report of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Young, 24 July 1917, Young Personnel File, fiche 12 of 12.

79. Letter from President Woodrow Wilson to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, 25 June 1917; quoted in Morris Macgregor and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, vol. 4, *Segregation Entrenched, 1917-1940* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1977), 106. Apparently President Wilson and Secretary Baker incorrectly referred to Albert Dockery as a first lieutenant when he was, in fact, a captain. They corrected this mistake in their later correspondence concerning the matter.

80. Letter from Secretary of War Newton D. Baker to President Woodrow Wilson, 26 June 1917; quoted in Macgregor and Nalty, eds., *Segregation Entrenched 1917-1940*, 107.

81. David P. Kilroy, *For Race and Country: The Life and Career of Colonel Charles Young* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 123; U.S. Military Academy, *Fifty-Third Annual Report of the Association of Graduates*, 152.

82. U.S. Military Academy, *Fifty-Third Annual Report of the Association of Graduates*, 153.

83. *Ibid.*, 155.

84. Historian Charles Kenner states, “The careers of the black officers show only too well the limits of the frail entente between blacks and whites in the military.” Although at times a sense of camaraderie must have existed between the Anglo and African American officers of the four all-black regiments he contends that “race relations were too dependent on national trends to have any chance of permanent success.” See Charles L. Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898: Black and White Together* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 309.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE VIEW FROM THE BLACK COMMUNITY

The late nineteenth century was an especially trying time for black Americans. Following the end of Reconstruction, many of their civil and political rights were systematically stripped away. Across the country, Anglo Americans denied African Americans full citizenship, and their subordinate social and political status deprived them of even the most basic rights and freedoms. Violence against blacks was commonplace, particularly in the South, and few opportunities for advancement were available to members of the black race.<sup>1</sup>

African Americans viewed military service, perhaps more than any other occupation, as a relatively egalitarian career field with opportunities for advancement. Despite serving in segregated units and sometime working for openly prejudiced officers, black soldiers received equal pay for equal work and experienced more freedom and security in the profession of arms than they could have hoped to achieve in practically any other line of work available to them at the time. The success of African Americans in the Regular Army, particularly the small number that served as commissioned officers, forcefully demonstrated that, when properly educated and trained, no portion of military service was beyond the abilities of blacks.

The nation's African American population viewed Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander and Charles Young as important figures in their struggle for equality and respect. The black press closely monitored their careers and heralded their accomplishments as well as their failures and setbacks. Each of these men served as role

models for aspiring African American youths and, through their successes, they helped to instill a sense of dignity and pride within other members of their race. To varying degrees black West Point graduates were embraced as heroes by their people during their own lifetimes.

\* \* \*

Following Henry Flipper's graduation from West Point in 1877, there was some discussion of how he could best be utilized by the War Department. An editorial in the *Brooklyn Eagle* maintained that Flipper "could be made much more useful than as a target for Indian bullets, if our government would withdraw him from the army and place him in some colored college." This particular newspaperman, however, had a rather biased reason for advocating such an assignment. He contended that at such an institution Flipper "could teach the pupils engineering, so that when they reach African they could build bridges, railroads, etc."<sup>2</sup>

There were also serious leaders in education of both races, though, that believed that African American officers should be detailed to all-black colleges and universities. Leading educators realized that these men were outstanding examples to other members of their race of the success that could be gained through education and perseverance. In 1878 Richard Coke, a powerful Democratic senator from Texas, asked the Secretary of War, George W. McCurry, to assign Flipper to the "branch of the A & M College of Texas devoted to the education of colored youths." Senator Coke made the request on behalf of the college president, Thomas Sanford Gathright, who intended to use Flipper as the Commandant of Cadets at the institution. McCurry informed the senator that he



could not detail Flipper at that time because only a limited number of officers were available for duty at college campuses, and the state of Texas had “only about two thirds of the population required for the detail of an officer.” For his part, Flipper did not see the point of such assignments. He stated that he had “no taste or tact for teaching” and contended that, if presented with the opportunity to serve at a black college or university, he “would decline any such appointment.”<sup>3</sup>

Booker T. Washington, the influential black leader and principal of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, also sought the services of African American West Point graduates. It was likely not their teaching abilities that he desired as much as their ability to serve as positive role models for his black students. Shortly after John Alexander’s graduation from the Military Academy Washington asked the army’s Adjutant General, Richard C. Drum, “if it would be possible ... to secure the services of Lieut. Alexander the colored man who recently graduated at West Point as professor of military tactics?” To make sure that the general knew that his request was legitimate and that the officer would be put to good use, he informed him that Tuskegee was a state sponsored institution that was “for the benefit of the colored people.”<sup>4</sup> Drum replied that Alexander could not be detailed to the school because “Army regulations forbid the detail of an officer for duty of this character until he shall have served three years with his regiment.”<sup>5</sup>

A few years later Washington again sought the services of an African American graduate of the Academy, Charles Young. He offered the black officer a position as the professor of military science at Tuskegee, but warned Young that, unlike some northern

schools, weapons would not be furnished to students at his institution and weapons training would not be a part of their curriculum. Young replied that “It would be impossible ... for me to do creditable work with the boys without ... guns and equipment for them.” He informed the black leader that “The pride and manliness, the self-respect and obedience, the strong virtues of promptness, reverence, neatness, and command—things consequent to training—are not to be had without a gun, a uniform, and authority at the back of the whole department.” He assured Washington that this type of training would not “turn your institution into a military camp” but would rather be “common-sensical and along the line of helpfulness.” Washington, however, likely knew that white southerners would not tolerate the arming and military training of young black men at a college campus in the Jim Crow South. Although this disagreement ultimately prevented Young from accepting the position at Tuskegee, he and Washington remained cordial and corresponded regularly about matters pertaining to their race until the black leader’s death in 1915.<sup>6</sup>

Samuel T. Mitchell, the president of Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio, also sought to bring African American officers to his campus. In 1894 he successfully secured the services of John Alexander as the school’s first professor of military science and tactics. Charged with organizing and overseeing the newly formed military department, the black lieutenant’s “sad and sudden death” shortly after arriving at the institution left “a vacancy at the very beginning of a most promising work.”<sup>7</sup>

Mitchell began a vigorous letter writing campaign to political and military leaders, including President Grover Cleveland, in an attempt to have Charles Young

assigned to the position left vacant by Alexander. “He is [the] only colored graduate from West Point left in the service, his home is in Ohio, and he bears the reputation of being an efficient and honorable officer,” Mitchell informed Ohio Democratic Senator, Calvin S. Brice.<sup>8</sup> The War Department initially declined his request because the black lieutenant had not, at that time, completed five full years of active service in the Regular Army, a newly instituted legal requirement before officers could be detailed away from operational troop assignments. In the end Mitchell’s persistence paid off and Young joined the faculty of Wilberforce University in May of 1894.<sup>9</sup>

As these examples indicate, the army’s senior leadership did not initially embrace the idea of assigning African American officers to all-black institutions. As black officers were promoted to higher ranks, though, these assignments came to represent the nexus of the interests of senior white officers and some influential black educators. The War Department wanted to ensure that African Americans were not placed in command positions over white subordinates, and college presidents, such as Washington and Mitchell, wanted to provide their students with examples of black men who had achieved success through education, discipline and hard work. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the War Department repeatedly detailed the small number African Americans that existed in the officer corps of the Regular Army to Wilberforce University or to military attaché positions in predominantly black nations. Although these assignments took these officers away from troop duty, they do not seem to have negatively affected their potential for promotion. And, duties such as these

allowed African American officers to enjoy a level of socialization that was almost completely denied to them in the army's operational regiments.<sup>10</sup>

Of the three black men that graduated from West Point in the nineteenth century, only Young served for an extended period of time as a professor of military science and tactics. At Wilberforce University he was an important member of the faculty and taught language and math courses in addition to his military science classes. Not all of the young men appreciated the black officer's attainments and some openly rebelled against his attempts to teach them discipline. A young black man named John Hilton complained to the War Department that one day Young "flew into a rage, attacking me unexpectedly, mutilating my clothes" and contended that the black lieutenant "drew his sword with the threatening words 'I will fix him.'" This student asserted that "probabilities are that he would have injured me had it not been for the prompt action of Pres. Mitchell as I was unarmed and defenceless [sic]." As a "law abiding citizen" Hilton urged the Adjutant General to "bring [Young] to justice."<sup>11</sup>

Young answered the charges by stating that Hilton's allegations were "falsehoods concocted for the purpose of gaining that sympathy from the War Department which he ... signally failed to obtain from those in authority before whom his case has come." He denied drawing his saber and indicated that he had grabbed the unruly and insubordinate young man by the collar "for the purpose of bringing him to himself." Far from a defenseless individual, Young asserted that Hilton was a "heavy, stout, muscular man, the strongest in the Corps of Cadets." His physical strength "combined with his innate stubbornness" led the black youth to believe that he could

challenge authority and essentially do as he pleased. The black officer advised the War Department not to give “too much weight to communications coming thus from malcontents who have been duly dismissed ... because of their bad acts.”<sup>12</sup>

The leadership and faculty of Wilberforce supported Young completely in his efforts to discipline and train his young wards. Their response to the Hilton incident, in particular, demonstrated their faith in the black officer and their endorsement of his methods. Mitchell informed the War Department that Hilton’s “responsibility in the case was so apparent that the faculty unanimously decided that he must make due apology for his insubordination ... or be dismissed. He chose the latter alternative.” The student appealed his dismissal to the executive board of the university but “So manifest a spirit of intolerance did he there exhibit, that the Board did not even call upon Lieut. Young for explanation.” The executive board “endorsed unanimously the action of the faculty” and upheld Hilton’s dismissal from Wilberforce. Mitchell concluded that “the whole affair was simply a case of stubborn [sic] defiance of rightful authority.”<sup>13</sup>

Young found similar discontentment among members of his own race while serving as a battalion commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Ohio volunteers during the Spanish American war. As a Major of Volunteers, Young enforced strict discipline throughout his command even though the unit never deployed into the war zone. Some of the black volunteers chafed at the rigid and repetitive military training demanded by their commander. One soldier declared that Young drilled his men so hard because he wanted to impress whites. “It is true that he takes pains to gratify the curiosity of white people to the neglect of our race. Whenever there is a large crowd of white people on the

grounds, we can be expected to 'be drilled to death' as the boys say." This soldier also mused that Young was only interested in his own promotion. "Major Young ... says he has a 'sure thing' on getting a captaincy of a troop of cavalry [in the Regular Army], as many of the officers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry were killed [in the war]... he also knows the longer he remains in the battalion the less will be his chances when this battalion is disbanded."<sup>14</sup>

Despite these denouncements, which were made public through the press, the editor of the *Cleveland Gazette* openly defended Young as "one of the most capable and efficient men in the army." The editor declared that "Maj. Young has won the confidence and esteem of his superiors" and contended that "a more kind-hearted, courteous and affable officer and a gentleman does not exist..." As a professional army officer and West Point graduate he "naturally insists upon discipline" and that "his men obey his orders," but "he is not the harsh, cruel commander" that some "would have people believe." Although his style rankled some within the ranks of his organization, Young maintained the support of his superiors and of the local black community.<sup>15</sup>

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Many African American leaders, particularly those involved in education, embraced Flipper, Alexander and Young as outstanding examples of black equality. However, this did not translate into uniform acceptance into the top ranks of the black community at large. In fact, only one of the three, Charles Young, achieved a notable leadership status among African Americans during his lifetime. Henry Flipper, for one, felt that his own acceptance by prominent blacks was directly related to his continued

success in the white man's world. After charges were proffered against him in 1881 he sent a white friend to Washington, D.C. to ask "the leading colored men" for their financial assistance to help him secure adequate legal representation for the court-martial. His associate was told that "if Lieut. Flipper proves his innocence, he can have all the money he needs." Flipper's friend "met with similar rebuffs in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other places."<sup>16</sup> His rejection by black leaders was even made public in the *New York Times*, which maintained that "Among the leading colored men the sentiment is unmistakably one of bitter indignation against Flipper." The newspaper contended that "if the court-martial before which he will be tried imposes a rigorous sentence, no effort will be made on their part to mitigate the punishment."<sup>17</sup> For the rest of his life, Flipper believed that the leadership of the black community had abandoned him in his hour of need. In his memoirs he remembered that "Greatly chagrined and depressed, helpless and alone ... I determined to fight my battle alone and unaided, as I had always done."<sup>18</sup>

Almost two decades after his forced dismissal from service Flipper again asked influential African Americans to aid him in his fight to have his military record cleared. A number of prominent black men offered him their help, including William S. Scarborough, a former Atlanta University classmate of Flipper's who went on to become the president of Wilberforce University. The former army officer recalled in his memoirs that in 1898 Scarborough "expressed his pleasure at knowing I was trying to have my Army record cleared up, said he personally knew the two Senators and all the representatives in Congress from Ohio, had considerable influence with them, as he had

obtained various services from them for Wilberforce and he knew he could help me through them.” Flipper sent money to Scarborough in the hopes that the college president could use his political connections to help move along his appeal, but declared that “if he ever did anything, I never heard of it.” He lamented that “[Scarborough] had found a sucker and bled him to the limit.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the professional success that Flipper enjoyed as an engineer after leaving the army, he was never accepted by the black elite and often felt like an outsider when he came into contact with them. During a trip in 1898 to the nation’s capital, influential African Americans Robert and Mary Terrell and Alice Dunbar invited him to be their dinner guest. Robert Terrell, a municipal judge in Washington, D.C., was an important black leader in the capital city, and his wife, Mary, was one of the most prominent and influential black women in the nation at that time. Alice Dunbar, the wife of celebrated black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, was also a well-known author and political activist. Flipper described the event as somewhat awkward and embarrassing and intimated in his memoirs that he “worried quite a bit over the incident and reached the conclusion that they had invited me merely to see what Lieut. Flipper looked like and to size him up.” He admitted that he felt “the result had been unsatisfactory to them.”<sup>20</sup>

Although Flipper lived to be eighty-four years old, he never assumed a significant leadership position within the African American community. The fact that he spent much of his professional life after the military in the border regions of the American Southwest and in South America, far from the centers of black population and influence, likely contributed to his lack of high status. But in his memoirs Flipper



indicated that, in his mind, prominent African Americans distanced themselves from him because of the public humiliation that accompanied his 1881 court-martial and subsequent dismissal. After that event he believed that he was more of a novelty for black leaders rather than a serious candidate for a leadership role among African Americans.

John Alexander also never assumed a significant leadership role within the African American community. It was his untimely death at the age of thirty rather than a professional misstep that prevented him from becoming a prominent black leader. Widely viewed as an intelligent, articulate and highly capable individual, Alexander may have gone on to attain much of the prominence and recognition that Charles Young later enjoyed had he lived longer. One black newspaper commented that, with Alexander's death, "the race loses probably its greatest military light."<sup>21</sup> Another editor stated that "His sudden death is a shock to us, and we sincerely mourn his untimely end." The article described Alexander as "a young man of unusual brilliancy, with a long and useful career before him" and lamented that "to be cut down just at the beginning of life, as it were, is a sad blow to the whole race."<sup>22</sup> The black lieutenant was certainly admired and well respected by the African American enlisted men that served with him in the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment. Following his death his soldiers named their local chapter of the Army and Navy Union, an all-black mutual aid association, the John H. Alexander Garrison in his honor.<sup>23</sup>

Of the three African American men that successfully negotiated the challenges of West Point in the nineteenth century, Charles Young, by far, received the most

recognition and developed the greatest leadership role within the black community. His professional success, no doubt, helped him to achieve national recognition as a black leader. During a military career that spanned almost thirty years, Young consistently achieved success and demonstrated the innate equality of blacks. His service confirmed that, when properly educated and trained, African Americans could succeed as Regular Army officers.

Young also developed and maintained friendships with prominent black leaders that helped make him a nationally known figure. Probably the most significant of these associations was with W. E. B. Dubois, an influential civil rights activist and founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The two men served together on the faculty of Wilberforce University where they formed a lasting friendship and a deep respect for one another. This friendship, combined with his continued professional success in the army, helped Young become a recognized member of the “Talented Tenth,” a term used by Dubois to describe the black intelligentsia. To Dubois, the black officer was “an heroic figure ... silent, uncomplaining, brave and efficient.” He respected Young because he “had been segregated, discriminated against and insulted” throughout his career, but in the end, he “came through everything with flying colors.”<sup>24</sup>

Dubois’ friendship and support helped Young receive national acclaim for his services to his race. After returning from attaché duty in Africa in 1915, Young received word from his old friend, that he had been selected to receive the NAACP’s Spingarn Medal. Given annually to the “man or woman of African descent and American

citizenship who shall have made the highest achievement during the preceding year in any field of elevated or honorable human endeavor,” this prestigious award recognized Young’s significant contributions to his race while assigned to the American mission in Liberia.<sup>25</sup> Considered “to be the most distinguished recognition which a colored man receives in this country for scholarly attainments and distinguished service,” the Spingarn Medal cemented Young’s status as a civil rights leader within the black community.<sup>26</sup> Massachusetts Republican governor Samuel W. McCall presented the award to Young in front of more than 2,500 people in Boston, praising his service to blacks throughout the world. The African American officer informed the assembled crowd that “there are two ways, besides warfare methods, to kill a black man, the first is to oppress him by continually telling him that it is against the nature of things that he can ever rise in the world; the other is to tell him ‘he is it,’ and doesn’t need to do anything further.” The black officer jokingly told the crowd that “This is the first time this [second] method has been tried on me, and I hope to survive it.”<sup>27</sup> Widely covered by the black press, this event helped make Young a nationally known black figure.

Two years later, following a successful squadron command within the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Young was found to have a serious medical condition during a routine physical examination. Although army doctors recommended that he be medically retired, Young believed himself to be fit enough to remain on active duty and assured senior army leaders that he was “willing to take any future risks to my health and life connected therewith.” He argued that “our country needs trained officers too badly ... to retire an officer without ache or pain, who feels himself physically fitted for active campaign.”<sup>28</sup>

Many African American leaders rallied behind the black officer and attempted to pressure President Woodrow Wilson's administration into leaving him on active duty. W. E. B. Dubois told Young that "We will take all possible steps to bring your case to the notice of the authorities."<sup>29</sup> Robert R. Moton, who became principal of Tuskegee Institute following Booker T. Washington's death, informed President Wilson that "The colored newspapers and the colored people generally are very much concerned about this matter."<sup>30</sup> Emmett Scott, who served as the special assistant to the Secretary of War for Negro Affairs during the First World War, assured Young that "All of us, in fact the whole race, are proud of you beyond measure because of the splendid record you have made. You are our one proof of what black soldiers can do in the way of accepting responsibilities as officers and of living up to the traditions of West Point if given a chance." He intimated to the black officer that he had joined in with others to urge the president to "halt this procedure."<sup>31</sup> Despite the best efforts of his powerful friends, Young was medically retired from active duty in July 1917 with the rank of colonel. Ordered to report to the Ohio state Adjutant General, he was placed in command of a militia regiment "raised purely for political purposes" that was "not required for service anywhere."<sup>32</sup>

Young's forced retirement just prior to the nation's entry into World War I elicited a flurry of protests from black leaders and the black press. One editorial noted that the "retiring of Colonel Young when our country is at war ... arouses suspicion in the minds of Colored men." The newspaper editor charged that "Had Colonel Young remained on the active list he would have surely risen to the rank of general, if justice

was done him. But ... it appears that injustice has been done him, and the race, in advance, by retiring him now.”<sup>33</sup> In an open letter to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, the editor of the Cleveland *Advocate* maintained that Young’s retirement “from active service when in the very prime of life—right in the midst of war, and just before the creation of a long line of brigadier generals” demonstrated that “the fair play we assumed would rule in your department has been routed by damnable race discrimination.” The editor asked if Baker’s approval of the black officer’s medical retirement meant “that the rank to which he had attained [colonel] is the dead line of Colored officers no matter how meritorious.”<sup>34</sup>

In a last ditch effort to demonstrate his fitness to the War Department, Young rode a horse from his home in Xenia, Ohio to Washington D.C. in June 1918. Averaging thirty-one miles a day with only one rest day during the entire ride, Young completed the 497-mile journey in only sixteen days. Widely reported in the black press, the ride brought renewed interest to his case, but ultimately failed to change his status.<sup>35</sup>

Young continued to seek reinstatement but was deeply disappointed. At one point, he advised a young black man seeking an appointment to the Military Academy to pursue a different career field. “If you put one-half of the time, patience, diligence and ‘pep’ in any other profession or vocation, you will succeed and get rich.” But “if you go thru [sic] the Military Academy it means a dog’s life while you are there and for years after you graduate, a pittance of a salary as a subaltern and in the end retirement on a mere competence, which does not pay if you have a little girl in view that wishes to wear

diamonds.” He assured the youth that “ I tell you this as a brother who has been over the whole road. I wish I had taken my time and put it in tropical agriculture and supplement it with the Spanish language and I would have been a rich man now instead of a Colonel on the scrap heap of the U. S. Army.”<sup>36</sup>

Despite his forced retirement, Young remained a prominent figure in the African American community. In 1918 he was selected to serve a three-year term on the Board of Directors of the NAACP, a position that recognized his role as an important civil rights leader and rewarded his many years of service to the black race. He took part in numerous speaking engagements on behalf of the organization until he was recalled to active duty at the end of 1919 to again work in the American mission to Liberia. Young served in this position in Africa until his death in 1922.

After Young’s death, W. E. B. Dubois asserted that army leaders knew that another assignment to Africa would kill Young. He declared, “They sent him there to die. They sent him there because he was one of the very best officers in the service and if he had gone to Europe he could not have been denied the stars of a general. They could not stand a black American general” so “they sent him to the fever coast of Africa” to die. Dubois viewed Young’s life as “a triumph of tragedy.” He had “lived in the Army surrounded by insult and intrigue and yet he set his teeth and kept his soul serene and triumphed.” Dubois maintained that “steadily, unswervingly he did his duty. And Duty to him, as to few modern men, was spelled in capitals. It was his lode-star, his soul; and neither force nor reason swerved him from it.” He concluded that “he is dead. But the heart of the Great Black Race, the Ancient of Days—the Undying and Eternal—

risers and salutes his shining memory: Well done! Charles Young, Soldier and Man and unswerving Friend.”<sup>37</sup>

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Though not equally welcomed into the top tier of black society, average African Americans almost universally embraced Flipper, Alexander and Young. In the press as well as in popular literature, these three men were lauded as heroic figures and, after their deaths, their reputations evolved into legendary status. In 1914, for example, the *Boston Advertiser* reported that Henry Flipper had been identified by the War Department as General Francisco “Pancho” Villa’s senior military advisor. The article maintained that the former black officer had been “as brilliant a cadet as ever studied at West Point” and that his talents and abilities “were much respected” in the Regular Army. Following his dismissal from the military Flipper “went to Mexico a soldier of fortune” and eventually became Villa’s “right hand man.” The article concluded that “Whatever successes Villa has had in a military way are declared to be due to Flipper.”<sup>38</sup> The former black officer was angered by the article, which he called “a pure and gratuitous fabrication.” He wrote in a letter to his friend, Republican New Mexico Senator Albert B. Fall, that he did not know Villa and had “never been in sympathy with him, his movements or his aims.”<sup>39</sup>

In 1916 a similar article appeared in the *Washington Eagle*, a black newspaper published in the nation’s capital. This time, Flipper responded with a scathing letter to the newspaper’s editor. He stated that the article about him “contains so many glaring falsehoods, it is inconceivable that a man of any intelligence could have written it” and

that it could only be used for the “purpose of injuring me in some way.”<sup>40</sup> He informed the editor that “I am loyal through and through” and proceeded to provide a complete list of jobs he had held while living in the American West to demonstrate that he had “been usefully and honorably employed since leaving the Army, and have not had time to meddle in Mexican politics.” He concluded his letter with a stinging rebuke to the article’s author, who he called “a conscienceless, gratuitous, malicious, unmitigated liar! His only excuse, if any be admissible, is his superlative ignorance.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite his blistering denial of this article, the rumor that Flipper was involved with Pancho Villa continued to circulate through black communities across the United States. Widely viewed as a Robin Hood-like figure, Villa captured the imagination of many Americans and garnered headlines in the nation’s press. The revolutionary leader’s war against the Mexican government was largely viewed as a struggle of the exploited masses against that country’s elite. To many downtrodden blacks, Flipper’s alleged support of this supposed champion of the oppressed was viewed with pride.<sup>42</sup>

Popular contemporary literature also depicted John Alexander and Charles Young as heroic figures. A book published in 1902 detailing the accomplishments of the black race declared that Alexander had served bravely in Cuba during the Spanish American war.<sup>43</sup> Charles Young was also said to have served in Cuba during the conflict. One book contended that “he served with distinction in the Spanish-American War, where his regiment rescued Colonel Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘Rough Riders’ from complete annihilation.”<sup>44</sup> Another book reported that Young had actually been in command of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry when it “saved the Roosevelt Rough Riders from



humiliation at San Juan Hill.”<sup>45</sup> These were, of course, sensationalized accounts of the service of these two black officers. Alexander died four years prior to the outbreak of the war with Spain and never served outside of the United States during his military career. Young, assigned to an Ohio volunteer battalion throughout the war, also never deployed to Cuba, though he eventually served two tours of duty in the Philippines. And, as a Regular Army first lieutenant, he certainly would not have been placed in command of a cavalry regiment even if he had been sent to fight in Cuba.

After Young’s death in 1922 General John J. Pershing received a number of letters from individual members of the black community asking him to confirm popular myths that existed about the black officer. Carl Murphy, the editor of Baltimore, Maryland’s *Afro-American*, asked the general in 1923 to confirm that he had “declared [Young] to be the most efficient officer you had with you in the Mexican Punitive Expedition and that you asked for him to be sent to France to take part in the World War.”<sup>46</sup> Pershing’s aid-de-camp informed the editor that the general “has no recollection of the declaration ascribed to him regarding Colonel Young.” While he maintained a high regard for the black officer “there were a number of unusually effective officers with the Punitive Expedition in Mexico.” The aid-de-camp wrote that “There were very few individuals who General Pershing called for by name to be sent to France” and he assured the editor that “Colonel Young was not among these.”<sup>47</sup>

Although Young’s military career was sensationalized somewhat by his admirers, he was truly a respected and revered leader among African Americans. As the most well known of the three African American men that graduated from West Point in

the nineteenth century, his death was mourned in black communities across the nation. His people gave him an elaborate funeral that befitted a fallen hero before his interment at Arlington National Cemetery in 1923. The *New York Times* reported that “The negro population of Washington made the occasion of Colonel Young’s funeral one of demonstration in respect to his memory, negro schools being closed for the day, and thousands gathered along Pennsylvania Avenue and Arlington.”<sup>48</sup>

More than a decade after his death, Young was included in a compilation of biographies of influential African Americans titled *Negro Builders and Heroes*. The author stated that, during his life, the black officer had held the “affection of his people throughout the country,” and that his successful military career inspired other members of his race. The author concluded that African Americans eagerly embraced Young because “The high courage he exhibited, the slights he suffered, and his hopes that were baffled or unfulfilled, were all a part of their own daily striving.”<sup>49</sup>

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By the turn of the century, Anglo Americans intent on maintaining power and authority had stripped African Americans of most of the civil and political rights that they had gained during Reconstruction. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the South, where both legal and extralegal means were used to force blacks from the political process and to ensure that they remained in a subordinate status to whites. Poll taxes, literacy tests and grandfather clauses deprived the majority of African Americans of the right to vote and organizations like the Ku Klux Klan used terror tactics, such as lynching, to control blacks and to deny them basic freedoms.

The military careers of Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander and Charles Young gave hope to a downtrodden and abused people. In the eyes of many, their success at West Point demonstrated the innate ability and inherent equality of African Americans while underscoring the value of hard work and perseverance. Leaders, especially those in education, held these three men up as important role models for black youths. The African American community treated Flipper, Alexander and Young as important figures in the perpetual struggle for freedom and increased civil and political rights. As the lives and careers of these black officers progressed, they became heroes for a people denied the most basic rights and freedoms. America's black population shared in the victories as well as the defeats that these men encountered throughout their professional military careers.

## Notes

1. For a general survey of these developments see Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in the Mind; Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998).
2. Undated newspaper article from Brooklyn, New York *Eagle*; quoted in Henry O. Flipper, *The Colored Cadet at West Point* (New York: Homer Lee & Company, 1878; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 282.
3. Letter from Democratic Senator Richard Coke to George W. McCurry, 25 February 1878 (first quotation), George W. McCurry to Democratic Senator Richard Coke, 13 March 1878, Officer Personnel Files: Henry O. Flipper (fiche 1 of 3), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Flipper Personnel File, fiche 1 of 3); Flipper, *Colored Cadet*, 283 (third quotation).
4. Letter from Booker T. Washington to Richard C. Drum, 8 October 1887 (first quotation); quoted in Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 391; *ibid.*, 390 (second quotation).
5. Letter from Richard C. Drum to Booker T. Washington, 11 October 1887; quoted in *ibid.*, 392.
6. Letter from Charles Young to Booker T. Washington, 31 March 1899; quoted in Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 5 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 69-70.
7. Letter from Samuel T. Mitchell to Republican Senator Calvin S. Brice, 2 April 1894, Officer Personnel Files: Charles Young (fiche 2 of 12), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Young Personnel File, fiche 2 of 12).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Letter from Adjutant General to Samuel T. Mitchell, 5 April 1894, *ibid.* Mitchell requested Charles Young's services following John Alexander's death in April 1894, but the black officer did not complete five years of service until August 1894. Although the War Department did not place Young on orders to Wilberforce University until he had completed the full five years required by law, he was allowed to take leave and proceed to the institution to begin work in May 1894.

10. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., son of the nation's first black general, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., briefly discusses the reasons that the War Department consistently assigned black officers to attaché duty or to faculty positions at all-black colleges and universities in his autobiography. He contends that the primary consideration was that senior military officials did not want African American officers assigned to command positions over Anglo American officers. See Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991), 4.

11. Letter from John Hilton to Adjutant General, 6 February 1895, Young Personnel File, fiche 2 of 12.

12. Letter from Charles Young to Adjutant General, 14 April 1895, *ibid.*

13. Letter from Samuel T. Mitchell to J. O. Gilmore, Assistant Adjutant General, 7 March 1895, *ibid.*

14. Letter from Taliaferro Miles Dewey to Editor, Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette*, no date; quoted in Willard B. Gatewood, *"Smoked Yankees" and the Struggle for Empire: Letters From Negro Soldiers, 1898-1902* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 120 (first quotation); Letter from Taliaferro Miles Dewey to Editor, Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette*, ca. 20 September 1898; quoted in *ibid.*, 116 (second quotation).

15. "Major Young Slandered," Cleveland, Ohio, *Gazette* [online], 19 November 1898, 2, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=19016>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.

16. Theodore D. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman: The Memoirs of Henry O. Flipper, First Black Graduate of West Point* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1997), 59.

17. "Lieut. Flipper's Disgrace," *New York Times*, 2 September 1881, 2.

18. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman*, 59.

19. *Ibid.*, 57. In his own memoir, Scarborough expresses his belief that Flipper was the victim of racial injustice and relates a conversation that Richard T. Greener, the first African American graduate of Harvard, had many years later with an unnamed white officer familiar with the case. This individual allegedly "admitted as fact the injustice done" the former black officer but contended that his conviction "could not be successfully combated because of powerful influence." Scarborough argues that "This same influence I myself met when Flipper's friends years later, were again striving, but unsuccessfully, to gain his reinstatement into the army." Scarborough never elaborates

on who was behind this “powerful influence” but seems to lead the reader to believe that Flipper’s court-martial and conviction were part of a concerted effort by those in power to remove the black lieutenant from the army. See William S. Scarborough, *An Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 43.

20. Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman*, 61.

21. Undated newspaper article from the *American Citizen*; quoted in eulogy for “John H. Alexander” in U.S. Military Academy, *Twenty-Fifth Annual Reunion of the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy* [online], p. 73; available from <http://digital-library.usma.edu/libmedia/archives/aogreunion/V1894.PDF>; internet; accessed on 05 February 2006.

22. Undated newspaper article from the Indianapolis, Indiana, *Courier*; quoted in *ibid.*

23. Frank M. Schubert, *Buffalo Soldiers, Braves, and the Brass: The Story of Fort Robinson, Nebraska* (Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 156.

24. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. DuBois* (New York: International Publishers Company, Inc., 1968), 267. DuBois believed that the upper echelon of the black community, properly educated and trained, could “through their knowledge of modern culture ... guide the American Negro into a higher civilization.” This was the group of people that he referred to as the “Talented Tenth.” See *ibid.*, 236.

25. “Spingarn Gold Medal Awarded to Maj. Chas. Young,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 February 1916, 5.

26. Unnamed, undated newspaper clipping under the title of Dodson’s Page, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (herein cited as NAACP Papers).

27. “Medal Given to MAJ Young,” Boston *Globe*, 23 February 1916, NAACP Papers.

28. Letter from Charles Young to President, Examining Board, 7 May 1917, Officer Personnel Files: Charles Young (fiche 9 of 12), Microfiche Publication M-1395 (U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (hereafter cited as Young Personnel File, fiche 9 of 12).

29. Letter from W. E. B. Dubois to Charles Young, 28 June 1917, Charles Young Papers, 1897-1931, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio (hereafter cited as Charles Young Papers).
30. Letter from Robert R. Moton to President Woodrow Wilson, 7 July 1917, *ibid.*
31. Letter from Emmett Scott to Charles Young, 18 June 1917, *ibid.* (first quotation); Letter from Emmett Scott to Charles Young, 9 July 1917, *ibid.* (second quotation).
32. Memorandum for Record, Tasker H. Bliss, 31 July 1917; quoted in Morris Macgregor and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, vol. 4, *Segregation Entrenched, 1917-1940* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1977), 113.
33. "Colonel Young's Retirement," Cleveland, Ohio, *Advocate* [online], 18 August 1917, 8, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=6502>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.
34. "To Hon. Newton D. Baker," Cleveland, Ohio, *Advocate* [online], 25 August 1917, 8, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=6512>; internet; accessed 17 January 2007.
35. David P. Kilroy, *For Race and Country: The Life and Career of Colonel Charles Young* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 130-31.
36. Letter from Charles Young to Clarence I. Smith, Jr., 15 January 1919, Charles Young Papers. Apparently Clarence I. Smith took Young's advice to heart. No one by that name was accepted into the U.S. Military Academy from 1919 through 1930.
37. Henry L. Moon, *The Emerging Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: Essays and Editorials from The Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 339.
38. "Brains Back of Villa," Boston *Advertiser*, 31 July 1914; quoted in Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman*, 99.
39. Letter from Henry Flipper to Senator Albert B. Fall, 14 August 1914; quoted in *ibid.*, 100.
40. Letter from Henry Flipper to Editor, Washington *Eagle*, 4 May 1916; quoted in *ibid.*, 101.

41. Ibid., 104.

42. In an interview with Flipper's sister-in-law, historian Theodore Harris learned that some blacks in Atlanta, Georgia actually believed that Flipper was Pancho Villa. See Harris, ed., *Black Frontiersman*, 93-104.

43. J. J. Pippin, *The Story of a Rising Race: The Negro in Revelation, in History and in Citizenship* (No place: N. D. Thompson Publishing Company, 1902), 51, accessed through the African American Biographical Database available at the Library of Congress.

44. J. W. Gibson and W. H. Crogman, eds., *Progress of a Race, or the Remarkable Advancement of the American Negro, 1925* (Naperville, Ill.: J. L. Nichols and Company, 1925), 460, accessed through the African American Biographical Database available at the Library of Congress.

45. John L. Hill, *When Black Meets White* (Cleveland: Argyle Publishing Company, 1924), 112, accessed through the African American Biographical Database available at the Library of Congress.

46. Letter from Carl Murphy to General John J. Pershing, 2 June 1923, John J. Pershing Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

47. Letter from George C. Marshall, Jr. to Carl Murphy, 8 June 1923, *ibid.*

48. "Negro Officer Buried," *New York Times*, 2 June 1923, 11.

49. Benjamin Brawley, *Negro Builders and Heroes* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 170.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

An individual's historical legacy is difficult to measure during his own lifetime. Because mainstream attitudes and perspectives change over time, later generations often assess an individual's life and accomplishments differently than previous generations. In life, Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander and Charles Young each enjoyed some level of attention and respect within the black community. These men embodied many of the qualities and traits that late nineteenth century black leaders believed were essential to the elevation of the race, and their successes at West Point and in the Regular Army were bright spots in an otherwise dark chapter in African American history. At a time when the promises of Reconstruction went largely unrealized for the majority of the country's black population, the professional careers of these three men provided some hope that recognition of equality could eventually be achieved through education, hard work and perseverance.

Historians and other scholars of African American studies who have examined the lives and professional careers of these three men have not significantly altered their legacies. For the most part, historians have concluded that these men were exceptionally gifted members of their race who achieved success in the face of overwhelming odds. Flipper, Alexander and Young each continue to be viewed as significant figures in black history and they continue to be included in scholarly works detailing the lives and careers of important African Americans, such as the *Dictionary of American Negro*

*Biography*, published in 1982, and *African Americans at War: An Encyclopedia*, published in 2004.<sup>1</sup>

Individuals familiar with the personal and professional lives of the first African American West Point graduates might assume that Charles Young, who had the longest and most successful military career, would also have the most enduring legacy. The first black man to attain the rank of major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel in the Regular Army, Young was the highest-ranking African American in the nation's Armed Forces for the last three decades of his professional life.<sup>2</sup> Although his forced medical retirement in 1917 denied him the ability to compete for promotion into the general officer ranks, he remained a very popular figure in the black community and was recognized as a pioneer for his race in the army's officer corps.

In the decades that followed his death in 1922, subsequent generations of successful black officers largely overshadowed Young's accomplishments. Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., a friend and protégé of Young, became the first African American general officer in 1940. Davis' career, in particular, eclipsed that of his former mentor. Today, Benjamin Davis is a much better known and more recognizable figure in African American history than Charles Young.

Of course, historical firsts, individuals who achieved success in a certain field or endeavor before any of their contemporaries, often receive the most interest from historians as well as the public at large. Of the three men that graduated from West Point in the nineteenth century, Henry Flipper has received significantly more attention than either Alexander or Young. His position as the first black graduate of the U.S.

Military Academy as well as the first black officer in the Regular Army have certainly made him a more identifiable figure, but the fact that many continue to believe that his court-martial and dismissal from service was racially motivated has also given him increased recognition and even some level of notoriety. An examination of Flipper's historical legacy effectively demonstrates the continuing relevance of early African American military trailblazers and confirms that these men continue to inspire generations of Americans in the twenty-first century.

In *African American Lives*, a compilation of biographical sketches of influential blacks in American history, Flipper is remembered as an individual who contributed greatly to the development and growth of the American West. Though best known as the first African American graduate of the Military Academy, it was Flipper's long engineering career after his dismissal from service that "established him as an important figure in western development." His "impressive linguistic and legal credentials were valuable assets for the growth of mining industries in both the United States and Mexico" and his long and successful civilian career was "conspicuously marked by the high moral conduct and methodological problem solving imparted to him at West Point."<sup>3</sup>

The *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, published in 2006, also praised Flipper for his contributions to the development of the West during his post-army career. He was "a recognized authority on Spanish and Mexican land law," and he became a trusted friend to many powerful businessmen and politicians in the region, including senator and future secretary of the interior Albert B. Fall. After serving as

Fall's assistant in the Department of the Interior during the Harding administration, the former black officer worked as a consultant for the Pantepec Oil Company in Venezuela where "he published an important translation of that country's mining and land law." Although he enjoyed a distinguished civilian career, the author notes that Flipper always felt that his good name had been tarnished by his forced dismissal from military service in 1882. He spent much of his life trying to overturn his conviction but "his efforts were in vain."<sup>4</sup>

In the decades that followed Flipper's death in 1940, relatives and activists vigorously sought to clear his military record. In the 1970s Flipper's niece, Irsle Flipper King, and a white Georgia schoolteacher named Ray MacColl petitioned the army to have Flipper's court-martial overturned. In 1976 the Army Board for Corrections of Military Records, an organization created by Congress after World War II to deal with the appeals of former soldiers for revisions of their service records, agreed to examine Flipper's case. The application provided to the five-person panel on Flipper's behalf asked that his conviction be thrown out and that his record be cleared. While the board lacked the authority to overturn the conviction, they voted four to one to upgrade Flipper's discharge from dishonorable to honorable. In February 1978 his body was exhumed from Southview Cemetery in Atlanta and was interred with full military honors in his hometown of Thomasville, Georgia.<sup>5</sup>

Although certainly not as well known as more recent African American leaders, Flipper's status as a hero within the black community has continued to grow in recent decades as well. Two made-for-television movies, *Trial of the Moke* (starring Samuel

Jackson) and *Held in Trust* (narrated by Colin Powell and Ossie Davis), recount his life and trials while celebrating his achievements.<sup>6</sup> In 1977 the U. S. Military Academy created the Henry Ossian Flipper Memorial Award, which is presented each year to a cadet “who demonstrates the highest qualities of leadership, self-discipline, and perseverance in the face of unusual circumstances.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1994 the law firm of Arnold & Porter took on Flipper’s case pro bono in a bid to receive a presidential pardon. They contended that Colonel William R. Shafter, his commanding officer at Fort Davis, Texas, was a racist and that Flipper had deceived him because he feared reprisals and believed that Shafter was conspiring to get him out of the army. In the five years that followed, seven attorneys and four summer associates dedicated more than 2,000 hours to the case. In February 1999 President William J. Clinton issued Henry Flipper the first posthumous presidential pardon in United States history. Almost fifty years after his death, the former black officer’s military record was cleared with the stroke of a pen. In his remarks President Clinton stated that “today’s ceremony is about a moment in 1882, when our Government did not do all it could do to protect an individual American’s freedom...this good man now has completely recovered his good name.”<sup>8</sup>

The examples set by early African American army officers in their personal and professional lives continue to be relevant and continue to influence and inspire generations of black military leaders to the present day. One of the men present for Flipper’s presidential pardoning ceremony was Colin L. Powell, arguably the most successful African American military and political figure of the late twentieth and early

twenty-first century. Powell rose to the rank of four-star general and, in 1989, became the first black Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In this capacity he served as the senior military advisor to the President of the United States and held the highest military position in the Department of Defense. His distinguished career in public service continued in 2000 when President George W. Bush nominated him to be the first African American Secretary of State in U.S. history. The U.S. Senate unanimously confirmed Powell and he served as the nation's chief diplomat for four years.<sup>9</sup>

Powell understood that his own success in the military could not have been possible without the efforts of early racial trailblazers such as Henry Flipper. In his memoirs he marveled at Flipper's accomplishments. "Imagine a child born into slavery, yet possessing the grit to get himself admitted to the U.S. Military Academy in 1873, just ten years after Emancipation." Powell believed that "bigots in uniform" had framed Flipper in an attempt to force him out of the service. He contended that the 1881 court-martial was not about deciding the young black officer's guilt or innocence, but was rather about determining whether an African American man was capable of serving as an officer in the Regular Army. "My career and that of thousands of other black officers answered with a resounding yes. But we knew that the path through the underbrush of prejudice and discrimination had been cleared by the sacrifices of nameless blacks who had gone before us, the Old Sarges and Henry Flippers. To them we owed everything."<sup>10</sup>

Powell confessed that he felt a special bond with the black men that had preceded him in the profession of arms. At a groundbreaking ceremony for a monument dedicated

to the Buffalo Soldiers of the all-black cavalry regiments Powell intimated that he “felt connected to my past, to Lieutenant Flipper, and to blacks who fought on the Western plains and charged up San Juan Hill, all but invisible to history.”<sup>11</sup> The fact that he kept a picture of Flipper, who he referred to as “the railroaded Buffalo Soldier,” on his wall during his tenure as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is a testament to the relevance of Flipper’s example and represents his enduring legacy.<sup>12</sup>

Lieutenant General Larry R. Jordan, a black West Point graduate and former instructor in the Academy’s history department, wrote on the centennial of Flipper’s graduation: “The changing pattern of human values and of the worth society places on the contributions of a minority have made an otherwise obscure graduate a national historical figure. The judgment of history has accorded Henry O. Flipper the honors he deserved but never received in his lifetime.”<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

Henry O. Flipper, John H. Alexander and Charles Young achieved success at West Point where many others before and after them failed. Raised in solid, two parent homes that emphasized education and racial solidarity, these three men imbibed the middle class values taught by their parents and used them to guide their personal and professional lives. Through their service, Flipper, Alexander and Young provided hope to a downtrodden people and the dignity and quiet resolve that these men carried with them throughout their lives has inspired generations of Americans. Although these black officers lived and served many years ago, they remain extremely important figures in

African American history and continue to be a source of inspiration for many Americans both inside and outside of the black community.



## Notes

1. Rayford W. Logan, ed., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982); Jonathan D. Sutherland, *African Americans at War: An Encyclopedia*, Vols. 1-2 (Santa Barbara, Cal.: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004).
2. John H. Alexander, who graduated from West Point two years before Charles Young, was the ranking black officer in the Regular Army until his death in 1894.
3. John C. Fredriksen, "Flipper, Henry Ossian" in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., *African American Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 298. For another account of Flipper's life see Bruce J. Dinges, "Flipper, Henry Ossian" in Roger J. Spiller and Joseph G. Dawson, eds., *Dictionary of American Military Biography*, Vol. 1 (London: Greenwood Press, 1984), 328-30.
4. Benjamin K. Scott, "Flipper, Henry O." in Colin A. Palmer, *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, Vol. 2 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), 804.
5. Darryl W. Jackson, "'Injustice Anywhere is a Threat to Justice Everywhere:' Lt. Henry O. Flipper Receives the First Posthumous Presidential Pardon in U.S. History [online]," available from [http://www.arnoldporter.com/publications\\_articles.cfm?practice\\_ID=91&publication\\_id=987](http://www.arnoldporter.com/publications_articles.cfm?practice_ID=91&publication_id=987); internet; accessed 20 March 2007; Jane Eppinga, *Henry Ossian Flipper, West Point's First Black Graduate* (Plano, Tex.: Republic of Texas Press, 1996), 232; Charles M. Robinson, *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry Flipper* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, 1994), 110; "West Point's First Black is Re-Buried with Honors," *New York Times*, 12 February 1978, 21
6. *The Trial of the Moke* [online film description], available from [http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v\\_id=275541](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v_id=275541); internet; accessed 08 August 2006; *Held in Trust: The Story of Lt. Henry O. Flipper* [online film description], available from [http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v\\_id=203529](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v_id=203529); internet; accessed 08 August 2006.
7. Eppinga, *Henry Ossian Flipper*, 232.
8. "The Five-Year Legal Battle to Win a Presidential Pardon for West Point's First Black Graduate," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 24 (Summer 1999): 35; William J. Clinton, "Remarks on the Posthumous Pardon of Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper, February 19, 1999," *Weekly Compilations of Presidential Documents* 35:8 (March 1, 1999): 261-262.

9. "Secretary of State Colin L. Powell [online]," available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/powell-bio.html>; internet; accessed 20 March 2007.
10. Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 277-78.
11. *Ibid.*, 456.
12. *Ibid.*, 587; Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military From the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2001), 450.
13. Larry R. Jordan, "A Different Kind of Centennial" *Assembly XXXVI* (June 1977): 26.

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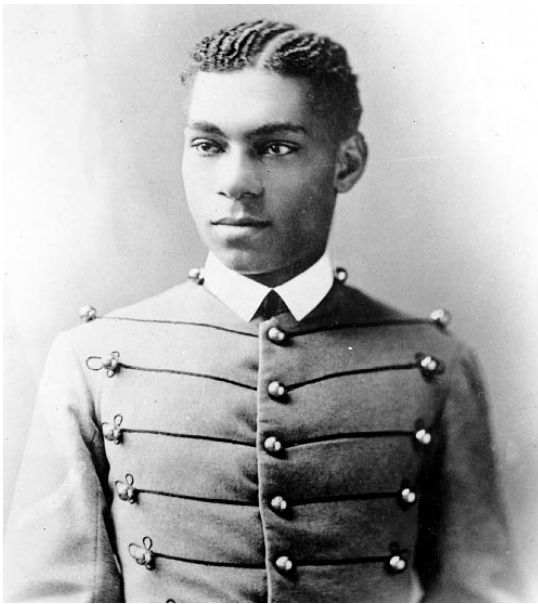
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## APPENDIX A



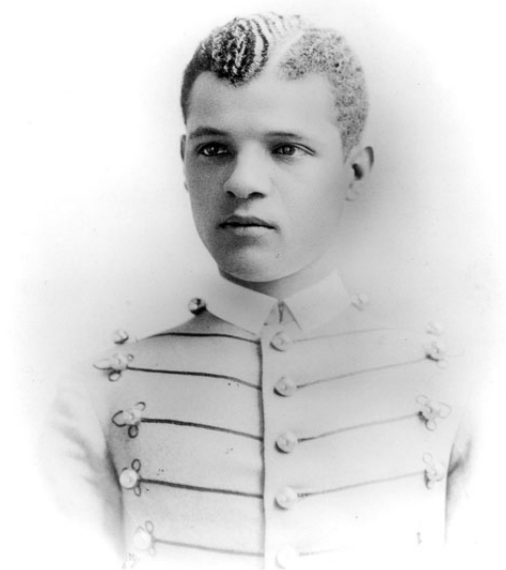
Cadet Henry O. Flipper



Second Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper

Source: "Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper, U.S. Army 1856-1940 [online]," available from <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/topics/afam/flipper.htm>; internet; accessed 20 March 2007 (top picture); National Archives and Records Administration, *Featured Documents; Lt. Henry O. Flipper's Quest for Justice: As Honorable a Record in the Army as any Officer in it* [online], available from [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/henry\\_o\\_flipper/](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/henry_o_flipper/); internet; accessed 21 December 2006 (bottom picture).

## APPENDIX B



Cadet John H. Alexander



Second Lieutenant John H. Alexander

Source: Gatewood, Willard B. "John Hanks Alexander" in *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture* [online], available from <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=46>; internet; accessed 04 April 2007 (top picture); Herschel V. Cashin and Others, *Under Fire With the Tenth U. S. Cavalry* (New York: F. Tennyson Neely, 1899; New York: Arno Press, 1969), xii (bottom picture).

## APPENDIX C



Cadet Charles Young



Colonel Charles Young

Source: "Cadet Charles Young," Charles Young Collection, 1897-1931, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio, available from <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/photo/831.cfm>; internet; accessed on 13 September 2006 (top picture); Stanford L. Davis, "Colonel Charles Young [online]" available from <http://www.buffalosoldier.net/CharlesYoung.htm>; internet; accessed 20 March 2007 (bottom picture).

## VITA

Jeremy Wayne James received his Bachelor of Science degree in history from the United States Military Academy in May 1998. Upon graduation he was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army and assigned to various posts both in the United States as well as overseas. A rated fixed and rotary wing aviator, Captain James most recently commanded B Company, 3d Military Intelligence Battalion (Aerial Exploitation) in the Republic of Korea. He received his Master of Arts degree from Texas A&M University in 2007 and is currently on assignment as an instructor of American history at the United States Military Academy.

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