

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Cathay Williams / William Cathay

(September 1844 – 1893)

“First Documented Woman to serve in U.S. Army in 19th Century “

Cathay Williams / William Cathay was born September of 1844 in Independence, Missouri, to a free-man father and a slave mother. According to the laws, a child followed the status of the mother, which made Cathay a slave as well. Her first 17 years were spent working for a wealthy farmer, William Johnson, and although he died just as the Civil War was beginning, Cathay was not released from her inherited status.

Around 1861, Cathay was taken to Little Rock, Arkansas, by the 13th Army Corps of Union Soldiers, under the command of Colonel William P. Benton. When the war ended, she was returned to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

In 1866, Cathay concealed her identity and enlisted in the 39th U.S. Infantry Company A, in St. Louis, MO, as William Cathay, a male soldier. (This infantry company, along with six others, eventually became known as the Buffalo Soldiers.) She was described by the recruiting officer as 5 feet 9 inches tall, with black eyes, hair and complexion. Cathay stated that *he* was 22 years old and a cook.

Although she saw no combat, Cathay carried a musket and marched through Kansas and New Mexico and assumed guard duty as required. In February 1867, Cathay was hospitalized for smallpox and again in April for an “itch” which, by the medical standards of the mid-1800’s, was likely scabies or lice. By January of 1868, Cathay’s health had seriously declined, likely from the effects of smallpox and the years of marching in unbearable heat. She was admitted to the hospital on five different occasions, but no one discovered she was a woman until her final hospitalization. She was honorably discharged by her commanding officer, Captain Charles E. Clarke on October 14, 1868.

Cathay returned to working as a cook at Fort Union, New Mexico and later moved to Pueblo, Colorado. She married and divorced a con-man that was later arrested for stealing her money, gold and horses. She then moved to Trinidad, Colorado, and worked as a seamstress. It was during this time that a reporter from St. Louis heard her story and interviewed her about her service in the Army. On January 2, 1876, Cathay’s life and military service narrative was published in the St. Louis Daily Times.

Around 1890, Cathay entered a local hospital and at the age of 47, applied for a disability pension, claiming that illnesses she had contracted in the Army, destroyed her ability to support herself. In September of that year, a doctor examined her and found that although she suffered from neuralgia, diabetes and that all her toes were amputated, she did not qualify for disability payments. He determined that she was in overall good health and did not merit a pension. The Pension Bureau agreed and in 1892, rejected her claim for benefits. The exact date of Cathay’s death is unknown, but it is assumed she died sometime in 1893. Her final resting place is now unknown.

In 2016, a bronze bust of Cathay Williams was unveiled outside the Richard Allen Cultural Center in Leavenworth, Kansas to honor her Buffalo Soldier service.

