

# The Clerk's Black History Series



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**Clerk of Superior Court**  
**DeKalb County**



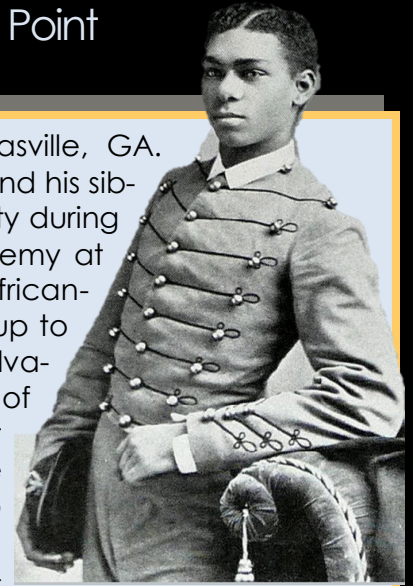
## Henry Ossian Flipper

First African-American U.S. Army officer to Command Black Troops

First African-American to graduate from West Point

(March 21, 1856 - May 3, 1940)

Henry Ossian Flipper was born into slavery, March 21, 1856 near Thomasville, GA. Despite the bleak conditions surrounding his birth, his parents instilled in him and his siblings the philosophy of pursuing excellence. While attending Atlanta University during Reconstruction, Flipper received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Although he faced hatred and rejection along with four other African-American students, he persevered and in 1877, became the first of the group to graduate, earning a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Cavalry. He was assigned to the 10th Cavalry Regiment, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, one of the four all black Buffalo Soldier regiment in the Army and became the first black officer to command regular troops in the U.S. Army during battle. He earned distinction during the confrontation between Apache leader Victorio and the U.S. Army in Texas and New Mexico between 1879 and 1880. In the



Victorio Campaign, he led A Troop under the command of Captain Nicholas M. Nolan. Flipper also distinguished himself at Fort Sill with his effective engineering skills. He constructed roads and built drainage systems that facilitated the removal of stagnant water and prevented the spread of malaria. Flipper's Ditch" became a National Landmark in 1977.

THE COLORED CADET  
AT  
WEST POINT.  
—  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF  
LIEUT. HENRY OSSIAN FLIPPER,  
U. S. A.

FIRST GRADUATE OF COLOR FROM THE  
U. S. MILITARY ACADEMY.



His military career ended in 1881 when his commanding officer accused him of embezzling almost \$2,000 of commissary funds while serving as a quartermaster in Fort Davis, Texas. Flipper was acquitted of all charges except "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman" at a U.S. Army court-martial at Fort Davis on September 17, 1881. It was revealed that his association with Mollie Dwyer, the white sister-in-law of Captain Nolan, was the real motive behind the charges and the harsh sentence was racially motivated. When President Chester A. Authur refused to reverse the verdict, Flipper was discharged from the Army on June 30, 1882. He spent much of the rest of his life challenging the charges and attempting to clear his name. He went on to work as a civil mining engineer, surveyor, translator, newspaper editor, historian and folklorist in Arizona, New Mexico, Mexico and primarily Texas (El Paso) until 1919. In 1921, he went to Washington, DC as the assistant to former U.S. Sen. Albert Fall of New Mexico when the Senator was appointed Secretary of the Interior by President Warren G. Harding. By 1923, he was employed by Texas oilman William F. Buckley Sr. as an engineer in the petroleum industry in Venezuela. Then Flipper retired to Atlanta, GA in 1931 where he died in 1940.

In 1976, President Jimmy Carter granted Flipper, posthumously, an honorable discharge. In 1999, President Bill Clinton gave Flipper a full presidential pardon.