

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



William H. West

(September 1842 – September 15, 1915)

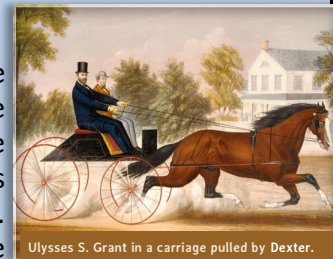
“Black Police Officer that Arrested President Ulysses S. Grant”

William H. West was born into slavery in September of 1842 in Prince George's County, Maryland. In 1863, William joined the Union Army and fought in the American Civil War. He was a soldier in Company K, 30th United States Colored Infantry, an all-black unit created by the United States War Department on May 22, 1863. The Infantry was composed of African American troops commanded by white officers. After the war West married Kathrine “Kate” Bowie on June 11, 1867, in Washington D.C. and the couple would have six children.



On August 1, 1871, William was appointed to the Washington D.C. Metropolitan police force. He was one of only two black officers on the force. In 1872 William was on duty at 12th and M Streets where he was tasked with patrolling the streets in response to a series of accidents involving speeding carriages and pedestrians. On the lookout for speeders, William noticed a horse and carriage approaching quickly. He dashed into oncoming traffic and forced the carriage to stop. Once the buggy was stopped, William recognized the driver was President Ulysses S. Grant. William gave President Grant a verbal warning for speeding and released him. It was reported that the President apologized and promised not to do it again.

The next day, William was investigating a collision when he saw President Grant's horse and buggy speeding in the same area. It took William an entire block to run down the buggy operated by the President and advised him that this time, he had no choice but to arrest him for speeding. William took President Grant to the police station, where the President quickly posted a \$20 bond and was released. There was no controversy involving the arrest of the President and William was commended for upholding the law and trying to make the streets safer.



Ulysses S. Grant in a carriage pulled by Dexter.



THIRD PRECINCT—1872
AN OLD PICTURE OF THE THIRD PRECINCT, TAKEN IN 1872. NOTICE THE CHANGES THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN THE STYLES OF THE UNIFORMS. THE METROPOLITAN POLICE RELIEF ASSOCIATION WAS FORMED SEVEN YEARS BEFORE THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN. SIMON WEST, THE COLORED OFFICER, SECOND FROM THE RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE ROW, ARRESTED PRESIDENT U. S. GRANT FOR REINING A HORSE TOO FAST DOWN PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE. THE PRESIDENT PAID THE FINE.

President Grant owned up to his mistake — though he did choose to skip his court appearance scheduled for the following day, which meant he forfeited his \$20 bond. He didn't face any further consequences, however. It was reported that 32 women showed up to testify against the drivers who had to appear in court - all who vehemently contested the speeding charges in vain. History would show that President Grant was previously arrested for speeding earlier in 1866. In all, Grant was arrested three times for violating speeding laws. After the arrest, it was reported that William and President Grant became friends, sharing their love of horses and racing.



In his later life, William himself would get into some trouble with the police. In 1884, he and fellow officer, William H. White, were tried before the board of the Metropolitan Police for neglecting their duties. They were both fined \$25. In 1898, William was accused of not paying a debt of \$40. He had borrowed money from a local lender known only as a Mrs. Terrell. The loan agreement called for him to pay 10% interest per month until the loan was paid off. In 19 months, William had paid \$72 on the \$40 loan. He stopped paying prompting Mrs. Terrell to sue him. The case was dismissed as Commissioners reviewed the loan and deemed that the lender was guilty of preying on William. In 1901, West was arrested for disorderly conduct following an argument. Later that year he retired from the Washington, D.C. police force.

William Henry West died on September 15, 1915 in Washington, D.C. He was 73.



William H. West in 1908

PREY OF MONEY LENDERS

Policeman William H. West Has Paid \$72 on a Loan of \$40.

Commissioners Decide He Need Not Pay Any More—An Order Issued Against One of the High Rate of Interest Men.

Washington Post headline—January 29th, 1898