

The Clerk's Black History Series

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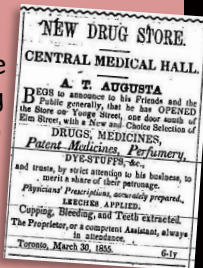


Dr. Alexander Thomas Augusta (March 8, 1825 – December 21, 1890)

"First Black Professor of Medicine and Highest-Ranking Black Officer in the Union Army"

Dr. Alexander Thomas Augusta was born March 8, 1825 in Norfolk, Virginia to free parents. Later, his parents moved to Baltimore, Maryland where he worked in a barbershop while studying. At an early age, he showed an interest in medicine. Although discrimination kept Alexander from attending the University of Pennsylvania, a local professor began teaching him privately.

In 1847, at the age of 22, Alexander married Mary O. Burgoin. In 1850, the couple moved to Toronto where Alexander was accepted into the Medical College at the University of Toronto. In 1855, he opened a Drug Store in Toronto offering medicines and other medical services. He received his M.B. (Bachelor of Medicine) degree in 1856 and was later appointed head of the Toronto City Hospital.



Augusta was inspired to action when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. Alexander wrote to President Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, on January 7, to offer his services to one of the Black regiments in the Union army. He requested an appointment as surgeon to some of the colored regiments or as a physician to some of the depots of freedman. On April 14, 1863, Augusta was the first out of eight black officers in the Civil War commissioned as a U.S. Army Major in the Union army and appointed head surgeon in the 7th U.S. Colored Infantry. Although he was a Major, his pay was only \$7 a month, significantly lower than that of white Privates. In protest, he wrote Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson who raised his pay to the appropriate level for commissioned officers.



Although he was an Army officer, Alexander suffered violence and discrimination for wearing his uniform in public. Many of the lower ranking surgeons complained about being subordinate to a black man. At the same time, streetcars were still segregated. President Lincoln responded by placing Alexander in charge of the Freedman's Hospital at Camp Barker near D.C.



In February 1864, Alexander was thrown off a streetcar during a rainstorm, wearing his Army uniform. He was forced to walk in the rain, arriving wet and late to his meeting with Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. The Senator was so outraged when he learned that Major Augusta was forced off the streetcar that he immediately requested that Congress allow blacks the same railroad privileges as whites, changing the laws and desegregating streetcars in the capital.



In 1865, Alexander was promoted to Lt. Colonel - making him the first highest-ranking black officer in the U.S. Military at that time. In 1866, he was discharged from the military, and became the head of Lincoln Hospital in Savannah, Georgia. In 1868, he opened his own practice in Washington, D.C and became the first black medical professor as one of the original faculty members of the newly formed Medical College at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Later he was the attending surgeon at the Smallpox Hospital in Washington in 1870. Alexander continued teaching Anatomy at Howard University, and remained there until 1877.

Dr. Alexander T. Augusta died on December 2, 1890. He was 65. He was buried in Section 1 of Arlington National Cemetery, making him the first black officer to be buried in the Arlington National Cemetery.

In May of 2023, Fort Belvoir Community Hospital in Fairfax County Virginia was renamed The Alexander T. Augusta Military Medical Center. Upon the hospital's naming, it was redesignated from a Community Hospital, a type of Medical Department Activity (MEDDAC) to a Medical Center (MEDCEN), a higher designation assigned to the largest and most capable military medical facilities.

