

## **Julius Witherspoon (1860 – 1906)**

Julius Witherspoon was born in Arkansas in about 1860 and spent his first twenty-four years there. In 1884 Julius, his wife Mary, and his four daughters, Stella, Gabriella, Ora, and Frances, moved to Bloomington, Illinois where Julius pursued a career as a farmer under the employment of two influential area men. He was also employed by I.H. Light for many years. While in Bloomington, Julius and Mary had two more daughters; Georgia and Jennie. They lived at 509 West Grove Street.

In 1893 Julius went to work for the Bloomington City Police, where he remained for eight years. During this time, he chose to answer the call to arms and joined the military. On June 28, 1898 he enlisted in Company G of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry in Springfield, IL. This was a regiment formed entirely of local African American men, mainly from McLean County. It was the only regiment of colored troops officered entirely by colored men. Julius was made captain of the regiment on July 21, 1898 just in time to lead the infantry into garrison duty in Cuba during the Spanish-American War.

The Spanish-American War, often referred to as “The Splendid Little War,” was caused when the United States blamed Spain for sinking their man-of-war, the U.S.S. Maine, in Havana Harbor, killing 266 men. However, it has since been determined that the actual cause of the explosion which sunk the USS Maine was the spontaneous combustion of coal gasses in a coal bunker adjacent to the munitions magazine.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the sinking of the Maine, President McKinley declared war on Spain on March 21, 1898 and called on Governor Tanner of Illinois to provide seven regiments of infantry and one regiment of cavalry. Men from across Illinois responded to the call, “Remember the Maine,” and enlisted in the Military. Bloomington then had two units of the National Guard Company D of the Fifth Infantry, and Troop B of the First Illinois Cavalry.

At first, only white soldiers were sent but because so many became sick with malaria and could not tolerate the heat, it was thought that African Americans would make better soldiers in this type of climate. This was based on the opinion of the U.S. War Department that African American troops could better tolerate the hot climate and would be immune to the diseases of the tropics because of their skin color and race.<sup>2</sup> Four all-black regiments of soldiers were some of the first units ordered to Cuba. However they too fell victim to the extreme heat and malaria just like white soldiers did. But they served with perseverance and dignity in the hopes that their outstanding work would be recognized and bring them the honor they deserved.

However, there was a great deal of division in the African American community for supporting this war. Some hesitated because they were sympathetic with the plight of Cuba, especially the black Cubans. The anti-imperialist black community said, “Is America any better than Spain? Has she not subjects in her very midst who are murdered daily without a trial of judge or jury? Has she not subjects in her borders whose children

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<sup>1</sup> “Destruction of the USS Maine,” Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq71-1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Powell. “Black Participation in the Spanish American War,” <http://www.spanamwar.com/AfroAmericans.htm>, 3

are half-fed and half-clothes, because their father's skin is black?"<sup>3</sup> Those in the black community which supported the war "maintained that the black man's participation in the military effort would win respect from whites and therefore enhance his status at home."<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1898 Congress authorized the War Department to organize ten additional volunteer regiments under its immediate direction, which was when Julius and his infantry entered the scene. These additional units (the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry) were comprised of all African American men and were recruited from the South and the Ohio River Valley.<sup>5</sup> Company G of the 8<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry, which Julius commanded, was sent primarily for garrison duty.

While in Cuba Julius wrote a letter to *The Pantagraph* about the status of his infantry. In the letter, he addressed the false reports that had been circulating through the papers giving his regiment a bad reputation. He wrote, "But in the face of these false reports made by parties who have no sense of honor, we will toll on, and brighten our past records with deeds of valor and courage, and will add to the past brilliant record of the negro soldier, noble deeds, which will be envied by the soldiers of the world... we will toll on, that our record may be as burning lights to guide and inspire our posterity for years and centuries to come."<sup>6</sup>

Sure enough, the colored regiments performed beautifully. In regards to the black regiments who momentarily enjoyed the status of heroes, the war correspondent Stephan Bonsal wrote, "The services of no four white regiments can be compared with those rendered by the four colored regiments. They were at the front at Las Guasimas, at El Caney and at San Juan, and what was the severest test of all, that came later, in the yellow fever hospitals."<sup>7</sup> The Spanish-American War was also the first instance where black men led other black men. Prior to this, it was believed that while blacks made good soldiers, only whites made good officers.

The war ended in August 1898 but shortly after the war, Company G was transferred to Puerto Rico and saw active service and most likely occupied the territory in an effort to secure the US control of the island.<sup>8</sup> The men returned home in April 1899 hoping that their military participation would improve their situation in society. Sadly, despite all the praise they received during their time in service, nothing changed at home in terms of segregation or the attitudes of whites toward the African American people.

Back in Bloomington in 1900, Julius worked as a liveryman and attended Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church. Julius had remained in poor health since his service in Cuba, possibly suffering from malaria or yellow fever. In 1903 his wife passed away. Then in 1906 Julius, who was still sick, went to spend the winter in the Soldiers' Home in Danville, IL with the hope of getting better. A few days before his death, his daughter received word that his health was improving. However on November 12, 1906, Julius died at the Home. His remains were then taken to his daughter, Mrs. Wyley Casey of 307 South Lee Street. His obituary in the *Daily Pantagraph* stated:

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<sup>3</sup> Powell. "Black Participation in the Spanish American War," 4

<sup>4</sup> Powell, 4

<sup>5</sup> Powell, 16

<sup>6</sup> "Letters from Cuba," *Daily Pantagraph*, January 3, 1899

<sup>7</sup> Powell, 10

<sup>8</sup> "The Changing of the Guard: Puerto Rico in 1898," <http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/bras.html>

“Captain Witherspoon had many friends here who will learn of his death with regret. He was a respected leader of his race and one of the best-known colored men of the city.”<sup>9</sup>

The funeral was held at Wayman and was officiated by Reverend George Brown of Normal. Company G, Bloomington’s colored militia organization, took charge of the services and fired a final salute while the company’s bugler sounded taps. Julius was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

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<sup>9</sup> “Captain Witherspoon Dead,” *Daily Pantagraph*, November 13, 1906