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Sky Pilots: African American Chaplains with the Buffalo Soldiers

John Langellier

In this 160th anniversary year of the establishment of the famed Buffalo Soldiers, some of whom served at the Presidio, the PHA thanks historian John Langellier for this story, which we offer in this special edition of the Communiqué.

July 28, 2026 marked the 160th anniversary of the U.S. Army Reorganization Act, a date set aside each year as “National Buffalo Soldiers Day.” At various times all four regiments included in this pivotal congressional legislation (the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry regiments and the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Infantry regiments) served at the Presidio of San Francisco. Although many people have heard of the exploits of these Black troops especially by their sobriquet — “Buffalo Soldiers” — the African American chaplains who ministered

to these stalwart men who faithfully donned the uniform of Uncle Sam rarely received the attention they deserve.

Between 1886 and 1939 the roll of honor included these devout Christian soldiers who served their military flocks:

Henry Plummer
Allen Allensworth
Theophilus G. Steward
George W. Prioleau
William T. Anderson
Washington E. Gladden
O.J.W. Scott
Louis A. Carter
Alexander W. Thomas
Monroe S. Caver
Issac C. Snowden

Each of the amazing stories from this litany of worthies offer inspiration to those who simultaneously seek to serve a higher power and pledge an oath to defend their country. While their individual biographies merit discussion, perhaps one example will suffice to illustrate this inspiring band of brothers who served not by bearing arms, but by the spiritual and temporal lives they dedicated to the military congregations they served.

One such story is that of one of the first Black chaplains, Allen Allensworth, who hailed from enslavement in Kentucky and cast off his chains. After the outbreak of that pivotal conflict, Allensworth’s abiding will to escape from his bondage prompt-

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ed him to flee north. For a brief time he served with the Illinois Volunteers. There he displayed his strong humanitarian bent by assisting in a military hospital. Eventually, he joined the United States Navy. Before war's end, he was a petty officer. Significantly, given circumstances aboard U.S. Navy vessels that tended to be small in size and with limited space to segregate the crew, Blacks and Whites essentially served side by side performing similar duties for the same pay. Regrettably, that practice, which dated back decades, sadly disappeared in the late Victorian era when the navy's "Great White Fleet" could be viewed with multiple meanings, including the adoption of segregation in that arm of the service akin to that long practiced by their brothers in the Army.

Be that as it may, his willingness to go to war and risk all might be traced back to Allensworth's youth. Prior to the conflict that tore the nation asunder, his thirst for knowledge led to learning the illegal arts of reading and writing while "playing school" with one of the children whose family enslaved the Black youngster. This drive for knowledge and self-improvement continued during and after the Civil War. In fact, after peace returned, Allensworth, now free from bondage, at long last, could pursue a road of his choosing. After a brief time with the Freedman's Bureau, Allensworth entered school to obtain an undergraduate degree in divinity. With his studies completed, the minister turned his full attention to preaching.

By 1885, when a vacancy for chaplaincy of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry opened, Allensworth set about to secure his commission and fulfill his desire to minister among the Black foot-soldiers

in this unit. To this end, he realized the necessity to gain political support for his cause. Mustering his allies, he wrote President Grover Cleveland, a Democrat who briefly held the presidency during a long period dominated by the Republicans. In his carefully worded letter to the commander in chief, Allensworth stated: "a number of my Democratic friends, who desire to strengthen your administration among the colored people, particularly in the south, and to show the good feelings which exist and is growing between the two races, have encouraged me to ask for an appointment."

Allensworth further suggested he could "secure good discipline and gentlemanly conduct among the soldiers." Additionally, the reverend felt that such an appointment would demonstrate the administration's support of deserving, able men from the Black community. Given that Southern Democrats of this period tended to be hostile to African Americans, this final statement might have struck a resounding chord. Here was a potential means for Cleveland's party to secure the Black vote.

Allensworth assured Cleveland that he relished the "opportunity to show, in behalf of the race, that a Negro can be an officer and a gentleman." Allensworth's carefully reasoned concluding remarks reflected the bias he realized existed. He ended: "I know where the official ends and where the Social life begins and therefore gaurded (sic) against social intrusion . . . and am prepared to gaurd (sic) against allowing myself in any position to give offense."

Mindful of the extant powerful color line, once

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Chaplain Allen Allensworth as he appeared during his posting to the Bay Area.

Join PHA on October 17th

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with Ranger Rik Penn

The Presidio Historical Association

is honored to welcome

Ranger Frederik Penn
(retired)



Saturday, October 17
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Frederik Penn grew up in a Northern Virginia town steeped in Civil War-era folklore and historic wayside markers, where his father also shared stories about his time as a soldier in the Korean War. Penn himself served his country in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division. After his service, Penn would go on to work for his country in the National Park Service, particularly at the Presidio of San Francisco, where his upbringing in history and storytelling came to the forefront.

Becoming affectionately known as Ranger Rik, he was an exceptional truth teller of the often-un-told stories of the significant roles that people of color played, especially the striking contributions of the Buffalo Soldiers, the United States Army's first all-Black unit, in the growth of our parks. Even in retirement, Rik continues to bring these complex conversations out of the shadows in illuminating fashion.

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Buffalo Soldiers at the Presidio: Company H, 9th Cavalry, 1900. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Sky Pilots

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Reverend Allensworth actually secured his appointment as chaplain, he continually balanced his own vision of the future for African Americans with the harsh political and social realities of his times. This he did from the outset. Thereafter, his record remained impeccable, yet often required caution.

After his 1886 appointment, news appeared in such announcements as one printed in a paper from his native state. The story indicated: “Rev. Allen Al-



In addition to religious duties, African American chaplains played a vital role in the education of their soldier flocks.

lensworth the well-known colored minister and politician of Bowling Green was accepted as chaplain of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry. . . . This is the first colored appointment given to Kentucky, and there is only one other colored man who is a commissioned officer in the army Henry V. Plumber (sic), of Maryland, and is stationed at Fort McKinney, Wyoming Territory.” Allensworth, the article went

on to say, was “a good speaker very ready-witted and a hard worker. In speaking of his appointment yesterday he said: ‘I feel very much honored at being selected for this place, and feel the appointment was secured through the intercession of my white friends. I have worked hard to try and elevate the colored race, always teaching one doctrine—that when a colored man displays refinement and intelligence the whites will surely recognize it.’”

In an unusual aside, the paper mentioned: “Mrs. A.V. Starbird, Mr. Allensworth’s old mistress, joined in the petition for his appointment. . . . and he was a servant in her family for several years.” Adding to the strange mix, the article divulged the minister had “also been engaged in preparing a book entitled ‘The Bright Side of Slavery,’ which he contemplates publishing in a few months.” The manuscript, however, never reached print. It seems to have been lost, perhaps on purpose, if Allensworth rethought the implications of such a publication.

What is known, despite the constraints Allensworth faced, is that his two decades in uniform found him a constant bearer of the double-edged sword of a man of God and mentor for his martial congregation. In the latter instance, while at Fort Bayard, New Mexico, he prepared one of the first army manuals for the education of enlisted personnel. Allensworth proved innovative and diligent in this and all his endeavors along with his devotion to industrial training as espoused by the better-known Booker T. Washington.

In this pursuit, Allensworth received personal leave to attend “the National Educational Association, of which he is a director,” said one newspaper account. The article, which unabashedly proselytized military service at length, indicated “young men who sought to distinguish themselves on a preparatory field for a successful career can find it in the Army that in the army as in civil life there is room at the top for all who reach it.” After extolling the virtues of spending five or ten years in uniform, the reporter advised “our young men of a patriotic turn of mind to write to the Chaplain at Fort Bayard N.M. for further information on the subject.”

Later, the chaplain took leave from the regiment on an unusual detail to be present “at the world’s Columbian exposition.” He remained at this prestigious, highly visible international fair in Chicago for nearly nine months before his return to the Twenty-Fourth. At least one newspaper derided his posting. It questioned: “Among the thirty army officers detailed for duty at the world’s fair is Captain Allen Allensworth, colored, of the 24th infantry. Army officers and the general public are wondering what possible duty an army chaplain would be called upon to perform at Chicago during the big show?”

Regardless of this snipe, the chaplain once again departed from the regiment, this time during the Spanish American War. For a brief departure from the norm, the clergyman turned army recruiter. After the Twenty-Fourth triumphantly came back to the post it had occupied before

overseas deployment — Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City, Utah — once more their spiritual leader left for yet a second temporary recruiting stint.

While keen on bringing in new and better educated blood to the regiment, the chaplain never lost sight of his religious obligations, nor his determination to share pride in a rich Black heritage with his congregation. For instance, he played a significant part during “a very impressive and appropriate programme . . . rendered at the post chapel . . . in honor of Mr. Frederick Douglass.” The regimental band “furnished music” followed by Allensworth’s delivering “a very fine address.”

Additionally, the avid educator looked to var-

ied methods of conveying his messages, whether sacred or secular. As an example, during his lecture on “Old Testament Characters,” he illustrated his text by means of a stereopticon presented to the regiment by a “Philadelphia philanthropist.”

He, however, required no extra devises to make his message clear in that he was a confident orator. Nowhere was this more evident than at a gathering of the National African American Press Association that met in St. Paul, Minnesota. There he appeared

among a lengthy list of apt presenters. Each of these worthies received no more than three minutes to deliver “rapid-fire speeches” on “The Outlook for the Race.” Why the chaplain, who was not a journalist, attended this convocation remains a mystery although he published “The Kiss,” a title and its contents evidently having been lost like his slavery manuscript.

More typically, the chaplain tended to his military assignments. Once, he even would be singled out for an unprecedented honor near the end of his tenure at Fort Douglas. This was when the “entire garrison turned . . . to witness the presentation of the flag handed the regiment by the White Rose society of New York City.” The flag was placed in the chaplain’s hands and those of one of the regiment’s senior captains. In turn, the pair passed the flag to the regimental color sergeant followed by a grand review. Fulfilling his prestigious charge “Chaplain Allensworth, with an orderly bearing the colors, advanced from the flagstaff, halted, about faced, and received the flag from the orderly. At the command



Twenty-fourth U.S. Infantry Band, 1896.

‘backward march,’ the orderly stepped back five feet, the chaplain lowered the flag, and the casing was removed by the orderly. The chaplain again about faced, unfurled the flag and presented it” to the assembled honor guard.

The martial pomp came in advance of the regiment’s next transfer. This time the Twenty-Fourth sailed to the Philippines. In early May, as the first stopover on the way to the islands, the chaplain encamped with the Twenty-Fourth for temporary marshalling at the Presidio of San Francisco, California. After his arrival there, his spouse briefly joined him.



Soon after the Twenty-fourth Infantry’s arrival at the Presidio of San Francisco, some of the men from the regiment briefly went on detached duty in Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks. This photo is from 1899.

While the regiment remained in the Bay Area, in recognition of the respect that Allensworth had gained within the Black community at large, the chaplain periodically accepted invitations to preach at local churches. Sometimes he made “appeals to his race” in sermons such as one where “he called attention to the fact that the negro had fought in all of the great wars of the nation and has won for himself, and to the nation of which he is a part, an imperishable record.” He emphasized: “the splendid work done by the colored troops at San Juan and other notable fights in the late war with Spain.” The chaplain added “they were again called to go to Manila” where they were expected to “bear a share in the conflict.” He assured his men were ready and able. Continuing, he noted that whenever a call to arms was made by the country for Black soldiers “they responded ‘Here I am. Send me.’”

Further, the chaplain urged the young men in the pews “to educate themselves, intellectually, morally and religiously; to become men of good, sound moral character, honest in all things and above all honest to themselves and their race. He impressed this advice on their minds as being a great duty which he hoped every man would fulfill.” Similarly, he urged the women in attendance “to maintain pure and virtuous characters, without which the standard of the race could not be maintained with a degree of dignity which it ought to have as a race.”

At another congregation, the powerful preacher took as his text as the “Hidden Principles of Influence.” This appearance in the pulpit took place only a few weeks after Allensworth had marched in San Francisco’s 4th of July parade with the regiment’s first battalion and band.

Toward the end of the month, Allensworth and the Twenty-Fourth Infantry were in step once again. They proceeded to *City of Para* at last to board the steamer bound for the Philippines.

As with most of the men going abroad, his family remained behind. That separation soon ended. Not long after landing in the Philippines, the chaplain experienced health problems. His medical condition resulted in sailing eastward to the Bay Area. There he rejoined his family at the Presidio of San Francisco.

He remained at the post through October 25, 1900. Then the Allensworths took a launch across the bay to Fort McDowell on Angel Island. Just before departing, he addressed another civilian flock at the Bethel A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church between Powell and Jackson.

The chaplain subsequently took up a temporary assignment on Angel Island. His medical leave eventually extended for many months. The reason for his unanticipated absence resulted from infirmities that required him to use a cane in order to remain ambulatory.

On January 21, 1901, his physical condition worsened. As reported: “while walking the cane used to support his left knee slipped, and he fell, fracturing the patella of his left knee.” Despite the setback and a good deal of pain “during the Chap-

lain's stay at Angel Island he never lost sight of his commitment to the education within the Twenty-fourth." This passion manifested itself in the form of his securing of "2,000 pounds of reading matter and a quantity of stationery, which he . . . forwarded to his regiment in the Philippines." This effort not only indicated the chaplain's loyalty to his regiment, but also a much higher level of literacy than had been the norm in times past.

Finally, on March 15, 1901, the chaplain's health improved to the degree that he could rejoin his beloved Twenty-Fourth. Before that, however, while at Angel Island, his temporary responsibility as a post chaplain presented an exceptional example of crossing the color line. There, by one account, he preached "a very interesting and instructive picture sermon" to white members of the garrison, both officers and men. Supposedly his homily was "thoroughly enjoyed by all."

Beside this one of many distinctions, because of his service in the Civil War, Allensworth occasion-

ally took part in veterans' programs. For instance, while in Salt Lake, the Utah Department of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) selected him as alternate delegate to the national encampment, which was an annual convention of this influential veterans' organization.

He also remained a party loyal. In 1904, the well-traveled chaplain attended the Republican national convention in Chicago. Political contacts and his Civil War duty combined with steadfast service brought a promotion to major. A Salt Lake newspaper article noted this advancement came about "under the new act of Congress" which resulted in the fact that Allensworth "jumped" every other army chaplain and "was made the senior major." Revealing support for the move, the reporter deemed Allensworth "one of the most intelligent men and best speakers in the corps of chaplains. . . . He is at present the only colored man in the regular army holding the rank of major."

Adding to the discussion, another observer



Credit: Angel Island State Park

After being injured in the Philippines, while serving there with the Twenty-fourth Infantry, Reverend Allensworth returned to the United States. He continued his pastoral duties at the garrison on Angel Island. Courtesy Angel Island State Park.

predicted this step would end with Chaplain Allensworth likely retiring with the rank of lieutenant colonel. That forecast provoked a salvo of refutations arguing why this would not be the case, nor supposedly was it the U.S. Army's intent under the new promotion scheme for chaplains to advance to any higher grade. Purportedly, even if Chaplain Allensworth's service in the Union Navy "seemed to entitle him to advancement to a lieutenant colonelcy upon his retirement if the War Department had known of his civil war record before his advancement it is probable, he would not have been advanced to a major's rank. This advancement would have been withheld until his retirement and the right of a chaplain to act in a lieutenant colonelcy would not have been discussed."

Several months of speculation and wrangling ensued. Rumors grew that President Theodore Roosevelt had "determined that chaplains should enjoy the rank of major and not be promoted to lieutenant colonel," stated the *Washington Times*. Even as "Teddy" Roosevelt's administration wrestled with the matter, Allensworth devotedly soldiered on as long had been his model. Nonetheless, ill health continued to plague him although not inhibiting him from travel to such places as St. Paul and Fort Snelling, Minnesota as well as Chicago. For the most part, he remained on duty with the Twenty-Fourth, which by that time headquartered at Fort Harrison, Montana.



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Finally, during the summer of 1905, orders called for this "oldest chaplain on the active list in the army" to leave his post after two decades and proceed to his home to await retirement as an end to his remarkable climb from enslavement to a nationally recognized religious figure and educator.

At that juncture, he again took leave. He passed through Salt Lake on his way for a "vacation in East and was registered at the White House for a visit." Was it possible that he thought he could meet with Roosevelt to persuade the chief executive to reverse the president's supposed stand against chaplains advancing beyond major?

Regardless of the intent of this trip, the chaplain eventually would be placed on the retired list as of April 7, 1906 "with the advanced rank of lieutenant colonel on account of his civil war record. He has the distinction of holding the highest rank of any colored man in the army." Indeed, just before Allensworth's retirement, he numbered among the last sixty-five Union veterans who remained on duty as officers out of the legions who originally served after the conflict's conclusion.

As Allensworth awaited his honorable discharge and promotion to be processed, the family began to settle at their new Los Angeles home. Even before retiring in Southern California, preliminary discussion about a colonization "scheme" in Colorado drew notice. One of these articles tinged with racist overtones ran, "another black cloud is rising over yonder: A self-governing negro colony, of which there are but thirteen in the entire country, will be established in Colorado within the next year. A tract of 10,000 acres will be purchased to set up the black crest of Ethiopia in the Arkansas valley." A trio of men headed by "Allen Allensworth, chaplain of the Twenty-Fifth (sic) United States infantry" who was to serve as "president of the colony," Reverend J.E. Ford, pastor of Zion Baptist church, was to be vice-president, and John Adams, editor of the *Western Appeal*, was slated for secretary. This preliminary concept gave way to seeking a site in the Golden State. That effort occasioned the founding of a black self-sustaining community in the San Joaquin Valley that bore Allensworth's name, and long years

later, became a California state park. Many of the key community residents and co-founders had been non-commissioned officers in the Twenty-Four and whom their former chaplain had sought to join him in California after their respective retirements.

In addition to efforts for the establishment of a town, Allensworth previously participated in Los Angeles politics and other civil duties. He would be called on as one of sixty jurors for duty in the superior court. Such a summons would have been unheard of during his enslaved youth or even at that juncture in many other states. Further, when in 1906 the devastating earthquake and fire struck San Francisco, he volunteered as member of a committee of Black citizens dedicated to raising funds for victim relief.

Moreover, justly proud of his status as a Civil War veteran, he periodically appeared at various integrated Grand Army of the Republic events as an honored guest. He occasionally offered invocations or provided remarks such as on one occasion when he made Lincoln's Birthday remarks. In one of his presentations, he even shared the program alongside another speaker—an ex-confederate officer!

From time to time, Reverend Allensworth returned to the pulpit. His sermons took such titles as the "Five Manly Virtues," "Lincoln and the Colored Soldier" and a discourse on army life in which, interestingly, he opposed the post canteen that supposedly had been instituted as a haven for off duty soldiers designed to keep them away from neighboring civilian dens of iniquity.

This negative view of an official U.S. Army policy that ran contrary to military chapter and verse diametrically opposed his stance on another matter. Surprisingly, Allensworth, endorsed the army's handling of the 1906 Brownsville Affair. He personally sought to convince African Americans "of the justice and necessity of the action of the [War] Department," which seemed contradictory to decades of support for Black soldiers. This stand spoke volumes about his complex loyalty to the U.S. Army on one hand, and to the men for whom he had served as a minister and mentor.

These examples reflected the fact that during

his lifetime Allensworth typically had to tread carefully. Throughout his chaplaincy, he regularly addressed the restrictive racial mores of his era as best as he could under cumbersome circumstances. He took advantage of the measure of opportunity afforded Blacks in the military where a greater semblance of equality existed, although limited in many ways, than could be gained from any other institutions or within the nation as a whole.

His death on September 14, 1914, in Monrovia, California, after being struck by a motorcycle, brought down the curtain on a remarkable exemplar. He truly lived by the code of his personal philosophy of influencing others "through a tolerant, genial and kindly attitude toward all men."

For Further Reading

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