

What Ever Happened to Cathay Williams (A.K.A. William Cathey): Buffalo Soldier?

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A photograph some believe to be Williams, outside The Lincoln Home orphanage in Pueblo, courtesy of Ruth Steele, The MLK Heritage Center.

While it is known that African-American troops were among the first soldiers to serve at Fort Lyons, few people know that America's only documented female Buffalo Soldier also lived in Colorado.

Catharine Williams was born on a plantation near Independence, MO. Although her father was a free man, because William's mother was a slave, so was she. New evidence suggests that when her master, William Johnson, moved up river to the new capital of MO, Jefferson City, little "Kate" was with him. Thus she may have been torn from her family before her sixth birthday. Fortunately for Kate, she would still be a teenager when she was liberated by Yankee troops, just after the first shots of the Civil War were fired in 1861. Kate, an illiterate house girl, would become personal cook to two great Union Generals, even serving General Phil Sheridan during his Shenandoah

Valley Campaign.

However it is her two years as a Buffalo Soldier that make her the darling of Military, African American, and Feminist historians. When the Civil War ended, Williams (who was described by one reporter as “black as night and masculine-looking”) officially enlisted in the first group of colored infantry formed in MO after the Civil War, the 38th Infantry. She simply flipped her name, and the recruiters and doctor pronounced her “fit for duty.” After four years of living with the Bloody 8th Indiana during the war, she knew how to survive, and what’s more, she knew how to look and act like a soldier.

The mystery surrounding Cathay Williams begins once her trail of government documents runs out. Almost everyone who has tried to solve the mystery of her last, missing, years has assumed she must have died, probably in early 1893, when her third and last request for a military disability pension was rejected. Crippled, impoverished, and with no one to care for her in Trinidad, she disappears from history—until now.

Recent research and a remarkable historical discovery by ex-librarian, Colorado Humanities Scholar, and writer Rebecca Atkinson strongly suggest that Kate Williams did not die in 1893. In fact, Atkinson believes Williams lived for two more decades, under the most shocking conditions imaginable.

Anyone interested in learning about Colorado’s most famous Buffalo Soldier, and what really happened to her, is cordially invited to Boggsville (2 miles south of Las Animas on Highway 101) on Friday, September 13th. Tours of the site begin at six, and Atkinson’s lecture and her new documentary on Williams begin at 6:45. Ice cream and refreshments will be provided by the Bent County Historical Society. Don’t miss this free, fun, and one-of-a-kind historical evening at Boggsville. For more information, call 719.546.1358.