

HENRY VINTON PLUMMER, 1844-1905

Life in Slavery

Henry Vinton Plummer was born on July 31, 1844 to Adam Francis Plummer and Emily Saunders Plummer, slaves at two Maryland plantations, Riversdale and Three Sisters, in Prince George's County. Sold with his mother in 1851, he then lived at Meridian Hill in Washington, DC, and later at Ellicott Mills, Maryland. In the spring of 1862, Plummer escaped and made his way to Riversdale, where his father hid him until he could get to an aunt's home in Washington, DC. That summer, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy, and served the Union in the Civil War until his honorable discharge in 1865. He returned to live with his parents and siblings at Riversdale. In 1866, his parents sent him to New Orleans, Louisiana, in search of his sister, Sarah Miranda, who had been sold in 1860. Their return to Maryland united the entire family under one roof for the first time. Sarah soon founded the St. Paul Baptist Church, which exists to this day. In 1867, Henry married Julia Lomax; together, they had nine children.



Henry V. Plummer (Seated Right) with Father, sisters, brothers and a niece
June 1899

Becoming a Chaplain

In 1872, Henry enrolled in Wayland Seminary, ironically located at Meridian Hill. While attending school, he worked as a night watchman in the Washington, DC post office. In 1876, he became the third pastor of St. Paul Baptist Church. Desiring to become a U.S. Army

chaplain, he applied, supported by letters of recommendation from Frederick Douglass and others. After President Chester Arthur appointed him Chaplain of the 9th U.S. Cavalry in July 1884, he served at Fort Riley, Kansas, Fort McKinney, Wyoming, and Fort Robinson, Nebraska.

Life as a Buffalo Soldier

Immediately following the end of the Civil War, Congress legislated that African Americans joining the U.S. Army were to be assigned to one of four regiments - the 9th or 10th cavalry, the 24th or 25th infantry. The Plains Indians were so intrigued by these strange looking soldiers that they named them "Buffalo Soldiers" because of their likeness to the buffalo and their courage. Although they served their country with unusual diligence, racial bias prevailed against them; all their commanding officers, for example, were white. Chaplain Plummer attended to his duties vigorously and officers commented favorably on the large numbers of enlisted men who attended his services. In addition to his duties as Chaplain, he ran the post bakery and the day school. He encountered prejudice from all aspects, but the most difficult to accept was with regard to his family's housing and in his supervision of others. His activities with the temperance movement and plans to conduct a missionary tour to Africa also made him unpopular with some post commanders. After an alleged incident in June 1894, those commanders found their opportunity to be rid of him, once and for all.

After the Military

By a general court martial, Henry Vinton Plummer was dismissed from the U.S. Army on September 7, 1894. He and his family moved to Kansas, where he pastored and held office in the Kansas State Baptist Convention. Until he died on February 10, 1905, he maintained his innocence and continued his appeal for reinstatement, citing "false testimony and prejudice" as the reason for his dismissal.

For further reading:

Kenner, Charles L. "The Ordeal of Chaplain Plummer" in *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry 1897-1898: Black and White Together*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.

Lamm, Alan K. *Five Black Preachers in Army Blue 1884-1901: The Buffalo Soldier Chaplains*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998.

Schubert, Frank N. "Religion, the Chaplaincy, and the Court Martial of Chaplain Henry Vinton Plummer" in *Buffalo Soldiers, Braves, and the Brass: The Story of Fort Robinson, Nebraska*. Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing Company, Inc., 1993.

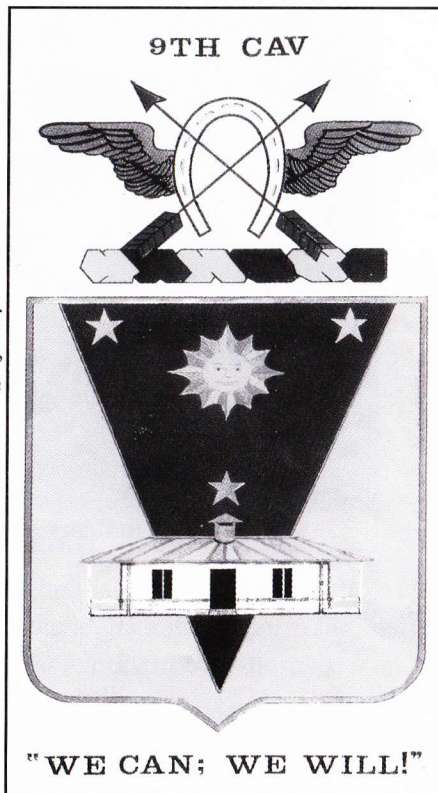
THE COURT MARTIAL OF CHAPLAIN PLUMMER

With a charge of "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman," a General Court Martial was convened at Fort Robinson, Nebraska on August 27, 1894, for the trial of Chaplain Henry V. Plummer, 9th Cavalry, U. S. Army. One specification accused him of furnishing liquor to enlisted men and drinking with them. A second accused him of behaving in an "unbecoming manner" and using "intemperate and vulgar language toward an enlisted man" in the presence of the man's wife.

Military and civilian lawyers represented Chaplain Plummer and he testified in his own behalf. There were seven witnesses for the prosecution and twelve witnesses for the defense. Chaplain Plummer pleaded not guilty to the charge and specifications.

On September 7, 1894 the court found Chaplain Plummer guilty of the charge and all specifications and sentenced him to be dismissed from the service of the United States. The court martial was reviewed through military channels, and Major General J.M. Schofield, the Commanding General, recommended that the sentence be commuted to suspension of half pay for one year; instead, President Grover Cleveland approved the record, proceedings and sentence. The Secretary of War directed the sentence to take effect on November 10, 1894.

Two days later, Chaplain Plummer wrote an appeal to President Grover Cleveland. His request was denied. Until his death, his repeated appeals to the President and to the Secretary of War were denied, as were other appeals on his behalf.



THE COMMITTEE TO CLEAR CHAPLAIN PLUMMER:

Advocating the Reconsideration and Exoneration of Chaplain Henry Vinton Plummer, U.S. Army

In 1884, Henry Vinton Plummer became the first African American to be appointed as a U.S. Army Chaplain after Reconstruction. He held a rank equivalent to Captain. Ten years later and under questionable circumstances, he received a dishonorable discharge for "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman." Until his death in 1905, Plummer unsuccessfully protested the charges against him, claiming "false testimony and prejudice."

Recently his family and others have taken up his cause. From an initial meeting in 1997, interest has grown. Since August 2001, family members, political leaders, military personnel, clergy, and others have met regularly to determine a course of action. Archival research and conversations with lawyers, military personnel, and historians have only served to underscore the injustice done to Chaplain Plummer.

The committee plans to request a review of the court martial and dishonorable discharge by the Department of the Army, Congress, and the President. Our goal is to clear Chaplain Plummer's name.



Chaplain Henry Vinton Plummer

The Committee to Clear Chaplain Plummer represents people from across the country with many areas of interest in Plummer's cause. If you wish more information or would like to work with us, please contact Reverend L. Jerome Fowler, Chair, at:

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