

Fort Davis

National Historic Site

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Curriculum Materials Grades 6-8

Student Activity: Second Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper

SECOND LIEUTENANT HENRY O. FLIPPER

Henry Ossian Flipper was the first African American to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. It was a time of prejudice, and many of his fellow students were afraid to be his friend. Flipper worked hard to earn their respect by behaving properly and not returning the insults of others.



Following his graduation from West Point in 1877, the U.S. Army assigned Second Lieutenant Flipper to Company A, 10th U.S. Cavalry (one of two black cavalry regiments authorized by Congress following the Civil War) and stationed him at Fort Sill, Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Before coming to Fort Davis in November 1880, the young officer had already compiled a list of accomplishments. While at Fort Still, he supervised a project to drain ponds of stagnant water that had been thought to cause malaria. During the Victorio Campaign of 1880, Flipper distinguished himself by riding 98 miles in 22 hours to carry an important message concerning the Indians' whereabouts to the commanding officer.

At Fort Davis, Flipper was appointed the officer in charge of the post commissary—the food store for the post. Soldiers were issued food at the government's expense, but they could also buy products with their own money. Officers, who were not given food, could make purchases on credit, but were expected to pay their bills at the end of each month. Flipper kept the commissary money in his locked trunk instead of an office safe.

In July 1881, Fort Davis the commissary funds were discovered missing from Flipper's trunk. When his commanding officer asked him about it, Flipper was scared and he lied about what happened to the money. A military court found him innocent of embezzlement (taking the money) but guilty of "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman" for lying and falsifying records. The sentence for being found guilty of this charge was dismissal from the army. Lieutenant Flipper was dismissed from the United States Army on June 30, 1882.

Although no longer able to serve in the military, Flipper had a successful career as a mining engineer and surveyor. He became friends with Senator Albert Fall and worked for him in Washington, D. C. as a translator. When Fall was appointed Secretary of the Interior, Flipper worked for him as an assistant.

Flipper tried many times to have his court martial conviction overturned by Congress, but he was never successful. He died in 1940 at the age of 84. In 1976, an Army Board for Correction of Military Records reviewed the case and decided the punishment of dismissal was too severe. The Committee changed Flipper's record to an honorable discharge. In 1999, President William J. Clinton posthumously granted "a full and unconditional pardon to Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper."

QUESTIONS:

1. Where did Lieutenant Flipper receive his military training? Was there anything unusual about this? Explain.
2. What was Lieutenant Flipper's job at Fort Davis?
3. What ended his military career?
4. Was he treated fairly? Explain why you feel this way.
5. Did Henry Flipper lead a successful life after his dismissal from the army? Explain

ENRICHMENT:

1. The year is 1877. As a newspaper reporter, write an article about an interview you have with Henry Flipper that year when he becomes the first African-American to graduate from West Point.
2. Imagine you are Henry Flipper, born in Georgia, and serving as an army officer in the American West. Write a letter to your family telling how you
 - a.) helped to drain the malarial ditches at Fort Sill in the 1870sOR
 - a.) ran a telegraph line from Fort Elliott to Fort SupplyOR
 - a.) took part in the campaign to capture Victorio in west Texas