

Cathay Williams

(1844 – c. 1892)

Cathay Williams was an African-American woman who served in the 38th U.S. Infantry (Buffalo Soldiers). She was born in 1844, as a slave at Independence, MO. During the Civil War, Cathay was assigned to a company of the 8th Indiana Volunteer Infantry as a cook. After the war, on November 15, 1866, she cut her hair, wore men's clothing, and enlisted at St. Louis into Company A, 38th Infantry as Private William Cathay. She is the only documented African-American woman to serve in the frontier army.

Reportedly, she was tall, looked masculine and easily passed as a man. Soon after her enlistment, Private Cathay contracted smallpox which caused continuing health issues. The 38th Infantry move to Fort Leavenworth, and then to Fort Riley. From there, the regiment

marched over the Santa Fe Trail in 1867. Some of these soldiers were infected with Asiatic cholera. Although Private William Cathay did not develop cholera, she continued to have health problems. She was admitted to the post hospital where the surgeon discovered her gender. Private William Cathay was immediately discharged from the military on October 14, 1868, for medical reasons listed as "health problems" but no indication of the gender issue.

As a private citizen again, Cathay Williams worked as a cook at Fort Union on the Santa Fe Trail, then moved to Pueblo CO where she served as a cook, seamstress, and nurse. She moved to Trinidad CO on the Santa Fe Trail. Her health problems increased and her pension claims were denied. She was listed in 1892 as "indigent" by the county. She probably died the same year, although her date of death remains unknown. It was a tragic end for the first African-American woman to serve in the U.S. Army, a woman who had marched over the Santa Fe Trail as a soldier. There are no known photographs of her but the picture here shows how she may have looked.

