



LIEUTENANT COLONEL ALLEN ALLENSWORTH (deceased)

An Officer And A Gentleman: Chaplain Allen Allensworth Of The Twenty-Fourth Infantry

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Writing to President Grover Cleveland in April, 1885, the Reverend Allen Allensworth, pastor of the Union Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, petitioned the Chief Executive that he be appointed a chaplain in the United States Army. In his letter Allensworth held that his appointment would provide an "opportunity to show, in behalf of the race, that a Negro can be an officer and a gentleman."¹ One year later President Cleveland signed Allensworth's appointment as Chaplain of the 24th Infantry Regiment, one of the Army's four black regiments. On July 1, 1886, Allensworth was ordered to join the regiment at Fort Supply in Indian Territory. Thus began a career in the Army which would end twenty years later in 1906, with Chaplain Allensworth holding the rank of lieutenant colonel, the highest ranking black in the American military at that time, the first of his race to reach this rank. He was also only the second Army chaplain to be promoted to lieutenant colonel when that rank became open to chaplains in 1905. It had been a remarkable military career for a man who had been born a slave in 1842.²

The son of Levi and Phyllis Allensworth came into a world in which both he and his parents were the property of the Starbird family of Louisville, Kentucky. When he was "old enough to be of service," Allensworth wrote later, he was given to one of the family's sons, Thomas

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¹Allen Allensworth to Grover Cleveland, April 1, 1885, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Letters Received by the Appointment Commission and Personnel Branch, National Archives, File No. 670, Box 1006 "Allen Allensworth."

²The main sources for this article in addition to ACP, RG 94, NRS are: Allen Allensworth Biographical File, Archives, United States Army Chaplain Center and School, Fort Monmouth, N.J.; John Phillip Langellier, "Chaplain Allen Allensworth and the 24th Infantry, 1886-1906," *The Smoke Signal* XL (Fall 1980), 189-208; Charles Alexander, *Battles and Victories of Allen Allensworth* (Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1914).

Starbird.³ At this age he served as a playmate/companion for the young Starbird child. The relationship was an important one because it provided Allensworth with the initial rudiments of his education. At the urging of Allen's mother the two boys played school together, with Thomas Starbird essentially passing along to Allensworth what he had been learning in the classroom.⁴ Thus began Allensworth's education. It would become a life-long affair. By becoming literate, albeit secretly and with great difficulty, he had taken the first step on the road to becoming a truly free man.

Allensworth continued his furtive education until the Starbird family learned about it and ended the relationship between the boys. Eventually Allen and his mother (his father had died when Allen was an infant) were sold and he was separated from her, although both stayed in the Louisville area. He resumed his education on his own with the help of a Webster speller and the *Bible*. He was not alone in this, for as he remembered later, "... after the *Bible*, no work [Webster's] was so popular or more highly praised among slaves as this little volume..."⁵ In 1855, at the age of thirteen, he made his first attempt to escape bondage by fleeing to Canada. He was caught, returned to his owner, and then attempted to escape again. As a result of this second failed attempt his owner sold him to a trader heading into the deep South, a common solution to unruly slaves in the border states. He first went to Memphis, Tennessee, and later to New Orleans, Louisiana. Here Allensworth was trained as a jockey and spent several years prior to the Civil War racing horses throughout the South. During this same period he was bought and sold a number of times.⁶

The Civil War was arguably the most significant historical event in nineteenth century America. The entire society experienced a titanic social, economic, and political upheaval which deeply altered the nation and its future. The war was critical for Allen Allensworth in that it gave him not only his freedom, but also the opportunity to profoundly change the direction of his life. It was during the early months of the conflict that Allensworth, now twenty, made a successful third attempt to escape. Reaching Illinois he attached himself to the 44th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment as a hospital corpsman/nurse, and then accompanied the 44th as it moved South with a Union army in the 1862 campaign into Tennessee. After this he served in a similar capacity on the steamer *St. Patrick*, which was being used on the Mississippi as a hospital ship for the Union Army.⁷

In April, 1863, Allensworth enlisted in the U.S. Navy as a seaman and was assigned to the river gunboat *Queen City*. For the next three and a half years he would see service on a series of Union gunboats on the Mississippi. On the *Queen City* his intelligence was recognized and he became the captain's steward and chief clerk, and was promoted to petty officer. When the captain transferred his command to the gunboat *Tawah*, Allensworth went along with him. After the sinking of the *Tawah*, he served

³Alexander, *Battles and Victories*, 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵*Ibid.*, 20.

⁶*Ibid.*, 133-170.

⁷*Ibid.*, 172-176.

on the ironclad gunboats *Cincinnati* and *Pittsburgh*. His naval career ended when he was honorably discharged on September 4, 1865, holding the rate of chief petty officer.⁸

Reunited with his mother and family in Louisville after the war, Allensworth served for a time as commissary to the commandant of the Navy Yard at Mound City, Illinois. Then, in 1867, he and his brother William went down river to St. Louis where they established two successful restaurants. Selling out at a profit and returning to Louisville, Allensworth began to realize an old dream when he embarked upon his first foray into formal education at the age of twenty-six. He attended the Ely Normal School which the Freedman's Bureau had established near Louisville. He then continued his education at Roger Williams University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he studied education and theology. This thirst for learning was combined with a long-standing interest in religion when Allensworth underwent a religious conversion, first joining the Baptist church and then being ordained into the Baptist ministry. After graduating from Roger Williams (the school would award him an honorary Master of Arts degree in 1887) he ministered to several Kentucky congregations, and "acquired a reputation as a forceful preacher and religious educator."⁹ He also worked as a financial agent for the General Association of the Colored Baptists in Kentucky, Superintendent of Sunday Schools of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, and missionary for the American Baptist Publication Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.¹⁰

Active as well in Republican party politics in this period, he was chosen as a Republican elector from Kentucky in 1880, and he attended the Republican national conventions in 1880 and 1884 as Kentucky's only black delegate. He achieved a certain amount of influence in Republican politics because of his "tact, moderate disposition, and ability as a public speaker."¹¹ In these years he also made a lecture tour of the New England states and served the Joy Street Baptist Church of Boston for four months while the congregation looked for a permanent minister. In 1884, he left Louisville with his wife Josephine (he had married in 1877) and two young daughters to take up a position as pastor of the Union Baptist Church in Cincinnati.¹²

Even before moving to Cincinnati Allensworth had begun to take an interest in becoming an Army chaplain. This was stimulated in 1882, when a soldier in one of the Army's black regiments wrote to him asking that he use his influence to have a black chaplain appointed to the regiment. In 1884, his interest increased when he heard that the Reverend Henry V. Plummer had been appointed as chaplain of the 9th Cavalry Regiment, the first black chaplain since the Civil War. Allensworth also discovered that the white chaplain of the 24th Infantry Regiment was planning to retire. This provided the impetus for him to commence a two year campaign of letter-

⁸*Ibid.*, 180-186.

⁹Langellier, "Chaplain Allen Allensworth," 191.

¹⁰Alexander, *Battles and Victories*, 195-217.

¹¹Earl F. Stover, *Up From Handymen: The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1865-1920*, Vol. III (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, 1977), 54.

¹²Alexander, *Battles and Victories*, 217-243.

writing, and political wire-pulling.¹³ “Not only,” wrote Earl F. Stover, “did he persuade several congressmen, businessmen, and ministers to endorse his application, but also his former owner, Mrs. A.P. Starbird.”¹⁴

Thus, Allensworth became the Army’s second black chaplain, succeeding Chaplain James C. Laverty. The Army which Allensworth became a part of in 1886, was a small military force scattered over the United States. It was particularly undersized when compared to European armies of the same period, given the extent of the nation and its population. In truth, the Army can be justly described as amounting to no more than a frontier constabulary. Since 1876, when it had been reduced in size to a total of 27,472 officers and men, its numbers had remained relatively constant, and would stay so until the Spanish-American War. It was composed of 25 regiments of infantry, five regiments of artillery, and 10 of cavalry. Two of the infantry regiments, the 24th and the 25th, and two of the cavalry regiments, the 9th and 10th, were made up of black soldiers with white officers.¹⁵ Between 1866 and 1898, eight blacks received commissions in the United States Army. Three were line officers (all West Point graduates) who served with cavalry regiments, and five were chaplains. The names of Allensworth’s compatriots in the chaplaincy during these years deserve mention. They were, besides Plummer (who served from 1884 to 1894) and Allensworth, Theophilus G. Steward, George W. Prioleau, and William T. Anderson.¹⁶

The chaplaincy which supported the Army was a tiny, ill-organized group of 34 men.

None of them had any ecclesiastical superior within the Army, such as a chief of chaplains or a chaplain general; they were all ultimately responsible to the one to whom they sent their reports, the Adjutant General of the Army. The Office of the Adjutant General maintained their records, made their assignments, approved or disapproved their requests for leaves of absence, and saw that they did their duties in accordance with Congressional legislation and Army regulations.¹⁷

Black chaplains, like their white counterparts, were commissioned and held the rank of chaplain without command. Their rank was equivalent to a captain of infantry, however their pay was that of a first lieutenant. Since 1867, all chaplains were “on the same footing with other officers as to terms of office, retirement, allowances for service, and pensions.”¹⁸ When Allensworth arrived at Fort Supply in July, 1886, to take up his duties with the 24th, he wore the then regulation uniform of the chaplain which was quite different from the attire of a line officer. It consisted of a “fine black cloth coat, and trousers, shoulder straps, [with] shepherd’s crook in the center, five braid frogs across the front of the coat, [and] nine black buttons down the front.”¹⁹

¹³Langellier, “Chaplain Allen Allensworth,” 192–194.

¹⁴Stover, *Up From Handymen*, 54.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784–1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 226.

¹⁷Stover, *Up From Handymen*, 32.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 2–3.

¹⁹Langellier, “Chaplain Allen Allensworth,” 194.

The two years that Allensworth spent at Fort Supply saw him undertake many of the duties that fell to the Army chaplain of this period. Besides his religious function, he was also made the post treasurer and librarian. His most important work outside of his primary religious obligation was in education, and it was through his success in this field that he achieved his greatest renown. Because of the important role that chaplains had played in the education of blacks during the Civil War, the same 1866 law which specified the duties of the chaplain in the black regiment, also tasked the chaplain to include the "instruction of enlisted men in the common English branches of education."²⁰ Building on what Chaplain Laverty had already done for the 24th, Allensworth soon developed an educational program which included a small group of black enlisted soldiers serving as teaching assistants.²¹

Allensworth moved with the regiment when it was transferred to Fort Bayard, New Mexico, in 1888. Here he enlarged upon the role of educator that he had begun at Fort Supply. He developed a graded course of study for both children and soldiers in order to deal with the large numbers of students which he and his assistants were now charged with educating. In 1889, he published a pamphlet titled "Outline of Course of Study, and the Rules Governing Post Schools of Ft. Bayard, N.M." This guide "described his education program for six grades and the objective of each study. [It] called for a day by day program to be organized into two parts, one for children and the other for soldiers."²² The pamphlet and the program were praised in the *Army-Navy Journal*, and Brigadier General McCook, the commander of the Department of Arizona, wrote the Commanding General of the Army, recommending that Allensworth's program be adopted on an Army-wide basis. A number of other chaplains used Allensworth's methodology in organizing their own educational programs.²³

During the 1890's, the unique role that Allensworth played in the chaplaincy as an educator was recognized both inside and outside the military. In 1891, for example, the National Education Association asked him to address its convention in Toronto, Canada. His talk, titled "The History and Progress of Education in the U.S. Army," was warmly received. The *Toronto Globe* called Allensworth "a fluent and forceful speaker as well as a graceful writer."²⁴ In 1893, he served on detached duty at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, with a team of Army officers.²⁵

The outbreak of the Spanish-American War in April, 1898, found Allensworth and his regiment at Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City. The 24th had been stationed there since 1896. At a parade of the regiment just prior to its being sent to Florida, from where it would embark on the Cuban campaign, Allensworth addressed each company individually from horseback.

²⁰Act of Congress, July 28, 1866, Chapter 299, Section 30.

²¹Langellier, "Chaplain Allen Allensworth," 195.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Stover, *Up From Handymen*, 35.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵Langellier, "Chaplain Allen Allensworth," 198.

Soldiers and Comrades: [he said] Fate has turned the war dogs loose and you have been called to the front to avenge an insult to your country's flag. Before leaving . . . I will say to you, 'Quit yourselves like men and fight.' Keep in mind that the eyes of the world will be upon you and expect great things of you. You have the opportunity to answer favorable the question, 'will the Negro fight?' Therefore, I say, 'quit yourselves like men and fight.'²⁶

According to Charles Alexander, Allensworth biographer, the men of the 24th "marched away with a cheerful step, inspired for the service before them."²⁷

Allensworth did not accompany the 24th in the Cuban campaign, where it took part in the charge up San Juan Hill along with Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders." Instead, he was placed on detached duty as a recruiter for the regiment in the South, working in Louisville, Nashville, and Tuskegee. Early in 1899, the 24th was withdrawn from Cuba and sent to California where Allensworth joined them. Shortly thereafter the regiment was shipped to the Philippines where it was headquartered in Manila. Because of illness Allensworth returned to the United States in 1901, and temporarily assigned to Camp Reynolds, California, while he was convalescing.²⁸

In 1902, the 24th came back to this country and was posted to Forts Harrison, Missoula, and Assiniboine, in Montana. Allensworth was sent to Fort Harrison, but he travelled frequently to the other posts.²⁹ While he was at Fort Harrison the Congress in 1904 passed an act opening up the rank of major to chaplains for the first time. Of the 57 chaplains then in the Regular Army, 14 were adjudged fit for promotion. Of this number only four were deemed "exceptionally efficient" and promoted. Allensworth was one of the four. One year later, in 1905, another act of Congress opened the rank of lieutenant colonel to chaplains. Allensworth became the second chaplain chosen. After he was promoted he was placed on the retired list.³⁰ It was, declared one black newspaper, the *Cleveland Gazette*, "the highest honor ever given to an Afro-American."³¹ It would not be until World War I that another black, Charles Young, would reach the rank of full colonel.³²

After retirement Allensworth settled in California. In 1908, along with three other blacks, he formed the California Colony and Promotion Organization which began to purchase land in Tulare County in the San Joaquin Valley of California, about halfway between Los Angeles and San

²⁶*Ibid.*, 200.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 201.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 201.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 202.

³⁰Stover, *Up From Handymen*, 148, 150-151.

³¹*Cleveland Gazette*, April 21, 1906, p. 1.

³²Allen Allensworth Biographical File, Archives, U.S. Army Chaplain Center & School, Fort Monmouth, N.J. The path that Allensworth pioneered in his two decades in the chaplaincy was later expanded by other black chaplains. In 1936, Louis C. Carter of the 10th Cavalry became the first black chaplain to reach the rank of colonel; while in 1989, has seen Chaplain (COL) Matthew A. Zimmerman chosen to become the Deputy Chief of Chaplains with the rank of brigadier general.

Francisco. The purpose being “to create a community entirely of blacks, a place where they could live and work in dignity, free from racial prejudice that had followed them in California.”³³ On this land a new town was established and named Allensworth in honor of its founder. At its peak it contained almost two hundred black families. “Its citizens,” writes Stover, “engaged in farming, dairying and mercantile pursuits. In only six years [1908–1914], the town grew to be a market center of the surrounding area, and included a hotel, post office, and railroad station.”³⁴ After Allensworth’s death in 1914, the town began to decline and was eventually abandoned. Today, the site of the settlement has been designated the Allensworth State Historical Park by the state of California.³⁵

It had been a remarkable life. Allen Allensworth had gone from being a slave to become the highest ranking black officer in the United States military. Looking back over his life one cannot come away without being impressed by what he experienced and achieved, especially when one takes into consideration the great barriers which circumscribed a man of his race during this period in American history. Slave, Civil War gunboat sailor on the Mississippi, businessman, pastor, educator, politician, officer in the United States Army and chaplain. It was, indeed, a remarkable life.

³³Langellier, “Chaplain Allen Allensworth,” 203.

³⁴Allen Allensworth Biographical File.

³⁵*Ibid.*