

WILLIAM OTHELLO WILSON, 1867-1928

Born

September 16, 1867 or April, 1867
Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland

Enlisted

January 1889 or August 1889
St. Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota

Medal of Honor Citation Issued

September 17, 1891
Bravery

Rank and Organization

Corporal, Company I, 9th U.S. Cavalry

Place and Date Sioux Campaign, 1890

Died

January 18, 1928
Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland

Buried

Rose Hill Cemetery, Hagerstown,
Washington County, Maryland



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Early Years

I believe William Othello Wilson was born on September 16, 1867ⁱ, although his birth date on the 1900 U.S. Federal Census is recorded as April 1867.ⁱⁱ We do know he was born in Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland. Washington County records were destroyed by fire December 6, 1871.ⁱⁱⁱ Wm. O. Wilson's enlistment record^{iv} states that William was 21 years, 4 months old when he enlisted. If I use the September date for his birth and his age on his enlistment record, it means his enlistment date was in January 1889. If he enlisted on August 21, 1889,^v; ^{vi} his birth date would be in April.

How, why or exactly when he came to Minnesota is a mystery.

Military Life

William entered the United States Army at St. Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota in 1889. He was 21 years, 4 months old, 5'7½" tall and assigned to the 9th Cavalry. The 9th Cavalry, one of only four completely African-American United States army regiments during the Indian Wars Period, was informally called 'Buffalo Soldiers'.^{vii} "The nickname was given to the "Negro Cavalry" by the Native American tribes they fought. The term eventually became synonymous with all of the African-American regiments formed in 1866.^{viii} The four all-black military units in the Plains Indian Wars were the 9th & 10 Cavalry Regiments and the 24 & 25th Infantry Regiments.

"The 'Buffalo Soldiers' were established by Congress as the first peacetime all-black regiments in the regular U. S. Army. These regiments existed through WWII."^{ix} The Buffalo Soldiers served in the Indian Wars on the Plains and in the Southwest. They often distinguished themselves in spite of being issued old horses, scanty ammunition and faulty equipment. In addition to controlling

the Indians of the Plains and the Southwest, the soldiers built roads, discouraged illegal traders who sold guns and alcohol to the Indians, policed cattle rustlers and formed escorts for stagecoaches carrying military payroll or other valuables.^x

For many black soldiers, being a Buffalo Soldier was an attractive occupational choice in a society that only rarely and begrudgingly honored black achievement. Many were career soldiers in the United States Army and won Medals of Honor for their valor.^{xi}

“On the morning of December 29, 1890, the Sioux chief, Big Foot and some 350 of his followers camped on the banks of Wounded Knee creek, a tributary of the White River. Surrounding their camp was a force of U.S. troops charged with the responsibility of arresting Big Foot and disarming his warriors. In a frantic attempt to return to their glory days, many Sioux sought deliverance in a new mysticism preached by a Paiute shaman called Wovoka, and fought fiercely believing that their "Ghost Shirts" would protect them from the bluecoats' bullets. In this savage battle twenty-four soldiers distinguished themselves to the degree that they were awarded the Medal of Honor.”^{xii}

The 9th Cavalry was stationed at Fort McKinney near Buffalo, Wyoming in the 1880's during the Plains Indian Campaign.^{xiii} In December 1890, Troops D, F, I and K of the 9th Cavalry, under the command of Major Guy V. Henry, made a forced march in harsh winter conditions from the fort to the Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota. It was one of the greatest cavalry rides in recorded military history.^{xiv}

Corporal Wilson's unit, a battalion of the 9th Cavalry, had been sent in search of the Sioux band led by Big Foot and were about 50 miles from the Pine Ridge Reservation when news arrived about the battle at Wounded Knee. The courier with news of the battle also had orders for them to return to Pine Ridge as soon as possible. To expedite their return, the Lt. Colonel and the main part of the unit left immediately. Corporal William Wilson under Captain Loud, stayed with the slow supply wagons and a small detachment.”

About two miles from Pine Ridge early on the morning of December 30 1890, after the battle of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, a band of Burlé Lakota Warriors under Chief Two Strike attacked the 9th Cavalry supply train and cut off the wagons.^{xv} Captain Loud wrote a message to send to Major Guy V. Henry for help, but Indian scouts refused to carry it. Wilson volunteered to ride to the agency for help and successfully delivered the message, despite being pursued by hostile Sioux Indians. The besieged soldiers were soon rescued by Major Henry's troops from the agency.^{xvi}

Corporal William Wilson's Medal of Honor was awarded for action during the Sioux Campaign in South Dakota.^{xvii;xviii} His award was for his heroism in action on the day after Wounded Knee, December 30, 1890, at White Clay Creek, a tributary of the White River.^{xix}

Citation

William Wilson returned to Hagerstown, Maryland in 1898.^{xx} For his voluntary action during the Indian Wars, William was cited for bravery.^{xxi} On September 17, 1891, nine months after his dash for help, William was awarded the Medal of Honor for “qualities of the most conspicuous bravery and gallantry.”^{xxii} A more detailed citation was published in General Order 100 on December 17, 1891: “For gallantry in carrying a message for assistance through country occupied by the enemy. When the wagon train under escort of Captain Loud was attacked by hostile Sioux Indians, near the Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota.”^{xxiii}



xxiv

Rank and organization: Corporal, Company I, 9th U.S. Cavalry.
Place and date: Sioux Campaign, 1890. Entered service at: St. Paul, Minn. Birth: Hagerstown, Md. Date of issue: 17 September 1891. Citation: Bravery.^{xxxv}

(Note: the citation has no date for entering service or a birth date for William O. Wilson.)

Civilian Life

After his military service, William married Margaret Virginia (nee Jackson) Brown in 1898 in Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland.^{xxvi} Seven children were born to this couple: Percy born July 1899;^{xxvii} Maroline born abt. 1902; C. Herman born 1903, died 1977; Elsie M. born 24 Nov, 1905, died Dec 5, 2001. Elsie was married to ? Comer; Sadie born abt. 1907 was married to ? Webb; William O. born abt. 1910 and Anna V. (Jones) born May 7, 1912 & died on May 20, 2008.^{xxviii, xxix}

The 1900 United States Census has William, his wife Margaret and son Percy, age 1, living with his in-laws, Peary and Hanna L. Jackson, their adopted son age 21, sister and nephew. Margaret is age 30 and gives the information that they have been married two years and that she is the mother of two children, one living. The 1910 United States Census has William listed as a teacher. Other sources and census records have stated William worked at carpentry, upholstering, cooking and calligraphy; he was adept at many skills.^{xxx}

William's family knew of his distinguished military service. He is the only Washington County person to have received the Medal of Honor, but he received little recognition until recently. In 1988 a traffic triangle was named for him and a marker placed there. The triangle is located where Jonathan Street, Pennsylvania Avenue, Charles Street and Forest Drive meet. In May 2011 a flagpole was added during a ceremony attended by more than 100 neighborhood residents and participants. Mary Jones, a great-granddaughter of Wilson, was present for the dedication. In 2015 a New Memorial Park and Hagerstown Circle of Achievement was dedicated. Among the nine honored was William Othello Wilson, 1867-1928.^{xxxi}

He died January 18, 1928 at the age of 61.^{xxxii} In 1997, his grave was located at Rose Hill Cemetery and the Veterans Administration placed a military marker there.^{xxxiii}

William O. Wilson was the last American soldier to receive the Medal of Honor during the Indian Campaigns and on American soil. Twenty-four soldiers received the Medal of Honor for Wounded Knee. There were seventeen, not at Wounded Knee, black soldiers serving in the frontier Indian Campaigns who were awarded the Medal of Honor.^{xxxiv}

Rose Hill Cemetery, Hagerstown, Maryland



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Compiled by Susan Carleton Jirele
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NOTES

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