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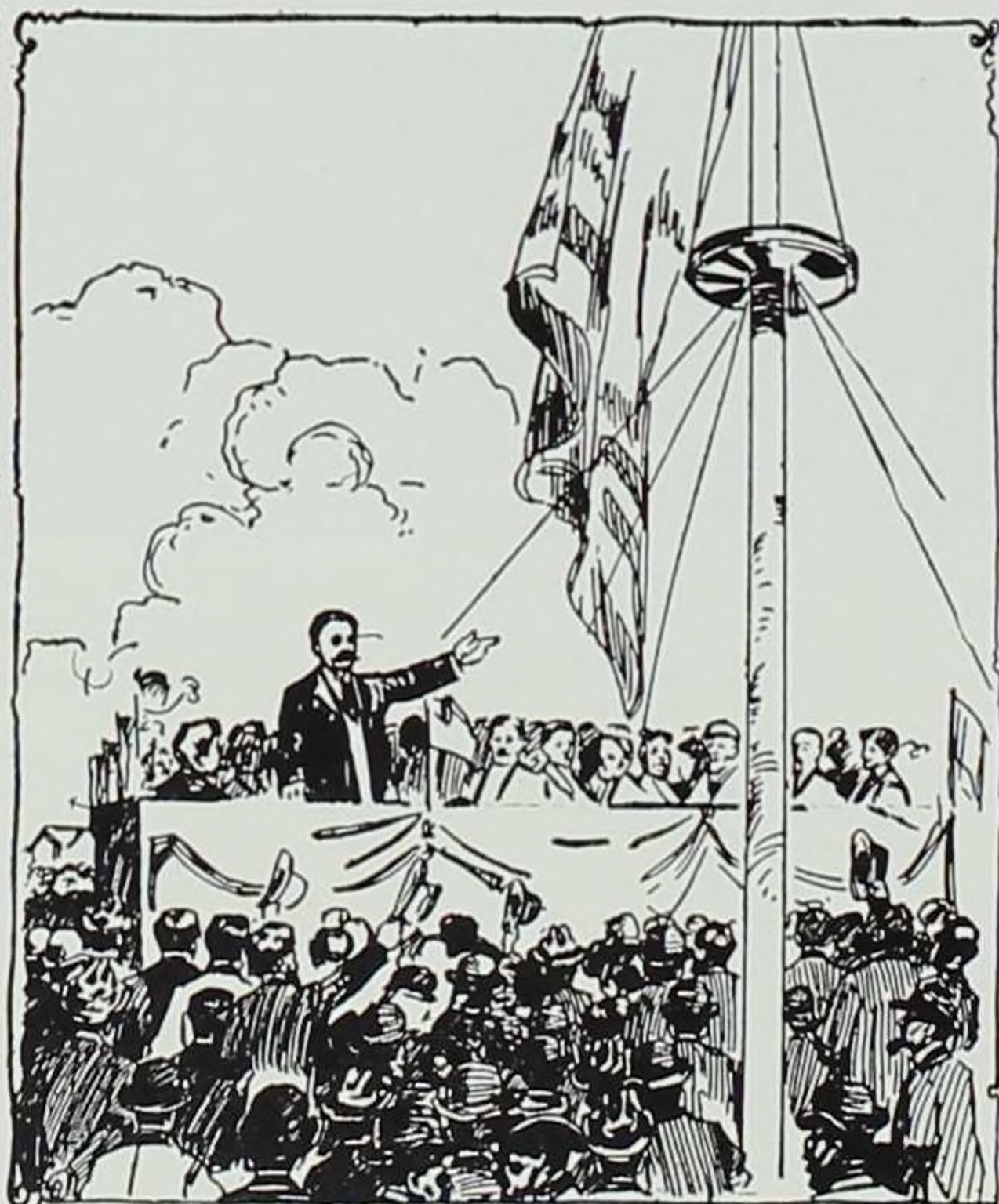
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# Fort Des Moines and its African-American Troops in 1903/04

*by Douglas Kachel*

DES MOINES REGISTER AND LEADER (11/14/1903)



"DEDICATING THE FLAG AT THE NEW FORT DES MOINES." November 1903 opening ceremonies completed local efforts to locate a cavalry post in Des Moines.

ALTHOUGH MANY IOWANS are aware that Fort Des Moines in Des Moines was the site of the Colored Officers Training Camp during the first world war, most do not know that African-American soldiers were actually stationed there much earlier — within the first months of its opening in 1903. Although this early chapter in the history of Fort Des Moines is a short one, it adds to our understanding of turn-of-the-century attitudes about the military and about race relations.

Fort Des Moines was the third fort in Iowa to bear that name. The other two were built in 1835 near Montrose in Lee County, and in 1843 at the confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. Fort Des Moines No. 3 opened in mid-November 1903 five miles south of downtown Des Moines. The occasion was marked with parades, ceremonies, barbecues, reduced railroad rates, and considerable attention from the press. The *Des Moines Register and Leader* explained the hoopla this way: "The opening of an army post in Iowa is an event that calls for more than a local celebra-





The romance and excitement of the cavalry in Americans' minds were fueled by memories of the Civil War and the Indian Wars. Here, a practice charge by the Fourteenth Cavalry at Fort Des Moines (ca. 1930).

tion. The first fort of regular soldiers within the confines of Iowa is to be dedicated and opened this week. Heretofore, Iowans have been forced to go to St. Louis, Omaha, Chicago, or St. Paul to see regular soldiers and regular army encampments and forts."

John A. T. Hull — Civil War hero, editor, two-term lieutenant governor, five-term congressman, and chair of the important Committee on Military Affairs in the House of Representatives — is often credited with the idea for locating the fort in Des Moines. Hull may have actually received the idea from others — including S. B. Keffer, the city's park commissioner, and Major J. G. Galbraith, who was in charge of the army's recruiting station in Des Moines. Covering the dedication, the Des Moines *Register and Leader* reported that when Keffer "wrote to Congressman Hull about the fort, he had in mind the help to local labor, the benefit to the business interest of the city and the addition of a park to Des Moines." Another article noted that "Major Galbraith is generally known among military men and in official circles with having been the first to

suggest the desirability of an army post located in Des Moines."

Regardless of who suggested the idea, it was Congressman Hull who first introduced legislation in 1894 and worked for its eventual passage in 1900. A *Register and Leader* editorial commented that "the task was a hard one, for it became necessary not only to convince the federal authorities that the post was needed here but the local people that it was wanted here." Apparently the "opposition, indifference, and ridicule" from "certain elements of Des Moines society" were overcome. Following the accustomed procedure, a citizen committee headed by F. M. Hubbell raised forty thousand dollars, purchased four hundred acres, and turned the property over to the War Department.

Fort Des Moines was to be a cavalry post, which embodied all the romance and dash that the cavalry still represented to Americans. Although construction began July 12, 1901, the *Iowa State Bystander* newspaper that month called for citizens to be patient: "No one should anticipate the actual location of a squadron of





Construction began in July 1901 for Fort Des Moines, after a citizens committee raised funds, bought four hundred acres, and turned the land over to the federal government.

cavalry at the post short of 1903. When completed Des Moines will have the model cavalry post of the army.”

Most Americans revered the cavalry as the “true army,” recalling gallant images of cavalry in the Civil War, in the series of wars with Native American tribes, and, most recently, in Cuba and the Philippines. In 1908 *The Midwestern*, a Des Moines booster magazine, articulated this cavalry mystique in an article about the U.S. Second Cavalry, whose history had been “an integral part of the military history of the country” and “in the storm center of every war.” *The Midwestern* continued, “For it is the horse that makes the cavalry the most picturesque branch of the service. The infantry has been called the backbone of the army, and the cavalry its eyes and ears. It is the flying squadron, alert, mobile, here today and there tomorrow. It is the incarnation of the spirit of battle, and the cavalry unit is the irresistible combination of horse and man; the modern Centaur of the old fable.”

**W**HEN FORT DES MOINES officially opened on November 13, 1903, pomp and patriotic fervor embraced the citizens of Des Moines at the dedication of what the press billed the “the largest and only exclusive cavalry post in the United States.” *The Register and Leader* commented that the fort “means almost as much as the location here of the state capitol; its dedication is one of the most important events in Des Moines for half a century.”

In the days preceding the event, thousands had taken advantage of reduced railroad rates to arrive in Des Moines for the festivities. Free trolley rides took car after car of passengers to the new fort. The *Des Moines Register and Leader* noted that the crowd of 25,000 was “but a portion of the throng that would have been present had there been adequate transportation facilities.” (Adding extra trolley cars for the occasion had overloaded the system and slowed the cars down.)

Crowds lined downtown Des Moines and



applauded a parade of dignitaries, many in the new curiosity — automobiles. The autos and more than a hundred carriages, each lavishly decorated with American flags, bunting, and flowers, proceeded to the fort. The first carriage held General John Bates, Governor A. B. Cummins, Congressman Hull, and J. B. Olmsted, chairman of the citizens' dedication committee.

There at the fort was Troop E of the Eighth Cavalry, splendidly dressed in blue, high-collared tunics with brass buttons and wearing tall, black boots. With capes flowing and sabers at their sides, the mounted detachment must have matched the public's expectations of what a cavalry should be.

However, the splendid cavalry troop stayed less than a month after the opening ceremonies. Then the two dozen soldiers under Sergeant Thomas Sozensky returned to their regiment at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. Once again Des Moines would have to wait for the cavalry to arrive.

**A**PPARENTLY General Bates had been so impressed with the new fort's "magnitude . . . and the excellence of the site," according to the Des Moines *Register and Leader*, that he issued orders for infantry to immediately occupy the new fort. Three weeks later — much to the surprise of many citizens — two infantry companies did indeed arrive, composed of 127 African-American soldiers.

The press reported that as Companies C and L of the black 25th Infantry "tumbled off the train" on the morning of December 3, 1903, "the advent of troops created a sensation and large crowds gathered to watch the sturdy colored veterans as they swung along with the regulation marching step." The *Register and Leader* noted "these colored troops would be in [the] charge of five white officers" commanded by Captain J. D. Leitch and Captain R. L. Bush. (In 1903 there were four African-

American regiments — the 24th and 25th infantries and the 9th and 10th cavalries. These were the maximum number of black units as established by Congress in 1869.)

Much to the disappointment of many Des Moines citizens, not only were infantry troops occupying the long sought and highly romanticized cavalry post, but the troops' sole responsibility was to guard forty military convicts sent from overcrowded Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. Infantry guarding military convicts — where was the gallant cavalry practicing their drills on horseback, which the citizens of Des Moines had expected? The *Register and Leader* reassured its readers that "Fort Des Moines will be a cavalry post but until the horsemen can arrive it will be occupied by infantry." According to General Bates, the black troops would be at the fort until the cavalry returned from Manila the next spring.

Nevertheless, some Des Moines citizens must have been vocal about the arrival of African-American troops, given the response two weeks later in the *Iowa State Bystander*, a black-owned and -operated newspaper based in Des Moines. In an article titled "Wrong Idea," the *Bystander* editor challenged the rumor "that because a garrison of Afro American troops has been sent to the new \$1,000,000 army post in Des Moines the voters are enraged and threaten to defeat Captain Hull for renomination." The editor argued, "It has been proven to be a fact that the Afro American soldiers are the best in the United States so far as sobriety and good behavior are concerned as well as in many other essentials in the makeup of good soldiers and it is a shame that they receive such outrageous treatment by the people whom they serve so faithfully and well." The editor added, "No real man or set of gentlemen to our knowledge are enraged at our Congressmen on this account."

Then another concern was addressed — this time by Congressman Hull. Apparently organized labor feared that the military convicts (whom the black soldiers were guarding) would be used as a labor battalion for the remaining construction work at the fort, thereby "taking wages from their pockets." Hull tried to mollify these fears through a story in the *Register and Leader*: "Convicts will not be engaged in work





Editor John L. Thompson and his *Iowa State Bystander* covered social events at Fort Des Moines and argued that "Afro American soldiers are the best in the United States so far as sobriety and good behavior . . . [and] in many other essentials in the makeup of good soldiers."

at the Fort Des Moines Army Post," he said. "It is not the intention of the war department to utilize these prisoners in the work of construction at Fort Des Moines in any way that would interfere with the employment of laborers."

**A**FTER THIS initial controversy, it appears that at least the African-American citizens of Des Moines and the black soldiers at the fort enjoyed amicable relations. Over the months the soldiers had several parties that black citizens of Des Moines attended. For example, the *Bystander* reported that Company C gave a social reception on December 23, 1903. Dancing, conversation, and games were the amusements. Music was furnished by a "mandolin

club" and at 10 o'clock the party entered a spacious dining hall for a five-course supper "all cooked and served by the members of the Company."

If the reception had been held a week later, conversation may well have centered on the attempted lynching of two black males in Council Bluffs, some hundred miles west of Des Moines. The December 28 *Register and Leader* reported that "Mob Cries for Lives of Negroes" and described how "a thousand men surged the county jail," and broke down the door to get at the "cringing negroes" charged with robbing and assaulting two women. At the last minute, the mob was pacified.

On March 18, 1904, soldiers of Company L gave an elaborate reception at the fort. After the dancing program the sixty guests proceeded to the dining area in a "grand march" led by *Bystander* editor J. L. Thompson. The halls were all decorated with flags and Japanese lanterns and an elegant, five-course meal was served. The affair was written up in the *Bystander*.

In an adjacent column in the *Bystander*, however, an editorial had a less festive tone. Titled "Is Mob Spirit Growing," the article asserted that "race hatred is constantly growing stronger, and the breach between the two races seems to be widening." This article was in reaction to several lynchings of African-American men elsewhere in the nation. The *Bystander* asked boldly, "Can America long exist with such unfair treatment of one-tenth of her population, or will the righteous conscience of the broad minded Americans arouse itself to the true responsibility of righting those wrongs, destroying race hatred and ceasing the organization of those lawless mob murderers?"

The *Iowa State Bystander* often covered more events involving blacks or interpreted them differently than the Des Moines *Register and Leader* and the *Evening Tribune*. A decisively Republican paper, especially in its formative years, the *Bystander* expressed its goal as "bettering the relationship between the colored and white citizens." Although its journalists regularly reported national stories about lynchings, discrimination, and other racial problems, the *Bystander* was more accommodational than confrontational or militant. In





A guard paces across the entrance of Fort Des Moines, 1908. Few images of the fort in 1903 exist.

comparison, the white-oriented *Register and Leader* and *Evening Tribune* were characteristic of most newspapers in this period, in that their news coverage of African-Americans was sparse and often negative. Yet in fairness, these two papers occasionally lauded blacks, questioned prejudice, and often lambasted racism in the American South.

**W**HILE THE African-American soldiers were stationed in Des Moines, there is no evidence that they attended social functions off post. Historians know little about what Des Moines social opportunities were available to its black citizens at the beginning of the twentieth century. Writing about Des Moines of 1918, historian Leola Nelson Bergmann noted in 1948 that "except for a public dance hall, described as more or less of a dive, and a Masonic Hall there were no public recreational centers for negroes." In general, black troops stationed near American cities seemed to be carefully monitored by their white officers, granted fewer passes than white soldiers, and were often virtually cut off from the existing social life of the city. According to Charles

Williams's *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers* (1923), "Sometimes the negroes were denied the privilege of visiting the cantonment cities for fear that trouble might arise. One very effective means of restriction was the establishment of a state of quarantine." While conditions may not have been so restrictive in Des Moines, it would appear that the soldiers in Companies C and L had very limited opportunity to leave the post for any length of time.

On April 22, 1904, a farewell reception for the two Companies C and L was held before they departed for their regular station (which appears to have been Fort Niobrara, Nebraska). By early May, the white troops of the Eleventh Cavalry returned from the Philippines under the command of Colonel Earl D. Thomas and were stationed at Fort Des Moines. Here was the much-heralded cavalry for which the citizens of Des Moines had long waited.

Yet on May 13 the *Bystander* reported that Colonel Thomas had ordered his troops to turn in at 8 P.M. due to the "results of criticism on the part of certain individuals regarding the behavior of the soldiers." The *Bystander* noted that "the privates are a bit sore at the parties who brought about the condition of affairs. They argue that they have just returned from the Philippines where they seldom saw white people and ought to be allowed a free rein for a





"No frowning, grim looking fort is this, but a place to delight the eye and the spirit of him who approaches." Photo and quotation from May 1908 *The Midwestern*, a Des Moines booster magazine.

little while until they got back in touch with humanity."

The *Bystander* added, "And they are white soldiers. Company L and C of the Twenty-fifth Infantry was here for several months, and their commanding officers never had to issue any such orders, and just to think, the white boys have not been here two weeks yet and have made themselves very obnoxious."

Not until June 1917 would African-American soldiers again be stationed at Fort Des Moines. This time the fort would be a training camp for black officers, the first such camp in America. During World War II, the fort would be the first training center for the Women's Army Corps. Because of these programs during the two world wars, Fort Des Moines has played an important role in Iowa's military history. Nevertheless, the fort's first months, in which it barracked black infantry soldiers, represents an intriguing episode also worthy of note. Likewise, the press coverage of the fort during this period begins to reveal mainstream expectations and attitudes about the military and about race in turn-of-the-century Iowa. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Major primary sources for this article are the *Iowa State Bystander* and the *Des Moines Register and Leader*. Other sources include Johnson Brigham, *History of Des Moines and Polk County, Iowa*, vol. 1, (1911); and Charles H. Williams, *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers* (1923).

Other sources are well recognized for their coverage of the fort's later history. For example, see Emmett J. Scott's *The American Negro in World War I* (1969), written shortly after Scott's unprecedented position as Special Assistant to the Secretary of War, probably the highest ranking black in the Woodrow Wilson administration. Charles Kellogg's *A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, vol. 1, 1909-1920 (1967), offers a detailed analysis of the NAACP and others in calling for the establishment of the first black officers training camp, eventually located in Des Moines in 1917. See also Leola Nelson Bergmann, "The Negro in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 46 (1948); Charles Garvin, "The Negro in the Special Service of the U.S. Army," *Journal of Negro History* (Summer 1943); Ruth A. Gallaher, "Fort Des Moines in Iowa History," *Iowa and War* (April 1919); several articles in *The Midwestern* (May 1908, Sept. 1909, July 1910); and Gerald W. Patton's *War and Race: The Black Officer in the American Military, 1915-1941* (1981). Yet these sources lack information on the fort's earliest years.

The archives at the U.S. Army Reserve Center on the grounds of the old Fort Des Moines also hold historical information.

The original, annotated manuscript of this article is in *The Palimpsest* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa.