

Captain Julius C. Witherspoon (1859 – 1906)

Introduction/Overview

A wall mural at 100 E. Monroe Street, Bloomington, Illinois, includes the visage of Julius Witherspoon. Artist Mark Blumenshine put Witherspoon's likeness – and appropriately so - next to the most prominent names associated with McLean County, such as President Abraham Lincoln, Supreme Court Justice and U.S. Senator David Davis, Illinois State University and *Daily Pantagraph* founder Jesse Fell, playwright Rachel Crothers, and Kickapoo Nation Chief Machina. Blumenshine chose to depict Witherspoon – also appropriately so - in the uniform of a U.S. Army officer.¹ Witherspoon was captain of Company G of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which played a significant role in the Spanish-American War. Making this particularly noteworthy is the fact that Witherspoon was a Black man commanding an all-Black company, which was part of an all-Black regiment with an all-Black officers corps. It was the first such fighting force in U.S. military history.² The efforts of the 8th proved that Black men could soldier and officer as well as White men. Born in the South where African Americans experienced withering injustice well beyond the Civil War, Witherspoon sought possibilities in the North and, with his wife and daughters, settled in Bloomington, Illinois. There, before and following his hitch in the war, Witherspoon proved to be a responsible and trusted employee, active citizen, community leader, devout churchman, and dedicated family man. He died at the Old Soldier's Home (today Veterans' Administration Medical Center) in Danville, Illinois, at the age of 47, the war having taken a toll on his health. His grave can be found in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Early and Personal Life

Julius Witherspoon was born in Arkadelphia, Arkansas in April 1859, and spent his first twenty-four years there. More-than-likely, Julius was born into slavery. Records of his early life are sketchy, but it appears that he and his older brother, Archie (b. ca. 1857), were raised by their mother, Harriet. By 1870, the boys and their mother were tenants of Ned Perry and family. Julius and Archie were listed as farm laborers.³ Julius and Mollie "Mary" Ross were married on November 20, 1879, by a justice of the peace in Greenville Township, Clark County, Arkansas.⁴ Over the next 11 years, the couple became parents of six daughters.⁵

Although the *Emancipation Proclamation* had been issued and the Civil War had ended in a CSA defeat, life did not improve much for African American families in the South. For example, in 1880, the Republican Party in Clark County, Arkansas, presented a slate of Black men for election to county offices, with young Julius nominated for the office of assessor. The editorial staff of the *Southern Standard*, an Arkadelphia newspaper, referred to the candidates in question as "incompetent blockheads" and claimed that "not more than half of them can write their names." The candidates, therefore, could not be entrusted with such important positions.⁶ A man as astute as Witherspoon, no doubt, interpreted the paper's brazen insults as a sign that a

¹ www.downtownbloomington.org/explore/about-us/public-art.

² Obejas, Achy, "100 Years Ago, Illinois Black Soldiers Went to 'Fight' in Cuba," *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1998.

³ United State Census, 1870, Ancestry.com.

⁴ Arkansas County Marriages, 1837-1957.

⁵ "Witherspoon, Julius," *Ancestry Family Tree*, Provo UT: Ancestry.com; Devore, Michael, Family Group Sheet for Julius Witherspoon, McLean County Museum of History, 2024.

⁶ "Democrats, Turn Out and Vote," *Southern Standard* (Arkadelphia, Arkansas), Sept 4, 1880, pg. 2.

Black man could never succeed in such a place and moved his family north, well before the Great Migration.

In either late 1884 or early 1885, Julius, Mary, and their four daughters moved to Bloomington, Illinois. After their arrival, the couple had two more daughters.⁷ Now with eight mouths to feed, Julius needed to find work. While Bloomington did not present the hostile environment of the Deep South, racism was still as prevalent as in any moderately-sized mid-western city and as reluctant to welcome African Americans.

Occupation(s)

It was not long, however, before Julius's skills and dependability were recognized by two of the area's most influential men in the agriculture industry. He worked as a hired hand for Osborn Barnard, a "pioneer" and "progressive" farmer, and considered "the largest agriculturalist in that section of the state;" and as a livery barn manager for I. H. Light, a draft horse buyer and trader "more widely known all over the state than any other man" in his chosen profession.⁸ Julius, very likely, alternated between the two employers. Clearly, he was a valuable worker and was entrusted with important responsibilities in both camps. His daughter, Ora, also worked as a maid for Mrs. Light.⁹

In 1891 Julius joined the Bloomington police force as a peace officer and nighttime driver of the patrol wagon, which was used to haul prisoners from place to place (following arrest to jail, from jail to court, etc.).¹⁰ Once again, it took little time for him to make a positive impression, and the local press followed his activities with great interest. On June 12, 1891, the *Weekly Leader* reported that the Bloomington police had made 101 arrests in the month of May that year. In the report, Julius was singled out for his contributions to the count. "Officer Witherspoon, the colored man who has just served his first month, made 14 captures, thus distinguishing himself."¹¹ On May 15, 1892, he single-handedly captured two "tramps" at the Union Depot. "They were tough-looking characters," the *Weekly Leader* observed, "and were armed to the teeth."¹² Even gun play didn't keep Julius from "protecting and serving" the citizens of Bloomington. On July 6, 1893, he took down a young man who had shot and wounded his stepfather. The young man had intervened to protect his mother, whom he believed the wounded man had been abusing. The boy's mother picked up a revolver in the confusion, but Julius quickly disarmed her, too.¹³ On February 4, 1897, Julius and his partner, Hess, stopped a man who was "on a rampage in Dickinson's Drug Store on North Main." Evidently the man had been experiencing a psychotic episode and was "adjudged insane . . . and taken to the asylum in Kankakee."¹⁴ It appears Officer Witherspoon was generally well-thought of, the *Pantagraph* describing him at one point as "one of the best men on the force."¹⁵

⁷ "Capt. Witherspoon Dead," *The Pantagraph*, Nov. 16, 1906.

⁸ "Osborn Barnard Dead," *The Weekly Pantagraph*, June 28, 1901; McCard, Harry S., and Henry Turnley, *History of the 8th Illinois U.S.V.*, Chicago: E.F. Harman & Co., 1899; "Death of I.H. Light, *Streator Free Press*, Feb 17, 1910.

⁹ "Bloomington News," *Weekly Pantagraph*, Nov. 8, 1901.

¹⁰ "101 Arrests," *The Weekly Leader*, June 12, 1891; "Capt. Witherspoon Dead;" "The Slate," *The Pantagraph*, May 7, 1895

¹¹ "101 Arrests."

¹² "Two Bad Tramps," *Weekly Leader*, May 19, 1892.

¹³ "Shot by His Stepson," *Weekly Leader*, July 6, 1893.

¹⁴ "Crew Violent Again," *Weekly Leader*, Feb. 3, 1897.

¹⁵ "Short Paragraphs," *The Pantagraph*, Nov. 17, 1893.

Trials . . .

Occasionally, even the most well-intentioned can become entangled in controversy. Sometime in early May 1893, Julius was transporting a man named Howell to jail in the patrol wagon. Howell had been arrested for fighting. On the way, Howell asked Julius to hold some money for him, explaining that it was to be used later for bail. Seeing the request as reasonable, Julius obliged. Although no evidence was presented that he kept or spent the money, he fell immediately under suspicion, the assumption being that he had accepted a bribe. Several Bloomington aldermen called for his dismissal. Among them was Alderman Charles Scott, who took the position that, should he be retained after such an incident, it would set a “vicious precedent.” Alderman Fred J. Maxwell attacked Scott and defended Julius, saying the charges against him were politically and racially motivated and that, at worst, his behavior was the result of his naïveté. The plot thickened as six council members favored dismissal; and six, retention. Mayor Daniel Foster was forced to break the tie and decided in favor of Julius, who was retained “upon his good behavior.”¹⁶

On April 1, 1897, Julius appeared, again, before a legal proceeding, this time at the trial of Mayor Foster. Foster, whose several terms as mayor were rife with controversy, allegedly took a bribe to let a prisoner escape from his jail cell at police headquarters. On October 15, 1896, Patrick “Paddy” Ryan was arrested in Bloomington for picking the pockets of several citizens attending a rally for presidential candidate William McKinley. Ryan, a known associate of criminal organizations in Chicago, escaped while under the watch of Richard Dunn, the sergeant on duty. Immediately suspended without pay from the force, Dunn accused Mayor Foster of ordering the release of the petty thief. Ryan was recaptured in Chicago and upon his return to Bloomington, he testified that he had made arrangements with the Mayor and Sgt. Dunn to free him in exchange for \$150 and a diamond pin worth \$60.¹⁷ Officer Witherspoon, who was on duty as a patrol wagon driver the night of October 15, testified that, at what was later determined to be the approximate time of the escape, Dunn sent him “to go to Blumke’s and get him [Dunn] a sandwich.”¹⁸ He later learned that Ryan had escaped. After a protracted trial, the Mayor was acquitted, but the event effectively ended his political career. Dunn, whose story changed several times during the proceedings, each time to cast him in a better light, was subsequently dismissed from the force.¹⁹ Julius was “released” from the police force on May 8, 1897. While he was never implicated in Ryan’s escape, nor did his testimony damage the embattled mayor’s chances for acquittal, his dismissal was probably part of the city’s efforts to “clean house” following the scandal.²⁰

. . . and Tribulations

His unguardedness and dumb luck did not detract from the positive impression Julius Witherspoon was making in Bloomington. He had worked for, and was valued by, Barnard and Light, two of the most prominent and popular citizens in the Bloomington area. While employed as a police officer, he had earned the respect of his law enforcement colleagues as well.²¹ The

¹⁶ “The Witherspoon Matter,” *The Pantagraph*, July 1, 1893.

¹⁷ Dunn, Mark, “The Paddy Ryan Affair,” pp. 8-15, 22, 28, 33, 65.

¹⁸ “Foster a Witness,” *Weekly Leader*, April 2, 1897.

¹⁹ Dunn, pp.8-15, 22, 28, 33, and 65.

²⁰ “Have Seen Long Service,” *The Pantagraph*, May 8, 1897.

²¹ “Short Paragraphs,” *The Pantagraph*, Nov. 17, 1893.

congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (today Wayman A.M.E.) appreciated his service as an attendant.²² On August 15, 1896, following his well-received speech, he was selected as a delegate to represent the Colored McKinley Club of Bloomington at the September 1 Republican League convention in Peoria. The Colored McKinley Club was an organization created (nationally, but with local chapters) to support the candidacy of William McKinley for president in the election of 1896 against William Jennings Bryan. Robert Savage, Richard Blue, and A.D. Cecil were chosen to accompany Julius to the convention.²³ Julius also helped organize a large-scale rally in Bloomington for the Republican Party nominees in the coming election—not only McKinley but John Riley Tanner, a candidate for governor of Illinois.²⁴

It seemed fitting, then, that Julius Witherspoon was named chief marshal of the Emancipation Day parade in Bloomington, held on September 22, 1896, “the thirty-fourth anniversary of the emancipation of the negro race [*Emancipation Proclamation*].”²⁵ The *Emancipation Proclamation* was signed into law by President Lincoln on September 22, 1862, a few days after the Union’s strategic, but costly, victory at Antietam.²⁶

Spanish-American War

Origins

Julius’s credibility was clearly growing in the Black, as well as the white, community but his accomplishments to-date would pale in comparison to what lay ahead for him. With good reason, the name of Julius Witherspoon is most often associated with the Spanish-American War. The conflict revealed his initiative, his considerable leadership capabilities, and his desire to promote Black men as able soldiers who were more-than-worthy to fight alongside their white comrades. A gallant performance in war, he thought, may even ease the oppressive state in which Black people found themselves at the turn of the 20th century.

The Spanish-American War, tagged “The Splendid Little War” by U.S. Secretary of State John Hay, had its roots in Spain’s weakening grip on its long-held colonies in the Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico) and the South Pacific (Guam and the Philippines), and the U.S.’s growing interest in reducing European presence in those areas, with the Monroe Doctrine as underpinning. Recognizing the potential for independence, revolutionaries in Cuba spurred the island colony into revolt against Spain’s constitutional monarchy, hoping the United States would intervene in its behalf. Such may eventually have invited the U.S.’s involvement, but the event that triggered a taking up of arms was the sinking of the battleship *U.S.S. Maine*, anchored in Havana Harbor, on February 15, 1898. What was thought to be a bomb attack on the vessel resulted in the deaths of 266 men. While it has since been determined that the cause of the ship’s loss was the spontaneous combustion of gasses in a coal bunker adjacent to the munitions magazine, the United States - its citizens stirred to anger and vengeance by the press, especially papers published by Pulitzer and Hearst – held Spain responsible for the sinking of the Maine. On April 21, 1898, with the authorization of Congress, President McKinley declared war on Spain.²⁷

²² “Capt. Witherspoon Dead.”

²³ “Selected Delegates,” *Weekly Pantagraph*, Aug. 20, 1896.

²⁴ “First Big Rally,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, Oct. 2, 1896.

²⁵ “Emancipation Day,” *Weekly Pantagraph*, Sept. 25, 1896.

²⁶ McPherson, James M., *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam, The Battle That Changed the Course of the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

²⁷ Quince, Charles, “5. Sliding Towards War,” *Resistance to the Spanish-American and Philippine Wars: Anti-Imperialism and the Role of the Press, 1895–1902*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, Inc., 2017.

McKinley realized that his armed forces had been, essentially, dormant since the end of the Civil War, some 33 years earlier, and needed to be hastily restored. He called on state governors to assemble armies. He asked Governor John Tanner of Illinois to provide seven regiments of infantry and one regiment of cavalry. Men from across Illinois responded to the rallying cry, “Remember the Maine,” and enlisted to fight in the Spanish-held territories. Bloomington put “two troops of cavalry” and “one company of infantry” on alert for deployment.²⁸

Participation of African American Troops

As the United States mobilized for war, the African American community contemplated its disposition on participating. Some Black men expressed empathy for the plight of Cuban insurgents, especially the Black Cubans. The revolution in Cuba – the “Cuban Libre” movement – seemed not unlike their own struggle for civil rights. Since the Civil War, Black people, especially in the South, had seen only diminishing returns for their efforts to achieve equality. The war offered the chance for African American men to illustrate they were made of stern enough stuff for battle, and to hopefully earn, with their perseverance and dignity, the respect and honor of a grateful nation.²⁹ But, the anti-imperialist Black community asked, rhetorically, “Is America any better than Spain? Has she not subjects in her very midst who are murdered daily without a trial of judge or jury? Has she not subjects in her borders whose children are half-fed and half-clothed, because their father’s skin is black?” Those in the Black community supporting the war maintained that, regardless of his past or present experiences, the “Black man’s participation in the military effort would . . . enhance his status at home.”³⁰

Whether or not, or how, Black men would participate in the war effort remained a question, not only among themselves but at the highest levels of government. And, if they did participate, likely in segregated ranks, who would lead them? There would be little time to make these decisions, for it became quickly apparent that the White soldiers deployed in the early phases were susceptible to tropical diseases and had little tolerance for the intense heat of the Caribbean and Southeast Asian territories. Considering this turn of events, the U.S. War Department adopted the position - as well as the stereotype - that African American troops could better tolerate the hot climate and would be immune to diseases of the tropics because of their skin color and other race-related characteristics.³¹ Four all-Black regiments were ordered to Cuba in the early-going, but, they, too, fell victim to extreme heat and illness. Nevertheless, they served with hope for the recognition and, ultimately, the elevated status they had long sought.

Witherspoon’s Company, Captaincy

In the summer of 1898, faced with increasing casualties from both combat and illness and recognizing the need of reinforcements, Congress authorized the War Department to organize 10 additional volunteer regiments under its immediate supervision. The number of African American men opting to fight was sufficient to populate four of those regiments - the 7th, 8th, 9th,

²⁸ “Its Ranks Dwindled,” *The Pantagraph*, September 4, 1939.

²⁹ Russell, Timothy Dale, *African Americans and the Spanish–American War and Philippine Insurrection. Military Participation, Recognition and Memory 1898–1904*, Riverside, CA: University of California, Riverside, 2013, 8.

³⁰ Powell, Anthony, “Black Participation in the Spanish-American War,” <http://www.spanamwar.com/AfroAmericans.htm>, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

and 10th. The enlistees from the four hailed from the South, the Ohio River Valley, and the Midwest. All of the soldiers comprising the 8th were Illinoisians.³²

As the drama unfolded, Julius Witherspoon decided the time was right to assemble a company of Black men and join the fight. On April 28, 1898, only a week after war was declared, he chaired a meeting at Bloomington City Hall to gauge the interest in forming a combat company of exclusively Black soldiers. The *Weekly Pantagraph* reported the outcome of the meeting in its next edition: “The patriots of the colored people of the city reached a climax . . . in the organization of a strong military company.”³³ The meeting’s attendees not only approved the formation of a company that evening, but also elected its officers. Because he had “been the most active in the organization of the men,” Julius was elected captain, or commanding officer, of the prospective company. This was an honorary title; the formal commissioning had yet to occur.³⁴ A company included 50 to 250 soldiers and was commanded by a major or a captain. Several companies formed a regiment, which consisted of 1,000 – 5,500 soldiers and was normally commanded by a colonel or brigadier general.³⁵

Julius’s intention was for his company to officially become part of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Based in Chicago, the regiment was comprised not only of all Black rank and file, but all Black officers as well, including its commanding officer, Col. John R. Marshall. Its racial composition made the 8th the first of its kind in the history of the U.S. military.³⁶

Capt. Witherspoon left the April 28 meeting with 65 interested men. Col. Marshall authorized the formation of a company but set the number at 100 men to join the 8th. Julius successfully petitioned for more time to recruit.³⁷ By May 2, word had gotten out and men from Clinton, Illinois (DeWitt County) expressed interest in joining the company.³⁸ Black men in other surrounding towns soon followed suit. By mid-July, Julius had his 100 men from the towns of Bloomington (McLean County), Champaign (Champaign County), Decatur (Macon County), and Clinton (DeWitt County). The majority of the company’s enlisted men - 59 - were from McLean County, plus two of the three officers.³⁹ The company was mustered into service as “Company G” in Springfield, Illinois, between July 12 and 21, 1898. Julius was commissioned as captain of Company G on July 20, 1898, and, as he had wished, “G” was officially attached to the 8th. In just a few short weeks Capt. Witherspoon had already led his men from obscurity to membership in what would morph into one of the most celebrated fighting forces in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Company G Recognized

As Company G awaited orders with the other companies of the 8th in Springfield, Capt. Witherspoon and his men were pleasantly surprised by the visit of four representatives of the citizens of Bloomington. John G. Welch (commissioner for the department of public property), Benjamin F. Funk (former mayor of Bloomington and former U.S. congressman), George A. Hill (main spokesperson, Black attorney, former justice of the peace), and Watson A. Bunnell

³² Ibid.

³³ “Colored Volunteers Organize,” *Weekly Pantagraph*, April 29, 1898

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Military Unit.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/military-unit>.

³⁶ *Illinois Militia Regiments – Spanish-American War*, globalsecurity.org.

³⁷ “Told to Go Ahead,” *Champaign Daily Gazette*, April 29, 1898.

³⁸ “Colored Volunteers at Clinton,” *The Pantagraph*, May 2, 1898.

³⁹ “Bloomington’s Colored Company,” *Weekly Pantagraph*, July 29, 1898.

(salesman at Livingston's Department Store) visited the encampment and presented Company G with a new guidon (company flag) to be carried into battle. Mr. Hill addressed the company in the elocutionary style of the day, with dramatic expressions and classical references. He likened Company G to the Carthaginians, who bore similar banners as they faced the mighty Roman army in the Punic Wars. Hill's "eloquent remarks were loudly cheered, not only by the soldiers, but by the 1,000 or more colored people who had assembled to witness the ceremony." Julius, no stranger to public speaking himself, "responded in a feeling manner" while graciously accepting the flag on behalf of his company.⁴⁰

The War's Winners, Losers, and Heroes

Col. Marshall heavily petitioned the War Department for a part in the fighting but recognized that participation was high stakes. He believed, as did Julius, that if Black soldiers "proved their patriotism and manhood in Cuba, they could win both civil rights and respect at home." The colonel added, ominously, that if the 8th were to fail, "the whole race will have to shoulder the burden."⁴¹

The War Department's decision to call up more regiments proved to be well-advised. The 1st Illinois (all-White) Volunteer Infantry Regiment landed in Cuba on July 9, 1898, and, by mid-August, had suffered 107 deaths in its ranks – all non-combat: malaria, exposure, dysentery, and insufficient food supplies.⁴² The numbers didn't tell the whole story, i.e. those who were seriously ill, but eventually recovered. Said one of the regimental surgeons: "I can easily bear witness to one fact that no enlisted man in our command escaped sickness while in Cuba."⁴³

As the War Department contemplated reinforcements, the decisive battles had come and gone; and, with the help of the press, Americans had already identified their heroes. U.S. Admiral George Dewey and Lt. Col. – and future President - Theodore Roosevelt. After his famous order, "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley," Dewey destroyed the Spanish Pacific squadron in Manila Bay, the Philippines, in a matter of hours. Roosevelt led the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, AKA the "Rough Riders," in a successful assault on Kettle Hill. Americans also overlooked heroic deeds, such as the performance of the 10th Cavalry, an outfit of Black soldiers commanded by Capt. – later Gen. and commander of the American Expeditionary Force during W.W. I. – John J. "Black Jack" Pershing.⁴⁴

After only 114 days of combat, the war was an obvious mismatch in favor of the U.S. On August 12, 1898, the Spanish government saw the handwriting and asked for, and was granted, an armistice while diplomats crafted a formal treaty to end hostilities. Out of the Treaty of Paris, signed by the belligerents on December 10, 1898, came Madrid's complete capitulation. It agreed to the sovereignty of Cuba and ceded all other disputed territories to the United States: the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico. The United States agreed to pay Spain \$20 million

⁴⁰ "Company G's New Flag," *Weekly Pantagraph*, August 5, 1898.

⁴¹ Obejas, Achy, "100 Years Ago, Illinois Black Soldiers Went to 'War' in Cuba."

⁴² *Statistical Exhibit of Strength of Volunteer Forces Called into Service During the War with Spain, With Losses from All Causes*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899.

⁴³ Petritsch, Joe, *A Brief History of the First Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, Affidavit located in Veterans' Administration files prepared in connection with the pension application of Joseph Petritsch.

⁴⁴ Kinevan, Marcos E., *Frontier Cavalryman, Lieutenant John Bigelow with the Buffalo Soldiers in Texas*. El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, The University of Texas at El Paso, 1998.

(estimated at \$75 million today) for the infrastructure it was forced to abandon in the surrendered areas.⁴⁵

Spain's losses were staggering, considering the brevity of the conflict: 56,400 casualties, including 15,700 deaths. Of the deaths registered, 15,000 were from disease.⁴⁶ In contrast, the U.S. suffered 4,119 casualties, which included 2,446 deaths - 2,061 of which were from disease.⁴⁷

Clearly, the de facto winner of the Spanish-American War was disease. The warm, humid climate of the Cuban theatre of operations – where the 8th spent all, or at least the bulk, of its service time - provided ideal conditions for American soldiery to contract four dreaded diseases: typhoid fever (infectious disease caused by unmanaged waste, sometimes misdiagnosed as malaria), yellow fever (viral disease with hemorrhagic fever, transmitted by the mosquito), malaria (infectious disease with fever, also transmitted by the mosquito), and diarrhea (infectious disease, usually with bacterial, viral, or parasitic causes). Pneumonia and smallpox were also present but to a much lesser degree. The United States entered the war hastily, leaving insufficient time to contemplate the devastating potential of disease. Effective treatments, such as inoculations, had not yet been developed. Regimental surgeons, therefore, could only treat symptoms and control conditions, e.g. mosquito netting and improved sanitation.⁴⁸

Although the guns were silenced, there was much work to be done before the war could be declared “over.” “Now it was the goal of many” wrote historian Joe Petritsch, “to extract the troops suffering the ravages of disease and replace them with new regiments for the occupation.” Enter, the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment . . .⁴⁹

The Eighth Mobilized, But Not for Combat

He had preferred a combat assignment, but Col. Marshall finally got his wish for the 8th's deployment. Only days before the armistice, U.S. Adjutant General Henry Corbin asked the 8th to relieve the disease riddled 1st Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Gen. Corbin announced, "I called the officers of the 8th Illinois, colored, in conference and they are unanimously and enthusiastically in favor of being sent to relieve the 1st Illinois at Santiago." Gratitude came from the highest offices. The response of Secretary of War Russell A. Alger was appreciative. Assured Corbin, "The Secretary of War appreciates very much the offer of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry for duty in Santiago and has directed that the regiment be sent there by steamer *Yale* The main trouble with our troops now in Cuba is that they are suffering from exhaustion and exposure incident to one of the most trying campaigns to which soldiers have ever been subjected." President McKinley, himself, said that when the 8th volunteered to relieve the beleaguered 1st, "that it was the proudest moment of his life."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Treaty of Paris, 1898*, Archived from the original on May 23, 2015, Retrieved December 31, 2009; Measuringworth.com.

⁴⁶ Keenan, Jerry, *Encyclopedia of the Spanish–American & Philippine–American Wars*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001, 70.

⁴⁷ Clodfelter, M., *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Encyclopedia of Casualty and Other Figures, 1492–2015* (4th ed.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2017, 256.

⁴⁸ Sternberg, G.M., *Report of the Surgeon-General of the Army to the Secretary of War*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Army, 1902; Shanks, G. Dennis, “Infectious Disease Mortality in Deployed Soldiers During the Spanish-American War,” *Journal of Military and Veterans’ Health*, Vol 32, No 2, 43-46.

⁴⁹ Petritsch, Joe, *A Brief History of the First Illinois Volunteer Infantry*, Affidavit located in Veterans’ Administration files prepared in connection with the pension application of Joseph Petritsch.

⁵⁰ McCard & Hurley, *History of the Eighth Illinois USV*, Chicago: EF Harman, 1899.

It is unclear if the leaders of the 8th – or even Gen. Corbin - were, at the time of the request, aware that the “shooting war” was in its final days. The 8th departed New York for Cuba aboard the steamer *Yale* on Thursday, August 11, 1898, and arrived in Santiago on Tuesday, August 16 (four days after the armistice), and in San Luis (a town in the Santiago Province) on Friday, August 19.⁵¹

So, to its disappointment, the 8th, including Capt. Witherspoon’s Company G, saw no combat, but was, instead, “charged with rehabilitating the area where they disembarked, and which had seen three years of constant war.” Company G helped to restore order, improve sanitary conditions, erect schools, and rebuild infrastructure, such as roads and bridges.⁵² The 8th did confront a foe after pitching camp near San Juan Hill – not men, but birds. Corpses of fallen Spanish soldiers were beginning to protrude from shallow graves, drawing congregations of vultures. “The first task of the 8th Illinois was to rid the countryside of this macabre and dangerous hazard.”⁵³

As journalists Hearst and Pulitzer were romanticizing the war and lionizing its leaders, Capt. Witherspoon concerned himself with how the men of Company G were acquitting themselves in less-than-pleasant conditions. While in Cuba he felt compelled to write a letter to *The Pantagraph* defending, and extolling the virtues of, the men in his command. In the letter, he addressed unsubstantiated reports circulating in the press that his men had clashed with Cuban citizens, thus sullyng his company’s reputation. He wrote, “. . . In the face of these false reports made by parties who have no sense of honor, we will toll on, and brighten our past records with deeds of valor and courage, and will add to the past brilliant record of the negro soldier, noble deeds, which will be envied by the soldiers of the world. . . we will toll on, that our record may be as burning lights to guide and inspire our posterity for years and centuries to come.”⁵⁴

His report, albeit endowed with typical grandeur of the times, was corroborated. Williams Shields, a private in Company G, had been discharged and sent home to Bloomington on November 13, 1898, to recuperate from a serious bout of “yellow jack” (yellow fever). When he had recovered sufficiently to be interviewed by a *Pantagraph* reporter, he readily verified his captain’s account, adding that the conditions in the encampment were less than ideal. He noted that “The boys are all well-clothed but sleeping facilities are not at all good.” He reported that the morning dew was heavy and the tents in which the men sleep could not keep the moisture out. These warm, wet conditions probably accounted for at least some of the illnesses. “The only real complaint,” he said, “was against the food.”⁵⁵ Opinions on the fare in the mess tents were mixed, depending on the sustenance to which a soldier was accustomed.

Shields described Julius as an exemplary leader. “Capt. Witherspoon is the best officer on the ground. The discipline of his men is good, and the company has received many compliments for good behavior.” He reported that, at the time of his departure from Cuba, an estimated 600 men in the 8th had contracted one or more of the illnesses afoot, accounting for nearly half of a regiment of 1,244. He spoke well of his captain, also, for working to improve conditions and

⁵¹ “Correspondence Relating to the War with Spain,” *The Organization of the Army during the Spanish-American War*, Center for Military History, U.S. Army, Vol 1, 509.

⁵² Obejas, 212.

⁵³ Gatewood, Willard B. Jr., “The Experiment in Color: The Eighth Illinois Volunteers, 1898-1899,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 54 No. 3, Autumn 1972, 305-306.

⁵⁴ “Letters from Cuba,” *The Pantagraph*, January 3, 1899.

⁵⁵ “Our Colored Soldiers,” *The Pantagraph*, Nov. 18, 1898.

minimize illness in Company G. “The sick reports . . . show the least number of men sick in any of the regiments.”⁵⁶

Lt. Henry W. Jameson also weighed in on the status of Company G and the accusations to which his captain referred. He wrote a letter to the *Weekly Pantagraph*, which was printed November 25, 1899. Jameson was, for a time, second in command of Company G. He cited an accusation that some of the company’s men had engaged in what he called “a mix-up” with Cuban citizens. He vehemently denied the alleged altercation, assuring Bloomington readers that “nothing of that kind could happen and I not know it.” He commented on a popular subject – the health of the soldiers – saying that, while many in the company had been ill during the acclimation period, the vast majority of them had fully recovered. He commented that Capt. Witherspoon had contracted an illness, but that he now looked “as fine as a major.” He reported the loss of three men to illness or injury. Two - Pvt. Shields, whose interview is aforementioned, and Pvt. Brown – had been discharged and sent home to recuperate. Another, Pvt. Bert Whitworth, had died. He agreed with Shields’s account that Capt. Witherspoon had great concern for the welfare of his troops and, as a result, his company enjoyed an impressively low mortality rate.⁵⁷

While contemporary accounts place the 8th exclusively in Cuba, *Pantagraph* articles published in 1936 and 1940 made mention that a detachment of the regiment, possibly including Company G, was transferred to Puerto Rico near the end of deployment, where it occupied the territory in an effort to secure US control of the island.⁵⁸ Regardless of where, precisely, it was stationed, its mission was accomplished and the 8th boarded the steamer *Chester* (some sources say the *Sedgwick*), on March 10, 1899, in the Port of Santiago - three months to the day after the Treaty of Paris was signed - and disembarked at Newport News, Virginia, on March 15 (or 16). The force arrived in Chicago by train on March 18. The last of its soldiers having been mustered out on April 3, “the 8th Illinois United States Volunteers ceased to exist.”⁵⁹

Status of African Americans Following the War *As Soldiers*

The 8th’s reception can be broken down into short- and long-term. War correspondent Stephan Bonsal wrote, “The services of no four white regiments can be compared with those rendered by the four colored regiments, the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th Volunteer Infantry Regiments. They were at the front at Las Guasimas, at El Caney and at San Juan, and what was the severest test of all, that came later, in the yellow fever hospitals.” Contemporaries McCard and Hurley described the arrival in Chicago: “Home at last, and a true Chicago welcome it received. A magnificent ovation all along the line of parade; a glorious banquet; a mammoth reception . . .”⁶⁰ Bloomington welcomed its native sons, Julius’s Company G, home with no less enthusiasm on April 4. Following its “faithful service for the United States government, the residents of the city extended a welcoming hand to the members of Company G, 8th Illinois Volunteers.” A lavish dinner at Armory Hall was provided for the troops. “It was a great spread,” the *Pantagraph*

⁵⁶ “Our Colored Soldiers.”

⁵⁷ “Colored Boys in Cuba,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, Nov. 25, 1899.

⁵⁸ “City Natives World Famed,” *The Pantagraph*, April 8, 1936; “Colored Company Goes,” *The Pantagraph*, June 20, 1940.

⁵⁹ Obejas, Achy, “100 Years Ago, Illinois Black Solders Went to ‘War’ in Cuba;” McCard & Hurley, *History of the Eighth Illinois USV*, Chicago: EF Harman, 1899.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

observed, and the soldiers “were in a mood to do ample justice to the feed.” A parade followed in the afternoon, during which “the men were cheered lustily all along the line of the march and were made to feel proud of their service for their country.” The parade ended at the Coliseum, where a standing-room-only crowd of both Black and White supporters waited to honor the troops. Among other speakers, Mayor Koch gave the soldiers a hearty welcome on behalf of the citizens of Bloomington, saying they “would have performed great feats of valor if given the chance in Cuba” and that they “exemplified the principle of universal brotherhood.”⁶¹

Did Black men respond as well as white men to the demands of armed conflict? McCard and Hurley observed, “Now that the 8th has served, and has been mustered out with a most excellent record . . . what was once an experiment is now an assured success.”⁶² However, it would be a long time before African American soldiers would truly achieve the respect of the U.S. military’s upper echelons. In World War I, Gen. John J. Pershing, in command of the American Expeditionary Force, was reluctant to share ranks with the other allied armies, desiring that his army fight as an intact unit. As a compromise, he assigned Black soldiers to French legions. The Black troops impressed not only their French allies, but their German adversaries as well.⁶³

In World War II, with a few noted exceptions - such as the famed Tuskegee Airmen and the 761st Tank Battalion - Black soldiers were relegated to stevedores and other non-combat roles. Only 3% of African Americans who enlisted actually saw combat. While Black troops were stationed in England as the U.S. contemplated an invasion of the mainland, British citizens were quick to observe the degrading way these troops were treated by the White American troops.⁶⁴ The U.S. military did not desegregate until President Harry S. Truman issued the order to do so on July 26, 1948.⁶⁵

Status of African Americans Following the War

As Civilians

The men of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment returned home in April 1899 hoping that their military participation and the turn of the 20th century would improve life for African Americans in society. Some believed that those hopes were realized. “Their time in Cuba was challenging,” summarized the Chicago Tribune 100 years later, “marked by harsh conditions and the aftermath of battle. However, their service was a turning point for Chicago’s African American community, contributing to Black political empowerment and community organization.”⁶⁶ By most accounts, though, the euphoria of a victorious campaign and the well-documented success of the 8th served to only temporarily obscure the patterns of White America’s oppression of African American people. Some would suggest that prejudice and discrimination against Black people, with the backing of the Nation’s institutions, not only persisted with the advent of the 20th century, but intensified. Historian Rayford Logan contended

⁶¹ “Welcome to Company G,” *The Pantagraph*, April 5, 1899.

⁶² McCard & Hurley, *History of the Eighth Illinois USV*, Chicago: EF Harman, 1899.

⁶³ Lentz-Smith, Adriane, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans in World War I*, Cambridge: MA, 2009, 114.

⁶⁴ “African American Platoons in World War II,” *HistoryNet*, October 20, 2006, Retrieved July 1, 2016.

⁶⁵ “African Americans In Korean War,” *Koreanwarlegacy.org*, 2020.

⁶⁶ Obejas, Achy, “100 Years Ago, Illinois Black Soldiers Went to ‘War’ in Cuba.”

that the African American's status reached its lowest point in 1901, not long after the Spanish-American War.⁶⁷

Later Life and Death

By 1900, Julius Witherspoon had settled back into his pre-war life in Bloomington, returning to Mr. Barnard's employ as a liveryman, attending Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church, and reconnecting with his family. He had sacrificed a great deal to defend both his country and his race, including his health. For the rest of his brief life, he suffered the lingering effects of either malaria or yellow fever. In 1903 his beloved wife, Mary, passed away at the age of 43 from what was termed "a short illness with brain fever" (probably encephalitis).⁶⁸

A widower now and in declining health, Julius, nevertheless, contemplated another run for political office. His experience as a nominee for county assessor in Arkadelphia, Arkansas in 1880, undoubtedly, left a bad taste in his mouth and may well have fueled his decision to move his family north. Nevertheless, when nominated to represent precinct number nine as a committeeman in 1901 and 1904, he accepted. His selection was yet another testament to his credibility and a small, but positive, step for race relations in Bloomington.⁶⁹

By 1906 Julius's health was rapidly deteriorating, and he decided to spend the late fall and winter months at the Old Soldiers' Home in Danville, Illinois (now known as the Danville Veterans' Administration Medical Center) to convalesce. In early November, his daughter, Ora (Mrs. Wiley C.) Casey, was encouraged at receiving word that his health was improving. However, on November 12, 1906, Julius died at the Home. He was 47 years old. In keeping with the practice of the times, his remains were taken to Mrs. Casey's home at 307 South Lee Street, Bloomington. His obituary in the *Pantagraph* offered this brief summary of a life well-spent: "Captain Witherspoon had many friends here who will learn of his death with regret. He was a respected leader of his race and one of the best-known colored men of the city."⁷⁰

The funeral was held at the Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church, North Center Street, Bloomington, and was officiated by Rev. George Brown of Normal. Company G which, in 1901, had become a permanent unit in the Illinois National Guard, took charge of the services and fired a final salute while the company's bugler sounded taps, a fitting gesture for the "officer and gentleman" his family, many friends, and fellow veterans thought him to be.⁷¹

Children, Residences, Resting Places

The Witherspoons were the parents of six daughters, the first four of whom were born in Clark County, Arkansas. The oldest was Stella (known also as Estella or Gustella), born August 1880. She married William Parrish on December 18, 1900, in Bloomington, but the marriage evidently ended in divorce. She married Samuel Alexander McClelan (1881-1941) in either 1904

⁶⁷ Logan, Rayford Whittingham, *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, Boston: Da Capo Press, 1965, 1997 Reprint.

⁶⁸ "Mrs. Julius Witherspoon Dead," *Weekly Pantagraph*, Dec 11, 1903; "Encephalitis," *NHS Choices*, 2016 [Archived](#) from the original on 22 September 2017. Retrieved 29 October 2017.

⁶⁹ "Bloomington News," *The Weekly Pantagraph*, March 8, 1901; "List to be Voted on Feb 20," *The Weekly Pantagraph*, 12 Nov. 12, 1904.

⁷⁰ "Capt. Witherspoon Dead."

⁷¹ "Funeral of Capt. Witherspoon," *The Pantagraph*, Nov. 16, 1906; "Splendid Fight," *The Pantagraph*, Feb. 15, 2010.

or 1905.⁷² Samuel was born in Nashville, Tennessee. He was employed as a custodian for a small business building, while Stella worked as a housekeeper for several Bloomington residents. Samuel died January 3, 1941, at age 59; Stella passed away on December 3, 1956, at the age of 76.

Orach “Ora” was born in October 1882 and was also employed as a housekeeper, oftentimes for the Light family, her father’s employer. She was, for a time, a manicurist. Ora was married to Wiley E. Casey on March 22, 1906, and, later in life, to a man named either Jones or Johnson. Ora died in Champaign, Illinois, on September 23, 1947, at age 64.⁷³

Daughter number three, Gabriella, was born August 15, 1883, and married Fred Chester on April 5, 1911, in Bloomington. The two later divorced. Gabriella was a teacher but was also listed as a “cateress.” She passed away at age 51 in Urbana, Illinois, on November 8, 1934.⁷⁴

Frances “Frankie” Witherspoon was born in July 1884 and, on August 9, 1909, married Clifton J. Jordan in Bloomington. She, too, earned her living as a domestic. Mr. Jordan died in 1949. Frankie died sometime after February 1953, which would have made her at least 68.⁷⁵

The youngest two Witherspoon children, daughters Georgia “Georgie” and Jennie, were born after the family arrived in Bloomington. Georgie was born in February 1885, and was married to a man named Carver in Bloomington on May 4, 1912. Like several of her sisters, she worked as a domestic. At some point, the Carvers relocated to Chicago, where Georgie died on July 12, 1969, at age 84. Jennie was born in May 1890, and married Ed Harris on June 1, 1915. They were later divorced. The couple resided in Champaign, where Jennie worked as a cook for a fraternity house. She died in 1958 at the age of 68.⁷⁶

Julius had six grandchildren who survived to adulthood, all provided by daughter Stella and her husband Samuel McClelan: Vera, Donald, Orach, Virginia, Chester, and Gabriel. Julius may have lived long enough to meet Vera, his first.⁷⁷

While the children lived at home, the Witherspoons resided at several addresses during their time in Bloomington: 510 North Lee (1889), 606 North Madison (1891), 404 W. Mulberry (1893), 716 W. North (1895), 509 W. Olive (1897-1899, 1901-1904), and 408 E. Taylor (1905).⁷⁸ In 1900, the U.S. Census put them at 509 S. Lee.⁷⁹

Julius, Mary, Stella, Ora, and Gabrielle are all buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, but, regrettably, not together. Julius’s grave can be found in section 7, lot 14 of the Old City Cemetery, while Mary’s grave is in lot 15.12 of the Free Ground area. The three daughters - Stella, Ora, and Gabrielle – are located in Section 17, lots 129, 111, and 66 respectively.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

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⁷² “Gustella McClelan Obituary,” *The Pantagraph*, Dec. 5, 1956.

⁷³ “Witherspoon, Julius,” *Ancestry Family Tree*, Provo UT: Ancestry.com.

⁷⁴ *Illinois, U.S. Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916-1947*.

⁷⁵ “Witherspoon, Julius,” *Ancestry Family Tree*, Provo UT: Ancestry.com; Devore, Michael, *Family Group Sheet for Julius Witherspoon*, McLean County Museum of History, 2024.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ “Witherspoon, Julius,” *Ancestry Family Tree*, Provo UT: Ancestry.com.

⁷⁸ *Bloomington-Normal City Directories, 1822-1995*.

⁷⁹ *U.S. Census, 1900*.