

Lieutenant Colonel Allen Allensworth (1842 - 1914)

Birth, Childhood, and Self-education

Allen Allensworth was born into slavery on April 7, 1842 at Louisville, Kentucky, the son of Phyllis and Levi Allensworth. His mother named him for Bishop Allen, an eloquent preacher of the A.M.E. Church, whom she hoped he would emulate. Phyllis Allensworth encouraged her son to become educated, and suggested that he learn to read and write, even though this was illegal for a slave, by playing "school" with the son of his mother's owner, who was receiving regular instruction himself. In this manner he cleverly learned all that the son was learning in school.

Allensworth's early education continued when he became a member of the household of the Talbot family, and at a school established for slave children at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Louisville. These efforts to become literate, however, alarmed his owners so much that in the spring of 1854 they intervened by sending him to a rural plantation in Henderson County, Kentucky as a punishment for attempting to learn to read and write.

He became a member of the Pat Smith household, where his duties included waiting on the table in the dining room as well as assisting with some of the lighter agricultural work. His thirst for knowledge continued, however, in spite of all the obstacles placed in his way by the Smiths. He and an orphaned white boy, Eddie, who was also a member of the household, studied secretly whenever it was possible, and reinforced each other's learning.

Attempts to Escape from Slavery

The following year the Smiths took an extended trip to Louisville, leaving the plantation in charge of a cruel overseer. After a severe and unwarranted beating, Allensworth resolved to leave the plantation and run away to Canada. He was only thirteen years old at the time. Allensworth hid overnight in the nearby woods and spent the following two weeks with a family several miles from the plantation whom he knew. Then he went into the city of Henderson, Kentucky. Here he was identified as a runaway slave, captured, and taken back to the Smith plantation. After escaping from his place of confinement and hiding for a week on the plantation, he ran away once again, only to be apprehended a second time. This time he was held by the Smith's family physician until they returned from Louisville with instructions from his owners there to sell him. His confinement continued until he was sold at auction for \$960 on the court house steps in Henderson.

His new owner was Martin Hancock, with whose family he stayed for several years before being taken down the river to Memphis, Tennessee. Efforts to sell him in the slave market there were unsuccessful, and Allensworth was then sent to the

slave market in New Orleans. Here he was sold to a race horse owner, Fred Scruggs, who trained Allen as a jockey. He was with Scruggs at the outbreak of the Civil War, and returned with him to Louisville in spite of the Confederate blockade of the Mississippi at Memphis. The return to Louisville allowed a reunion with his devoted mother, whom he had not seen for over seven years.

Due to the war activities, there was to be no racing season in Louisville. Allensworth and the other members of Scruggs racing entourage were entrusted to James Ficklin, while Scruggs returned to New Orleans on business. They never saw him again. Ficklin assumed control of the slaves, and arranged for Allensworth to work for the family of Virgil Mc Knight, a banker of Louisville. Soon afterwards the Mc Knight's home in the country near Louisville was surrounded by Union forces, and Allensworth had the opportunity to talk with some of the Union officers and men. He expressed to one officer his past experiences as a slave, and his longing to be free. The officer in turn invited him to join the hospital corps of the Forty-fourth Illinois Regiment as a nurse. Allensworth accepted the invitation, and marched with the Forty-fourth when they left for Louisville. His ultimate goal, however, was still Canada and freedom.

Civil War Service

The Forty-fourth Illinois was engaged in the Battle of Perryville and then marched south towards Nashville, where they engaged the Confederate Army under General Bragg. The fighting was fierce, and the hospital corps was forced from its location. Allensworth caught a horse whose rider had been knocked from the saddle, and headed for Nashville, where he finally found a military hospital under the command of Dr. Gordon, who took him in and assigned him to duty. Large numbers of wounded from the battle of Murfreesboro were being brought in, and Dr. Gordon received orders to load as many of them as possible on board the steamer St. Patrick, and to take them to a military hospital in Evansville, Indiana. Dr. Gordon took Allensworth with him. At Evansville, Allensworth was allowed to go ashore. It was the first time in his twenty-one years of life that he had ever walked on free soil.

In the spring of 1863, Allensworth decided to act on his new-found freedom and his realization that the war was now about the issue of slavery. He wished to continue his military service, and was advised that the Navy would be the best branch of service for him. He presented himself to the recruiting officer at Cincinnati, Ohio, signed up, and was shipped as a first class seaman at a salary of \$18.00 per month. He was assigned to the gun-boat "Queen City", which had been fitted up for service on the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Allen was selected as a wardroom steward, and proved himself capable in the extreme, later becoming the captain's steward. When the captain was transferred to the "Tawah", Allen went with him. The Tawah was responsible for patrolling the Tennessee River and destroying any Confederate vessels being used to cross and re-cross the river. Guerrillas firing from the high cliffs along the banks of the river made life dangerous

for anyone on deck, and Allen had many narrow escapes. Allen served on another gun-boat, the Cincinnati, after the Tawah was destroyed by enemy fire. He was honorably discharged from the Navy on April 4, 1865, his term of enlistment being completed.

Business Career and Religious Conversion

After a brief reunion with his mother in Louisville, Allensworth returned to Mound City, Illinois, where he found employment as Commissary to the commandant of the Mound City Naval Yard. He filled this position for two years, then left Mound City in 1867 and went with his brother William to St. Louis, where they established two restaurants in different parts of the city. Both establishments were extremely successful from the very beginning, and were sold by the brothers when they received an attractive offer. William remained in St. Louis after the sale, while Allen returned to Louisville. Here he found employment with two different families before reaching a major turning point in his life. He "got religion" and joined the Fifth Street Baptist Church in Louisville.

Education and Teaching Career

At about this same time, the American Missionary Society of New York was implementing plans to organize a Normal School for freedmen in Louisville. When Allensworth heard that a building was being erected to house the school, he applied for the position of janitor. This enabled him to attend the school and earn his living at the same time. The school became known as the Ely Normal School, and here Allensworth received his first formal instruction.

The opening of a Freedman's Bureau to establish schools throughout the state of Kentucky gave Allensworth his first opportunity to demonstrate and develop his teaching skills. The officer in charge of the Freedman's Bureau asked the principal of the Ely Normal School to recommend a student to take charge of teaching a small school in Christmasville, south of Louisville. Allensworth was the principal's choice. This took place in 1868. Allensworth was later in charge of schools at Cave City and Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

Somewhat later, the officers and members of the Fifth Street Baptist Church in Louisville, recognizing their fellow parishioner's ministerial potential, keen intellect, and strength of character, ordained Allensworth to the work of the Gospel ministry on April 9, 1871. Through this commission he received considerable experience as a teacher and missionary throughout Kentucky.

Formal Preparation for the Ministry and First Pastorate

Feeling that he was inadequate to the challenges provided by his early ministerial experiences, Allensworth applied for admission and was accepted by the Baptist Theological Institute at Nashville. Here he received the formal theological

training he desired. During his second year at the Baptist Institute, Allensworth received his first regular pastorate--a congregation of thirteen members at Franklin, Kentucky, north of Nashville. During the time he spent with this congregation, it grew to one hundred and sixty members, and was able to build and pay for a regular house of worship. He submitted his resignation in order to complete his final two years of study at the Baptist Institute, leaving the congregation on a sound financial footing and able to call a pastor who could devote his entire time to them.

Further Teaching, Pastorates and Marriage

In the fall of 1875 Allensworth accepted the position of teacher in the school at Georgetown, Kentucky. This position gave him the opportunity to visit the surrounding communities and hold preaching services for children on Sundays. And he was especially gifted in preaching to children. Allensworth left this position to become secretary for the General Association of Baptists in Kentucky. The goal of this organization was to establish a school for the religious training of teachers and preachers and, to further this goal, they founded The State University of Kentucky. Allensworth was among the organizers and incorporators of this institution. Allensworth's next pastorate was at a troubled church in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. He was able to reconcile the congregation before accepting a call to return to his first church in Franklin. From Franklin he accepted a call from the Harney Street Baptist Church in Louisville. Allensworth reorganized this church as the Centennial Baptist Church, and it flourished under his leadership.

Allensworth's reputation as an eloquent preacher and a healing minister had spread to Bowling Green, Kentucky, where the members of the State Street Baptist Church desired to call him as their pastor. They were concerned, however, that Allensworth was unmarried. He had been engaged for a number of years to Miss Josephine Leavell of Trenton, Kentucky. Upon receiving their call, Allensworth informed Miss Leavell that he would be in a position to culminate their engagement with marriage, and they were married in Trenton on September 20, 1877. The newlyweds were warmly welcomed by their congregation when they returned to Bowling Green and began their life together. The new Mrs. Allensworth was a talented musician who worked side by side with her husband and endeared herself to the entire congregation.

Allensworth and his wife organized the church into various departments and found a way to actively involve every member of the congregation in the life of the church.

Career as a Lecturer and Involvement in Politics

During the time he was serving as pastor at the State Street Baptist Church, Allensworth became noted as a public lecturer. His wit, charm, and command of language made him a popular and respected speaker. He wrote five lectures that were immensely popular and won him nationwide notice. The most famous of the five was "The Five Manly Virtues". Allensworth identified those virtues as being Industry, Fidelity, Gentleness, Fortitude, and Prudence. Allensworth was widely

sought for the lecture circuit, and traveled throughout New England under the management of the Williams Lecture Bureau. His main reason for the lecture tour was to raise funds for the indebtedness of his church, but a secondary reason was to broaden his horizons and his acquaintance.

Allensworth also became interested in politics, and served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention at Chicago in 1880. He also served as an elector for the State of Kentucky in the Election of 1880. Allensworth was again a delegate to the Republican National Convention in Chicago four years later. At this convention he demonstrated before all those present that he was a man of principal and honor, and that he would not be swayed from the course his conscience dictated by political maneuvering. He left the convention widely known and admired.

Application for Chaplaincy, 1886

As early as 1882, Allensworth had been informed by a black soldier that the chaplains of the black regiments in the United States Army were all white men. The soldier urged Allensworth to use his influence to bring about the appointment of black chaplains for the black regiments. Allensworth made inquiries, and learned that the Chaplain of the 24th Infantry was scheduled to retire in four years. After due consideration, Allensworth decided that he would make application for the position himself at the appropriate time. He was concerned for the future of his family, for he and Mrs. Allensworth had become the parents of two daughters, and it seemed to him that a career as an army chaplain would provide a steady income and a secure future.

In the meantime, he accepted a call to the Union Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Word of Allensworth's high moral character, leadership ability, and experience as a minister had reached the congregation, who had been without a regular pastor for some time. After a year's trial as their pastor, they asked him to remain. Allensworth still desired to serve as an army chaplain, however, and he began to enlist supporters for his application. After a number of prominent politicians intervened with President Arthur on his behalf, Allensworth was appointed Chaplain of the 24th Infantry with the rank of Captain on April 1, 1886. After a farewell reception given in his honor by the Union Baptist Church, Allensworth left for Fort Supply in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Mrs. Allensworth and their daughters were to join him later.

Service with the 24th Infantry Regiment

When Chaplain Allensworth entered the Army in 1886 there was but one other black officer, a chaplain like himself. In the course of his twenty years' service, he saw that slowly begin to change. After serving at Fort Supply, Indian Territory, Chaplain Allensworth was stationed at Fort Bayard, New Mexico, Fort Douglas, Utah, Fort McDowell, California, and Fort Harrison, Montana. During the Spanish-American War he was stationed in the Philippines and remained there from 1898 to

1901. At each post, Chaplain Allensworth was noted for organizing regular church services and Sunday Schools. At one post he wrote the curriculum for the graded schools he was responsible for organizing. While in the Philippines, he organized schools for the enlisted men in addition to his other responsibilities. His entire military career was marked by enthusiasm, efficiency, devotion to duty, and a deep concern for the men entrusted to his care.

One interesting sidelight of Chaplain Allensworth's military career was his participation at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1892, which provided the opportunity to meet and talk with Frederick Douglass.

At the conclusion of twenty years' service, Chaplain Allensworth requested retirement. Due to a change in military policy for chaplains and his prior service in the Civil War, he was retired with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, the highest ranking chaplain and the highest-ranking black officer of his time.

The Founding of Allensworth, 1908

Allensworth's commitment to the service of black Americans did not end with his retirement from the military. And he had a vision, a vision of an all-black community where the seeds of black self-determination could be planted, grow and flourish, free from the discriminatory laws and practices of the time. Allensworth had established a residence in Los Angeles prior to his retirement in 1906. Soon he met William Payne of Pasadena, a graduate of Denison University and a teacher of considerable talents. Payne and Allensworth shared the same vision, a place where black Americans could demonstrate their ability to organize and manage their affairs, to control their common destiny, and to reach their full individual potential. On June 30, 1908, Allensworth and Payne formed the California Colony and Home Promoting Association, with offices in Los Angeles. Allensworth and Payne were the prime movers in the association, but John W. Palmer, William H. Peck and Harry A. Mitchell were involved with the association's formation as well.

After initial difficulty in finding a location for the new community, the association was finally able to purchase land from the Pacific Farming Company at Solito in Tulare County, mid-way between Fresno and Bakersfield. The location was re-named Allensworth to honor the Colonel, and the association began to market the colony to responsible blacks who shared the founders' vision and desired to make their dreams a reality as well. Allen and Josephine Allensworth built a home in the new community in 1910, and by 1912 the official population of Allensworth stood at 100. The community was served by two general stores, a post office, a hotel, and a recently completed school that also functioned as the community's social center. The high point of Allensworth's growth occurred during the years 1912-1915, and the small community attracted nation-wide attention.

Conflicts with the Santa Fe Railroad, the duplicity of the Pacific Farming Company, and a diminishing water supply, however, all combined to hamper the growth of the community and to bring about the eventual demise of Allensworth. But the greatest blow to the community was the death of Colonel Allensworth.

The Death of Colonel Allensworth, 1914

On September 13, 1914, Colonel Allensworth arrived in Monrovia on the Santa Fe Railroad. The newspaper account of the tragic accident that resulted in his death incorrectly identifies Shiloh A.M.E. Zion Church as his destination, but clearly states that he was in town to speak Sunday morning at the church "which he founded". That could only be Second Baptist Church. While walking up the west side of Myrtle Avenue, Colonel Allensworth was struck by a tandem motorcycle and sustained multiple injuries. He was taken to the Haben Hospital, now the Monrovia Community Hospital, where he died the next evening. Colonel Allensworth's funeral services were held at the Second Baptist Church of Los Angeles, with a military honor guard of both races, and he was interred at Rosedale Cemetery on September 18, 1914. Today the Colonel Allensworth State Park, dedicated on October 6, 1976, hallows his memory.

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