Captain Julius C. Witherspoon (1859 – 1906)

Introduction/Overview

A wall mural at 100 E. Monroe Street in Bloomington, Illinois, shows a picture of Julius Witherspoon. The artist, Mark Blumenshine, placed Witherspoon's image next to some of the most famous people from McLean County, like President Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Senator David Davis, Jesse Fell, founder of Illinois State University and The Pantagraph, playwright Rachel Crothers, and Kickapoo Nation Chief Machina. Blumenshine decided to show Witherspoon in a U.S. Army officer uniform, which makes sense because Witherspoon was the captain of Company G in the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment during the Spanish-American War. This regiment was important because it was the first all-Black fighting force in U.S. military history, led by Black officers, which Witherspoon was one of.

Witherspoon was born in the South, where African Americans faced harsh unfair treatment even after the Civil War. He moved to the North with his wife and daughters and settled in Bloomington, Illinois. There, he became a hardworking and trusted employee, active in the community, a devoted church member, and a loving family man. He passed away at the Old Soldier's Home in Danville, Illinois, at the age of 47 due to the health problems caused by the war. He is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Early Life and Personal History

Julius Witherspoon was born in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, in April 1859, and lived there for the first 24 years of his life. He was probably born into slavery, and not much is known about his early years. It seems he and his older brother, Archie, were raised by their mother, Harriet. By 1870, the family worked as tenants for a man named Ned Perry. Julius and Archie were farm laborers. Julius married Mollie "Mary" Ross on November 20, 1879, in Greenville Township, Clark County, Arkansas. They had six daughters together over the next 11 years.

Even though the Civil War was over and slavery had ended, life for African Americans in the South was still very difficult. In 1880, the Republican Party in Clark County, Arkansas, nominated Black men to run for local offices, including Julius for the job of assessor. A local newspaper called these candidates "incompetent blockheads" and said that many of them couldn't even write their names. This harsh insult likely made Witherspoon realize that it would be impossible for a Black man to succeed in such a place. So, he decided to move his family up North, even before the Great Migration.

In late 1884 or early 1885, Julius, Mary, and their four daughters moved to Bloomington, Illinois. After they arrived, the couple had two more daughters, making it a family of eight. With so many people to support, Julius needed to find work. While Bloomington was not as hostile as the South, racism was still common in many mid-sized cities in the North.

Occupation(s)

It didn't take long for Julius's hard work and reliability to be noticed by two of the most important people in the local farming industry. He worked for Osborn Barnard, a well-known and successful farmer, and also as a manager at I. H. Light's livery barn. Light was famous across the state for buying and selling draft horses. Julius likely worked for both of them at

different times. He was a valuable worker, trusted with important tasks at both jobs. His daughter, Ora, also worked as a maid for Mrs. Light.

In 1891, Julius joined the Bloomington police force as a peace officer and nighttime driver of the patrol wagon, which was used to move prisoners. Once again, he quickly made a good impression, and the local newspaper paid attention to his work. On June 12, 1891, the *Weekly Leader* reported that the Bloomington police had made 101 arrests in May of that year. Julius stood out, with 14 arrests in his first month. The newspaper mentioned him by name, calling him "Officer Witherspoon, the colored man who has just served his first month." On May 15, 1892, he captured two "tough-looking" men at the Union Depot, even though they were armed. On July 6, 1893, Julius arrested a young man who had shot and wounded his stepfather. The boy was trying to protect his mother, but Julius disarmed both him and his mother. On February 4, 1897, Julius and his partner stopped a man who was causing a scene at Dickinson's Drug Store. The man was having a mental health crisis and was taken to a hospital in Kankakee. It seemed that Julius was well-respected, with the *Pantagraph* calling him "one of the best men on the force."

Trials . . .

Sometimes, even people with good intentions can get caught up in controversy. In early May 1893, Julius was driving a man named Howell to jail. Howell had been arrested for fighting. On the way, Howell asked Julius to hold onto some money for him, saying it was for bail later. Julius agreed because it seemed like a reasonable request. Although there was no proof he kept or spent the money, people started to suspect he had taken a bribe. Some local government members wanted him fired, including Alderman Charles Scott, who argued that keeping Julius would set a bad example. But Alderman Fred J. Maxwell defended Julius, saying the charges were politically and racially motivated, and that, at most, Julius was just naive. The city council was split evenly, so Mayor Daniel Foster had to make the final decision. He kept Julius on the force, but only if he behaved well.

Then, on April 1, 1897, Julius was involved in another case. This time, it was at the trial of Mayor Foster. Foster, who had been a controversial mayor, was accused of taking a bribe to help a prisoner escape. On October 15, 1896, a man named Patrick "Paddy" Ryan was arrested for stealing from people at a rally for presidential candidate William McKinley. Ryan, who had ties to criminal groups in Chicago, managed to escape while under the watch of Sergeant Richard Dunn. Dunn was suspended without pay and said Mayor Foster had ordered Ryan's release. Ryan was later caught in Chicago and testified that he had made a deal with the mayor and Dunn to escape in exchange for $150 and a diamond pin. Officer Witherspoon, who was driving the patrol wagon that night, said Dunn had sent him to get a sandwich, and when he came back, Ryan had already escaped. After a long trial, Mayor Foster was found not guilty, but the case ruined his political career. Dunn's story changed many times during the trial, making him look better each time, and he was eventually fired. Julius was dismissed from the police force on May 8, 1897. Although he wasn't involved in the escape, his firing was probably part of the city's attempt to clean up after the scandal.

. . . and Tribulations

Julius Witherspoon made a great impression in Bloomington, even though he was sometimes careless or lucky. He had worked for and was respected by Barnard and Light, two of the most well-known people in the area. As a police officer, he earned the respect of his fellow officers. The members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (now called Wayman A.M.E.) also valued his work as a helper. On August 15, 1896, after giving a great speech, he was chosen to represent the Colored McKinley Club of Bloomington at a Republican convention in Peoria on September 1. The Colored McKinley Club was a group that supported William McKinley for president in the 1896 election against William Jennings Bryan. Robert Savage, Richard Blue, and A.D. Cecil were also picked to go with Julius to the convention. Julius also helped organize a big rally in Bloomington for the Republican Party candidates, including McKinley and John Riley Tanner, who was running for governor of Illinois.

Because of all his work, Julius was chosen as the chief marshal of the Emancipation Day parade in Bloomington on September 22, 1896. This date marked the 34th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, which was signed by President Abraham Lincoln on September 22, 1862, after the Union's important, but costly, victory at the Battle of Antietam.

Spanish-American War
Origins

Julius Witherspoon's reputation was growing among both Black and white communities, but his greatest achievements were still ahead of him. His name is most often linked to the Spanish-American War, a conflict that showed his leadership skills and his efforts to prove that Black men were just as capable as white soldiers. He believed that doing well in the war could help improve the harsh treatment Black people faced at the turn of the 20th century.

The Spanish-American War, sometimes called “The Splendid Little War” by U.S. Secretary of State John Hay, started because Spain was losing control of its colonies in the Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico) and the South Pacific (Guam and the Philippines). The United States wanted to limit European influence in these areas, following the Monroe Doctrine. Cuban revolutionaries, hoping for U.S. help, led a rebellion against Spain. The U.S. might have eventually intervened, but the event that pushed the U.S. to act was the sinking of the battleship U.S.S. Maine on February 15, 1898, in Havana Harbor. The attack killed 266 sailors. Though it was later determined that the explosion was caused by an accident, the American public, influenced by newspapers owned by Pulitzer and Hearst, blamed Spain for the attack and demanded action.

On April 21, 1898, President McKinley declared war on Spain, with Congress’s approval. McKinley realized that the U.S. military had been mostly inactive since the Civil War and needed to be quickly built up. He called on state governors to raise armies, including Illinois Governor John Tanner, who was asked to provide seven infantry regiments and one cavalry regiment. People from all over Illinois responded to the call to “Remember the Maine” and enlisted to fight in Spanish territories. Bloomington prepared two cavalry troops and one infantry company for deployment.

Participation of African American Troops

As the United States prepared for war, the African American community had to decide whether they should join the fight. Some Black men felt connected to the Cuban rebels,

especially the Black Cubans, because their fight for freedom seemed similar to the struggles Black Americans had faced. Since the Civil War, many Black people, especially in the South, had seen little progress in their fight for equality. The war seemed like a chance for Black men to show they were brave enough for battle and, through their hard work and respect, gain the honor they deserved. However, some members of the Black community questioned whether America was any better than Spain. They pointed out that in the U.S., Black people were often killed without a trial, and their families lived in poverty because of their skin color. Some still believed that fighting in the military would help improve the Black man's status in the country.

Whether Black men would join the military and how they would be treated was a big question. If they did serve, they would likely be in segregated units, but who would lead them? This question became even more important when it became clear that the White soldiers who were sent to fight were getting sick from tropical diseases and couldn't handle the heat. The U.S. government, relying on racist ideas, believed that Black troops could handle the heat better because of their race. As a result, four all-Black regiments were sent to Cuba, but even they struggled with the extreme conditions. Still, the soldiers served with the hope that their hard work would earn them the respect and recognition they had long wanted.

In the summer of 1898, Congress decided to create more volunteer regiments, and many Black men volunteered to join. The 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th regiments included Black soldiers from the South, Ohio River Valley, and the Midwest, with all of the men in the 8th Regiment coming from Illinois.

One of these men was Julius Witherspoon. He believed it was the right time to form a company of Black soldiers, so he called a meeting in Bloomington, Illinois, on April 28, 1898, just a week after the war was declared. At the meeting, the community approved the formation of the company and elected Julius as its captain. He was chosen because he had been very active in organizing the men. Although his title was honorary at first, Julius was determined to have his company officially join the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, an all-Black regiment lead by Black officers, the first of its kind in U.S. military history.

By May 2, word had spread, and men from nearby towns also wanted to join the company. By July, Julius had gathered 100 men from Bloomington, Champaign, Decatur, and Clinton. His company was officially mustered into service as "Company G" in Springfield, Illinois, between July 12 and 21, 1898. Julius was officially made captain of Company G on July 20, and his company became part of the 8th Regiment, which would later become one of the most celebrated fighting forces in the U.S. military.

Company G Recognized

While Company G waited for orders with the other companies of the 8th in Springfield, Captain Witherspoon and his men were surprised by a visit from four representatives from Bloomington. The visitors included John G. Welch (a public property commissioner), Benjamin F. Funk (former mayor of Bloomington and former U.S. congressman), George A. Hill (a Black attorney and former justice of the peace), and Watson A. Bunnell (a salesman). They presented Company G with a new flag to carry into battle.

Mr. Hill gave a speech in a dramatic style, comparing Company G to the Carthaginians, who fought against the Roman army in ancient times. His powerful words were cheered by the soldiers and the 1,000 or more Black people who had gathered to watch the ceremony. Julius,

who was good at speaking in public, responded warmly and accepted the flag on behalf of the company.

Colonel Marshall was determined to get his regiment involved in the war. He, like Julius, believed that if Black soldiers showed their bravery in Cuba, they could gain both respect and civil rights at home. However, Colonel Marshall also warned that if the 8th failed, the whole Black community would suffer.

The decision to send more troops to Cuba turned out to be smart. The 1st Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment (which was all White) arrived in Cuba on July 9, 1898. By mid-August, the regiment had lost 107 soldiers to illness, including malaria, exposure, dysentery, and lack of food. Many more soldiers were very sick but eventually recovered. One of the doctors said that no soldier in the regiment escaped getting sick while in Cuba.

As the War Department thought about sending more troops, the big battles had already been fought. The American press had already made heroes out of people like U.S. Admiral George Dewey and Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt, who would later become president. Dewey won a quick victory in the Philippines, and Roosevelt led the Rough Riders in a famous battle on Kettle Hill. However, other heroic actions, like those of the 10th Cavalry (a group of Black soldiers led by Captain John J. "Black Jack" Pershing), were overlooked.

The war was quick and ended on August 12, 1898, when Spain asked for a ceasefire. The Treaty of Paris was signed on December 10, 1898, officially ending the war. Spain gave up control of Cuba and other territories like the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico. The U.S. paid Spain $20 million for the land and infrastructure they had to leave behind.

The U.S. had far fewer casualties than Spain—about 4,119 compared to Spain's 56,400. But the real winner of the Spanish-American War was disease. The warm, wet climate in Cuba made it easy for soldiers to catch dangerous diseases like typhoid fever, yellow fever, malaria, and diarrhea. Soldiers also suffered from pneumonia and smallpox, though not as much. The U.S. had not prepared for the threat of disease, and with no vaccines at the time, doctors could only treat the symptoms, using mosquito nets and improving sanitation.

Although the fighting stopped, the war was not truly over. Many troops were still suffering from disease, and the military needed to replace them with fresh soldiers to continue the occupation of the territories.

Enter, the 8 th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment . . .
The Eighth Mobilized, But Not for Combat

He had wanted a combat mission, but Colonel Marshall finally got what he asked for when the 8th Illinois was called to deploy. Just before the armistice, U.S. Adjutant General Henry Corbin asked the 8th to replace the sick and disease-stricken 1st Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. General Corbin said, "I called the officers of the 8th Illinois, and they all agreed and were excited to go to Santiago to help."

The offer was greatly appreciated by higher-ups. Secretary of War Russell A. Alger thanked the 8th, saying, “The Secretary of War is very grateful for the 8th Illinois’ offer to go to Santiago. Our troops there are exhausted from a very tough campaign.” Even President McKinley said that when the 8th volunteered, it was the proudest moment of his life.

It is unclear if the leaders of the 8th or General Corbin knew that the "shooting war" was almost over. The 8th left New York for Cuba on Thursday, August 11, 1898, and arrived in

Santiago on Tuesday, August 16, just after the armistice had been signed. They reached San Luis, a town in Santiago Province, on Friday, August 19.

So, unfortunately for the 8th, including Captain Witherspoon's Company G, they didn't get to fight in combat. Instead, they were tasked with helping to rebuild the area, which had been at war for three years. Company G worked to restore order, improve sanitary conditions, build schools, and fix roads and bridges. They didn't face enemies, but they did have to deal with a different problem. When they camped near San Juan Hill, they found that vultures were attracted to the bodies of Spanish soldiers that had been buried in shallow graves. "The first job of the 8th Illinois was to get rid of this dangerous situation."

While journalists like Hearst and Pulitzer were glorifying the war, Captain Witherspoon worried about how his men were doing in these tough conditions. He felt he needed to write a letter to *The Pantagraph* to defend his men and make sure people knew they were doing the right thing. There were rumors that his men had fought with Cuban citizens, and he wanted to clear their name. He wrote, "Despite these false reports, we will keep working hard and add to the proud history of the African American soldier, with bravery and honor that will inspire future generations."

One of his soldiers, Private Williams Shields, returned home to Bloomington on November 13, 1898, after getting sick with yellow fever. When he recovered, he was interviewed by a reporter and confirmed what Captain Witherspoon had written. Shields said that while the soldiers had good clothes, the sleeping conditions were not great, and the tents couldn't keep out the moisture from the heavy morning dew. He said the food wasn't the best, but it depended on what a soldier was used to. Shields also praised Captain Witherspoon, saying, "He is the best officer around. The men behave well, and the company has received many compliments for their good behavior."

Lieutenant Henry W. Jameson, who had been in charge of Company G for a while, also spoke up about the situation. He wrote a letter to *The Pantagraph* denying the rumors about a clash with Cuban citizens. He said, "Nothing like that happened, and I would know if it had." He also talked about the health of the soldiers, saying most of them had recovered from illness. He mentioned that Captain Witherspoon had also been sick but was now doing well. Jameson confirmed that only three men died or were sent home because of illness or injury, and he agreed with Shields that Captain Witherspoon had done a great job looking out for his men's well-being. Some reports mention that near the end of their deployment, a part of the 8th was sent to Puerto Rico to help secure the U.S. control of the island. Regardless of where they were, the 8th did their job. On March 10, 1899, the 8th boarded the ship Chester (or Sedgwick) in Santiago and arrived in Newport News, Virginia, on March 15 or 16. They reached Chicago by train on March 18. The 8th Illinois was officially disbanded on April 3, 1899.

Status of African Americans Following the War
As Soldiers

The 8th Regiment's reception can be divided into short-term and long-term effects. War correspondent Stephan Bonsal wrote, "The service of no four white regiments compares to that of the four Black regiments, the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th Volunteer Infantry Regiments. They fought at Las Guasimas, El Caney, and San Juan, and faced their toughest challenge later, in the yellow fever hospitals."

McCard and Hurley described the warm welcome in Chicago: “They were home at last and received a true Chicago welcome. There was a huge parade, a grand banquet, and a big reception…” Bloomington also welcomed its soldiers, specifically Company G of the 8th Illinois Volunteers, on April 4. After their “faithful service to the United States,” the city threw a welcoming party for the troops. A grand dinner at Armory Hall was provided. “It was a great feast,” the *Pantagraph* reported, and the soldiers were eager to enjoy the meal. Later, a parade took place, where the soldiers were cheered all along the route and felt proud of their service. The parade ended at the Coliseum, where a large crowd of both Black and White people waited to honor the troops. Mayor Koch also gave a speech, welcoming the soldiers and saying they “would have shown great courage if given the chance in Cuba” and that they “represented the idea of universal brotherhood.”

Did Black men respond as well as White men to the demands of war? McCard and Hurley noted, “Now that the 8th has served and been mustered out with an excellent record, what was once an experiment is now a proven success.” However, it would take many years before African American soldiers gained respect from the higher-ups in the U.S. military. In World War I, General John J. Pershing, who led the American Expeditionary Force, didn’t want to mix his troops with other countries’ armies. As a compromise, he sent Black soldiers to fight with French troops. These Black soldiers impressed both the French and the Germans.

In World War II, Black soldiers were often assigned to non-combat jobs, like working as loaders. Only 3% of Black soldiers actually fought in combat. While Black troops were stationed in England during the build-up to the invasion of Europe, the British noticed how poorly these soldiers were treated by White American troops. The U.S. military remained segregated until President Harry S. Truman ordered its desegregation on July 26, 1948.

Later Life and Death

By 1900, Julius Witherspoon had returned to his life in Bloomington. He went back to working for Mr. Barnard as a liveryman, attended Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church, and reconnected with his family. Julius had given up a lot to serve his country and fight for his race, including his health. He continued to suffer from either malaria or yellow fever for the rest of his life. In 1903, his wife, Mary, passed away at 43 from an illness called "brain fever," which was probably encephalitis.

Now a widower and in poor health, Julius thought about running for political office again. His earlier experience running for county assessor in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, might have left him with bad memories and led him to move his family north. But in 1901 and 1904, he was nominated to represent his precinct as a committeeman, and he accepted both times. His selection showed his reputation and helped improve race relations in Bloomington.

By 1906, Julius's health was getting worse, so he decided to spend the fall and winter at the Old Soldiers' Home in Danville, Illinois, to recover. His daughter, Ora, was relieved to hear that his health was improving in early November. However, Julius passed away on November 12, 1906, at the age of 47. His body was taken to Ora's home in Bloomington. His obituary in the local newspaper described him as a well-known and respected leader in the African American community.

Julius’s funeral was held at Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church and was led by Rev. George Brown. His fellow soldiers from Company G, which became a permanent part of the Illinois National Guard in 1901, managed the service and fired a salute as a bugler played

taps in honor of him as an officer and gentleman. He is buried in the Old City section of Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.