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Fletcher F. Moon
Tennessee State University, fmoon@tnstate.edu

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(Re-) Discovering LT William McBryar (1861-1941): African American Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient and 1934 Graduate of Tennessee State University

Fletcher F. Moon
Associate Professor/Head Reference Librarian
Tennessee State University
Association for the Study of African American Life and History
Indianapolis, Indiana
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(Re-) Discovering Lieutenant William McBryar (1861-1941): African American Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient and 1934 Graduate of Tennessee State University

This amazing story of developments within the last two years at my home institution, Tennessee State University (TSU), began with the appointment of LT Col. Sharon Presley as the new commander of the University’s Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) Detachment 790 on June 29, 2016. In the course of familiarizing herself with the history and particulars of this latest assignment in her own distinguished military career, a “perfect storm” was on the horizon. While reviewing files, records, and other documents in the AFROTC offices, she noticed the name “William McBryar” in a caption near the bottom of a trifold display that was among other historical information that had been saved (if not always well-preserved) over the years. The detachment itself dates back to 1919, just seven years after TSU opened in 1912, as one of 12 units at HBCUs established under the auspices of the United States Army. In 1951, the unit began its affiliation with the United States Air Force under the leadership of two former Tuskegee Airmen, Col. Howard Baugh and LT Col. Hannibal Cox, and has produced numerous officers and aviators including four-star General Lloyd “Fig” Newton as the detachment approaches its centennial in 2019.

It was unclear at that point why McBryar’s name was included in the detachment records. Col. Presley, who grew up in a military family and had a passion for military history which intensified during her studies at the U.S. Air Force Academy, associated the name McBryar with the “Buffalo Soldiers” Ninth and Tenth Cavalry units of African Americans who participated in the “Indian Wars” of the late 19th century. However, she was astounded and awestruck to
discover that numerous sources indicated McBryar was also a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest military honor.

Additional research led Col. Presley to Mr. Dale Rich, a Detroit, Michigan-based veteran and expert on the Buffalo Soldiers and other African American military history. Mr. Rich informed Col. Presley that in 1986, he corresponded with the late Mrs. Vallie Pursley, associate professor and special collections librarian/archivist and sent information on LT McBryar to the TSU Library Special Collections and Archives unit. Mrs. Pursley created a file which supplemented Mr. Rich’s material with additional documentation that revealed another perspective on McBryar. Decades after his years of military glory and well before the term “nontraditional student” came into vogue, this material provided conclusive evidence that McBryar began attending TSU (then Tennessee A&I State College) at age 70 and graduated in 1934 at the age of 73 with a degree in agriculture. Also in the file was a copy of an essay McBryar wrote which was published in the college’s “A&I Bulletin” in 1935, again citing him as a lieutenant and member of the TSU Class of 1934 while also acclaiming his insight into the nature of militarism and justice from a broad historical perspective.

Staff Sergeant Keshawn Lipscomb, Non-Commisioned Officer In Charge (NCOIC) for Adimintration/Management, contacted TSU Special Collections to facilitate the initial visit by Col. Presley and Sharon Hull Smith, assistant professor and current special collections librarian/archivist, successfully located the intact McBryar files. Shortly afterwards, Col. Presley shared her excitement before leaving the TSU Library by stopping at our Information/Reference desk and asking if I was aware that our University alumni included a Congressional Medal of Honor (CMOH) recipient. I was not, but agreed that this was definitely news that should be shared and publicized, beginning with my colleague and supervisor Dr. Murle Kenerson, Interim
Dean of Libraries and Media Centers. She also noted that her research revealed few Medal of Honor recipients were directly affiliated with colleges, even including those who attended and/or graduated from the academies associated with the various branches of the military. To date, her own service academy (U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado) has only one CMOH recipient, Captain Lance Peter Sijan, decorated for actions during the Vietnam War.

Knoblock (2008) stated that McBryar was one of the last of 18 African American soldiers who received the CMOH for actions during the Indian Wars and the only one to later become a commissioned officer. McBryar was possibly the first CMOH recipient ever who had attended and/or graduated from what were then called “Negro colleges”, especially given the 1890 date of his commendation. Lovett (2017) noted ambivalence of Native Americans toward the Buffalo Soldiers, while Kessel and Woosster (2005) documented 24 Native American CMOH recipients between 1869 and the Korean War of the 1950s. The first was Sgt. Co-Rox-Te-Chod-Ish (Mad Bear), a Pawnee scout decorated on August 24, 1869 for actions on July 8, 1869 during the Comanche Wars. At least ten more Native American soldiers predated McBryar’s recognition in 1890 for his bravery against Apache warriors in the Arizona Territory on March 7 of that year.

The TSU Library continued to assist and support Col. Presley as she informed University administrators, other military officials, Federal, state, and local legislators, and historians about this significant addition to our University’s history. It was also significant that most other historical books and references citing McBryar included no specific mention of his education at TSU. For example, Schubert (1997) includes an entire chapter on McBryar, but indicates he attended college in Tennessee before his military career, which Knoblock (2008) cites as beginning when he joined Company K of the Tenth Cavalry Regiment in 1887.
As a native of North Carolina, several of that state’s historical resources indicate that before he became a soldier, McBryar attended St. Augustine’s College (now University), a small HBCU in Raleigh, the state capital. While there were other HBCUs in Tennessee prior to 1887 (with Fisk University in Nashville and Knoxville College being two examples), in addition to the fact that TSU was not established/opened until 1912, it seems highly unlikely that McBryar’s pre-military college studies were done in Tennessee.

Omissions and/or inaccuracies in several previous historical books and publications on McBryar as a Buffalo Soldier and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient may help explain why his full story still seemed to be “hidden in plain sight”. More information has been available (and most attention has been focused) on his military exploits, as opposed to his personal/later life and final years. The other consideration seems to be that McBryar did not “toot his own horn” or draw undue attention to himself despite his many outstanding accomplishments and achievements, although he maintained frequent correspondence with the government regarding his whereabouts and access to his rightful share of military and veteran’s benefits.

In another recent conversation, Col. Presley cited a case with interesting parallels to the McBryar story. During her cadet years at the Air Force Academy, she became aware that one of its janitors, William John “Bill” Crawford (1918-2000), was in fact a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient during World War II. Like McBryar, he was very humble and low-key about his status when she met him, saying “That was a long time ago, and [just] one day out of my life.”

News of McBryar’s direct connection to TSU generated widespread interest from historians, officials/officers from various military branches, political officials, and media. The University administration and media relations unit determined that the annual Veterans Day
observance would be an ideal time to highlight the McBryar “re-discovery”. Another decision involved scheduling the campus observance on Friday, November 10 as the 2017 Veterans Day actually fell on a Saturday. Col. Presley and Detachment 790 assisted the University Veterans Day Committee chaired by Associate Vice President Dr. Evelyn Nettles with special program planning for this occasion, including protocols involving the anticipated presence of distinguished military/veterans and political officials including Tennessee Congressman Jim Cooper. The TSU History/Geography/Political Science, Communications, Art, and Music departments as well as the Library provided additional support as well as faculty, staff, and/or student participation, with supporting documentation, displays, and exhibits available for the media and other campus visitors including the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club, Inc..

Col. Presley provided welcoming remarks, which put LT McBryar’s military career and TSU association into meaningful context, while keynote speaker Dr. Learotha Williams, TSU associate professor of history, expanded on this theme by placing McBryar into the broad perspectives of American, African American, and military history in his address for the occasion. The success of this event generated research interest and media attention from local to international levels, as LT McBryar’s story became more widely known and appreciated through technology and electronic/Internet documentation as well as more traditional formats.

In December 2017 representatives from the TSU National Alumni Association made a pilgrimage to Arlington National Cemetery to lay a wreath at the McBryar gravesite to further acknowledge him as one of the University’s most notable graduates, despite his “Unsung” status prior to developments within the last two years. On March 19, 2018 the Tennessee Legislature posthumously honored McBryar’s connections to the state, followed by the March 20 unveiling of a Tennessee Historical Commission marker on the TSU campus.
Army Lt. Col. Paul Coakley (retired), president, Tennessee chapter of Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club, Inc., was the keynote speaker for this occasion. During his remarks he shared that the actions which led to McBryar’s Medal of Honor designation were especially significant. After pursuing the Apache warriors to a cave, he directed his men to fire at the cave ceiling instead of directly toward their adversaries until they surrendered peaceably, preventing unnecessary bloodshed or loss of life.

McBryar further distinguished himself as a leader of African American troops in 1898 during the Spanish-American War in El Caney, Cuba alongside future President Teddy Roosevelt and the “Rough Riders”, and during the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902). Despite his extensive combat experience, honors, and relatively good health, McBryar was denied reenlistment due to age when World War I broke out, and he filed for his military pension. Records indicate he successfully lobbied the Veterans Administration for pension increases due to his CMOH status, and used these funds to finance his later education at Tennessee State and supplement his other work as a teacher and farmer in North Carolina.

After fulfilling his quest to complete college, McBryar returned to North Carolina and then relocated to Philadelphia for the final years of his life. At the time of his death, he was misidentified by a funeral director as being white/Caucasian, but the mistake was quickly rectified by his family and his military records. As a result, McBryar’s pension and CMOH status assured that he would be interred with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, a place where he had once served as a caretaker and groundskeeper.

McBryar’s military accomplishments are also been documented in such places as the African American Medal of Honor Recipients Memorial monument in Wilmington, Delaware and the Buffalo Soldiers monument in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. It is also interesting to note that
here in Indianapolis is the Congressional Medal of Honor Memorial in White River State Park, with architecture and touch-screen technology that also provide information on McBryar as well as fellow CMOH recipients. McBryar and/or other Buffalo Soldiers have also been remembered and documented in monuments and museums at Xenia, Ohio; Huntsville, Alabama; New Orleans; The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and numerous other sites, venues, and formats including musical compositions and film productions.

It is fitting to conclude this presentation by sharing from a 1935 essay written by McBryar after his graduation from Tennessee State University, as follows:

The word justice is one of the most potent in the English tongue. Justice has been thus defined; conformity in conduct or practice to the principles of right or of positive law: regard for or fulfillment of obligations. Two important synonyms are equity and fairness; equity is equal justice and a close synonym of fairness. The chief distinction between the creation of civilization and the brute creation is in that one word – justice.

Over there in the wilds of nature the little birds have no police force, no national guard, no protection, know nothing of justice, of courts of law, and of jurisprudence. If the birds of prey are stronger than they are and swifter on the wing, the little birds become food for the birds of prey.

Out yonder in the briar patch, the rabbit has no army and no navy, and no protection except his fleetness of foot and his cunning. When these furnish him no escape, he becomes food for the hound and the fox. So on and on throughout the great animal kingdom, we have the rule of force, the consequence of which is bloodletting and suffering. Darwin called this the survival of the fittest.

During the past generation, the great German philosopher Nietzsche proclaimed the doctrine of the super-man. With keen delight, he taught the German manhood to be hard and to be strong, and to rely upon their hardness and to rely upon their strength.

If I were required to explain the German initiation of the World War, were I to attempt to explain the recent substitution of German persecution for that culture for which the German people are renowned, and which produced that supremely excellent music of the generation just past: if I were required to account for those groundless and unseemly actions, which are a discredit to her great leadership, I should explain them in terms of the teaching of the philosopher Nietzsche. He
has succeeded in inoculating the German blood with that barbaric spirit, which, in moments of sober thinking, may cause us to tremble for the future of our civilization.

What is the nature of that human weakness which seeks justice for itself and denies it to others? What is it within us which causes us to shudder at cruelty in the brute creation and to accept it with complacency among human beings? Why is justice glorified for one race as the supreme good and denied to another? It is a mental conception of the human which cannot be explained.

The average man in the English race has been fighting for more than a thousand years, trying to extract justice from the English ruling classes and make it secure for himself and his posterity forever. Justice is the life-line of a nation; injustice, the cancer that slowly eats away the heart.

Let us call the roll of a few of the great empires of antiquity: Assyria, Syria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Where is the Babylonian empire with its great wealth and power? What has become of Persia with her tremendous expanse of territory and might? What remains of the Grecian empire except her literature and her art? And Rome with her mighty armies? All of these mighty nations have perished on the rock of injustice. The world is littered with the remains of other dead empires which went likewise.

But in the hearts of men there is an instinct for justice which causes them to establish governments to protect the weak, to provide for the care of the children and the aged. This might properly include, justice in commerce in the courts, justice between men and men, justice among races, as well as the recent ambitious national program of social justice. Allow this to become stagnant, and the nation languishes and dies.
African American Medal of Honor Recipients Memorial. Indian Campaigns, 1861-1891.
https://www.hmdb.org/Photos/79/photo79196o.jpg
Washington, DC: Potomac Corral, the Westerners.
New York: Checkmark Books/Facts on File.
https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=lib
Wilmington, DE: SR Books.
Approved Pension File for William McBryar, Company K, 49th U.S. Volunteer Infantry

https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75300434

(Re-) Discovering Lieutenant William McBryar: Buffalo Soldier, Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient, and 1934 Graduate of Tennessee State University

Fletcher F. Moon, Associate Professor/Head Reference Librarian
Tennessee State University
ASALH Conference/Indianapolis, Indiana
October 4, 2018
LT Col. Sharon Presley, Commander, TSU
AFROTC Detachment 790
William McBryar
Sergeant

Born: February 14, 1861
Died: March 8, 1941
Home: Elizabethtown, North Carolina
Years of Service: 1890 - ?
Conflicts: Indian War Campaigns

“Distinguished himself for coolness, bravery and marksmanship while his troop was in pursuit of hostile Apache Indians.”
LT McBryar’s Gravesite and Tombstone at Arlington National Cemetery
(https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=7878236)
Mr. Dale Rich, Photojournalist and Research Expert on LT McBryar and Other African American Medal of Honor Recipients
TSU Special Collections Librarians Vallie Pursley and Sharon Hull Smith
Documentation of Lt. McBryar’s TSU Years
Dr. Learotha Williams, TSU History Professor and Keynote Speaker for Veterans Day Observance Honoring McBryar (November 10, 2017)
TSU Alumni at McBryar Gravesite in Arlington National Cemetery
TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Lilliam $rF
Medal of Honor Recipient & Buffalo Soldier

at one o'clock on Tuesday afternoon
the twentieth of March two thousand and eighteen.

Tennessee State University
3500 John A. Merritt Blvd
Nashville, Tennessee

R.S.V.P.
Major Michael Gordon
615-963-5980
McBryar Historical Marker Unveiling on TSU Campus with Lt. Col. Paul Coakley, Nashville Chapter President, National Association of Buffalo Soldiers and TSU President Dr. Glenda Baskin Glover