

25 African-Americans were from Brunswick County

'Buffalo Soldiers' served in the Great War

In the racially segregated America of a century ago, 25 African-Americans from Brunswick County stepped forward to serve abroad in the Great War.

Three made it through basic training and two went on to fight in combat in France. Both were seriously injured and one spent time in a German prison camp. All are buried at the historically black John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport. At the close of Black History Month, and the centennial of the war, supporters of a planned World War I monument at the Fort Caswell Rifle Range have chosen to highlight their stories.

William James Gordon from Southport and William Frederick Brooks and Robert Bollie Stanley from Shallotte made it through basic at Camp Grant in Illinois, after receiving their orders in March 1918.

Gordon was the son of Nannie and Franklin H. Gordon (1855-1939), the first black educator in Brunswick County. The Gordons are buried in the Smith cemetery.

Gordon, Brooks and Stanley all trained with Company H, 365th Infantry, in preparation for battle in France. They were appointed to the 92nd Division, an almost exclusively black unit that took the nickname of "Buffalo Soldiers," in honor of the segregated unit that served Union forces in the Civil War.

The trio of infantrymen were scheduled to board the *USS Agamemnon* in Hoboken, New Jersey, on June 10, 1918, for their voyage to France. Brooks's name was crossed off the U.S. Army Transport Service list because he became ill. Private Brooks died of meningitis three days later, on

June 13, 1918.

Privates Gordon and Stanley reached Brest, France, on June 19, 1918, and camped at Bourbonne-les-Bains, a small resort town in the northeast portion of the country, about 60 miles from the front lines.

They joined other soldiers in an intensive, eight-week training session on offensive and defensive tactics. The Army promoted Gordon to Private First Class on July 6, 1918.

Soldiers from the 92nd Division and its brother unit, the 93rd, were among the first Americans to fight in France. They served with honor during multiple engagements on the Meuse-Argonne and received several awards from the French government.

In the final battle of the 365th Infantry, 43 men were killed in action or died shortly after, 583 were wounded and 32 went missing. It was assumed that most of the missing were killed or later died from wounds.

It turns out Stanley was taken prisoner by the Germans on October 29, 1918, making him the only known prisoner of war from Brunswick County during the Great War. Records show he was released on November 27 and returned to the United States on March 24, 1919. Stanley's right leg was amputated at the thigh. He was discharged on August 25, 1919, with a 95-percent disability.

Stanley was buried September 22, 1961, at the Smith cemetery, where his parents were also laid to rest. No one requested a military headstone, so this brave soldier's sacrifice for his nation is not readily apparent.



The 92nd Division of the Army was the unit that called themselves "Buffalo Soldiers" in honor of the segregated Civil War unit that served out West.

Gordon was wounded on November 4, 1918, and returned to the United States with other injured and sick soldiers. He died at the young age of 39 in 1930, in part because of the sacrifices he made in battle. His death certificate lists "paralysis left side due to bullet wounds received in World War" as a contributory cause.

Gordon's gravesite received a military headstone in 1937 and it remains there today.

Epilogue

The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range are working through-out the centennial of World War I to raise awareness about the site and the people from Brunswick County who served.

Located in the Caswell Dunes subdivision, the range pit is the only openly accessible structure in the county remaining from the Great War. Supporters are working to fully restore it and to have an official Brunswick County monument established there.



The African-Americans from Brunswick County were trained at Camp Grant in Illinois.

The site was once part of the larger Fort Caswell, and was where soldiers learned long-range marksmanship.

Donors may sponsor veterans, who are listed on the friends website, along with stories about veterans and others who have helped the effort. The group plans to publish a booklet of names this year.

To learn more, visit <http://www.caswellriflerange.com>.

The physical address for the friends group is 5 Foxfire Trace, Caswell Beach, NC 28465.

—Compiled by
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The three black men from Brunswick County who served in the Great War are all buried at John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport, considered a regionally threatened historic site.