

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



HENRY ALVIN CAMERON (1872-1918)

Henry Alvin Cameron was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on February 4, 1872, to Walter and Jane Bentley Cameron. The earliest known address of Henry Cameron comes from an 1880 census record of the Cameron household when he was eight years old. The family lived at 158 Line Street (currently Jo Johnston Avenue in North Nashville). There were five people living in the Cameron household at the time: Henry's father, Walter, whose job occupation was listed as a laborer; his mother Jane, a washerwoman; his older brother William and his maternal grandmother, Mary. There was also a sister named Willie who was mentioned in Henry's will that was written just days before he sailed for France to fight in World War I (A copy of his will can be found at the Eva B. Dorsey Library at Cameron School).

Cameron graduated in 1892 from Meigs High School in East Nashville. Among the students in his graduating class of five boys and four girls was Louise S. Brien, his future wife. In 1896, he received a B.A. degree from Fisk University and later joined the Pearl High School faculty as a science teacher. Professor Cameron received the LL.B. degree from Central Tennessee College in 1898 (which later became Walden University in 1900)---a post-secondary school for African Americans that was located at the current site of Cameron Middle School. He married Brien, his high school sweetheart, on June 7, 1899, in Nashville. Reportedly, Louise Cameron had one of the finest singing voices in Nashville and performed at many local events in the city.

Professor Cameron was a man of unusual mental ability and extraordinary physical fitness. He was an avid sports enthusiast who became the first basketball and baseball coach at Pearl High. He possessed a deep love for his students and they in turn adored him

immensely. He had a multitude of dear friends, cherished his wife Louise and involved himself in an array of successful business ventures, which included a stint as president of the Capital City Baseball League, a local baseball franchise consisting of eight teams based in the Nashville area. Professor Cameron was also actively engaged in the social, political, and civic life of his community. Some of his affiliations included serving as president of the Middle Tennessee Teacher's Association; secretary of the Tennessee Aid Association; Organic Member of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee (32nd Mason); fraternal member of the Knights of Pythias; member of the Nashville Teacher's Literary and Benefit Association; and a beloved elder of his church---St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, which was formerly located on Capitol Hill. He was often in the company of many of the prominent Nashville African-American contemporaries such as J. C. Napier, Robert H. Boyd, Preston Taylor, and John Wesley Work, Jr., only to name a few. One of his closet friends was George E. Washington - mentor, teaching colleague at Pearl, business partner, and the person for whom the former Washington Jr. High School was named.

In April 1917, the United States reluctantly entered World War I in Europe against the Germans. Two months later, at age forty-five Professor Cameron, a devoted patriot, took a leave of absence from teaching at Pearl High and volunteered for the war effort. He was commissioned on October 15, 1917, as a 1st Lieutenant in the United States Army at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, which was a segregated facility established specifically for training African American officers in World War I. After completing basic training at camps in Illinois and New York, Lt. Cameron sailed for France on June 10, 1918. He was assigned to Company M, 365th Infantry, 92nd Division, one of three African American Infantry

Photograph provided by the author. This publication is a project of the 2008 Nashville Conference on African-American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.

Divisions in combat during World War I. For some unknown reason, the U.S. Army reversed Lt. Cameron's first and middle names and he was listed in his service records as Alvin H. Cameron instead of Henry A. Cameron. As an officer, he was a fastidious and capable leader who always cared about the safety and well being of the men under his command. They succeeded in winning many battles against a fierce and determined German army in the face of insurmountable odds despite the overt racism received from his own U.S. Army superiors. On October 30, 1918, during the Battle of Argonne Forest, France, Lt. Cameron was killed in action while on a scout patrol with his unit. His army comrades as well as the city of Nashville went into a state of panic upon hearing the news of his death. He was the first of only three black men appointed officers in WWI from Tennessee and the first black officer to die from Tennessee. Cameron was buried at St. Mihiel American Cemetery in Thiacourt, France.

In 1919, with the introduction of American Legion posts all over the country, the Henry A. Cameron Post 6 was established in Nashville in his honor. One of the first American Legion posts named after an African American, it is still operational. On November 26, 1928, the Nashville City School Board named Cameron School in tribute to this man who stood for the highest example of civic duty by giving his life unselfishly for his country. His distinguished career as an educator, businessman, lawyer, community leader, coach, churchman, soldier, and officer leaves an indelible testimonial of scholarship, commitment, and public service for all to follow.

--Donald L. Johnson
