

Dr. Alexander T. Augusta: Patriot, Officer, Doctor



Alexander T. Augusta, M.D.
Courtesy Oblate Sisters of Providence
Archives

“My position as an officer of the United States, entitles me to wear the insignia of my office, and if I am either afraid or ashamed to wear them, anywhere, I am not fit to hold my commission.”

Born: 1825

Died: 1890

Profession: Doctor

A Canadian Education: Alexander T. Augusta was born free in Norfolk, Virginia, and traveled north as a young man. Augusta wanted to be a doctor, but he was not allowed to go to a medical school due to racial discrimination in the United States at that time. In the 1850's, he moved to Canada to study medicine. Augusta graduated from Trinity Medical College in Toronto, Canada, and began working as a doctor.

A Letter to the President: In 1863, Dr. Augusta wrote a letter to President Abraham Lincoln. He asked to work as a doctor to “colored regiments” that were being created during the American Civil War. Augusta became the first African American to be commissioned as a medical officer in the Union Army. He was surgeon-in-charge at the Contraband Hospital in Washington, D.C. The hospital was for free blacks and former slaves, then called contraband. Dr. Augusta next became the regimental surgeon for the 7th Infantry of the United States Colored Troops in Maryland. When he joined his regiment, several white surgeons objected to having a black man as their superior officer. They wrote to President Lincoln asking to end Dr. Augusta's appointment. Dr. Augusta was reassigned to a recruiting station for black troops.

Wearing a Military Uniform: Dr. Augusta wore his Union Army uniform with pride and patriotism. His appearance in uniform stirred pride in many African Americans, but provoked anger in others, both white and black. On one hand, Dr. Augusta was attacked by white men on a train in Baltimore because he was wearing his uniform. On the other hand, when he appeared in uniform in front of black soldiers in Washington, D.C., the response was joyous. Dr. Augusta represented a change in the role and position of African Americans who faced slavery and prejudice at that time. Some were unable to accept this change, but others were inspired by Dr. Augusta who represented the possibilities that freedom could bring.

Forced off the Streetcar: On a rainy day in Washington, D.C. in February 1864, Dr. Augusta, dressed in his army uniform hailed a streetcar. He wanted to stay dry, so he entered the covered area reserved for white passengers. The conductor informed Dr. Augusta that he would have to stand in the rain in the area assigned to blacks. When he refused, he was forced off the streetcar. He walked in the rain, arriving wet and late to his meeting. Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was outraged when he learned that Dr. Augusta was forced off the streetcar. Senator Sumner requested that the United States Congress allow blacks the same railroad privileges as whites. In a year, blacks and whites were allowed the same seats on streetcars in the capital, Washington, D.C.



Typical Washington, D.C. streetcar, c. 1880
Courtesy The Historical Society of
Washington, D.C.