



Photos contributed

The John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport was named by the Wilmington Historical Foundation as a Most Threatened Historic Site in the Cape Fear Region for 2017. The 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range is on the list for a second year.



Camp Grant in Rockford, Ill.

## Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range share World War I stories of county's 'Buffalo Soldiers'

On March 29, 1918, 25 African-American men from Brunswick County were ordered to report for military duty. Their destination was Camp Grant in Rockford, Ill. Very few African-Americans were given the opportunity to serve in combat units during World War I, but the War Department created two divisions (the 92nd and 93rd), which were comprised primarily of African-American combat units.

At Camp Grant, only three of the draftees from Brunswick County of the original 25 were chosen for the honor of a combat position in the 92nd Division. The three men were Pvt. William Frederick Brooks and Robert Bollie Stanley from Shallotte and William James Gordon from Southport. These men began training with Company H, 365th Infantry, 92nd Division in preparation for combat in France.

The 92nd chose the nickname "Buffalo Soldiers" in honor of African-American troops who served in the American West after the Civil War.

The 365th Infantry was scheduled to board the U.S.S. Agamemnon at Hoboken, N.J., on June 10, 1918, to travel overseas to France. All three men's names are listed on the U.S. Army Transport Service passenger list. Brooks' name is crossed out; he died of meningitis three days later on June 13, 1918.

Gordon and Stanley reached Brest, France, June 19, 1918. The camp was established at Bourbonne-les-Bains, a small resort area in the northeast of France, about 60 miles from the front. They immediately began an eight-week period of intensive training in offensive and defensive tactics. On July 6, 1918, Gordon was promoted to private first class.

The soldiers of the 92nd and the 93rd Infantry Divisions were the first Americans to fight in France. They fought with honor through many engagements on the Meuse-Argonne front and won numerous awards from the French.



In the 365th Infantry's final battle, there were 43 killed in action or died of wounds, 583 wounded and 32 missing, most of who were killed or succumbed to wounds. Gordon was wounded and Stanley was missing in action (MIA).

Later, it was found Stanley was taken prisoner by the Germans on Oct. 29, 1918, the only known World War I POW from Brunswick County. He was released Nov. 27. Documentation shows Stanley returned to America on March 24, 1919, with his right leg amputated at the thigh. He was not discharged until Aug. 25, 1919, reportedly having a 95 percent disability classification. After the war, he married Ethel Harrison and had several children.

Stanley was laid to rest Sept. 22, 1961, in Stanley Cemetery near the former Brierwood Golf Course same as his parents. A military headstone was not requested, so no World War I honors are displayed.

Gordon was the son of Franklin H. Gordon (1855-1939) and Nannie Gordon (1860-1943). Franklin Gordon was a public school teacher and the first black educator in Brunswick County. His father is buried in John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport.

His 1917 World War I draft registration shows he was married to Evelyn Frink (1891-1957), had a 4-year-old son and was listed as a laborer working in Philadelphia. His son, William James Gordon Jr. (1913-2004) had a very distinguished career in education like his grandfather, served his country like his father, and is buried in Lebanon National Cemetery in Kentucky.

Gordon was wounded Nov. 4, 1918, and returned to the United States with other sick and wounded soldiers. His injury led to his very early death in 1930 at 39. His death certificate lists a contributory cause to his death as "paralysis left side due to bullet wounds received in world war." He was laid to rest in the same cemetery as his father. A military headstone was requested in 1937 and remains there today.