

Jacob Wilks

Jacob Wilks personifies the story of the Buffalo Soldier. Born into slavery, Wilks escaped with his parents via the “Underground Railroad.” He was raised in Ohio and came of age as the Civil War started. Wilks first joined the army with the 116th Regiment of U.S. Army Colored Volunteer Infantry. He was present when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse. He was discharge on October 25, 1866 and enlisted in the regular army the same day at Greenville, Louisiana, for five years. At the end of that term, he reenlisted for another five years.

Wilks was from Clark County, Kentucky, was 22 years old, and listed his occupation as “soldier.” He stood 5’6” and had “black hair, black eyes and black skin.” He was assigned to Company F of the Ninth U.S. Cavalry. Company F was one of the four companies of the Ninth to re-occupy the abandoned post of Fort Davis, Texas on July 1, 1867. The company arrived at Fort Davis having marched 486 miles from San Antonio. Wilks was appointed sergeant on July 20, 1867, a rank he had held in the U.S. Colored Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War.

Additionally at Fort Davis, Wilks was assigned to extra duty in the Quartermaster Department “in charge of men.” It was a duty he would serve throughout most of the stay at Fort Davis and when the company moved to Fort Quitman.

Company F was ordered on detached service to Eagle Springs, Texas, in orders dated December 15, 1867. They arrived at Eagle Springs on December 31, 1867 after having marched 100 miles. Most of the company then went on to re-occupy the abandoned post of Fort Quitman. They remained there until August 1868 before returning to Fort Davis. In February 1869, Company F transferred to Fort McKavett. Like many others, Wilks’ military career had its ups and downs, with many happening at Fort McKavett, including Courts Martials, reduction in rank and time in the guardhouse. Ever resilient, Wilks worked to regain his rank, moving up to first sergeant, and became a good example for the rest of the men. He was often the non-commissioned officer in charge of patrols and escort duty.

Company F would move on to other western forts including Concho, Sill and Seldon.

After leaving the army, Wilks married Elizabeth Moore, the daughter of a former laundress at Fort McKavett, on October 24, 1884 at that post. Together they had six children. Owning property and cattle in both the San Angelo and Fort McKavett areas, the Wilks family enjoyed a prosperous life. In 1899, the family moved to San Angelo, where, according to his obituary, Jacob Wilks with both respected and well liked. He passed away on February 6, 1922 as the oldest black citizen in San Angelo.