

Private Gus Williams (1892-1918)

Augustus “Gus” Williams was born in Jacksonville, Illinois, on September 22, 1892. He was the son of Moses and Suthenie “Thenie” (Smith) Williams. They were married on December 24, 1890, in Morgan County, IL. Gus had six siblings: Eugene, Harold, Howard, Melvin, Corrine, and Ruth. Gus's father, Moses, was born in 1865, near the end of the U.S. Civil War, but it's unknown if he was born into slavery.

Around 1900, Gus and his family moved to Bloomington, Illinois. They first lived on West Grove Street and later moved to South Mason Street, where they stayed. As a young man, Gus had a few different jobs, but because of racial discrimination at the time, his job options were limited. In 1907, he was listed in the *Bloomington-Normal City Directory* as working at the Continental Pork Packing Plant. By 1909, he was a cook at the Illinois House hotel, which was the best hotel in town. The kitchen staff there was mixed-race, but most hotel staff, including waiters and maids, were white. Gus was not allowed to enter the dining room, but he worked there for seven years. In 1917, Gus enlisted in the Eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry and served during World War I.

The Eighth Illinois Infantry was made up mostly of Black soldiers from Bloomington and nearby towns. It was the first all-Black unit led entirely by Black officers. When the U.S. entered World War I, President Wilson made the Eighth part of the 370th U.S. Infantry, which was also all-Black. Gus served as a private in Company H. In July 1917, the unit left Bloomington and went to Peoria for training. After ten weeks, they traveled to Camp Logan in Houston, Texas. When the Eighth Illinois arrived in Houston, racial tensions were high. Earlier, a riot had broken out between African American soldiers and white civilians, leading to deaths on both sides. Because of this, the people in Houston were hostile toward the new soldiers, and segregation laws became even stricter. The soldiers weren't allowed to ride streetcars and had to deal with other racist rules. The soldiers had to be careful to avoid trouble so they could finish their training and go overseas. The unit had strong and disciplined Black officers, which helped them avoid further incidents. In March 1918, they moved to Newport News, Virginia, and then to France in April.

The 370th Infantry was part of the 93rd Division, one of two all-Black divisions in the war. The other was the 92nd Division. Like the Eighth Illinois, the 370th was the only regiment in the U.S. Army led by all Black officers. After training with French soldiers, the 370th went to fight near Regonville in June 1918. They spent a week in trench warfare, where soldiers fought in long, narrow ditches filled with mud and water. Soldiers were often exposed to machine gun fire, mortar shells, and gas attacks. The soldiers faced dangerous and uncomfortable conditions. In September 1918, the 370th was sent to the front line near Vraincourt, France, where they fought in heavy shell fire and gas attacks. Sadly, Gus was killed in action on September 26, 1918, at the age of 26. He was buried in France, and a memorial service was held for him at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church. His body was brought back to Bloomington in 1921 and buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

The 370th Infantry earned a reputation for fierce fighting. German soldiers called them "The Black Devils" because of their skill in battle, while the French called them “Partridges” because of their pride and confidence. Despite the nickname, the 370th proved they were strong and brave soldiers. They were praised by General Eugène Mittlhouser of the French Army for their bravery. Many soldiers in the 370th received medals, including 21 Distinguished Service

Crosses from the U.S. and several French awards. Sadly, many of those who were decorated for bravery gave their lives in battle, with 20% of the unit being killed.

In around 1922, African American veterans of the 370th in Bloomington formed their own American Legion post because they were not allowed to join posts for white veterans. They named it the Redd-Williams Post No. 163 to honor Gus Williams and John Redd, another soldier from the 370th who died in France.