Although African American soldiers have fought in America’s wars since the Revolution, they were not permitted to enlist in the Regular Army until Reconstruction. By 1869, Congress had established four all-black regiments: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. The soldiers of these regiments would become known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

The salary, $13 per month, was low for the 1870s, but still paid better than the menial jobs commonly available to African Americans. Moreover, the military provided a dignity not typically afforded by civilian life.

How the Buffalo Soldiers Got Their Name

According to legend, Native Americans called the troopers “buffalo soldiers” because their dark, curly hair resembled a buffalo’s coat. The Native Americans revered the buffalo for its fierce bravery and fighting spirit, so the nickname can also be considered a sign of respect. The soldiers accepted the title with pride and honor.

Indian Wars

Following the Civil War, the U.S. turned its attention to developing the American frontier. The Buffalo Soldiers fought in campaigns against native tribes, pursued bandits, improved roads, escorted the mail, scouted and mapped. Their work to secure the frontier was performed in the face of hostile conditions, not only in terms of extreme climates and terrain but also significant racial tension.

Cover from left to right: 9th Cavalry in Yosemite, 1904. NPS. Unidentified cavalry in forest. NPS. 9th Cavalry in Yosemite, 1903. Courtesy of the Neville Hawkins Stillion Collection; Buffalo soldier on Giant Forest Road, Sequoia 1903. Courtesy of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Wilberforce, Ohio.

In Cuba & the Philippines

After the U.S. declared war on Spain in 1898, Buffalo Soldier troops went to Cuba. They fought in the Battle of San Juan Hill alongside white regiments and Theodore Roosevelt’s volunteer “Rough Riders.” The Spanish-American War presented a conflicted situation for African American soldiers, in which they fought on behalf of their country abroad yet lacked equal rights at home.

After Spain’s defeat, an insurgent movement emerged in the U.S.-occupied Philippines. All four Buffalo Soldier regiments participated in the ensuing Philippine Insurrection. The troops began to return in 1902, passing through San Francisco to their new assignments, which included garrison duty at the Presidio and guard duty at Yosemite, Sequoia and General Grant (Kings Canyon) National Parks.

The Army in the National Parks

Before the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the Army was responsible for patrolling Yellowstone, Sequoia, and Yosemite—our first national parks. They protected the lands for the enjoyment of visitors and laid the foundations for the future national park system. Beginning in 1891, soldiers spent the summer blazing trails, constructing roads, creating maps, evicting grazing livestock, extinguishing fires, monitoring tourists, and keeping poachers and loggers at bay. The soldiers’ expeditionary frontier experience, as well as their sense of responsibility and service, lent itself toward duty in the parks.

The Buffalo Soldiers patrolled the parks during three summers, entrusted with the same duties as the units that preceded and followed them. In 1899, the 24th Infantry spent about a month in Yosemite and Sequoia. In 1903 and 1904, 9th Cavalry troopers were in the parks. In 1903 and 1904, the 24th Infantry spent about a month in Yosemite and Sequoia. In 1903 and 1904, 9th Cavalry troopers were in the parks.

Meeting Locals

The Army’s arrival in town drew attention, and the years of the Buffalo Soldiers were no exception. In some communities, the very concept of the national parks was as foreign as the presence of the troopers themselves. However, despite any praise in print for the “heroes of San Juan Hill,” residents did not always transcend their personal prejudices. The Buffalo Soldiers could expect to face discrimination, independent of their military status.

Nonetheless, the soldiers made an impression that lasted beyond their brief stay. In December 1903, Captain (later Colonel) Charles Young spoke at an assembly at Stanford University. Young was the third African American to graduate from West Point and the highest ranking black officer in the Army at the time. He had traveled in the vicinity of the university earlier that year, on route to Sequoia with the 9th Cavalry. His speech impressed the students to extend “the white man’s chance” for education to African Americans.
Buffalo Soldiers

In the City

A soldier’s life often included a dose of San Francisco culture. The Buffalo Soldiers socialized with the small but closely knit African American community. For nightlife, troopers commonly frequented the dancehalls and saloons along Pacific Avenue, the epicenter of the city’s infamous Barbary Coast. However, even in the popular black nightclubs, Buffalo Soldiers fell under additional scrutiny. Fights were a nightly phenomenon on the Barbary Coast, but the reporting of incidents involving African American soldiers tended to stereotype them as armed and dangerous.

Conflicts Among Soldiers

Conflicts among soldiers were not uncommon at the time, and racism was a part of the scene. Newsletters reported incidents including streetcar fare and fights that resulted in police intervention.

Booker T. Washington & Theodore Roosevelt

In 1903, Buffalo Soldiers figured into the California visits of two prominent Americans. In January, Booker T. Washington addressed the soldiers at the Presidio, reminding them that they were not only fighters, but also role models and cultural ambassadors. In May, President Theodore Roosevelt visited San Francisco. Two troopers of the 9th Cavalry led by Captain Charles Young served as the President’s Escort Honor, accompanying him on horseback through the city. This was the first time African American troops were given this honorable role.

Legacy at the Presidio

Today, the San Francisco National Cemetery is the final resting place of 450 Buffalo Soldiers. The headstones overlooking the Golden Gate are quiet reminders of the sacrifices and lasting contributions made by African Americans, both to the parks and to American history.

Yosemite National Park

Protecting the National Park Idea

Much was at stake for the Buffalo Soldiers. Many Californians, influenced by Manifest Destiny, were focused on settlement and expansion. To them, the concept of a national park appeared impractical, and the benefits of preserving such a large tract of land were not self-evident. Thus, when soldiers guarded the parks they were not only protecting the land, but also upholding an idea. Meanwhile, the Buffalo Soldiers were placed in a situation in which the authority inherent to their uniform could be undermined by racism. When they confronted white stockmen about trespassing livestock or seized weapons from potential poachers, race complicated the situation.

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

Envisioning the Park’s Future

Young also advocated for the park to acquire the privately-owned lands within its boundaries for the sake of protecting the forest. He negotiated options for the government to purchase all of the properties at reasonable rates. This was another diplomatic accomplishment that makes that summer an unprecedented example of leadership. The Buffalo Soldiers’ impact on the parks is reflected not only in their regular patrol responsibilities, but also the singular vision and drive of Charles Young.

Although troops of the 9th Cavalry went to Sequoia and General Grant for the following summer, Young never returned to the parks. He would reflect on that summer as a time from which he emerged “a different man with a better outlook.” In honor of Young and the Buffalo Soldiers, the Colonel Charles Young Tree was dedicated in 2004.

Roosevelt & Muir Visit Yosemite

After Theodore Roosevelt’s visit to San Francisco in May 1903, his next stop was Yosemite, where he toured the valley and camped with naturalist John Muir. During this historic meeting of the minds, 9th Cavalry troopers acted as the President’s escort, guarding him as he slept beneath the sequoias.

Promising the National Park Idea

Roosevelt & Muir Visit Yosemite

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