

PHOTO: Everett Collection/Shutterstock

Trace the path of these intrepid soldiers and early park rangers through the National Parks.

Black soldiers had been pressed into service or voluntarily participated in American wars since the Revolution, yet were banned from the military in peacetime. Despite this service, the American government largely prohibited Black people from joining the military in peacetime because they feared that arming African Americans, especially those who were or had been enslaved, could help them seek freedom. That changed in [1866](#) when federal legislation created six African American Army regiments—the 9th and 10th Cavalry, and the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st Infantry (the infantries soon reorganized into the 24th and 25th) during peacetime.

They became known as [Buffalo Soldiers](#), a nickname acquired during their postings in the West. The Plains tribes likened them to the revered animal, either because they thought their hair resembled the tuft between a buffalo's horns or considered their fighting skills equal to the buffalo, or perhaps both.

With the outbreak of the [Spanish American War](#) in 1898, all the units were dispatched to Cuba. Three of them charged up San Juan Hill [alongside the white Rough Riders](#). These same regiments landed in the Philippines to quell resistance forces after the U.S. took possession after the war.

The Buffalo Soldiers' military prowess and their role as some of the first rangers of America's western National Parks left an enduring legacy. Here are sites where their story is best told.



PHOTO: NPS Photo / Tom Engberg

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Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument

WHERE: Wilberforce, Ohio

Charles Young is undoubtedly the most renowned of the Buffalo Soldiers. He was the third African American to graduate from [West Point](#), taught military science and tactics at [Wilberforce University](#), and later functioned abroad as military attaché and diplomat. After his death, he received a full military funeral at [Arlington National Cemetery](#). This [park site](#), Young's former residence, is open only on weekends by [reservation](#). Extensive renovations begin in late 2021, but the exhibits will be moved to an area location in the interim. A [cell phone tour](#) of the park and surrounding sites, including the university and the [National Afro-American Museum](#), is always available.

INSIDER TIP

With military's desegregation in the 1950s, the Buffalo Soldier units were disbanded.

[One](#) of the few remaining veterans lives in Wilberforce.



PHOTO: Alison Taggart-Barone / Parks Conservancy

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Golden Gate National Recreation Area

WHERE: San Francisco, California

The [Presidio](#) operated as a garrison for Buffalo Soldiers between assignments, and is the [final resting place](#) for 450 of them. In May 1903, the 9th Cavalry, led by now Colonel Young—the first African American to achieve that rank—escorted President Theodore Roosevelt through the city streets. It was a reunion of sorts, albeit bittersweet: the last time they'd seen Roosevelt was five years earlier in Cuba when he'd commended them for their expertise in combat, but in the interim, he'd questioned whether they were even qualified to be soldiers. [Sites](#) related to their presence can be [explored](#) by self-led or guided [tours](#).

INSIDER TIP

Stay on base at the Presidio's [Inn](#) or [Lodge](#).

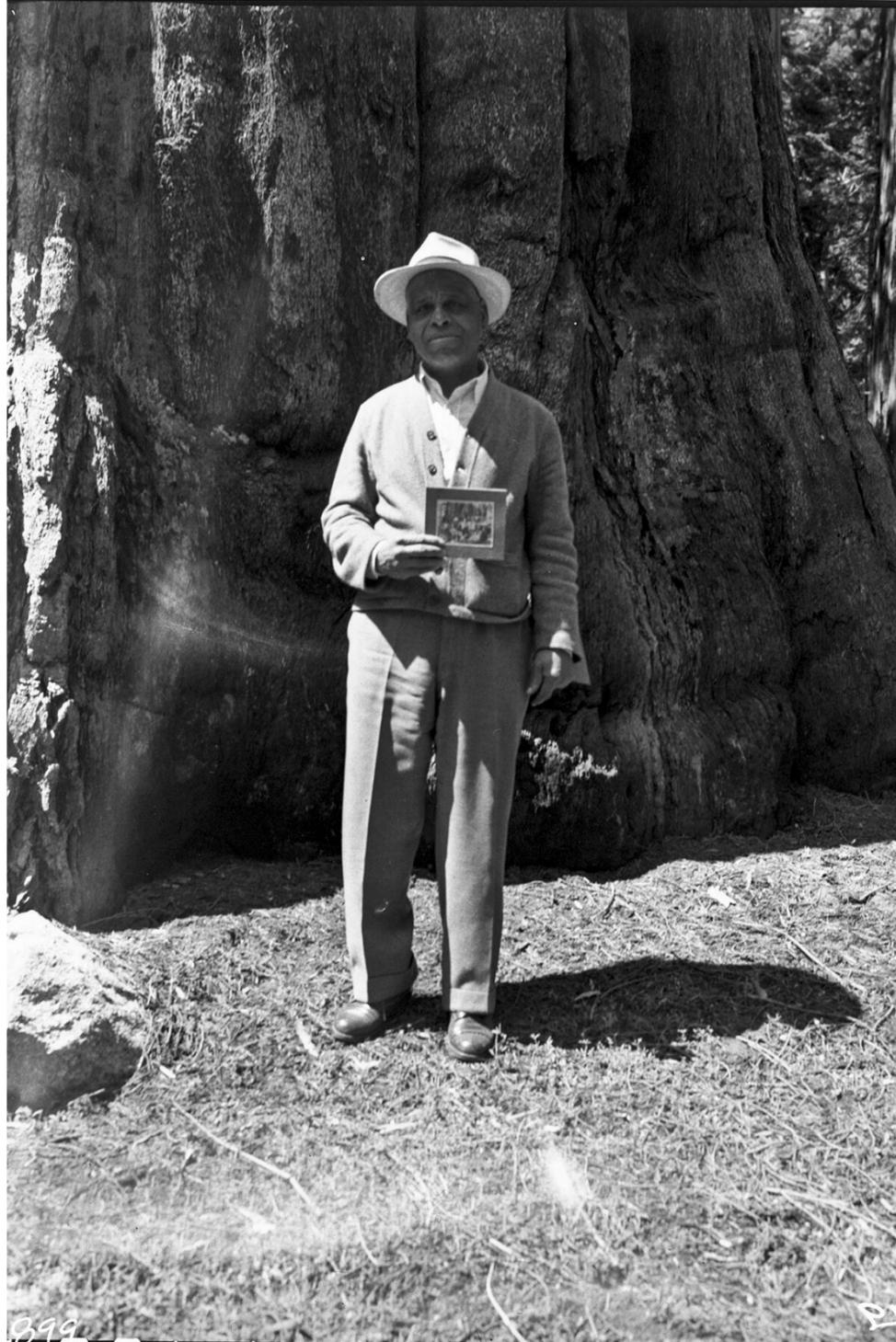


PHOTO: SEKI Historic Image, Public Domain

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Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

WHERE: Three Rivers, California

After the San Francisco parade, the 9th Cavalry was tasked with guard duty and beefing up the infrastructure at [Sequoia](#) and neighboring [General Grant National Park](#) (later renamed Kings Canyon and linked with Sequoia). Young became Sequoia's superintendent that year; not until 1971 did another African American become a park superintendent. Stop first at the Foothills and Lodgepole [Visitor Centers](#) and Giant Forest Museum, then look for the Charles Young and Booker T. Washington Trees along the road to [Moro Rock](#).

INSIDER TIP

The 9th Cavalry also spent time in [Yosemite National Park](#), about 200 miles to the north. Ranger Sheldon Johnson, featured prominently in Ken Burns' 2009 national parks [documentary](#), developed a one-man show based on records they left behind. Listen to his podcast, "[A Buffalo Soldiers Speaks.](#)"



PHOTO: Courtesy of Max Kandler

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Fort Davis National Historic Site

WHERE: Fort Davis, Texas

The military career of Henry O. Flipper, West Point's first Black graduate, had a much different trajectory than Charles Young's. In 1877, at the age of 21, the formerly enslaved Second Lieutenant was assigned to the 10th Cavalry. In 1881, while serving at Fort Davis, Flipper's commanding officer accused him of embezzling \$3,791.77 from commissary funds. A court-martial found him not guilty of embezzlement but convicted him of conduct unbecoming an officer and ordered him dismissed from the Army. Flipper attempted to clear his name during his lifetime, but it wasn't until the 1970s that the Army determined his punishment unduly harsh, and posthumously granted him an honorable discharge.

As a civilian, Henry Flipper went on to distinguish himself in a variety of governmental and private engineering positions: surveyor, civil and military engineer, author, translator, special agent of the Justice Department, special assistant to the Secretary of the Interior with the Alaskan Engineering Commission, aide to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, as well as an authority on Mexican land and mining law. President Clinton fully pardoned him in 1999.

Enter the park on Lt. Henry Flipper Drive to explore this Indian Wars' frontier post.

INSIDER TIP

On the other side of the state is Houston's Center for African American Military History, aka the [Buffalo Soldiers National Museum](#).



PHOTO: Fort Larned National Historic Site

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Fort Larned National Historic Site

WHERE: Larned, Kansas

Lying along the [Santa Fe Trail](#), this fort hosted the 10th Cavalry during the Indian Wars. As was often the case with the Black units, the captain was white, a position considered a stigma by many white people ([General John Pershing](#) acquired his derisive epithet of “Black Jack” when he later commanded the 10th). [Racism shaped conflicts and discrimination on the post.](#) Hour-long ranger [tours](#) and [living history events](#) at the [well-preserved fortification](#) testify to the other conflict the recently-freed soldiers must have experienced, as they skirmished with Native Americans enduring their own subjugation.

INSIDER TIP

The 10th Cavalry was [organized](#) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Its [Buffalo Soldier Commemorative Area](#) is [open to the public](#).



PHOTO: Photo by Volunteer Richard Gonzales Courtesy of National Park Service – Fort Union National Monument

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Fort Union National Monument

WHERE: Watrous, New Mexico

The Buffalo Soldiers story at [this adobe fortress](#), also along the Santa Fe Trail, is one of exceptional service, along with a touch of intrigue. The 9th Cavalry were the only troops stationed here to be awarded the nation's highest military decoration, the [Medal of Honor](#); six of them (a total of 23 bestowed on all the segregated units throughout their 85-year history). The 38th Infantry's [Private William Cathay](#) passed through the fort at one point before returning as a civilian, given a disability discharge when the soldier was discovered to be a woman in disguise.

INSIDER TIP

The nearby [Las Vegas Citizens' Committee for Historic Preservation](#) hosts a "Glimpses of the Past" lecture series every third Thursday in the months of March to October.



PHOTO: NPS CulturalLandscapes [CC BY-NC 2.0]/Flickr

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Fort Vancouver National Historic Site

WHERE: Oregon and Washington State

One company of the 24th Infantry was stationed here for 13 months following the Spanish-American War. A contingent was sent off to Idaho to quell violence stemming from a mining labor dispute. Upon the African Americans' departure, a Portland, Oregon newspaper wrote, “[W]hilst on the whole, they were well received, we have heard of one or two instances where low-bred people took an opportunity to exhibit the prejudice existing in their groveling nature.”

INSIDER TIP

The Visitor Center for this park, located in Vancouver, Washington, also serves the [Gifford Pinchot National Forest](#), which includes the [Mount St. Helens Volcanic Monument](#) and sections of the [Pacific Crest Trail](#).



PHOTO: Troy Smith [CC BY-NC 2.0]/Flickr

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Glacier National Park

WHERE: West Glacier, Montana

The 25th Infantry not only improved [the park](#) but demonstrated their ability as firefighters. They tackled “[The Great Fire of 1910](#)” that scorched three million acres of virgin woodland in northern Idaho and western Montana. In his book about the devastating inferno, [The Big Burn](#), Timothy Egan quotes a newspaper’s summation of their efforts: “The negro soldiers of the 25th Regiment...have done heroic service and saved many lives and much property.” In the [Two Medicine](#) area, hike the Firebrand Pass to view Soldier Mountain, named for the intrepid troopers.

INSIDER TIP

Further south in Montana, in [Yellowstone National Park](#), the short-lived [25th Infantry Bicycle Corps](#) tested whether two-wheelers were suitable for mountain warfare.



PHOTO: Ted McGrath [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0]/Flickr

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Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park

WHERE: Skagway, Alaska

There are many places to sightsee in this port town, but history buffs will head first to [this park's](#) Visitor Center and Museum detailing the [1897 Gold Rush](#). From their station at the Presidio, the 24th was ordered to the area to control the rampant lawlessness in the boisterous boomtowns crowded with those seeking their fortune. They also manned fire patrols and saved lives and property during the [Flood of 1901](#). Despite bigotry from the majority-white population, who objected when the [local Y.M.C.A.](#) admitted 30 Buffalo Soldiers, the 24th continued to carry out their duties in a place termed “little better than hell on Earth.”

INSIDER TIP

Skagway offers a number of scenic [short hikes](#), perfect for cruise passengers on a tight schedule.

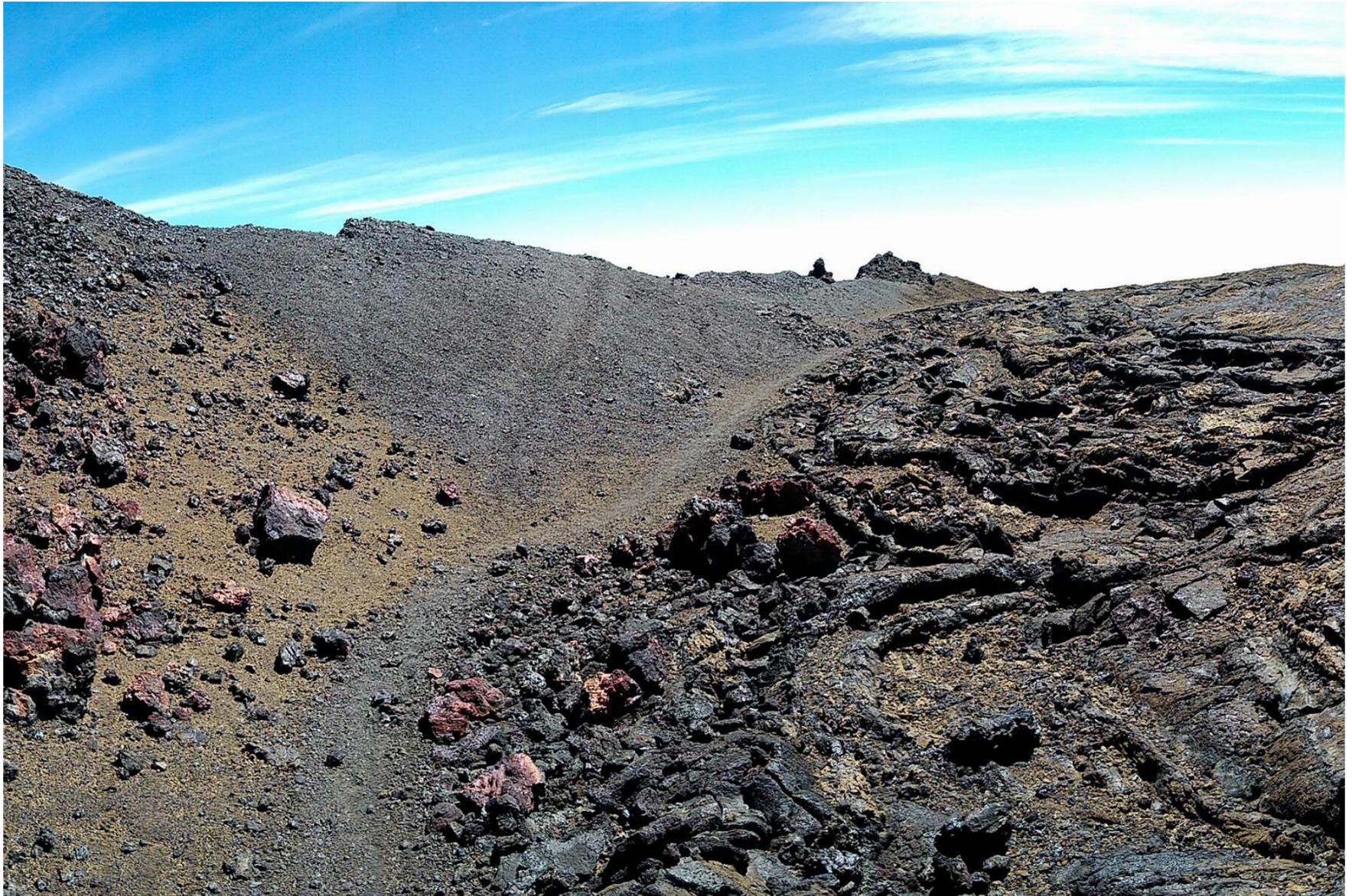


PHOTO: National Park Service, Public Domain

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Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park

WHERE: Big Island, Hawai'i

The 25th Infantry, stationed at O'ahu's Schofield Barracks from 1913 to 1918, [worked](#) at this park as well. Its website notes that within the state's multicultural society, "although they did not encounter the racial hatred that they had from communities on the mainland, they did not entirely escape prejudice." The work was grueling. As Martha Hoverson wrote in a 2015 [article](#) for the *Hawaiian Journal of History*, the soldiers "built between 26 and 27 miles of trail, won a baseball game, and endured at least 33 inches of rain." The toughest part entailed excavating through the hardened a'a and pahoehoe lava. Their lasting contribution, still used today, is the [Mauna Loa Trail](#).

INSIDER TIP

Several of those ballplayers subsequently joined the [Negro Leagues](#). One, Wilber "Bullet" Rogan, was elected to the [Baseball Hall of Fame](#).
