

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks

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THE LEGACY OF THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS JUNE 18, 2016

The Extraordinary Legacy of 1903

A century ago, an unusual group of soldiers with an outstanding leader came to these parks on assignment. It was 1903, and their task was to make the new national parks more accessible and to protect the huge, rugged landscape from the threats of that era. The troopers far exceeded all expectations, leaving a legacy that we all benefit from today.

This was not the toughest challenge these men had ever faced. They were black men, serving a country that had yet to live up to the ideal of the Gettysburg Address delivered by Lincoln 40 years earlier—that *all* men are created equal.

Then-Captain Charles Young was in command. He had graduated from the Military Academy at West Point in 1889, only the third African American to do so. It is recorded that Young felt that "... the worst he could wish for an enemy would be to make him a black man and send him to West Point." He persevered and became a leader in the 9th U.S. Cavalry

The 9th Cavalry was one of four regiments of

black troops who proudly carried the title "Buffalo Soldiers." During the second half of the 19th century, these men worked at remote outposts in the still-wild west, fighting Native American people who fiercely, understandably, resisted settlement from the east. The tribes, impressed by the looks and determination of these soldiers, named them after an animal that was sacred to them—the buffalo.

In 1903, the Buffalo Soldiers were to build a road into the parks, develop trails, protect wildlife from poachers and meadows from illegal grazing, and assist the few brave visitors who came to see the Big Trees. Previously, other troops had the same assignment, but none made significant progress.

"In the matter of road, bridge, and trail building, ... 1903 was a record year," wrote George Stewart, a local newspaper editor who was instrumental in creating Sequoia National Park. "The work accomplished by Captain Young is almost beyond comprehension."

When the new road was finished, wagons could enter the Giant Forest for the first time. Cars soon followed, and the park was remote no more. "People," said Young, "are awakening to the benefits and beauties of the park, and desire to protect the game and forests...."

Young also anticipated some of the challenges to park preservation that would arise as visitation grew. He increased protection of the most-visited sequoia trees. He worked toward purchasing pockets of private land within the park in order to protect it from logging and other conflicting uses.

After leaving the parks, Young built a career of distinction in national and international service that lasted until his death in 1922.

And so we honor Charles Young and the Buffalo Soldiers, men who toiled to preserve the national treasures of a country that would not fully protect their rights. We are just one of the future generations who benefit from their dedication.

A Buffalo Soldier's Legacy

COLONEL CHARLES YOUNG

1864

Born in Kentucky during the Civil War to Gabriel Young and Arminta Bruen, who were slaves.

1889

Graduated from the Military Academy at West Point, only the third African American to do so.

1889-94

Platoon leader for the 9th U.S. Cavalry Fort Robinson, Nebraska and Fort DuChesne, Utah.

1894-98

Professor of Military Science and Tactics at Wilberforce University, Ohio.

1898-1903

Major and battalion commander of the 9th Ohio Volunteer Colored Infantry during the Spanish-American War. Troop commander with the 9th Cavalry in Utah and the Philippines.

1903

While still assigned to the 9th Cavalry, served as superintendent of Sequoia and General Grant National Parks, making him the first black superintendent of a national park. *"Owing to the good work performed by Captain Charles Young..., I recommend his permanent detail on this duty as long as he is available."* – Capt. L.W. Cornish, 1903

1904-07

Military attaché to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Authored a study on Haiti and a book on Creole French.

1908-11

Troop and squadron commander with the 9th Cavalry in the Philippines, Wyoming, and Texas.

1912-15

Military attaché to Liberia, Africa. Authored the monograph *Military Morale of Nations and Races*. Awarded the Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an annual award for achievement by an African American.



1916-17

Lieutenant colonel and squadron commander with the 10th Cavalry under General Pershing.

1917-18

Promoted to full colonel, the highest-ranking African American in the Army and the first one to reach that rank. Involuntarily retired for medical reasons, he rode horseback 497 miles from Ohio to Washington, D.C. to prove his fitness for duty in World War I. Recalled to active service with the Ohio National Guard.

1919-23

Second tour as military attaché to Liberia, Africa. Died during a mission to Nigeria. Buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C., with tens of thousands attending his memorial parade.

1974

Colonel Charles Young House designated a National Historic Landmark in Wilberforce, Ohio. Prior to Young's time, it had been a way-station in the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves.

2003

The Colonel Charles Young Tree was dedicated in Sequoia's Giant Forest. It stands within sight of the tree that he named 100 years earlier for Booker T. Washington.

2013

Young's home in Ohio (see 1974 above), became the Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument, part of the National Park Service.

Two paths, a shared destination

Described as "a rare and cultured soul" by a 1903 resident of Three Rivers, Charles Young was a man of depth and breadth.

A military man not only in training but in vast experience, he was at home in the wilderness. Yet he was comfortable in society, as well. He spoke several languages, played musical instruments, and wrote plays. Later in life he served as a diplomat and traveled overseas. He was a husband and a father.

Young chose the military as his path to serve his country and his race. He corresponded with Booker T. Washington, a black man with similar goals but different tactics. Young's admiration for Washington led to his naming of a giant sequoia here in Washington's honor.

I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.

Booker T. Washington, 1911

Washington saw education as the true emancipator. He rose from slavery and manual labor to become a leading educator of African Americans at the end of the 19th century. As the first principal of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he built an educational program that emphasized agricultural and industrial training.

His program reflected an understanding of the racism, violence, intimidation, and lack of economic opportunities that most African Americans faced during this time. From 1895 to 1915, he was the most powerful and influential African American in the United States.

A Tree Lost in Time

When Ward Eldredge started work here as a museum curator in 1998, he began studying park history to help answer visitor and staff questions. One repeated request was for information on Col. Charles Young, a nationally known historical figure. However, Young had spent just one summer at the parks in 1903, so the files held little material.

Ward tried other sources, among them the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, where Young had served as a professor. Floyd Thomas, head of the center's Cultural Division, proved extremely helpful. In return, Ward shared what the park files held about Young.

During one conversation, Floyd asked, "Have you ever heard of a Booker T. Washington Tree?" In Charles Young's papers, Floyd had found a historic photograph of a large tree with such a sign on it, and he wondered if it might be a sequoia. Ward knew of no tree signed that way, but did more research.

It turns out that the soldiers under Young wanted to name a sequoia for him, but he demurred, saying the history should be the judge of his efforts. Instead, Young's 1903 report mentions that "...[a sequoia] was named for that great and good American, Booker T. Washington."

Just which tree had been honored, however, was a mystery: there was no map and no sign. Floyd faxed a copy of the old photo, and thus began Ward's quest for the Booker T. Washington Tree.

The Washington Tree in the Giant Forest bore no resemblance to the old photograph. A historic postcard from Grant Grove showed the "General and Lady Washington Trees."

The next focus was on the Moro Rock Road, since Young had overseen building that route. Carrying the fax of the old black-and-white image, Ward walked the road, but found no trees that matched it. As he turned away in defeat, there it was, the sequoia in the photo, its furrowed bark twisting up and slightly to the right.



The Booker T. Washington Tree, circa 1903. It stands not too far from Auto Log on what is now Moro Rock Road. Once lost to history, the tree was identified 100 years later by the bark that appears to twist up and to the right, and by the dark ring of bark some 30 feet off the ground around the tree to the left. A new sign, installed on the 100th anniversary of Young's time here, clearly marks it.

The clincher was a feature on another tree in the picture, with a horizontal ridge of bark some 30 feet above the ground.

Ward contacted Ted Jackson, then a district superintendent with California State Parks and a grandson of Booker T. Washington. Ted came to have a look.

When they got to the base of the tree, Ted stopped. "Can you be sure?" he said. Ward felt doubt swim in the pit of his stomach. At that moment, Ted looked up. Above them in the tree's trunk, where the historic photo shows the sign had once hung, a large old nail remained.

Roads to the Big Trees

In early 1903, the current road from Highway 198 to the Giant Forest did not exist. The way to the sequoias was via a wagon road, starting at the far end of Three Rivers, that followed the North Fork of the Kaweah River up toward the western edge of the Giant Forest.

This was the route that Young was responsible for completing into the grove and out to Moro Rock. Today's roads between Moro Rock and Crystal Cave follow some of the route finished in 1903.

The workers also finished a route from Visalia to the Grant Tree, and extended the road from Grant Grove north toward Converse Basin.

Trails to the High Peaks

In 1903, Mount Whitney (below) and its surrounding peaks were not yet part of these parks. Doubtless this is why no park records were kept about the Buffalo Soldiers' effort to build trails connecting that high country to the Owens Valley east of the Sierra.

In 1903 newspapers, park curator Ward Eldredge found reference to the trailwork. That led him to other sources confirming yet more work accomplished by Young and the 9th Cavalry, much of which remains in use today.



ACTIVITY SCHEDULE



SATURDAY, JUNE 18, 2016

Most of the day's scheduled activities take place in and around the Giant Forest, but other park areas offer programs, too. Check local bulletin boards for details.

All Day

EXHIBITS & VIDEOS

Stop at Giant Forest Museum (9am-6pm), Lodgepole (7am-7pm), and King Canyon Visitor Center in Grant Grove (8am-5pm) to see videos about the Buffalo Soldiers.

*10:00 am & 2:00 pm;
1 hour each; 0.5 mile*

THE COLONEL YOUNG TREE

This walk starts at Auto Log on Moro Rock / Crescent Meadow Road. From Giant Forest Museum, take the Route 2 (Gray) shuttle to Auto Log (first stop; 10 minutes from the museum). Meet a Buffalo Soldier and a ranger there for a short, easy walk to the Colonel Charles Young and Booker T. Washington sequoias. Learn about the soldier who "by sheer force of character overcame prejudices which would have discouraged many a lesser man" (Theodore Roosevelt).

10:00 am - 6:00 pm

BUFFALO SOLDIERS ENCAMPMENT

Lodgepole Campground Sites 1 and 3.

Talk with Buffalo Soldiers at their campsites to learn about their work over 100 years ago. These re-enactors and their horses, from the Northern California Buffalo Soldiers Association, bring the history of these brave men to life.

11:00 am & 1:00 pm; 45 minutes each

THE RIDE TO SEQUOIA

At Gamlin Cabin, Grant Tree Trail.

Charles Young shares the epic story of the Buffalo Soldier's travels from San Francisco to the Giant Forest. Traveling this distance on horseback during that era demanded the unbreakable resolve for which these troops were known.

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

COLONEL YOUNG IN OTHER PLACES

Booths at Giant Forest Museum Plaza.

Meet Joy Kinard, superintendent of Colonel Young National Historic Site in Ohio, who can share more about the life of Charles Young and the site she manages. Hear from a representative of Allensworth State Park, the only town in this state founded, financed, and governed by African Americans.

1:00 pm; 20 minutes

THE FIRST PROTECTORS

At the General Sherman Tree.

Hear the history of protection for the Big Trees and the first soldiers who stood watch over the Giant Forest grove.

8:00 - 9:00 pm

AN EVENING WITH THE SOLDIERS

Lodgepole Campground Amphitheater.

Relive Sequoia National Park's early days through the eyes of a Buffalo Soldier, Trooper David Jones.

8:00 - 9:00 pm

CAMPFIRE PROGRAMS

Amphitheaters throughout the parks.

Enjoy an evening with a ranger in any of these locations. Topics may range from Buffalo Soldiers and park history to the amazing features of these parks.

Visitor centers sell items about the Buffalo Soldiers, including a small book and a poster. See the park newspaper, the Guide, for details on trails and facilities in the parks and surrounding national forest.