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# The Buffalo Soldiers



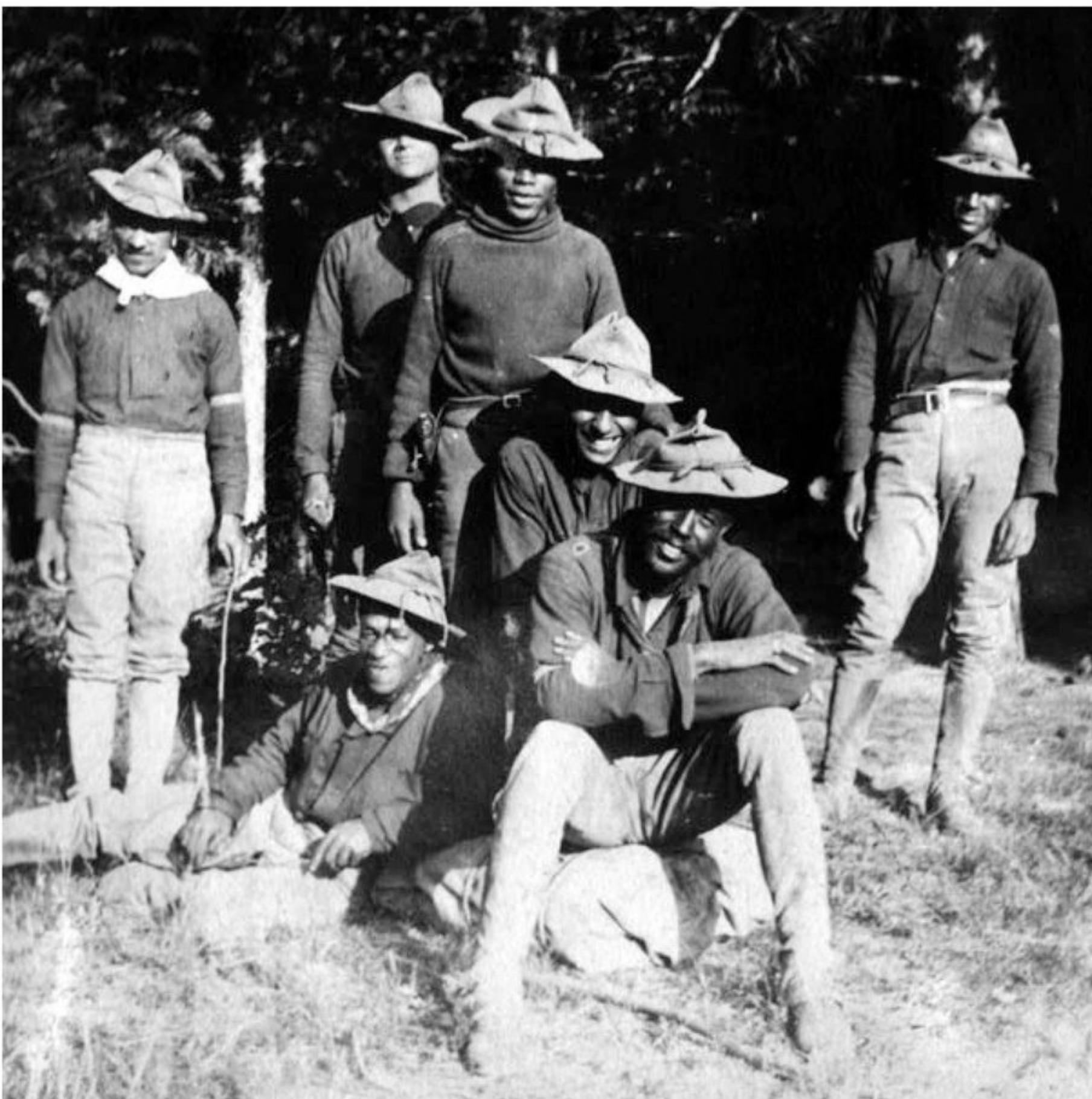
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Written by Anna-Maria Crum

# The Buffalo Soldiers



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## A New Army

Black soldiers have a long history in the United States. Thousands fought for both U.S. and British forces in the Revolutionary War, even though



Black Union Army troops in 1865

neither side granted them the same rights as white men. Even more black soldiers—more than 170,000—fought for the Northern Union Army during the Civil War (1861–1865) in hopes of ending slavery.

After the Union won the Civil War in 1865, Congress passed the Army Reorganization Act. Among other things, the act created the first peacetime **regiments** of black soldiers. These regiments would come to be known as the **Buffalo Soldiers**.

Many black men who joined these regiments had served in the Union Army. Many others were former slaves. As farmer-turned-soldier Charles Creek said, “I got tired of looking mules in the face from sunrise to sunset, thought there must be a better livin’ in this world.” They joined because the U.S. Army presented black men with unique **opportunities**.



Field workers stand in a Florida cotton field in 1879. Hard labor was the only work available to many black people after the Civil War—often the same work they'd done as slaves.

Although the Civil War ended slavery in the United States, black people still faced intense **discrimination**. It was difficult for them to find work, and when they did, they were often paid less than white workers or weren't paid at all. Black people often weren't allowed to live in the same places as white people. They also had a difficult time gaining an education.

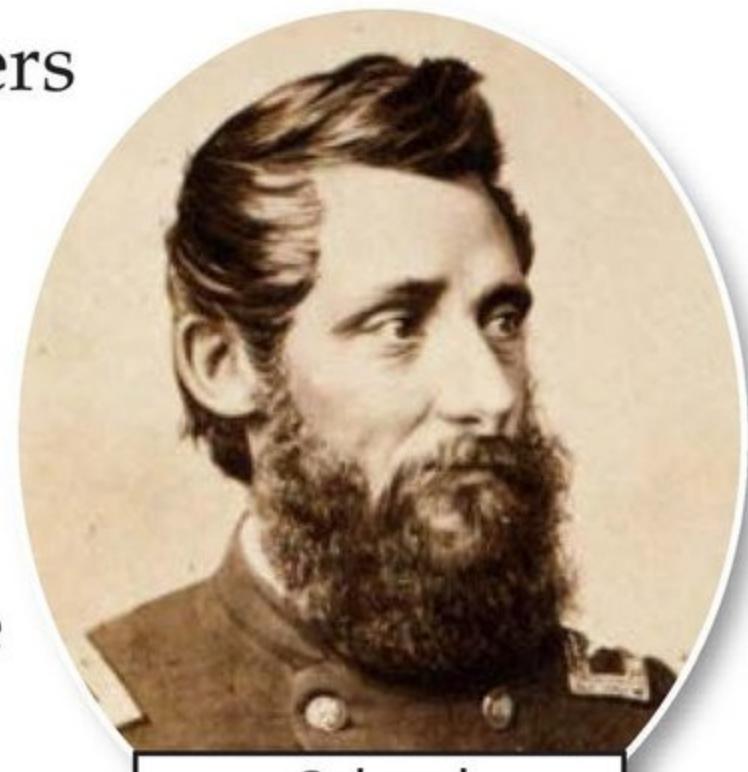
In 1866, the U.S. Army paid black soldiers the same as white soldiers—\$13 per month. Because black soldiers needed to write messages and understand orders and maps, those who couldn't were taught to read and write. The army provided soldiers with food, clothes, shelter, work, and the chance for adventure.

Most of these men were being sent to the **western frontier**—the Great Plains, deserts, and mountains west of the Mississippi. Few had ever been there or knew how to survive there, but they were about to learn.

## The Original Buffalo Soldiers

The first black units formed in 1866 by the Army Reorganization Act were the 38th through 41st Infantry Regiments and the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments. Many historians consider the 10th to be the original Buffalo Soldiers.

First stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the 10th Cavalry was commanded by Colonel Benjamin Grierson, a white man. Like the other black regiments, the 10th Cavalry faced many challenges. Many white soldiers and officers didn't think black soldiers should serve in the army. They gave the black soldiers old or lame horses as well as poor or damaged supplies. They gave them hot wool uniforms to wear in summer. During the winter, black soldiers were often wet and cold. The food they received was never as good as the food for white soldiers. If a white soldier stole from or hurt a black soldier, the white soldier often went free.



Colonel  
Benjamin Grierson

### Word Wise

*Infantries* are made up of soldiers who fight on foot. In the past, *cavalries* were made up of soldiers who rode horses. Today, cavalries are made up of soldiers in vehicles.



This map shows important forts where the Buffalo Soldiers served in the late 1800s.

Colonel Grierson asked to have his unit moved to another fort. They were moved, but the treatment was much the same wherever they went.

Still, the 10th Cavalry and the other regiments of black soldiers continued to perform their duties. The regiments were often praised for their work and conduct. Black soldiers were much less likely to desert their units or cause trouble than many white soldiers.



Outlaws rob a stagecoach in 1880. This drawing records the scene as described by a witness.

## Out West

The West was a wild place during the late 1800s. More and more settlers were moving into the region. Because the area was so vast, it was difficult to enforce laws. Outlaws rode freely, stealing cattle and horses. They also often robbed banks as well as stagecoaches, which provided important supplies and mail to the settlers.



A group of Sioux Indians in 1891, probably on or near the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota

Meanwhile, the **expansion** of the United States also pushed Native Americans off the lands they had lived on for thousands of years. The U.S. government required different Native tribes to make deals forcing them onto poorer land on **reservations** but promising them food and other supplies. The government did not keep its promises, which angered Native Americans. Some tribes began attacking soldiers and settlers, taking back land and supplies.

Regiments of black soldiers were ordered to protect settlers, towns, and supplies from outlaws and Native Americans. Yet because of their skin color, the black soldiers were rarely welcomed in towns.

Between 1866 and 1875, the 10th Cavalry was stationed in different places around Kansas and Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). It was during this time that they earned the name Buffalo Soldiers.

Historians differ on where the name actually came from. They agree that it came from Native Americans. Some say Comanches gave the 10th the name, while others say it was the Cheyennes.

One day in 1867, Captain George Armes and his men from the 10th Cavalry were following a trail along the Saline River when they were attacked by hundreds of Cheyenne warriors. They fought all day and into the next until Captain Armes led a charge that drove back the warriors. He later wrote that it was amazing both he and his men escaped with their lives. If it had not been for their toughness, Armes wrote, “not one of the command would have returned.”



Nineteenth-century illustration of an 1868 battle between Buffalo Soldiers and southern Plains Indians

Some stories say the name came from the black soldiers' fierceness in such battles—fierceness like a cornered buffalo's. Another story says the name came from the black soldiers' hair being similar to the dark, woolly hair between a buffalo's horns.

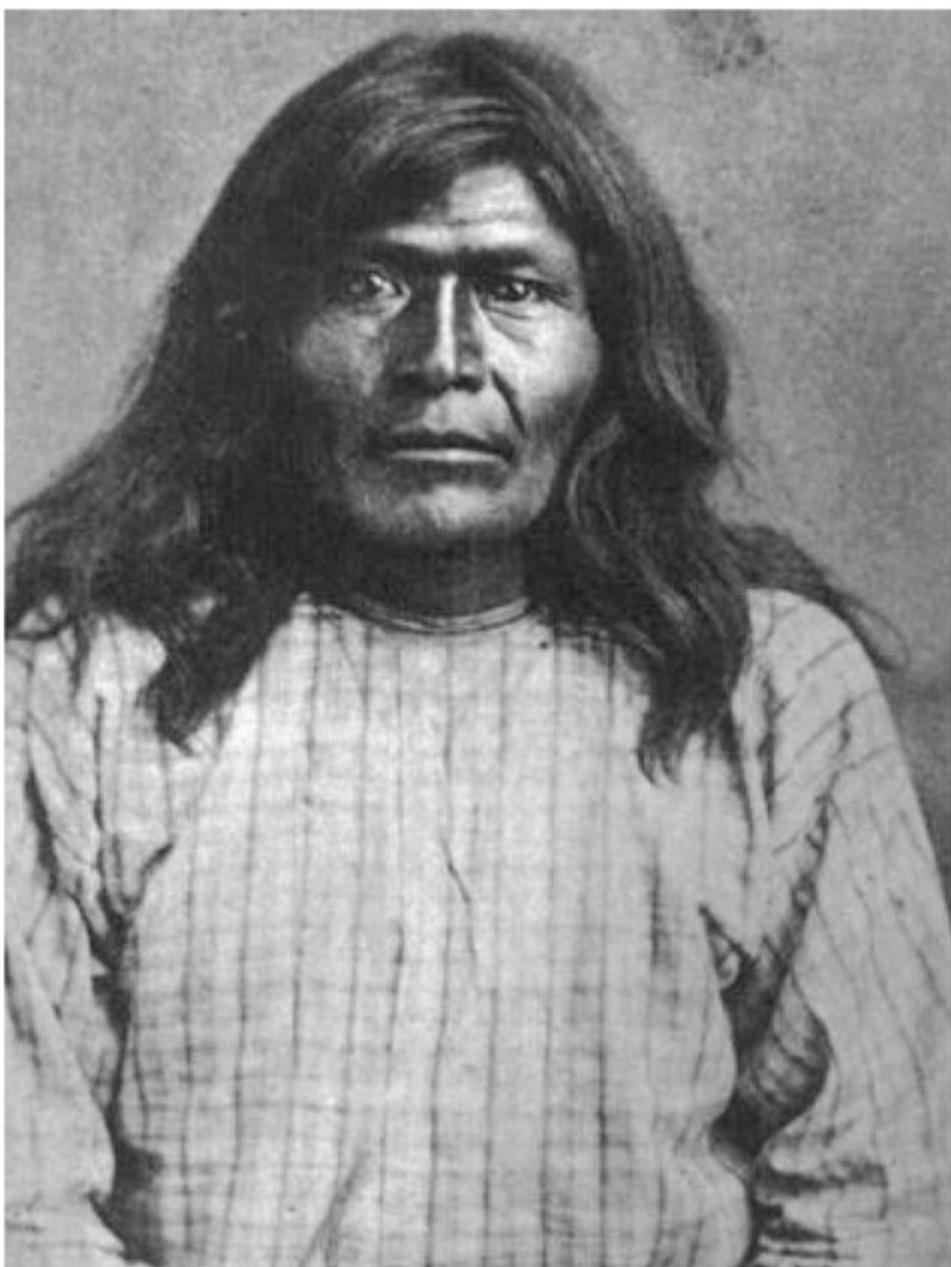
Wherever the name came from, all the regiments of black soldiers soon adopted it. They knew that the buffalo was sacred to Native Americans, and only a respected enemy would be named for it. In time, they even added an image of the buffalo to their flag.



The Buffalo Soldiers may have been named for the buffalo coats they sometimes wore.

## The 9th and 10th Cavalries Combine

In 1875, the 10th Cavalry was sent to Texas, where it joined the 9th. At that time,



Apache chief Victorio in 1877

the government was trying to force the Apache tribes to relocate onto reservations in Arizona. Knowing the government would not keep its promises, and not wanting to live on poor land far from their home, the Apaches resisted. The warrior chief Victorio had led a band of excellent fighters

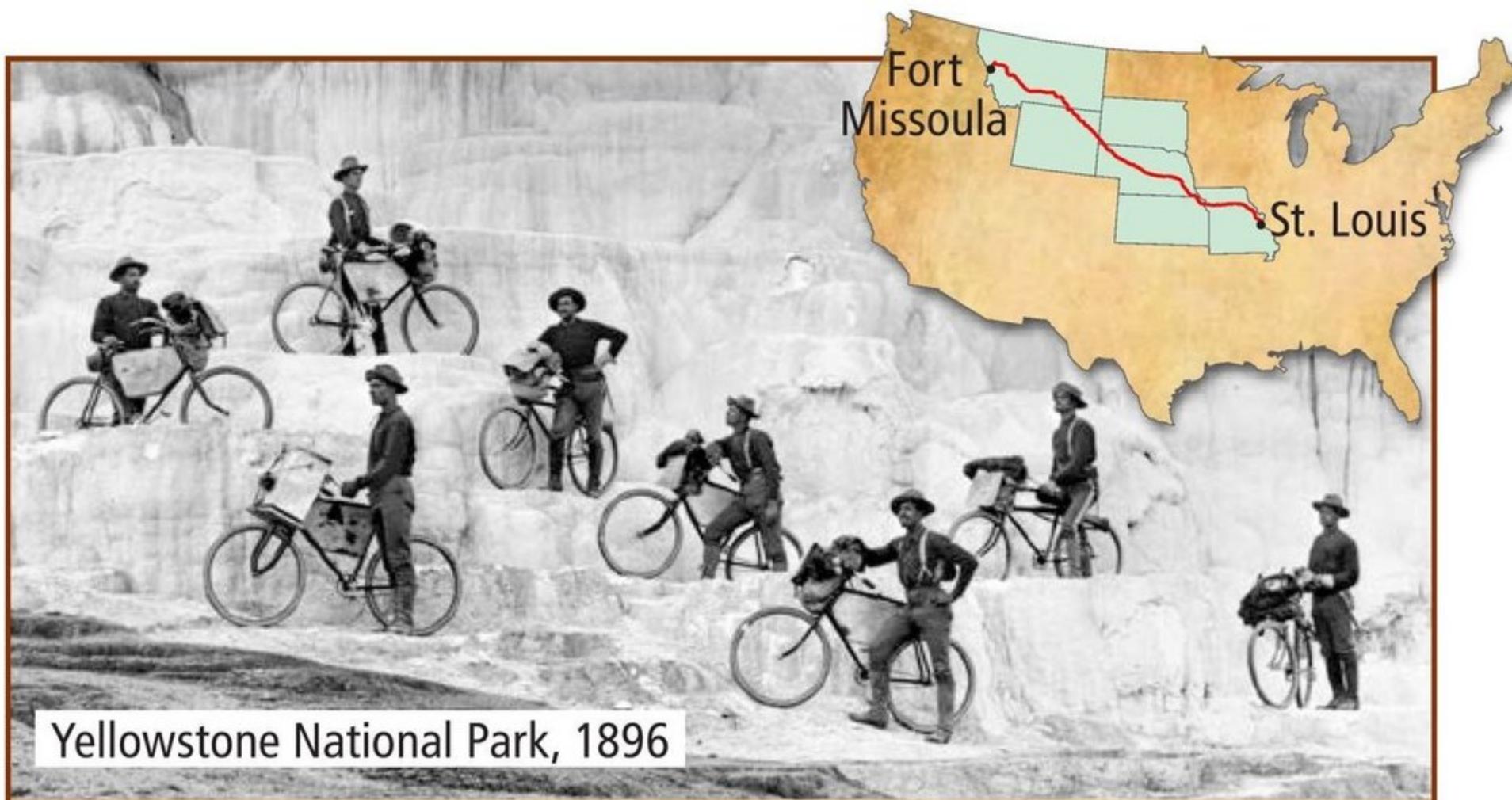
since the 1850s. They had been raiding settlements and attacking U.S. troops for years.

Colonel Grierson and the 9th and 10th Cavalries were ordered to capture Victorio. After many battles and chases throughout the Southwest, they finally drove him into Mexico, where he died in 1880. Afterward, the 10th Cavalry remained in the Southwest for almost a decade, trying to bring the Apaches under control. The 9th Cavalry was sent to Indian Territory, where they fought settlers and outlaws who were trying to take land set aside for Native Americans.

## Later Service

The Buffalo Soldiers continued to work throughout the West, earning fourteen Medals of Honor between 1870 and 1890. The Medal of Honor is the highest award a U.S. soldier can earn.

In 1898, the Buffalo Soldiers fought in the Spanish-American War. The conflict lasted ten weeks. They took part in many battles and earned five Medals of Honor. Even so, some leaders in the U.S. Army still thought black soldiers were unable to perform as well as white soldiers.



### Buffalo Soldiers on Bikes

In the 1890s, the army wanted to see if bikes could replace horses since bikes were cheaper and easier to care for. The Buffalo Soldiers rode 1,900 miles from Fort Missoula, Montana, to St. Louis, Missouri. The roads were bad. They crossed the Rockies, rivers, and shifting sandhills, and still averaged 50 miles a day. Before long, though, bikes were replaced with motorcycles.

After that war, between 1899 and 1904, the Buffalo Soldiers worked as park rangers, serving in Sequoia, Yosemite, and Kings Canyon National Parks in California. They built roads and trails, fought forest fires, and stopped people from hunting animals and stealing timber.

During World Wars I and II, the original cavalry and infantry units were disbanded and reorganized. The new regiments were still called Buffalo Soldiers, though, and were still led by white officers. They were kept separate from white soldiers until the Korean War (1950–1953). The army disbanded the last regiments of Buffalo Soldiers in 1951, and the troops were integrated into other units.



An integrated unit of black and white soldiers fights in Korea in 1950.



The Buffalo Soldier Monument at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

## The Buffalo Soldiers' Legacy

People have not forgotten about the Buffalo Soldiers. Many books have been written about them. Monuments to them stand in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and El Paso, Texas.

History remembers the Buffalo Soldiers as tough men who took on tough jobs. Although they were often given poor equipment and supplies, they never let that stop them. In the face of racism, they fought to prove that they were good at their jobs. Their bravery and **service** are an important part of America's story.

## Glossary

<b>buffalo</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	another name for the American bison; a large, cowlike animal with a big head, large hump, and short horns (p. 4)
<b>discrimination</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the unfair treatment of a person or group based on gender, race, age, religion, or other differences (p. 5)
<b>expansion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an increase in the size, amount, volume, or scope of something (p. 9)
<b>frontier</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a wilderness area at the edge of a country's official border or settled region (p. 5)
<b>opportunities</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	chances to do something (p. 4)
<b>regiments</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	military units that consist of two or more large groups of soldiers (p. 4)
<b>reservations</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	land set aside by the United States government for Native Americans (p. 9)
<b>service</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	work done for an organization or government, especially in a branch of a country's military (p. 15)
<b>stationed</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	based in or assigned to a place or position for a specific activity (p. 6)

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Front cover: Members of the U.S. 10th Cavalry on San Juan Hill, Cuba, following the hill's capture during the Spanish American War in 1898

Back cover: Henry Johnson was awarded the Croix de Guerre (Cross of War) in 1919 for bravery in battle. The French medal is awarded to those who perform heroic deeds in combat, including foreign forces allied with France.

Title page: Nine Buffalo Soldiers who won the Croix de Guerre return home in 1919.

Page 3: Buffalo Soldiers stationed at Yosemite National Park in 1899

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