



BUFFALO SOLDIERS IN YOSEMITE

REFLECTIONS ON A FORGOTTEN HISTORY
 BY SHELTON JOHNSON, PARK RANGER

ABOVE Stationed at the Presidio, members of the Ninth Cavalry were known as Buffalo Soldiers to the Plains Indians, circa 1900.

The African-American troops who patrolled the wilderness of Yosemite and Sequoia national parks served an important role in the early days of our first federally protected lands. These men, the children of enslaved people, were stewards of this incredible landscape and served the public good of all Americans, regardless of color or ethnicity. These men were the first “park rangers” — before the term even existed. They were the guardians of Yosemite, known as Buffalo Soldiers to the Plains Indians.

They were tasked with evicting poachers and livestock from park lands, as well as constructing the first roads and trails. Their story was lost for a time before being rediscovered among patrol and superintendent reports and old letters. On beautifully handwritten Army muster rolls, there were names without faces. In old photographs, there were faces without



Photo: © NPS

names. The people were forgotten, and what they accomplished was forgotten, too. The knowledge that they built the first usable wagon road into Sequoia’s Giant Forest, the first trail to the top of Mt. Whitney — then the highest peak in the United States — and the first museum in what would become the National Park System was also forgotten.

The Forgotten

Imagine for a moment what this breathtaking landscape looked like to men who were the children of enslaved people, who were forced to work land they didn’t own. What is the effect of this kind of unparalleled beauty on the human spirit? Did their proximity to the wonders of Yosemite and Sequoia profoundly affect their outlook? What did it mean to them to be stewards of the first federally protected lands in the nation?

These African-American troops who patrolled the wilderness of Yosemite and Sequoia served an important role in protecting the land and building infrastructure. The mountainous terrain and climate challenged them at every turn, while their horses kicked up clouds that stung their eyes. Their days were long and hard. They accepted all the world gave them without complaint.

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ABOVE A screenshot from the film trailer displays stunning Yosemite settings and actors in authentic period costumes

“For me, these men were family, and it was well past time for the world to hear their story.”

—Shelton Johnson
Yosemite Park Ranger



Photo: © Keith Walkiet

SHELTON JOHNSON is a ranger at Yosemite National Park and an important advocate for bringing culturally diverse populations to the national parks. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan and author of the novel, *Gloryland*. Johnson performs *The Forgotten Yosemite: A Buffalo Soldier Remembers* at Yosemite Theater. In 2009, he received the National Freeman Tilden Award as the best interpreting ranger in the National Park Service for his work with Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan on their national park film, *America’s Best Idea*.

Yosemite Conservancy has provided a grant to Yosemite National Park to fund the production of a film that will be completed in winter 2013. The film is written and performed by park ranger Shelton Johnson and is funded by Yosemite Conservancy and Delaware North Companies, Inc.



ABOVE Buffalo Soldiers, like the ones pictured, patrolled Yosemite's wilderness in the late 1800s and early 1900s. **BOTTOM** Park ranger Shelton Johnson depicts the experiences of an African-American cavalryman stationed in Yosemite in the late 19th century.

For me, these men were family, and it was well past time for the world to hear their story. When I saw them staring at me out of history, it was like my father was peering at me through their eyes — my father who had served in the Army in Korea and the Air Force in Vietnam, and who was raised in rural South Carolina in the 1930s. Beyond the boundary of every historic photograph, there was this unseen but palpable presence of living, breathing, extended family that was also abandoned in the shadows of history.

Of all the visitors to Yosemite National Park, only one percent are African-American. Even though the descendants of the 500 Buffalo Soldiers who served in the Sierra Nevada must number in the thousands, many probably have no idea their ancestors once protected Yosemite National Park and no idea a family trip to Yosemite is a homecoming. That's why this story is so significant: It connects the disconnected, and it powerfully counters the false assertion that African-American culture has little to do with national parks or the preservation of wilderness.

Today, the story of the Buffalo Soldiers is shared in live theater performances that take place each summer in Yosemite. But a

live performance is limited both in terms of audience and permanence. I will not always be able to tell the story of the Buffalo Soldiers in person.

With the assistance of Emmy Award–winning filmmaker Sterling Johnson, the story of the Buffalo Soldiers will be told before the majestic backdrops of Tuolumne Meadows, Glacier Point, the Minarets and elsewhere. The intent is to anchor geography to history and speak directly, through film, about the powerful effect of this place on the life of these soldiers. The film will bring these forgotten men to life in authentic detail, from the clothing of the period to the livestock that carried them on patrol. This film will also be made available to audiences who may not otherwise have considered a trip to Yosemite. By seeing the film online, minorities and underserved communities will be able to connect with this history. Because of your support, this story will be available in an accessible format that will honor this forgotten history, while inspiring minorities and underserved communities to preserve and protect Yosemite. ■

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—**Shelton Johnson**
Park Ranger at Yosemite National Park

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Your Yosemite Legacy.

We all remember our first experience in Yosemite: how we marveled at the timeless beauty and watched the glow of sunset reflected on the Valley's granite walls. Your legacy gift will ensure Yosemite remains the glorious treasure it is today.

To find out how you can leave your legacy to Yosemite, contact Darlene Bellucci at dbellucci@yosemiteconservancy.org or 415-434-8446 x 318.