

THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS MUSEUM: ONE MAN'S PASSION CREATES A LEGACY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS

by Joe Skeen



Artifacts in the museum include a display case containing firearms used by Buffalo Soldiers from all eras, an overcoat made from the hide of a buffalo, a taxidermy buffalo head, and a McClellan saddle of the type used on the western frontier.

Photos courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.

The gateway to the Museum District in Houston is not as recognizable as, say, the Gateway Arch in St. Louis—which prides itself as the “gateway to the West.” Nevertheless, the district’s gateway represents just as important a piece of history as Missouri’s most notable landmark. The Buffalo Soldiers National Museum is an excellent place to start a day or weekend touring the many museums that Houston has to offer. It is a place where the Buffalo Soldiers of the United States—both present and past—can call home; and where visitors can hear Captain Paul Matthews, the museum’s founder and one of its dedicated tour guides, tell the soldiers’ stories. Equally fascinating is the story of how it all started for Capt. Matthews and where the museum is headed in the future.

The Buffalo Soldiers began as segregated units in the western part of the United States in 1866. These soldiers stood apart from the first African American unit formed during the Civil War, the Massachusetts 54th Infantry Regiment, and were direct descendants of the first all-black regiment in the American

Revolution, the 1st Rhode Islanders.¹ The Buffalo Soldiers were the first black troopers garrisoned after the Civil War, and their actions on the western front live on in the halls of this south Houston museum.

The tour of the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum starts on the second floor of the museum with a fifteen-minute video that offers a brief history of the soldiers, and which the museum recommends guests see before strolling around on their own. Interpreters are also available as museum guides. After watching the video, visitors proceed downstairs to the main exhibit hall. Some of the display rooms are small, making it difficult to accommodate larger groups, but the quaint space makes the experience all the more enjoyable. Capt. Matthews started our tour, as he does with most guests, with an explanation of the “Preamble to the Buffalo Soldiers.” Frederick Douglass holds a prominent place in the museum as the most important person of the Preamble Period. Matthews pointed to a quote from Douglass: “Once the Black man get upon his person the brass



Shown at the museum's Preamble display which features Frederick Douglass, Captain Paul Matthews explains the origins of the Buffalo Soldiers to museum visitors.

letters U.S., let him get an eagle on his button and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States."

The Emancipation Proclamation moved the United States closer to freedom and citizenship for all of those held in bondage, but it had no force in Texas at the time of its issuance in 1863. Capt. Matthews explained that "Section 9 and 10 of the Emancipation Proclamation stated that slaves would be free when federal troops occupied the territory, and that occurred [in Texas] in June of 1865 when Major General Gordon Granger landed in Galveston, read the proclamation, and he had 300 of his black troops enforce the law."² This event was the origin of African Americans' Juneteenth celebration. Once Granger landed in Galveston, emancipation for the African American slaves in Confederate Texas had become a reality and was certainly a cause for celebration.

Scholars have debated the rationale behind Lincoln's proclamation. One theory held that he freed the slaves to incite a slave uprising in an attempt to weaken the Confederacy and hasten

The first four Buffalo Soldiers to graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point:

Lt. Henry O. Flipper, 1877;

Lt. John H. Alexander, 1887;

Lt. Charles Young, 1889; and

Lt. Benjamin O. Davis, 1936.

the Union victory. However, the proclamation could not be imposed upon the Confederacy, where it would have had its greatest effect, without a mechanism to enforce it.

Word of the proclamation guaranteeing the slaves' freedom reached the South through various methods. Therefore, Capt. Matthews asked, "How did the word get to Texas?" He explained that the two most popular means were the "walking wounded,"

Confederate soldiers that left the battlefield, and "a very well-established communication network." Word of freedom for black slaves did not travel fast, but it did travel as quickly as the Confederate soldiers returning to their homes in the South. This freedom established by the Union government was critical to the formation of the Buffalo Soldiers in 1866.

To tell the full story of the Buffalo Soldiers, the museum identifies the transformation of Africans to African Americans and, ultimately, to Americans. The museum's Transformation Display next to the Preamble area shows visitors exactly how this occurred. Emblematic of the African roots of the soldiers is a display with a family mask and a warrior's mask. Capt.

Matthews explained the steps of transformation as “rites of passage, if you will, from picking cotton, cutting sugar cane, the Underground Railroad, the above ground railroad, the Westward Movement, the Manifest Destiny—all of these that went into making” African Americans in the United States.

Once former slaves legally became Americans by virtue of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, it became apparent that they wanted to serve in the army of their reunited country to honor the sacrifices of those that had set them free. The Buffalo Soldiers emerged in 1866, finally able to serve their country when the United States Army created the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st Infantries as segregated units. The 39th and 40th were stationed primarily in North Carolina and Louisiana, with the 38th and 41st garrisoned in New Mexico and Kansas. As peacekeepers in post-Civil War communities, they earned a reputation as outstanding citizen soldiers. The units were combined in 1869 when the North Carolina units became the 25th Infantry, and the western units made up the 24th.³

At the time of the infantries’ creation, the units were not called Buffalo Soldiers. Capt. Matthews explained that the name was given to them by Cheyenne warriors who “saw two things in the soldiers that they saw in the buffalo: the naturally curly hair, and they were ferocious fighters. They put those two things together, and they came up with Wild Buffalo. The term ‘Wild Buffalo’ eventually became Buffalo Soldiers.” These units existed in some form until 1944, when the Army disbanded them during World War II in North Africa; however, African Americans who serve in the military today are still recognized as Buffalo Soldiers.



Captain Matthews speaks to two museum visitors in front of the modern-day Buffalo Soldiers display, which includes biographies of African American NASA astronauts and a 9th Regiment Flag that accompanied them on board the Space Shuttle.

The museum has a display dedicated to the African American astronauts who traveled into space or were lost in the effort of exploration. When asked why this group is included in the display, Capt. Matthews quickly pointed out that “they are modern day Buffalo Soldiers,” but that is not the only reason. “To be able to get students engaged, you’ve got to bring them from one era to the current era to make it all real. . . . They have

read about astronauts and say ‘How did this relate to the Buffalo Soldiers of 1866?’ Well, they [astronauts] are on the vanguard of civilization. In the 1860s west of the Mississippi . . . you were at the vanguard of civilization. It just wasn’t a place for mankind.” He continued by stating that “the same thing could be said about outer space. These people, astronauts, irrespective of their color, they are on the vanguard of civilization.”

For the most part, the history of the soldiers has been overlooked, but recently Colin Powell, arguably the most famous modern Buffalo Soldier, brought greater attention to the deeds of these early civil rights pioneers. Cherri Washington, newly appointed executive director of the museum, explained how the former secretary of state and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff honored the soldiers. Secretary Powell was on a run at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and “came to a fork in the road, and he saw a ‘10’ just in the road. He stopped, and he said, ‘Wow, this is the only thing at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, home of the 10th Cavalry of the Buffalo Soldiers, to let you know that this was [their] home.’” Recognizing the 9th and 10th symbols, he said, “We need to do more.” Powell organized a committee that worked for two years to create a monument to the Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Leavenworth. Washington remembered that Powell never let the public forget the soldiers’ contributions and always gave credit to the Buffalo Soldiers whenever he gave a speech saying, “I got where I am today on the backs of the Buffalo Soldiers.”²⁴

Capt. Matthews’ personal journey that led to the founding of the museum began in the 1960s. “I was an ROTC Cadet at Prairie View A&M University, and just by chance, read two paragraphs in one military book about the Buffalo Soldiers. I was just intrigued about these black men in the blue uniforms



Flags of the armed forces are displayed alongside a World War II uniform worn by a female Buffalo Soldier.

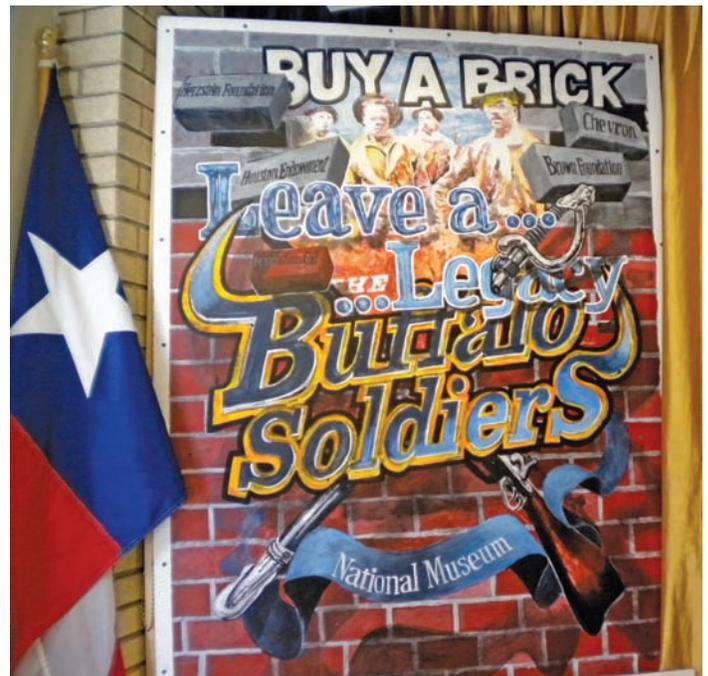
and why they were doing what they were doing.” He remembered that “In the 1960s, I made parallels to the 1860s. And so, I was looking for some mentors, some direction. What should I be doing? I was headed off to Vietnam with the commission [officer’s commission in the army] and all the other things that were going on at the time. I looked back at these guys, and they did what they did, not necessarily for themselves but for those that came behind them; and I said, ‘Wow, there is my answer.’” He went on to serve in the military and started collecting the items that are now artifacts in the museum. It grew from there as his family and friends sent him gifts related to military history for holidays and birthdays.

Matthews said he had to give his wife credit because six months to one year before he retired, he told her “you know, I am going to start a museum.” She replied “Honey it’s about time you got some of this stuff out of my house!” Matthews said he took \$40,000 from his retirement, with the wife’s permission, and found the current building. They started with 4’ x 6’ tables, and laid the artifacts on top of them. They lacked formal training as curators, but with a passion and Matthews’ background in the corporate world, the couple developed the exhibits. Once visitors started coming and saw the artifacts, they began bringing more items related to the Buffalo Soldiers. “We were just flooded . . . with uniforms, patches, helmets, rifles. We have about thirty rifles now from all different periods. Back from the Revolutionary War. One [musket] is so old, it crumbled . . . we have at least three from the 1860s, all the way through to the AK47.”

When Captain and Mrs. Matthews began their journey into the past, they owned eighty percent of the artifacts displayed

in the museum. Now, thanks to the numerous donations on the part of the museum’s benefactors, the Matthews’ collection makes up only about fifty percent of the total collection. The Buffalo Soldiers National Museum has outgrown its first home, and plans are in place for the museum to move from its quaint home on Southmore Boulevard to a more spacious location in the former Light Infantry Brigade Armory at the intersection of Caroline and Alabama Streets. The three-story brick structure, dating back to 1873, is a good fit for the museum—a historic building within the Museum District. Designed by architect Alfred C. Finn, the armory was built by contractor C. G. Street at a cost of \$150,000. Construction began on January 17, 1925, and the Holland Lodge 1 AF and AM laid and leveled the cornerstone for the building on April 1, 1925. The cornerstone has withstood the weather well, and its inscription remains legible.⁵

Since neither the federal nor the state government provided



The museum’s “Leave a Legacy . . . Buy a Brick” program gives the public an opportunity to contribute to the museum and be remembered in the Soldiers Plaza at the Houston Light Guard Armory. The donor is recognized with a personalized inscription on a brick in the plaza.

Photo by Aimee L’Heureux.



Pictures and artifacts are on display of Buffalo Soldiers from World War I and World War II. The sign at the top of the display is emblematic of the segregation enforced in the ranks of the armed forces throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

help to build the new armory, in 1925, the Houston Light Guard raised the funds for the building themselves. Some of the funds came from the winnings that the Houston Light Guard drill team accumulated from competitions throughout the region.⁶ Although Capt. Matthews started as the chief curator for the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, since acquiring the former Light Guard armory, he has taken on the task of preserving the guard’s history as well. He recounted how the Light Guard was a “historically white organization” made up of members of “all of the families that had power and influence.” However, when it came to the drill competitions, a black drummer, John Sessums, was one of the major reasons the drill team would win. Capt. Matthews added, “His great-nephew is a member of our organization now. The Light Guard Veteran’s Association has his uniform, they have his drum, and all of those things are going to be donated to the museum. It is just an amazing story.” Thanks in part to Sessums, the first Buffalo Soldier in the Houston Light



A close up view of the entrance at the Houston Light Guard Armory, the future home of the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum.

Guard, the armory building funds were raised through drill competitions in the 1880s and 1890s, and more than a century later, have given the Buffalo Soldiers Museum the foundation for a new home.

The new museum location will also serve as classrooms and offices for Houston Community College (HCC), which is across Caroline Street from the armory. HCC will have four classrooms in the building and will share the library with the museum. Students from all educational levels will be able to come to the museum to learn about the soldiers or attend college courses in the shadow of history. Capt. Matthews said, “We are also talking with Texas A&M and Prairie View [A&M], because they are military institutions, to work with us in our research library.” The museum’s goal is to become a place where people can come to learn more about the African American military experience. When the old armory is renovated and the move is complete, this military history will have a home in an armory built with the winnings of a great drill team and thanks to the efforts of a Buffalo Soldier.

The move will not change the focus or the mission that Capt. Matthews originally set before opening the museum to the public in 2001. He and his staff are working to ensure that visitors have the same experience in the new building that they receive in the current museum. He understands that there will be some challenges in a larger facility, but the rewards will remain. “We have the personal touch here. Now, we may lose a little of that when we go to the other museum because it is going to be a much bigger space, but we are always going to maintain our original focus and our original design.” Matthews indicated that the museum will explain the artifacts in greater detail, giving each “as much personal attention” as possible. “When we look back before we opened the doors, we said ‘What do we want to do?’ Our mission, as defined, is to preserve, promote, and perpetuate the honor and legacy of the brave men and women who fought, bled, and died in defense of America, and we want the world to know that.”

Today, the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum touches the lives of many. Capt. Matthews stated that the museum has around 40,000 visitors annually and hosts nearly twenty different schools each year. He predicted that the new building might almost triple attendance numbers—estimating that 100,000 people could visit the museum annually in its new home.

Capt. Matthews and his staff also go to schools and functions to tell the soldiers’ story. To arrange a visit to the museum or an on-site school visit, write to them at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, 1834 Southmore Boulevard, Houston, TX 77004, or call 713-942-8920. The museum can be found on the internet at www.buffalosoldiersmuseum.com. Admission fees are five dollars for general admission and three dollars for seniors and students with IDs. The museum is open Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., and Saturday from 10:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. Whether by visiting the museum, hearing a presentation at a school function, or viewing the website, you will find the story of the Buffalo Soldiers, from 1866 to today, an enriching experience. As Capt. Matthews is fond of saying, “We want to do something that is going to bless others.”



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When the Buffalo Soldiers Museum moves to its new location, Capt. Matthews plans to continue the original focus of the museum with a variety of artifacts representing the complete timeline of the soldiers’ service.

Photo by Aimee L’Heureux.