

MUSEUM

BUFFALO SOLDIERS: A NATION'S HISTORY

By Jessica Denise Mitchell

Today, when anyone can serve in the military regardless of color, religion, or sexual preference, many people tend to forget about a time when African Americans first earned the right to enlist in the military.

Given the name Buffalo Soldiers by Native Americans because of their fierce fighting ability, these African American men fought during the Civil War and opened many doors for minorities who wanted to serve in the armed forces.

Even war movies and history books often overlook the contributions of these trailblazers or reduce comments about them to small blurbs. Unlike pop stars and famous individuals who fought for civil rights, the stories of these men are not always kept alive through television specials or national holidays. When the last of the Buffalo Soldiers dies, who will keep their legacy alive?

The founder of the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in Houston, Texas, Captain Paul J. Matthews hopes to answer this question. Capt. Matthews, a Vietnam veteran and African American military historian, began collecting military artifacts over thirty years ago and established the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in 2001 (see *Houston History* v.7 n.2). Home to hundreds of years of history—not only African American history but also American history—the museum quickly outgrew its space on Southmore Boulevard as others added to the collection. This necessitated a move to a larger space, and Matthews found the perfect location in the nearby former Light Guard Armory Building. Located on the edge of downtown Houston in the Museum District, the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum has the largest collection of African American military memorabilia in the world. “This is not a ‘black’ museum; this is an American history institution,” Capt. Matthews says. “We feature black people, yes we do. History in America isn’t complete unless you tell the entire story.”

Capt. Matthews first learned of the Buffalo Soldiers in college. Reading a book for a class, he happened across a short paragraph about the Buffalo Soldiers, and he knew he had to tell the story of these men in their blue uniforms. “In military history, it’s not a popular topic,” Capt. Matthews explains. “We know about soldiers, but we don’t know about the Buffalo Soldiers.”



Photo courtesy of Herbert Moore II.

For first-time visitors, the museum serves as a connection to the past where they can get a sense of patriotism and pride. “I never even really knew about the Buffalo Soldiers,” college student Briana Moore exclaims. “Learning more about them really had me in awe.”

Schools teach African American history during February, and during those twenty-eight days, they do not al-

ways have enough time to cover the Buffalo Soldiers. The curriculum lacks the flexibility to really teach all African American history, which is why this museum is important. “Without the Buffalo Soldiers, the westward movement would have been delayed fifty years,” Capt. Matthews declares. “They built camps, forts, railroads, and chased down outlaws. That’s the contribution these men made.” The Buffalo Soldiers National Museum offers a way for people to learn about the dedication of these men and understand the significance of their hard work and the devotion required to fight for a country that did not show them respect.

A tour of the museum starts in the main lobby, where the visitor sees glass cases filled with pictures, statues, and mannequins in military fatigues. On a walk through a nearby hallway, paintings of the Buffalo Soldiers line the walls. Throughout the tour, personal stories go along with the pictures and enlistment documents. “People realize that they are standing on the contributions of people before them,” Capt. Matthews states. “They gain a better appreciation for these men.”

The stories told during a museum tour serve as a reminder of the Buffalo Soldiers’ hard work, dedication, and perseverance. Knowledge is not only gained in the classroom, as a day at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum proves. The knowledge one gains there will motivate, inspire, and excite people of all ages.

The Buffalo Soldiers National Museum is located at 3816 Caroline at the corner of Alabama Street. It is open Monday through Friday 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. For more information, visit www.buffalosoldiersmuseum.com.

Jessica Denise Mitchell is a graduate student at the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas.