

# On African History Month

by  
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I have been involved in the study of black history for over thirty years. Over that time, I've written a number of articles and three books about Buffalo Soldiers, the black regular Army troopers who served during the Indian wars and the early years of the twentieth century. When I started, there was a February commemoration known as "Negro History Week," which Carter G. Woodson of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History had introduced in 1926. Through the years, as the observance has evolved and my own research has progressed, I have never been able to shake my ambivalence about what is now called "African American History Month."

Personally, I have found the celebration very gratifying. February brings me a lot of attention, enough to compensate for the obscurity in which I usually toil. I talk to a variety of groups, ranging from professional historians to public library groups, and visit interesting places as the featured speaker. This year, I have weekend sessions scheduled at the visitor center in Gettysburg, at Theodore Roosevelt's home in Oyster Bay, New York, and in the library in Clearwater, Florida. I also have a radio interview scheduled with NPR (not the network, I'm sorry to say, but Nebraska Public Radio), and people buy my books in greater than usual number. Even the J-Scope wants to hear from me. So personally, African-American History Month brings me considerable satisfaction.

On the other hand, I do not think the current arrangement treats my subject fairly. The saga of the buffalo soldiers is a mainstream story. Their experience should not be hidden away for most of the year and brought to light only when the calendar says it is time to check off some Equal Employment Opportunity box and trot out the historian to say a few words about

Buffalo Soldiers before returning their tale to the files for another year.

Buffalo soldiers participated in central episodes of the American experience. Like the white soldiers of their time, they fought in wars that have become the stuff of movies and legends. They built infrastructure--roads and telegraph lines, wrested the country from the Native tribes, and represented a significant portion of the huge public investment in the development of the western portion of this vast country. They also fought in the two foreign wars of the turn of the century, in Cuba against Spain and in the Philippines against a native independence movement, and participated in General John Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico. During the period between the Civil War and World War, twenty-three of them received the Medal of Honor for valor.

They did all of this despite having to deal with the racism that was prevalent at the time. The facts of racism and prejudice gave their story a singular quality. They regularly faced hostility, occasionally confronted violence, and served in an Army that made it extremely difficult for them to advance above non-commissioned rank.

Nevertheless, their story is part of the national epic and should be treated as such. During the Martin Luther King observance in the middle of January, a Prince George's County, Maryland, elementary school teacher noted that "African American history is taught in isolation in February." She had a valid point. The story of African Americans in the United States, including the Buffalo Soldiers, should not be relegated to some corner of our understanding and treated as so much exotica to be noted in a pro forma way at a certain time of year, as it all too often is. It is not just black history. It is American history.