



# The Buffalo Soldiers: Guardians of the Uintah Frontier 1886 - 1901

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**T**HERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL STUDIES on the history of black soldiers in the post-Civil War years.<sup>1</sup> More than one historian has noted their presence at Fort Duchesne, Utah, but none has examined the soldiers' on-duty as well as off-duty activities during their years on the Uintah

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History* (New York, 1974); William A. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967).

*Frederic Remington drawing.*



frontier.<sup>2</sup> The population of this region of eastern Utah was heterogeneous; Native Americans and whites were in substantial numbers. Various companies of soldiers, white and black, were stationed at Fort Duchesne in the last decade and a half of the nineteenth century. White troops were from the Twenty-first and Sixteenth Infantry and the Seventh and Fifth Cavalry, while the black units were all from the Ninth Cavalry. Except for a six-month period in 1898 when the troops were fighting in the Spanish-American War, the post from September 1892 until March 1901 was garrisoned entirely by the Ninth Cavalry's "buffalo soldiers."<sup>3</sup> Black soldiers at Fort Duchesne gave Uintah County the second largest black population in Utah from 1890 until early in 1901. Thus, the stationing of black troops in the region provides an example of interracial adjustments on the western frontier.<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of racial antipathy from Indians and whites, the experiences of black soldiers there and in other western stations were similar to those of white soldiers. Black troops were used to subdue and control Native Americans. They assisted in quelling disputes among whites, protecting stage and railway lines, building and maintaining military posts, opening and clearing roads, and seeing to the general well-being of frontier settlers. All military units practiced their skills in horsemanship, marching, and marksmanship. Drill exercises, inspections, and annual marches kept the men in a state of preparedness. Black troops, like their white counterparts, performed ceremonial duties, such as participating in parades and serving as honor guards at Memorial Day observances.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Marvin Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army, 1891-1917* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. 80; Thomas G. Alexander and Leonard J. Arrington, "The Utah Military Frontier, 1872-1912, Forts Cameron, Thornburgh, and Duchesne," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 32 (1964): 344-52.

<sup>3</sup> Returns from United States Military Posts, Fort Duchesne, 1886-1902. Microfilm copies of the holograph post returns are available at the Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Some claim the term "buffalo soldiers" originated when Native Americans first came in contact with black soldiers. One story says the term started when black troops serving in the northern plains area started wearing buffalo hides as overcoats on cold winter marches. The black faces peering from the hides resembled the buffalo. Another story says the name was given by Native Americans to black troops because of the similarity between the hair of black soldiers and the mane of the buffalo. Noting that the buffalo was sacred to the Indians, historian William Leckie says: ". . . it is unlikely that he would so name an enemy if respect were lacking." At times the term applied to all black soldiers but was more often associated with the cavalry units. The men of the Tenth Cavalry had a regimental coat of arms with the head of the buffalo for an insignia. John M. Carroll, ed., *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York, 1973), pp. 179-80; Leckie, *Buffalo Soldiers*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> In 1890 there were 127 blacks in Uintah County; by 1900 the population had increased to 214. See George Ramjoue, "The Negro in Utah: A Geographical Study in Population" (M.A. thesis, University of Utah, 1968), pp. 9-10, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, pp. 80-82, 85-90; Arlen L. Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West, 1869-1891* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971), pp. 10-11.

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 OPPOSITION FROM THE UTES
 

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Reports of conflict among the White River, Uncompahgre, and Uintah bands of Ute Indians, the Utes' lack of respect for government employees, and concern for the safety of white settlers had influenced the War Department to build a military post on the Uintah frontier in 1886.<sup>6</sup> A site was selected between the Indian agencies of Whiterocks and Ouray on the Uinta River, approximately eight miles above its confluence with the Duchesne River. Troops B and E of the Ninth Cavalry under the command of Maj. Frederick W. Benteen were sent from Fort McKinney, Wyoming, to join four companies of the white Twenty-first Infantry from Fort Steele, Wyoming, and Fort Sidney, Nebraska, for duty at the new post.<sup>7</sup>




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*Frederic Remington drawing.*

The Utes were disgruntled over the decision to build a military post in their midst. A few white men circulated rumors among the Indians that the soldiers were coming to kill several of the Ute chiefs, place others under arrest, and remove the remaining Utes to another area, following which the reservation lands would be given to settlers. The white men urged the Utes to drive all the whites away from Uintah and Ouray, take whatever beef and supplies they wanted, and then attack the soldiers in the canyons. Spurred by the rumors, some Uintah Utes joined the Uncompahgre and White River bands. Women and children were sent to the mountains and the men prepared for war.

Several Uintah chiefs rode to the Uintah Agency in Whiterocks and told special Indian agent Eugene E. White of the impending crisis.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander and Arrington, "The Utah Military Frontier," pp. 343-44; Floyd A. O'Neil, "A History of the Ute Indians of Utah until 1890" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1973), pp. 171-75.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander and Arrington, "The Utah Military Frontier," pp. 344-46; Special Post Return, Fort Duchesne, August 24, 1886; Post Return, Fort Duchesne, August, 1886; *Provo Sunday Herald*, March 14, 1954.

White called for a council the following day with all of the White River and Uintah Utes and also asked that an invitation be sent to the Uncompahgres for a council in Ouray the day after that. The Utes agreed to hear White in council.<sup>8</sup>

In the meetings with the Ute bands, White sought to allay their fears concerning the soldiers. They were not, he told them, a threat to the Utes as long as the Indians behaved themselves. An attack on the soldiers by Ute warriors would only bring more soldiers, and eventually the Utes would be subdued and removed from their land. White told the Ute bands that their alleged white friends wanted their land and knew it would become available if the Utes initiated an attack against the United States Army. As an example of what would happen to the Utes if they attacked the soldiers, White pointed out that Geronimo, the Apache chief, had been relentlessly pursued by the army, captured, and sent to Florida where he was away from his people and probably plagued by mosquitoes and alligators.<sup>9</sup>

White asked the Utes for help in keeping peace and suggested that they return their women and children from the mountains. He promised to arrest the whites who had circulated the rumors if they came on the reservation again and admonished the Utes to put away their weapons except when hunting game and to behave "like sensible men." The Utes accepted White's counsel and Chief Sowawick of the White River band said, "If the soldiers want to sit down on the Reservation, all right—just so they do not try to hurt us without cause or take our country away from us."

Apparently, the Utes had assumed that all of the soldiers stationed at Fort Duchesne would be white men. As agent White returned to Uintah from his council with the Uncompahgre he was met by five fast-riding Utes coming from Uintah, among them an old headman named Sour who shouted excitedly:

Buffalo soldiers! Buffalo soldiers! Coming. Maybe so tomorrow. Indians saw them at Burnt Fort yesterday, coming this way. Don't let them come! We can't stand it! It's bad very bad! . . . You did not tell us that buffalo soldiers were coming, and we did not agree for them to come. We did not think about them at all. Our arrangement applies only to white soldiers. That is all right. We told you they might come, and they may.

<sup>8</sup> E. E. White, *Experiences of a Special Indian Agent* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), pp. 122–31, 145–46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134–39.

But all the Indians want you to come back quick and send them back. We cannot stand for them to come on our Reservation. It is too bad. . . .

Leaping from his pony, Sour rushed up to White's buggy, grabbed White's black coat sleeve, and rubbing it over his (Sour's) hand and face, exclaimed, ". . . All over black! All over black, buffalo soldiers! Injun heap no like him!!" With a jerk of his hand, the old man then rubbed his head all over and shouted, "Wooly head! Wooly head! All same as buffalo! What you call him, black white man? NIGGER! NIGGER!"<sup>10</sup>

White was surprised to learn of the Utes' dislike for the black soldiers. He tried to mitigate Sour's fears by telling him that the leaders of the black soldiers were white men. He promised Sour that the black soldiers would conduct themselves honorably. Somewhat relieved, "Sour agreed that they might come and gave . . . his word that he would hurry back and satisfy all the Indians." Upon returning to the agency, White learned "that Sour's excitement had been shared by the entire tribe." He was told:

The Utes had a strange and irreconcilable antipathy to negroes. Up to that time they had never suffered one to live on their Reservation. Several had dropped in among them from time to time in the past, but only to soon disappear and never be heard of again.

When the four companies of the Twenty-first Infantry arrived to establish the post, the Indians gathered at several high points and with anxiety watched the men organize the camp or "sit down" as the Utes called it. The next day Major Benteen and approximately seventy-five buffalo soldiers arrived, increasing the military personnel to nearly two hundred fifty men.<sup>11</sup>

On August 23, 1886, Fort Duchesne was officially established.<sup>12</sup> The Utes harangued agent White, several of them intimating a violent confrontation if the soldiers were not kept within their cantonment area.<sup>13</sup> On the second night following the arrival of the black troops, a commotion spread through Sowawick's village and several camps near the agency. Rumors that the soldiers were coming toward their encampment and that they might be buffalo soldiers ran throughout the reservation. Women and children fled toward the mountains. White left his home

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 139, 141, 146–47, 147–48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 148, 149.

<sup>12</sup> Post Return, Fort Duchesne, August 1886.

<sup>13</sup> White, *Experiences of a Special Indian Agent*, p. 149.

to investigate the rumors; puzzled that soldiers would be out at night, he sent a message to Sowawick, asking him to send several of his chiefs to accompany him (White) to discover the facts. The party left the agency and rode toward Antero's camp, located five miles away in the direction of Fort Duchesne. When they arrived at Antero's they discovered that the camp had been abandoned in haste.

The Utes in the party surmised that the Indians had all been captured by the soldiers. They wanted to return immediately, but the agent suggested they make an inquiry at the garrison. Although apprehensive, the Utes agreed. As they rode toward the post they encountered other Utes who had heard the rumors and were searching for the soldiers. The commanding officer of the post assured White and the Utes that all of the soldiers were present at the fort and that the officers would make sure the men remained orderly.

White returned to the agency and learned that a young herder from Antero's camp had seen a party of Uncompahgres coming from Ouray and in the dark had mistaken them for soldiers. He then ran to the camp and sounded the alarm, thus explaining the hasty abandonment of the camp by Antero and his people.<sup>14</sup> Although clearly a "false alarm," the episode indicates the nervousness in the Indian community caused by the presence of the new troops.

There are two possible explanations, or a combination of the two, that may shed some light on why the Utes showed a greater aversion to black soldiers than to their white counterparts. The buffalo was an important symbol for Plains Indians and figured prominently in their su-



*Frederic Remington drawing.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-57.

perstitutions, taboos, dances, societies, visions, and cures.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the Northern Utes had a particular fear of black soldiers based upon the similarity of the mane of the buffalo and the “woolylike” hair of many blacks. The second possibility is that the White River Utes remembered that black soldiers had come to the aid of Maj. T. T. Thornburgh in the fall of 1879 during the Battle of Milk River in western Colorado. In that action, Capt. Francis Dodge, who had been commanding a scouting party near Milk River, learned that Thornburgh’s command was under siege and led Company D of the Ninth Cavalry to the battle. Thirty-five buffalo soldiers and their officers joined the beleaguered men in trenches at Milk River. The soldiers were able to sustain themselves for three additional days until a large contingent of soldiers from the Fifth Cavalry arrived and forced the Utes to retreat.<sup>16</sup>

The Battle of Milk River, together with the killing of Indian agent Nathan C. Meeker at the White River Agency, influenced the decision to remove the White River Utes as well as the Uncompahgre from their lands in western Colorado to reservations in eastern Utah.<sup>17</sup> There may well have been in the minds of reservation-dwellers an association of blacks with these earlier unhappy events.

Although the Utes did not like having black troops nearby, their initial fears were allayed so that within a few weeks of their arrival the Indians were “harvesting quietly and going about their usual occupations.” Commenting on the Utes’ attitude toward black soldiers, the post trader said, “the dislike is not sufficient to cause apprehension.” Within several years the initial distrust was diminished and the Utes no longer feared coming to the post.<sup>18</sup>

#### ROUTINE AT THE POST

With the immediate threat of conflict with the Utes abated, the soldiers’ attention and efforts were turned to regular garrison duties and the building of the fort. Canvas tents, banked with soil for warmth, were

<sup>15</sup> Tom McHugh, *The Time of the Buffalo* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972), pp. 110–11.

<sup>16</sup> The Southern Utes did not oppose the presence of blacks. John Taylor, a black man who had served in the Union army was accepted by the tribe. He married a Ute woman and they had several children. The descendants are recognized and accepted as members of the tribe. This information was given to me by Dr. Floyd O’Neil, an authority on the Ute Indians. For information on the Battle of Milk River, see Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, pp. 223–43, 381–87.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander and Arrington, “The Utah Military Frontier,” pp. 339–40.

<sup>18</sup> *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 12, 1886; *Salt Lake Herald*, June 13, 1897.

used as temporary housing until more permanent quarters could be built. Each tent also contained a stove.<sup>19</sup>

The daily routine for soldiers throughout the army began with reveille at 5:45 A.M. Following breakfast, the men had a fatigue call at 7:30 A.M., lunch at 12:15 P.M., and a return to fatigue or school for some of the enlisted men and NCOs at 1:00 P.M. At 4:30 fatigue duty ended, and from 4:45 to 5:15 P.M. the men went through drills and had guard mount at 5:30. After dinner the men were free until tattoo at 9:00 P.M. followed by taps. This routine was broken on Sundays and holidays when officers relieved the troops of all but the necessary fatigue and guard duties.<sup>20</sup>

The foods eaten by soldiers were basically the same during the years of the Indian wars: beef or bacon, beans, potatoes, fresh vegetables from the post garden, fruits, and bread.<sup>21</sup> In the years after the Indian wars some of the food served black regiments was different from that of white regiments and reflected the cultural differences between the races. Mostly the different foods were served on holidays, but at times they were included on the regular menu. A typical menu for a black regiment by 1895 was:

Breakfast: puffed rice, sugar and cream, stewed beef, baked potatoes, toast, tea or coffee  
 Lunch: cream of potato soup, oyster crackers, beef pot pie, steamed rice, lima beans, radishes, steamed pudding, vanilla sauce, bread  
 Dinner: pickled pigs' feet, chile con carne, hot biscuits, butter, syrup, and tea.<sup>22</sup>

The soldiers' living quarters were typical of most military posts built during the period. In 1890 they were described as being good, except for water leaking in several of the quarters occupied by married men. Bathing facilities at the post were poor. Weather permitting, the soldiers bathed in the nearby "mosquito-infested, rocky-bottomed river." The

<sup>19</sup> Alexander and Arrington, "The Utah Military Frontier," pp. 344-45; Stephen Perry Jocelyn, *Mostly Alkali* (Caldwell, Ida., 1953), pp. 311-12. Capt. Stephen Jocelyn was an officer with the Twenty-first Infantry. He served at Fort Duchesne from 1886 until the spring of 1888. At that time he was transferred to Fort Douglas. His son, Stephen Perry Jocelyn, the author of *Mostly Alkali*, made extensive use of his father's diary in writing the biography.

<sup>20</sup> Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, p. 80. Fatigue duty included repairing roads and clearing snowbreaks between the fort and Price as well as between the fort and other points. Details were also sent to work at the sawmill, and there were various jobs within the fort itself. See Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, January 1888, February 1889, March and December 1890.

<sup>21</sup> Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, p. 178.

<sup>22</sup> Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, p. 80.

post surgeon reported that the "lack of bath tubs, lack of conveniences for warming water . . . and lack of privacy makes bathing uncomfortable, so it is frequently neglected."<sup>23</sup>

In anticipation of the coming winter the garrison was a beehive of activity. By the end of October 1886 a sawmill was installed thirty miles north of the post and operated around the clock, cutting lumber obtained from the nearby canyons. A quarry and kiln were also established, and the quarried stone was hauled to the fort. Many soldiers were assigned the duty of improving the road between Fort Duchesne and Price for hauling supplies. Others worked on building a telegraph line between the two points.<sup>24</sup>

New recruits, civilian employees, and a few women increased the garrison's population to approximately three hundred fifty by the end of the autumn. Two or three of the women were black, the wives of soldiers. They supplemented their husbands' income by taking in washing for post residents. Five of the six white women were wives or relatives of military personnel, the sixth was the wife of the post trader.

The winter of 1886–87 was difficult for residents of Fort Duchesne, as well as for settlers throughout the West. The temperature often fell to twenty degrees below zero or lower. The continual winds blew sand into the tents from all directions. Despite the harshness of the weather the garrison was relatively free of sickness, and as spring approached construction of the post resumed. Building plans called for construction of a hospital, commissary, storehouse, and larger quarters for both officers and enlisted men. After visiting the fort in July 1887 Gen. George Crook, commander of the Department of the Platte, expressed satisfaction over the developments.<sup>25</sup>

Military duty at Fort Duchesne was typical of frontier duty throughout the West. The reservations had to be patrolled and disturbances quelled. Potential danger arose every year when some of the Ute bands came back to hunt deer and other game on their old hunting grounds in western Colorado. White Coloradans resented the Utes' annual return,

<sup>23</sup> Herbert M. Hart, *Old Forts of the West* (Seattle: Superior Publishing Co., 1965), p. 135; Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> Jocelyn, *Mostly Alkali*, p. 314; *Provo Herald*, March 14, 1954. Shortly after the telegraph line was completed, several young Utes cut the line and made firewood from the poles. A group of cavalrymen were sent to apprehend the culprits and bring them to the fort. Their punishment was a brief stay in the guardhouse on a bread and water diet. See *Builders of Uintah: A Centennial History of Uintah County, 1872–1947* (Uintah County: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1947), pp. 187–88.

<sup>25</sup> Jocelyn, *Mostly Alkali*, pp. 312, 315–17; *Provo Herald*, March 14, 1954; *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 16, 1887.

and the cavalrymen were assigned to locate and send the Utes back to the Utah reservations.<sup>26</sup>

Sometimes the Coloradans attempted to drive the Utes out without the help of Fort Duchesne cavalrymen. In August 1887 the Colorado militia pursued a group of Utes, led by Colorow, from the former hunting grounds to the eastern boundary of the reservation. There the militiamen encountered black soldiers who had been sent to prevent the Coloradans from invading the reservation lands. On another occasion a company of buffalo soldiers commanded by Capt. Henry H. Wright was sent to investigate rumors that two white men and five Indians were killed during a fight on the Snake River near Lily Park, Colorado. On their way to Lily Park the soldiers met a party of Utes who had just left there. According to the Utes, the Colorado game warden and twenty-four deputies rode into a camp of seven Indians and started shooting. Two Ute women were wounded and two men were killed. Another account said a dispute arose between the game wardens and the Utes over hunting rights, and the Coloradans used the argument to start a fight. The returning black soldiers "were of the universal opinion that the Indians killed . . . were wantonly massacred by the game warden and his deputies."<sup>27</sup>

Rumors kept the buffalo soldiers busy. Reports that part of the Uncompahgre reservation land was to be opened for non-Indians brought hundreds of "sooners" into the area. Many left the reservation on learning they had been misled. However, two to three hundred decided to remain, and twenty buffalo soldiers under the command of Capt. M. W. Day were sent to eject the intruders. Recognizing that many of the trespassers were there because of a misunderstanding, Captain Day was ordered to avoid, if possible, any conflict that might lead to bloodshed. All but about twelve men heeded the soldiers' orders to leave. Those who refused were arrested and taken to the fort. After removing the "sooners," the troops and agency officials destroyed the locations and monuments posted by the intruders.<sup>28</sup>

Providing escort for Indian agents when large amounts of money, annuities to the Indians, were being transported was an important duty for black cavalrymen. Extra precautions were taken in March 1898

<sup>26</sup> *Salt Lake Tribune* August 13, 1887; *Vernal Express*, November 17, 1895; *Salt Lake Herald*, October 27, 1897.

<sup>27</sup> Post Return, Fort Duchesne, August 1887; *Salt Lake Herald*, October 27, 1897; *Vernal Express*, October 28, November 4 and 11, 1897.

<sup>28</sup> *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 10, 12, 1897.

when hearsay of an impending robbery attempt began circulating between the fort and Price, Utah. The reports were reinforced by the sighting of several members of the Robbers Roost gang in the vicinity of Price and Helper. It was said that the thirty thousand dollars to be paid to the Indians was lucrative enough to justify the robbery attempt.<sup>29</sup>

Captain Wright and Troop F were sent to the railroad depot at Price, and a detachment was sent from Price to Helper when the officer in charge heard that the attempted robbery was to take place at the second depot. When the train arrived at Helper it was guarded by the Ninth Cavalry troops, and no attempt was made to rob the train. The buffalo soldiers returned quickly to Price making sure that a holdup did not occur between stations. When the train arrived in Price approximately forty armed soldiers stood guard on the platform while the money was transferred to an open government wagon. The soldiers then escorted the Indian agent, Capt. G. A. Cornish, and the money from Price to Fort Duchesne. Although rumors persisted that the Robbers Roost gang would attack between Price and the fort, the holdup did not take place.<sup>30</sup>

#### BLACK-WHITE RELATIONS

Relations between black and white soldiers stationed at the post were generally amicable. A visitor to the fort said, "The white infantrymen and the black cavalrymen at the fort fraternize without any fine discrimination as to color." The men associated with one another, ate together, and according to the same visitor may have slept and fought "the festive bed bug together."<sup>31</sup>

During the summer of 1888 the two companies of black cavalrymen participated along with white companies from Fort Duchesne, Fort Douglas, and Fort Bridger in extensive maneuvers held in Strawberry Valley. The maneuvers took place near the reservations to demonstrate the military force that could be brought against the Utes should they break the peace. Later, with the closing of the post at Fort Bridger,

<sup>29</sup> Robbers Roost was an outlaw refuge in eastern Wayne County, Utah, on an elevated plateau near the summit of the San Rafael Swell. It was difficult to approach and thus an ideal hideout. Butch Cassidy was the most famous outlaw to use the Roost. For more information see Charles Kelly, *The Outlaw Trail: Butch Cassidy and His Wild Bunch*, rev. ed. (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1959), pp. 141-47, 302-3; *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 1, 1898.

<sup>30</sup> *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 1, 5, 1898.

<sup>31</sup> The relationship between black and white soldiers at Fort Duchesne was typical. See Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, p. 185, *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 28, 1886. It is unlikely that black and white soldiers shared the same sleeping quarters, even in tents. By 1888 the fort had permanent quarters and the soldiers, except for married men, would have been quartered according to units. See Hart, *Old Forts of the West*, p. 135.

Wyoming, in 1890, the Fort Duchesne troops would become responsible for guarding the entire Indian frontier areas of eastern Utah, western Colorado, and southwestern Wyoming.<sup>32</sup>

The cooperation between black and white soldiers stationed at Fort Duchesne does not imply that racial prejudice was nonexistent. Maj. F. W. Benteen, who was commander of Fort Duchesne from August 23 to December 18, 1886, commented in a letter written after his retirement that in 1866 he had turned down a promotion to major in the Tenth Cavalry and had remained a captain in the Seventh Cavalry rather than be associated with black troops. Blaming fate for his later association with the Ninth Cavalry, Benteen felt secure enough financially to retire after thirty years, saying, "it was not proper to remain with a race of troops that I could take no interest in and this on account of their 'low-down,' rascally character."<sup>33</sup>

The ill-disguised contempt that some white officers felt toward blacks was not limited to black enlisted men but to black officers as well. Between 1866 and 1917, a commission in the army could be obtained by three methods: graduating from the United States Military Academy at West Point, which supplied most of the officers; by enlisted men with at least two years of army service passing a qualifying examination; and by civilians successfully completing the same examination. Very few blacks applied for qualification in the last two categories, but blacks did seek appointments to West Point. Of the twenty-three who received appointments between 1870 and 1889, twelve passed the entrance examination. Only three graduated.<sup>34</sup> In 1880 Gen. J. M. Schofield, superintendent of the academy, said:

To send to West Point for four years' competition a young man who was born in slavery is to assume that half a generation has been sufficient to raise a colored man to the social, moral, and intellectual level which the average white man has reached in several hundred years. As well might the common farm horse be entered in a four-mile race against the best blood inherited from a long line of English racers.<sup>35</sup>

Blacks at the academy were ridiculed and harassed by white cadets. Between 1866 and 1900 West Point graduates filled all available posi-

<sup>32</sup> Jocelyn, *Mostly Alkali*, pp. 323-24; Alexander and Arrington, "The Utah Military Frontier," pp. 345-46.

<sup>33</sup> Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, pp. 191-92.

<sup>34</sup> Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History*, p. 65.



Fort Duchesne, 1883. U.S. Signal Corps photograph, National Archives.

tions for officers in the army. The antipathy shown blacks at the academy would be extended to black officers and enlisted men in the military garrisons of the West.<sup>36</sup>

Two of the three black West Point graduates, John H. Alexander (1887) and Charles Young (1889), served at Fort Duchesne between 1888 and 1901. Both men were from Ohio; Alexander's success inspired Young to emulate him. John Alexander was stationed at Fort Duchesne from June 1888 to October 1891. During that time he performed the regular duties assigned an officer. He directed fatigue details, led a patrol to remove intruders from the reservations, and took the soldiers on practice marches.<sup>37</sup>

Col. Edward Hatch, commander of the Ninth Cavalry, protested when he learned that Lt. Charles Young was to be assigned to his regiment. Noting that Lieutenant Alexander was already assigned to the

<sup>36</sup> Henry O. Flipper (1877) was the first black graduate from West Point. During his years at the academy, the white cadets ignored his presence. Flipper was court-martialed in 1882 and dismissed from the service. It was alleged that some irregularities occurred in the records of the commissary when Flipper was in charge of the books. He was cleared of the charges in 1978, and his remains were reburied with full military honors. Johnson Parker was assaulted by white cadets in 1880. See *Ibid.*, p. 64; Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, pp. 72–73, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, 1887–1901; Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, pp. 73–74; Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, June and July 1888, April, June and October, 1890.

Ninth, Hatch said the addition of Young might cause white "officers not to apply for assignment to the regiment." The War Department responded that Young was one of several new West Point graduates who had not been assigned to a regiment. To avoid the possibility that the next available cavalry vacancy might be in a white regiment, the War Department had assigned Young to the black Twenty-fifth Infantry with the agreement that he would be transferred to a black cavalry regiment when a vacancy became available. The next vacancy was in the Ninth, Young's new assignment. Charles Young arrived at Fort Duchesne in October 1890.<sup>38</sup>

Although the two Ohioans were stationed at Fort Duchesne together for nearly a year, they had little time to fraternize. Lieutenant Alexander was in charge of the government sawmill seven of the twelve months. Young was on leave for six weeks, and Alexander spent the month of September 1891 on detached duty in North Carolina. The following month Alexander was transferred to Fort Robinson, Nebraska.<sup>39</sup>

Lieutenant Young was stationed at Fort Duchesne until the fall of 1895. He later was reassigned to Fort Duchesne after the Spanish-American War but did not return to the fort until September 1899. He remained there until January 1901 but was periodically assigned detached service duty away from Utah. As professor of military science he taught at Wilberforce University in Ohio. During the Spanish-American War he took a leave of absence from the regiment in order to become a major with the Ninth Battalion Colored Ohio Volunteers. After the war ended he served as assistant mustering officer in Macon, Georgia, and once again taught at Wilberforce University before returning to Fort Duchesne. While on duty at Fort Duchesne Lieutenant Young, like Alexander, carried responsibilities common to junior officers throughout the army. In addition to leading patrols, he served as commissary officer, summary court officer, post exchange officer, and was in charge of the post school at various times.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, October 1890 to October 1891. Alexander died of natural causes in 1894. See Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, January 1894 to February 1901; November 1890; October 1891; April 1892; September 1899 to January 1901.

Young tutored and encouraged Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., who had joined the regular army after serving as an officer in one of the black volunteer regiments during the Spanish-American War. At Fort Duchesne, Davis studied, with Young's help, for the qualifying examination given for commission in the U.S. Army. He scored 91 percent on the final examination, received his commission, and was transferred to the Tenth Cavalry. Davis was the first black general in U.S. military history. His son Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., graduated from West Point in 1936 and later became a general in the U.S. Air Force. See Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, p. 74; Foner, *Blacks and the Military*, pp. 93-94.

A deterioration in the relations between black and white residents of Fort Duchesne appeared in 1896 and could have been the result of racial prejudice by white officers. During the spring of that year many of the black troops began to clamor for a change of station. They complained that the post had become "a prison instead of a military reservation." The white population of the garrison organized the Owl Club in August of that year and blacks were excluded. The club was to provide social activities such as card parties, theatrical performances, and other amusements during the coming fall and winter.<sup>41</sup>

Relations between the black soldiers at Fort Duchesne and civilian citizens in the area continued to be amicable, however, and there was a general absence of the blatant contempt for black soldiers expressed in some frontier communities such as San Angelo, Texas, and Johnson County, Wyoming. It has been suggested that "racism may have been mildest and whites most tolerant of black soldiers in communities near Indian reservations." White residents of the Uinta Basin firmly believed there was a need for military protection and vigorously opposed any plans that might lead to a removal of the troops. In addition, the fort and its military personnel contributed handsomely to the local economy. Yet, white civilians referred to the black soldiers as "darkeys" and "coons." During a dispute in a saloon Jack Thomas, a local white rancher, drew a gun and said, "You black son of a bitch, I will kill you." Racist manifestations, while few, leave little doubt of the existence of race prejudice among civilians.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, prejudice did not prevent the black soldiers and white civilians from occasionally engaging in social activities. The troops might entertain the residents of Vernal with an evening of comedy at the local opera house, and before the performances the post band would play and march in a street parade. Capt. F. H. E. Ebstein of the Twenty-first Infantry had organized a band comprised of both black and white soldiers at the fort during the winter of 1887–88, and both officers and enlisted

<sup>41</sup> New officers were transferred to Fort Duchesne during this period. See Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, March to August 1896; *Vernal Express*, May 28 and August 6, 1896.

<sup>42</sup> Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, pp. 186–87; Frank N. Schubert, "The Suggs Affray: The Black Cavalry in the Johnson County War," *Western Historical Quarterly* 4 (1973): 57–68; Frank N. Schubert, "Black Soldiers on the White Frontier: Some Factors Influencing Race Relations," *Phylon* 32 (1971):415 [for a similar opinion see Thomas A. Phillips, "The Black Regulars," in *The West of the American People*, ed. Allen G. Bogue, Thomas D. Phillips, and James Wright (Itasca, Ill., 1970), pp. 138–40]; *Vernal Express*, November 17, 24, December 1, 29, 1892; Alexander and Arrington, "The Utah Military Frontier," p. 346; *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 10, 1887; *Provo Herald*, March 14, 1954; Phillips, "The Black Regulars," p. 140, suggests that merchants in towns near forts manned by blacks allowed economic consideration to overcome race prejudice; *Vernal Express*, May 4, November 25, 1899.

men had contributed money for the instruments. Also, on occasion, a racially mixed group sang for post residents. Sports brought the races together as well. Black and white companies competed against each other in baseball contests, and the Fort Duchesne baseball team competed with the team from Vernal.<sup>43</sup>

In May 1897 Troop B was sent on a practice march to Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City. There the cavalrymen played a baseball game with the Twenty-fourth Infantry team. Although previously strong competitors, they could have suffered fatigue from the long trek, for they lost by a score of 23 to 9. Two months later Troop F received orders to travel to Fort Douglas on a practice march. The actual purpose of the trip was for the cavalrymen to participate in Utah's Jubilee Celebration. The men were absent from Fort Duchesne from July 13 to August 2. The brief duty in Salt Lake City probably seemed like heaven to soldiers accustomed to the isolation of the Uinta Basin. On the evening of July 24 Troop F gave a "thrilling exhibition of horsemanship" for the civilians and soldiers in attendance on the lower parade ground at Fort Douglas.<sup>44</sup>

#### OFF-DUTY HOURS

The off-duty activities of black soldiers at Fort Duchesne were similar to those of soldiers at other frontier posts. Some spent their off-duty hours drinking and gambling. Others sought the temporary companionship of prostitutes who frequented the saloon in an area known as the Strip. The Strip encompassed a triangular-shaped piece of land between the Uncompahgre and Uintah reservations, approximately one and a half miles from Fort Duchesne. Federal, state, and county law enforcement agents were uncertain as to who had jurisdiction over the area, and this proved an advantage to the Indians, whites, and blacks who visited there for liquor, gambling, and other pleasures.<sup>45</sup>

Tempers often flared in the Strip, and soldiers were sometimes involved in the ensuing disputes. The previously mentioned Jack Thomas, a white rancher, was killed there. Thomas often gambled in the Strip with members of the black troops. He was killed and a black soldier

<sup>43</sup> *Salt Lake Herald*, March 22, 1898; *Vernal Express*, March 24, 1898; Jocelyn, *Mostly Alkali*, pp. 320, 322; *Uintah Papoose*, May 29, 1891; *Eastern Utah Telegraph*, April 16, 1891; *Vernal Express*, June 23, July 7, 1898, June 23, 1900.

<sup>44</sup> *Salt Lake Herald*, May 24, 1897; Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, July and August 1897; *Salt Lake Herald*, July 24, 1897.

<sup>45</sup> *Salt Lake Herald*, May 2, 1899.

wounded in the brothel adjoining the saloon. The incident occurred when Thomas intervened in a dispute involving black soldiers. The white man drew his gun and struck William Carter before shooting him. Thomas was then shot and killed by the wounded Carter. During the melee Abraham McKee, another black soldier, joined in the shooting spree. At the inquest the jurors ruled that the shooting was justifiable and Carter was exonerated. The less-fortunate McKee was taken to Fort Logan, Colorado, where he faced a military court for his participation in the affair.<sup>46</sup>

To prevent black troops from going to the Strip, a guard was placed on the Duchesne bridge. Soldiers evaded the guard by walking beyond the bridge and swimming across the river. When the soldiers returned to the bridge, they were arrested, taken to the guardhouse, and fined a month's pay. The men were angered at Capt. John Guilfoyle's attempts to keep them from the Strip. There were rumors that a recent fire at the post had been deliberately started in retaliation. Other rumors blamed the fire on Indians or white businessmen on the Strip who were equally incensed with Guilfoyle.<sup>47</sup>

Almost all of the disputes involving black soldiers, however, were with their own army mates. For example, the two cooks of Troop I became embroiled in an argument that led to a fight. One of them died as a result of his injuries. Some of the fights did not involve soldiers. Dennis Ford, a black employee of the post trader, quarreled with the Chinese Ho Sing at the latter's restaurant. Ford stabbed Ho in the breast, was arrested, and placed in the guardhouse. Violence was a regular occurrence on the Strip and was by no means limited to blacks.<sup>48</sup>

Off-duty hours were also spent in activities other than drinking and gambling. A number of soldiers used their free time to further their education at the post school. The troops had a Masonic military lodge on the post. The isolation from a black civilian population forced black soldiers and their families residing on military garrisons to initiate their own social activities. On special occasions, such as holidays or when a favorite

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. The circumstances that led to the shootings are confusing. One report claims that two soldiers were arguing when one drew a gun. Orrin Curry, an employee, was attempting to get the gun when Thomas entered the room (*Vernal Express*, May 4, 1899). Another report (*Salt Lake Herald*, May 6, 1899) says the black soldiers were arguing with prostitutes when Thomas entered the room and confronted the soldiers. On May 2, 1899, the *Herald* had reported that the dispute was over the attentions a white prostitute, Sarah Allred, was paying to the black soldiers. See also, *Vernal Express*, May 4, 1899; *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 26, 1899.

<sup>47</sup> *Salt Lake Herald*, July 10, 17, 1899.

<sup>48</sup> *Vernal Express*, April 21 and 28, 1900; December 29, 1892.

member of the company was leaving the post, a dinner party and dance were often given and all of the black residents joined in the festivities.<sup>49</sup>

Black soldiers organized a brass band and others performed in a minstrel group. Baseball, boxing, and track attracted the interest of many troops. Baseball was by far the most popular athletic activity of the black troops at Fort Duchesne as well as of other black regiments. As noted earlier, the company teams played against one another and with white company teams when they were stationed at Fort Duchesne, and sometimes challenged the local team from Vernal. Besides competing in team sports, many soldiers spent their leisure hours swimming or fishing in nearby rivers.<sup>50</sup>

#### DEPARTURES

Citizens from Price and nearby towns turned out in large numbers to say farewell to the buffalo soldiers in April 1898. The men of Troops B and F were leaving for Tennessee before going to Cuba to fight in the Spanish-American War. The companies, including officers, numbered about 127 men. In Price the soldiers were feted by the local community with a lunch at the town hall. As the soldiers entered the hall they were serenaded by two lines of children from Wellington and Price singing "Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys" and other patriotic songs. After lunch soldiers and civilians played baseball. That evening both the civilians and soldiers entertained the community. The troops departed the next day by train amidst cheers and best wishes for their success.<sup>51</sup>

The black troops were replaced at Fort Duchesne by two companies of white soldiers from the Seventh Cavalry. Then, in October 1898 Troops C and I of the Ninth Cavalry arrived at Fort Duchesne from Montauk Point, Long Island, New York. Black troops from the regular army units had been sent to Montauk Point for rest and recuperation after a gallant display of bravery and patriotism in Cuba. The new men quickly adjusted to the rigors of a frontier post.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> The educational opportunities at posts varied, depending on facilities and personnel. Lt. Charles Young was in charge of the Fort Duchesne school from November 1899 to January 1901. According to the 1900 census schedule all the black soldiers at Fort Duchesne were able to read and write. See also Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, 1899 to 1901; Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, pp. 74, 104-5; *Broad Ax*, October 9, 1897; *Vernal Express*, January 11, 1894, May 7, 1896.

<sup>50</sup> *Vernal Express*, March 24, 1898; Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, pp. 104-5; *Uintah Papoose*, May 29, July 17, 1891; *Eastern Utah Telegraph*, April 30, 1891; *Vernal Express*, June 8, 1893, June 28, 1894, July 7 and 28, 1900.

<sup>51</sup> *Eastern Utah Advocate*, April 28, 1898.

<sup>52</sup> Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, Special Returns, April, October, and November 1898; Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer*, pp. 44-45.

Rumors of an impending departure from Fort Duchesne begin circulating among the troops in June and July 1900. In June 1899 Troop C had been sent to Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City to replace members of the Twenty-fourth Infantry who were being sent to San Francisco and from there on to the Philippines. It was widely believed that the Ninth Cavalry would be going to the newly acquired colonial possession. Many soldiers were excited over moving from Fort Duchesne, but the rumors were premature and the troops remained at the post. The disappointment was short-lived. In March 1901 Troop H of the Fifth Cavalry was sent to Fort Duchesne from Fort Wingate, New Mexico, and Troops I and K of the Ninth Cavalry were dispatched to the Philippines via San Francisco. The 192 buffalo soldiers and their 2 officers left the post on March 4, 1901, bringing to a close nearly fifteen years of black military duty on the Uintah frontier.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Vernal Express*, June 16, July 18, 1900; *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 21, 1899; *Vernal Express*, July 28, 1900; Post Returns, Fort Duchesne, March, April, and July 1901. The main body of black soldiers left the post in March; however, eight men remained at the fort until July 1901.

*Fort Duchesne, ca. 1890, with cairns marking entrance. Courtesy National Archives.*

