

# Fort Davis

National Historic Site  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## The Buffalo Soldiers and the Constitution: An Overview

It was during the summer of 1787 that delegates representing most of the thirteen states of the United States wrote the first official constitution this nation has known. The new document - - now the oldest written constitution in the world - - stresses the idea that governmental power must be limited if the liberty of the citizen is to be guaranteed. It clearly provides that the basic rights of all people are protected.

A system of checks and balances based on a two-house legislature, a separate executive branch, an autonomous judiciary, and provisions for amendment are the greatest strengths of the document.

It is the last provision, the ability to amend, that has had the most far-reaching effect on safeguarding the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is this last provision that has greatly affected the lives of descendants of nearly three million slaves brought to America.



**Ninth U. S. Cavalry at Fort Davis**

During the Civil War, President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed only those slaves in areas "in rebellion against the United States." Since the Union did not control the southern states that seceded, the Proclamation did not immediately free any slaves. It did, however, capture public attention and made all aware that the abolition of slavery was an aim of the war.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1865, was responsible for abolishing slavery in all parts of the United States. In 1868, the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment made citizens of all American-born blacks. Two years later, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave black males the right to vote.

These amendments, passed as a direct consequence of the military victory of the North over the South, took over one hundred years before their provisions became realities for all.

Yet the seeds were planted, and former slaves exhibited a new pride in their country and a new sense of personal responsibility.

It was this new sense of patriotism, linked with optimism for social and economic betterment, which led many blacks to enlist in the post-Civil War Army. African-American troops had served in every war, including the American Revolution. It was not until July of 1866, however, that they were permitted to enlist in the Regular Army. The Congressional Act of July 28, 1866 increased the size of the army and provided for the creation of six regiments which "shall be

composed of colored men." The new African-American regiments were designated the Ninth and Tenth U. S. Cavalry regiments and the Thirty-eighth, Thirty-ninth, Fortieth, and Forty-first U. S. Infantry regiments. In 1869, the four infantry units were consolidated into two: the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth U. S. Infantry regiments.

Nicknamed Buffalo Soldiers reportedly by the Indians, the soldiers of the black regiments were recruited from the United States Colored Troops that served in the Civil War, from the New Orleans area, from the fringes of the southern states, and from large northern cities. They were former slaves as well as freedmen.

Almost immediately after their establishment, units of the black regiments were stationed throughout the West. In the battles and countless skirmishes that marked the frontier Indian Wars, black soldiers played a significant role. Commanded by white officers, who at times resented their duty with the black regiments, the Buffalo Soldiers endured and overcame tremendous social and environmental obstacles. They faced discrimination and sometimes received inferior supplies and equipment.

The men of the African- American regiments often found themselves in the forefront of action. For more than twenty-five years they not only engaged in battles with American Indians, but they built forts and escorted wagon trains, mail stages and railroad crews. Mapping and charting areas and locating sources of water, they were responsible for opening millions of square miles of western lands to peaceful settlement and development.

The Buffalo Soldiers received little recognition for their years of service on the frontier. Between 1865 and 1899, Congress awarded the Medal of Honor to 417 men who served in the Indian Wars. Only eighteen enlisted men of African- American descent, however, received the medal.

The 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the U. S. Constitution were responsible for the extension and protection of the civil rights of all Americans. These amendments also encouraged African Americans to enlist in the military. The Regular Army of the 1870s and 1880s did not afford total equality or democracy for the black man. It did, however, offer social and economic opportunities that did not previously exist. The record of meritorious service and notable accomplishments amassed by the Buffalo Soldier regiments remain a symbol of hope and pride for all Americans. Their achievements serve as a reminder of the contributions they made to American life and culture.

### **African Americans in the Armed Forces: A Time Line**

- 1776:** The Continental Congress agrees to enlist free blacks, allowing 7,000 African- American volunteer soldiers and sailors to take part in the Revolutionary War.
- 1812- 1815:** Black volunteer soldiers and sailors fight against the British in the War of 1812 at such critical battles as Lake Erie and New Orleans.
- 1862:** President Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation.
- 1862- 1865:** During the Civil War, 180,000 African- American soldiers serve in Union Army volunteer regiments.
- 1865:** The Confederate States of America begins to accept black recruits.
- 1866:** Congress passes a bill increasing the size of the army and establishing African- American regiments. Black men may now enlist in the Regular U. S. Army.
- 1866- 1890:** Eighteen African Americans earn the Medal of Honor during the frontier Indian Wars.
- 1877:** Henry O. Flipper becomes the first African American to graduate from the United States Military Academy.
- 1898:** All four of the African- American regiments participate in the Spanish- American War, serving in Cuba and the Philippine Islands.
- 1914- 1918:** More than 400,000 African Americans serve in the U. S. Armed Forces during World War I.
- 1940:** Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. becomes the first African- American general in the Regular Army.

- 1941:** The Army Air Corps forms the first black aviation unit, the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron. These pilots become known as the Tuskegee Airmen.
- 1941- 1945:** American forces in World War II include more than a million African- American men and women.
- 1948:** President Harry S. Truman signs Executive Order 9981 ordering an end to segregation in the U. S. Armed Forces.
- 1950- 1953:** Black and white soldiers fight side by side in Korea as separate African- American fighting units are disbanded.
- 1965- 1973:** Twenty African- American soldiers receive the Medal of Honor for service during the Vietnam War.
- 1971:** Samuel L. Gravely becomes the first African- American admiral in the history of the U. S. Navy.
- 1975:** U. S. Air Force officer Daniel "Chappie" James becomes the first African American to achieve the rank of four- star general.
- 1989:** Colin Powell becomes the first African- American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
- 1990- 1991:** During the Persian Gulf conflict, 100,000 African- American men and women are sent to the Middle East.
- 1992:** The Buffalo Soldier Monument is dedicated at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.