

Colonel Charles Young

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Charles Young Buffalo Soldier
National Monument
Ohio



Above: Charles Young and other cavalry officer standing in front of troops with horses.

Courtesy of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center of the Ohio Historical Society

As a soldier, diplomat, and civil rights leader, Charles Young overcame stifling inequality to become a leading figure in the years after the Civil War when the United States emerged as a world power. His work ethic, academic leadership, and devotion to duty provided a strong base for his achievements in the face of racism and oppression. His long and distinguished career as a commissioned officer in the United States Army made him a popular figure of his time and a role model for generations of new leaders.

*With the colored officer
social equality is a small thing
but social equality means much.
He is working for bigger things in life.*

1918, Undated Notes by Charles Young, Coleman Collection



Colonel Charles Young, July 1919.
Courtesy Library of Congress

Childhood: From Enslavement to Freedom

Young was born to enslaved parents in 1864 in May's Lick, Kentucky. That same year his father escaped enslavement and in February 1865 joined the 5th Regiment, U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery. In June 1866, two-year-old Charles and his parents moved to Ripley, Ohio, where they sought a new life in this river town and center of abolitionism. He thrived there and at age 17 graduated with academic honors with his integrated high school class of 1881. After high school, Young taught elementary school and continued his education under the tutelage of African American abolitionist John Parker and by completing coursework at Xavier University in Cincinnati.



Cadet Young

Charles Young and two other African-American soldiers standing near tent opening in Wyoming.

Both Courtesy of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center of the Ohio Historical Society

West Point

In 1883, Young's father encouraged him to take the entrance examination to the United States Military Academy at West Point. He entered West Point on June 10, 1884, becoming the ninth African American to attend the Academy and only the third to graduate. As a cadet, he faced constant racial insults and social isolation from instructors and fellow cadets who resented his presence there. Despite these obstructions to his progress, Young persevered and his accomplishments became a source of pride among African Americans during his lifetime. Young eventually became the highest ranking African American officer serving in the Regular Army until his death in 1922.



A Lifetime of Remarkable Military Service



9th Battalion, Ohio Volunteer Infantry of which Charles Young was Major.

Courtesy of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center of the Ohio Historical Society

Buffalo Soldier

In 1866, Congress established six all-black regiments to help rebuild the country after the Civil War and to patrol the remote western frontier during the "Indian Wars." Although the pay was low for the time—only \$13 a month—many African Americans enlisted because they could earn more and be treated with more dignity than they often received in civilian life. According to legend, American Indians called the black cavalry troops "buffalo soldiers" because of their dark, curly hair, which resembled a buffalo's coat. Aware of the buffalo's fierce bravery and fighting spirit, the African American troops accepted the name with pride and honor.

Because military leaders would not allow an African American officer to command white troops, the Adjutant General's Office waited

three months after Young's West Point graduation in 1889 before assigning the newly-commissioned 2nd Lieutenant to the 9th Cavalry at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. After a year, marked by constant isolation and hostility, Young transferred to Fort Duchesne, Utah, where the command and fellow officers proved more welcoming. Here, Young mentored Sergeant Major Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. who later became the first African American to attain the rank of General.

Between 1889 and 1907 Young served in western posts and rose to the rank of captain. He also taught military science, served as a military attaché, and fought with distinction during the Philippine-American War, winning the praise of his commanders for his troops'

courage and decorum in and out of combat. While serving at the Presidio in San Francisco, California, Young was assigned to protect Sequoia and General Grant (now Kings Canyon) National Parks, becoming the first African American superintendent of a national park. Young directed the Buffalo Soldiers to blaze early park trails, build roads, produce maps, drive out trespassing livestock, extinguish fires, monitor tourists, and keep poachers and loggers at bay.

Young's career is marked by the challenges military leadership faced in dealing with the rising star of an African American officer within the existing racial constraints of the military and society. Like the Buffalo Soldiers he led, Young embraced the opportunities provided by serving his country, even as he fought to overcome discrimination.

Military Attaché and Rising Officer

In 1904 Captain Young became the first Military Attaché to Haiti and the Dominican Republic, joining 23 other officers (and the only African American among them) serving in such diplomatic posts in the Theodore Roosevelt administration. He won President Roosevelt's praise for his monograph on the people and customs of Hispaniola, his maps, and his many dispatches. Young's experiences in foreign service and as a commander in the Philippines formed the basis of his book *The Military Morale of Nations and Races* (1911). In 1912 Young was promoted to major and served in Liberia as a military attaché. While there he contracted Blackwater Fever, a dangerous complication of malaria. In 1916, Major Young was awarded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) prestigious Spingarn Medal in recognition of his "Services in organizing the Liberian Constabulary and roads in the Republic of Liberia."

In March 1916, Major General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing led an expedition against Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa in response to his attack on a garrison at Columbus, New Mexico. Major Young distinguished himself in combat, leading a squadron of the 10th Cavalry in a successful pistol charge against the Villista forces to save an outflanked American unit and rescue American wounded.

On the eve of World War I, Young was on track to become the first African American general in the U.S. Army. Examination boards recommended him for a wartime promotion, but also noted medical concerns about his fitness to serve. At the same time, increasingly influential southerners in Woodrow Wilson's administration pressured the President into shifting black troops from front line combat positions to prevent the likelihood of African American officers commanding white troops.

Although Young experienced racism throughout his military education and career, he remained disappointed that his record of achievement could not prevail against those—who could not abide the thought of a black officer in command of white troops. Rather than addressing the racial tensions associated with a promotion for Young, the U.S. Army medically retired Young at the rank of colonel in July 1917. Young protested his retirement and continued to work for the civil rights of all African American soldiers. Racial unrest intensified across the country due in large part to the treatment of African Americans serving their country. In an attempt to ease tensions, the Wilson administration recalled Young to active duty days before the November 1918 armistice that ended the war. Young died while serving in Lagos, Nigeria, on January 8, 1922. His remains were returned to the United States in 1923, and Colonel Charles Young became only the fourth soldier to be honored with a funeral service at the Arlington Amphitheatre before burial in Arlington Cemetery.

A Home in Wilberforce

In 1894, Young accepted a detached service assignment as an instructor of military science and tactics at Wilberforce University. Young organized the military training program for cadets and officer candidates. There were few such programs at civilian colleges or universities and none at African American institutions. Young developed the curriculum and served as a role model for the young men in the program. He remained an instructor at the university until 1899. Though the assignment limited his chances to participate in combat, it gave Young an opportunity to reestablish his Ohio roots.

It was at Wilberforce that Young began a life-long friendship with the intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois (co-founder of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP) and Paul Laurence Dunbar (nationally prominent African American poet and writer). It was here, also—not far from his childhood home in Ripley, Ohio—that Young and his widowed mother bought the house (built in about 1854) he called "Youngsholm". After he married in 1903, Charles and Ada Young made their home in Wilberforce. Although his career took him across the globe, Young considered Wilberforce his home where he raised a family, mentored a successive generation of leaders, and found intellectual refuge.

On May 30, 1974, Young's home was designated a National Historic Landmark. On February 25, 2013, Charles Young Buffalo Soldier National Monument, encompassing the home and its farmland, was established by President Obama by Presidential Proclamation, to become part of the National Park System.



Planning Your Visit

New to the National Park System, Charles Young Buffalo Soldier National Monument is being developed for visitor use. The home is located along U.S. Route 42 in Wilberforce, Ohio. It is not currently open to the public, but programs and exhibits are under development. For up-to-date information on the history and planning of the park, tours, and volunteer opportunities, please contact the park staff or visit the park website at www.nps.gov/chyo.

More Information:

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Charles Young Buffalo Soldier National Monument is one of more than 400 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. To learn more about national parks and the National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.