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Black Officer

in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment

The Military Career of Charles Young

BRIAN G. SHELLUM

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London

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Set in Swift EF by Kim Essman.

For my father
Lieutenant Colonel Alford C. Shellum,
U.S. Army
1916-2005
An Old Soldier

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Preface

Charles Young is an unheralded military hero, whose rich life story, from 1864 to 1922, is virtually unknown to most Americans, African Americans included. Consider his extraordinary honors: third black graduate of West Point, first African American superintendent of one of our national parks, first black U.S. military attaché, first African American officer to command a Regular Army regiment, and highest-ranking black officer in the Regular Army until his death in 1922. Unlike the first two black academy graduates before him, Young went on to a long and distinguished military career and achieved the rank of colonel. For nearly thirty years he was the standard-bearer for his race in the officer corps. Only serious medical problems discovered on the eve of the U.S. entry into World War I—and racial prejudice—prevented him from becoming the first African American general.

Why have we overlooked this trail-blazing American? In my research about Charles Young, I discovered two reasons. The first is a lack of primary resources about the man. The second reason, which also explains the scarcity of research about the soldier and diplomat, is that Charles Young was black, isolated in a world where prejudice reigned and white people had power. It is my hope that further in-depth research about Charles Young will give him the prominent place in history he deserves.

In my first book, entitled *Black Cadet in a White Bastion: Charles*

Young at West Point, published in 2006, I uncovered a great deal of information about his experiences at the academy, how he was treated by his classmates and instructors, and the way he responded. I also discovered the difficulty of tracing the life of a man who was usually invisible to his classmates. Young faced the enormous challenges of West Point with equal portions of determination, courage, and hard work. This earned him his diploma and the respect of some, but not all, of his classmates.

While my first book about Young takes the reader to his commencement at West Point and army commissioning, this volume describes his experiences as an army officer in the three decades after his graduation in 1889. Documenting Young's performance and accomplishments in the army is fairly straightforward, since his individual and unit records are available in the archives. It is much more difficult to uncover details of how he was treated, how he reacted, and what his fellow officers thought of him. As far as we know, Young never wrote a detailed account of his years as a Buffalo Soldier, so we are left with only general comments from his letters and papers. Likewise, few of his fellow officers described how they viewed Young. Indeed, he remained largely invisible to many of his officer colleagues because of his race. Still, using primary and secondary sources, I've gathered sufficient information to provide a detailed examination of Young's military experiences as a black officer in the U.S. Army.

We know enough about Charles Young to confirm that he was an important African American in his time. If not for Charles Young, we may not have had Benjamin Davis Sr. as the first African American general; his son, Benjamin Davis Jr., as the first black four-star general; or Colin Powell, as the first African American chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The experience of this point man for his race in the military makes for a fascinating success story and offers a sobering reminder of the effects of racial intolerance in our history. The first African American to graduate from West Point, Henry O. Flipper, United States Military Academy class of 1877, wrote a compelling autobiography of his cadet life in 1878. John H. Alexander, the second black graduate, died seven years after graduating in 1887 and left a scant record of his passage. Young graduated in 1889, the last African American graduate for nearly fifty years, yet his life remains largely a mystery.

The reader will discern a number of recurring themes or threads throughout this book. During his army career, a period firmly placed in the era of Jim Crow, Young lived socially isolated within an officer corps uneasy with an African American in its ranks. In spite of this, Charles Young used his natural gifts to persevere, succeed, and prosper. The army deliberately shuffled Young between the few assignments “suitable” for a black officer in a white man’s army: the Buffalo Soldier regiments, an African American college, and diplomatic posts in black republics. Fortunately for Young, the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries were among the best in the Regular Army, and the postings outside his regiments challenged and pleased him. Using the experience gained from these varied assignments, Young established himself as an exceptional cavalry officer with a strong record and important mentors.

It is my hope that *Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment* will further the process of rescuing Charles Young from his historical obscurity and restore the prestige and recognition he enjoyed at the time of his death in 1922. He deserves our understanding and merits a place in America’s pantheon of acknowledged military leaders.

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Acknowledgments

I owe the lion's share of gratitude to my wife, Paula, for offering me the time and encouragement to complete *Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment*, my second book on Young. She has been my chief advocate and an avid supporter along the way. As always, I thank my daughter, Kara, and my son, Greg, for inspiring and encouraging me as only children can.

In addition to the National Archives, four organizations or groups provided the majority of the research materials for this book. Floyd Thomas and the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, have been a rich source of original research materials and advice. Floyd Thomas was the first person I contacted in 1996 when I began my research on Young, and I have been back to consult with him many times since. The most important original source documents and photos on Charles Young came from the Coleman Collection. I cannot thank Jill and Malina Coleman enough for giving so freely of their time and hospitality. Suzanne Christoff and her staff generously helped me navigate the West Point Library Special Collections. I am also grateful to Michael Heintz for allowing me access to the papers of his mother, Nancy Gordon Heintz.

I was fortunate to have a group of dedicated readers who worked over my various drafts. I have already mentioned Floyd Thomas, who reviewed all of my drafts and with whom I spent many hours on the phone going over chapters line by line. My

sister, Rolyynn Anderson, a former English teacher, probably spent more time and evaluated more drafts than anyone else and recommended ways to improve my structure and organization. Tom Phillips, coauthor of *The Black Regulars*, offered invaluable insight into the lives of blacks in the military and reviewed the chapters of the first half of my book. Tom Buecker, author and historian at Fort Robinson, gave me a tour of the post and reviewed my chapter on Young's first duty assignment. Brian Linn, author of two books on the Philippine War, took time on short notice to examine my chapter on Young's experiences in that conflict. Ward Eldredge, historian at Sequoia National Park, provided critical information and reviewed the chapter on Young's summer in Sequoia. John Prout, an authority on military intelligence, commented on the chapters concerning Young's military attaché assignments. And finally, Mark Benbow, resident historian at the Woodrow Wilson House, assessed my chapter on Young in Mexico.

Two important works guided my early investigations into the life of Charles Young. Robert E. Greene wrote a master's thesis on Young and later expanded and published the work himself in 1985. Titled *Colonel Charles Young: Soldier and Diplomat*, it remains an essential resource on Young's life. David P. Kilroy published *For Race and Country: The Life and Career of Colonel Charles Young* in 2003. Kilroy provides an excellent overview of Young's life, but does not cover his military career in the detail it deserves.

I would like to thank the following organizations for their support: the Ninth and Tenth (Horse) Cavalry Association, West Point Association of Graduates, Ohio Historical Society, Ripley Museum, Huntington Library, Moreland-Spingarn Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Utah State Historical Society, Wyoming State Archives, and Uintah County Library Regional

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Chronology

- 1864 Born in Mayslick, Mason County, Kentucky
(March 12)
- 1865 Moved to Brown County, Ohio
- 1870 Living in Huntington Township, Ohio
- 1880 Living in Ripley, Ohio
- 1881 Graduated from high school in Ripley, Ohio
- 1881–84 Taught school in Ripley, Ohio
- 1883 Took West Point exam in Hillsboro, Ohio (April)
- 1884 Nominated to West Point (April 29)
- 1884 Accepted nomination to West Point (May 10)
- 1884 Passed medical and entrance exams (June 14)
- 1884 Entered West Point, class of 1888 (June 15)
- 1885 Found deficient in mathematics (June)
- 1885 Readmitted with the class of 1889 (June)
- 1889 Found deficient in military engineering (June)
- 1889 Tutored in engineering (June–August)
- 1889 Graduated from West Point (August 31)
- 1889 Commissioned second lieutenant, Tenth Cavalry
(September 14)
- 1889 Reassigned to Twenty-fifth Infantry (October 4)
- 1889 Reassigned to the Ninth Cavalry (October 31)
- 1889–90 Served at Fort Robinson, Nebraska
- 1890–94 Served at Fort Duchesne, Utah

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- 1894-98 Professor at Wilberforce University, Wilberforce, Ohio
- 1896 Transferred (on paper) to Seventh Cavalry (December 22)
- 1896 Promoted to first lieutenant, Seventh Cavalry (December 22)
- 1897 Transferred to Ninth Cavalry (October 1)
- 1898 Appointed major, Volunteers, Ohio National Guard (May 14)
- 1898-99 Commanded Ninth Battalion, Ohio National Guard
- 1899 Mustered out of Ohio National Guard (January 29)
- 1899-1901 Served at Fort Duchesne, Utah
- 1901 Promoted to captain, Ninth Cavalry (February 2)
- 1901-2 Served in the Philippine Islands
- 1902-3 Served at Presidio, San Francisco, California
- 1903 Superintendent of Sequoia National Park (May-November)
- 1904 Married Ada Mills in Oakland, California (February 18)
- 1904-7 Military attaché in Hispaniola
- 1906 Son, Charles Noel, born in Ohio (December 25)
- 1907-8 Temporary duty in Washington DC
- 1908-9 Served at Camp McGrath, Philippine Islands
- 1909 Daughter, Marie Aurelia, born in Philippines (March 26)
- 1909-11 Served at Fort D. A. Russell, Wyoming
- 1912-15 Military attaché in Monrovia, Liberia
- 1912 Promoted to major, Ninth Cavalry (August 28)
- 1913 Sick leave in the United States (June-August)
- 1915 Reassigned to Tenth Cavalry (October 15)
- 1916 Awarded the Spingarn Medal (February 22)

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- 1916-17 Duty in Mexico with the Punitive Expedition
- 1916 Promoted to lieutenant colonel, Regular Army
(July 1)
- 1916 Temporary command of Tenth Cavalry
(August 1-9)
- 1916 Temporary command of Tenth Cavalry
(September 15-28)
- 1917 Temporary command of Tenth Cavalry
(May 24-June 2)
- 1917 Medically retired and promoted to colonel
(June 22)
- 1918 Recalled to active duty, Ohio National Guard
(November 6)
- 1919 Relieved of duties at Camp Grant, Illinois
(February)
- 1920-22 Military attaché in Monrovia, Liberia
- 1922 Died in Lagos, Nigeria (January 8)
- 1922 Buried at Ikoyi Cemetery, Lagos, Nigeria
(January 9)
- 1923 Buried at Arlington Cemetery, Virginia (June 1)

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1.

Awaiting Orders

I do earnestly desire the transfer to the Ninth Cavalry.

CHARLES YOUNG, 1889

When Charles Young graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1889, he hoped he had ended a difficult chapter in his life. His five-year struggle to earn his coveted diploma and receive a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army was full of challenge and triumph. He repeated his plebe year after failing mathematics and graduated two months after his classmates because he had to make up for a deficiency in engineering. While West Point was a struggle for any young man, Young had to face this ordeal in a racially charged atmosphere where most of his classmates ignored him or refused to have anything to do with him. Yet he persevered and graduated.

Young departed West Point for home leave in Ohio in September 1889, full of excitement, anxiety, and questions. Would the Regular Army be like his experience at West Point? Could he survive a career in the army if the treatment he received was akin to what he had experienced at the academy? At West Point he had overcome the hurdle of prejudice to pass the twin

challenges of discipline and academics. What would it be like to add the ordeals of surviving in a white man's officer corps, leading black soldiers, and staying alive in combat? Young would find answers to some of these questions during his first posting on the frontier, but first he needed orders.

First Assignment

Young's commissioning and assignment as a second lieutenant were not routine, since West Pointers customarily chose their branch and duty posts based on class ranking shortly before graduation. Because Young had graduated months after the rest of his classmates, the army dealt with him as an exceptional case. As the only black graduate of the class of 1889, the army would have dealt with Young as a special situation anyway. The army policy at the time was to assign any black graduate of West Point to one of the four African American regiments in the Regular Army.¹

The U.S. Army commissioned Charles Young as a subaltern, or additional second lieutenant, in the Tenth U.S. Cavalry on September 14, 1889.² Young was the only member of his class of forty-nine cadets to be appointed to one of the two Buffalo Soldier regiments (the Ninth Cavalry being the other regiment).³ Two of his white classmates, Joseph Leitch and Frank Webster, who graduated near the bottom of their class with Young, were assigned to the all-black Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry regiments. In acknowledging his appointment to the adjutant general in Washington DC, Young gave notice that he would be spending home leave with his parents in Zanesville, Ohio. After his leave of absence, Young looked forward to joining his regiment and embarking on a new life in the Regular Army on the western plains.⁴

Other well-known academy graduates had preceded Young to the Buffalo Soldier regiments. John Pershing, a white upper-classman Young had encountered at West Point, later earned the nickname “Black Jack” due to serving with African American troops. He initially selected the Sixth Cavalry after graduating in 1886 because, like Young, he loved horses and was a born cavalryman. He transferred to the Tenth Cavalry in 1892 in order to position himself for a promotion to first lieutenant, a fairly common practice in the Old Army at that time. Later, he served with the Tenth in Cuba during the Spanish-American War.⁵

Henry Flipper, the first black alumnus of the academy, also chose the Tenth Cavalry after he graduated in 1877. Initially stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Flipper found the post “a pleasant one at which to be stationed” and performed his duties admirably. Flipper’s otherwise bright career came to a disastrous end with a court-martial in 1882. When he served as a commissary officer at a new station at Fort Davis, Texas, his commanding officer charged him with embezzling funds. He was cleared of the embezzlement charge but convicted of “conduct unbecoming,” and the court-martial board dismissed Flipper from the army. Young was well aware of this case and presumed that racial prejudice was central to the decision to remove Flipper from the army. The U.S. Army exonerated Flipper of the court-martial charges in 1976 after an exhaustive review of the records, testimony, and proceedings.⁶

John Alexander, the second black graduate of West Point, joined the Ninth Cavalry upon graduation in 1887. Alexander and Young shared a room for three years at West Point and their paths were fated to cross again. Initially posted to Fort Robinson, Nebraska, Alexander later served at Fort Duchesne, Utah, both posts occupied by the Ninth Cavalry. He won high praise from his commanders and quickly mastered the challenging duties

of a second lieutenant on the frontier. Alexander would serve as a key mentor to Young within a year of his graduation.⁷

Amended Orders

The War Department informed Young while he was on leave in Ohio that he had been reassigned to the black Twenty-fifth Infantry based on a vacancy in that regiment. Young protested the change in assignments from the Tenth Cavalry in an October 1889 letter to the adjutant general, stating that he had already made arrangements to purchase a cavalry uniform and that any change would be expensive. He also added that he was fond of horses and confident that he would be a successful cavalry officer. The adjutant general responded that consideration would be given to his request and promised that if a vacancy opened for a second lieutenant in the Ninth or Tenth Cavalry, his application for transfer would be reviewed.⁸

Young was pleased when he received a telegram from Washington on October 29, 1889, asking if he would accept a transfer to the Ninth Cavalry. A hand-written note in the adjutant general's files revealed the reason for this vacancy: "Lt. Young, the colored graduate, can now be re-transferred to the Cavalry—the death of Lt. Humphrey making a vacancy in the 9th Regt." Lieutenant Young wasted no time in cabling his acceptance to the War Department the following day, writing, "I do earnestly desire the transfer to the Ninth Cavalry." On October 31, 1889, the War Department issued special orders transferring Young from the Twenty-fifth Infantry to the Ninth Cavalry. Young had his cavalry assignment, replete with a storm of controversy.⁹

Maj. Guy V. Henry, acting commanding officer of the Ninth Cavalry, protested the War Department's transfer of Young to the regiment, since 2nd Lt. John Alexander was already assigned

to the unit.¹⁰ Henry feared that the presence of another black line officer in the Ninth would “be detrimental to the good of the regiment . . . by causing officers not to apply for assignment to the regiment.” In his letter, Henry explained: “If this transfer was made in order that Lt. Alexander might have company it has failed, for in a letter from an officer I am informed that Lieutenant Alexander objects to Lt. Young’s assignment, as keeping them together gives no benefit to their efforts to advance their race.”¹¹

Based on their history together, John Alexander would have been the last person to object to Young’s assignment with the regiment. Alexander had shared Young’s challenges at West Point as his roommate. They had grown close in their three years together, and Alexander had done much to enable Young, three years his junior at the academy, to survive the trials of isolation, discipline, and academics. They would have looked forward to a similar supportive relationship in the Ninth Cavalry, as was eventually the case. The second-hand information Major Henry received from a fellow white officer regarding Alexander’s wishes must have been misunderstood at best.

Major Henry, a grizzled veteran of many campaigns, was probably acting in what he thought was the best interests of the regiment. Henry, made a brevet brigadier general for gallant and meritorious service during the Civil War, worked for years to raise the reputation of the Ninth Cavalry as an elite regiment that attracted the best and brightest officers. Apparently, he bore Young no ill will, but reflected the attitude of many in the officer corps. To him this request was not about race but about the regiment’s reputation. He feared that the presence in the regiment of the only two black line officers in the Regular Army might cause young officers to avoid service with the Ninth Cavalry.¹²

Department Policy

The response to Major Henry's protest from the War Department revealed the real reason for the rapid change in assignments for Young. The army showed little concern for the reputation of the regiment but great fear that a black officer might end up commanding white troops. The adjutant general of the U.S. Army summarized the process as follows:

It will be remembered that Lt. Young was first assigned as an *additional* in the 10th Cavalry; that when in that position he was liable (as the senior Cavalry additional) to have a vacancy fall to him in a *white* regiment at any moment; that to avoid this he was appointed to a vacancy in the 25th Infantry (the Secty, having decided he should be in a colored regiment) and that, as Young had purchased a *Cavalry* uniform, and wanted cavalry, he was transferred to the first vacancy in a colored Cav regiment, which happened to be *the 9th* and he has *now been confirmed by the Senate, and commissioned in the 9th*. (Emphasis in the original)¹³

Prior to 1886, officer candidates could only pick a branch and regimental assignment in a unit with an actual vacancy for a new second lieutenant. Essentially, an officer had to be promoted, retire, or die in a regiment to create a vacancy. This caused problems for the army and the academy when too few vacancies existed in the field to cover the assignments of all the cadets graduating in a particular year. As a solution, Congress passed a law in May 1886 to allow cadets to join regiments as "supernumerary" or additional second lieutenants until actual positions opened. Young had been assigned as an additional in the Tenth Cavalry, but the death of Lieutenant Humphrey in the

Ninth opened a second lieutenant position in that unit, which the War Department was anxious to have Young fill for fear that he might otherwise be assigned to a white regiment.¹⁴

The direct involvement of the secretary of war in a normally routine assignment of a newly minted lieutenant showed the perceived gravity of the situation. The new secretary of war, Redfield Proctor, was respected for his positive efforts to modernize the Old Army, such as revising the military justice code and instituting a system of efficiency records and promotion examinations for officers. In this case, however, he approved the adjutant general's recommendation to move Young quickly to the Twenty-fifth Infantry and finally to the Ninth to avoid the possibility of Young going to a white cavalry unit to command white enlisted soldiers. In the black regiments, Young would work side by side with white officers, but command black troops. To the War Department, such an arrangement was the lesser of two evils.

Young was off to a confusing and exasperating start as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army. West Point had been a five-year struggle for Young to overcome the difficulties of discipline, academics, and racial prejudice. If he thought life would be easier or less biased in the Regular Army, he was in for a rude awakening. This assignment controversy was a harbinger that Young's life in the U.S. Army would be defined by the same set of rules as at West Point.

Young's first encounter with the bureaucrats at the War Department was one of many in a long and distinguished career. In the future, the department deliberately shuffled Young between the few assignments "suitable" for a black officer in a white man's army. These included the Buffalo Soldier regiments, an African American college, and diplomatic posts in

black republics. It was a measure of Young's abilities that he was able to thrive and succeed in spite of such obstacles. That he stood up to the War Department to obtain a cavalry commission after graduation from West Point was a first indication of his resolve.

The white officer corps in the U.S. Army feared being led by a black man in 1889. The War Department hoped that by sending Second Lieutenant Young west to serve with a black cavalry unit, this issue would go away. Little did they know that Charles Young would earn his spurs with the Ninth Cavalry, causing them to fear him all the more.