

African-American soldiers made significant contributions in a brief time to the efforts of frontier soldiers post-Civil War. The late 19th century frontier experience for these soldiers came immediately after freedom from slavery, adding an even more dramatic change to their life experiences.

Today, *The Sentinel* stands guard over the ghostly adobe ruins that remain of Fort Selden. *The Sentinel* is a bronze sculpture of a frontier "Buffalo Soldier" commissioned by Representative Bill Porter and designed by artist Reynaldo Rivera.

Artist Reynaldo "Sonny" Rivera was born in Mesquite, NM. He has great memories of the Mesilla Valley stating:

My family would go to Radium Springs for warm baths and also stop for apples at Bill and Carol Porter's orchard... We'd stop at Fort Selden and eat our lunch...

Joseph Louis Nobles, an actor, artist, law firm receptionist, and fashion model was used as the model for *The Sentinel*. Nobles died from complications of meningitis just weeks before the statue was unveiled. According to Rivera, Nobles was a talkative and attractive man, always smiling.

Rivera cast the sculpture in Juarez and spent a full year completing it. He helped transport and install *The Sentinel* and built its pedestal. The unveiling took place in 1994 and Nobles' mother and sister attended the statue's dedication ceremony. *The Sentinel* is a tribute to the dedication and sacrifice of African-American soldiers of the western frontier during the late 19th century.

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FORT SELDEN

HISTORIC SITE

BUFFALO SOLDIERS



Some 180,000 African Americans served with the Union Army during the Civil War. However, these were all volunteer units as not one company in the Regular Army was open to African-American recruits. Following the end of the Civil War, a Congressional restructuring of the standing U.S. Army created two regiments of African-American cavalry and four regiments of African-American infantry, all with white officers. The Army was finally required to include African Americans. The first of these regiments began arriving in New Mexico in 1866.

At Fort Selden, this included the 9th Cavalry, 125th Volunteer Infantry, 38th Infantry, and 24th Infantry. The soldiers of Fort Selden, whether African American

or Anglo, had a variety of assigned duties such as providing defense against hostile Apaches, mail escort, communication, traveler and wagon train escort, and community protection and assistance.

Between 1866 and 1891, 400 African American soldiers served at Fort Selden and another 600 passed en route to new stations or to prepare for scouting missions.

Native Americans on the western frontier nicknamed these troop units “Buffalo Soldiers” because of the soldiers’ short hair and courage, which they found similar to the much admired buffalo. The term was first applied to soldiers of the 10th Cavalry by the Kiowa Indians in Western Kansas.

The first regiment of Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Selden was the 125th Infantry. Within days of their arrival, a group of these troopers were sent on an 18-hour pursuit of Apaches who had captured a hay team of eight oxen and killed the teamster. The oxen were recovered but the Apache escaped into the San Andres Mountains. The 125th Infantry was replaced by the 38th Infantry in 1867.

Sometimes Fort Selden served as a focal point for larger operations against Native Americans. In March 1869 a small contingent of Mescalero Apaches attacked Fort Selden’s wood train twice. In April, six companies of the 38th Infantry, including most of Company K, posted to Fort Selden, launched an expedition against the Mescalero in the Guadalupe Mountains in Texas. The mission was unsuccessful.

In 1869 when the 38th Infantry transferred out of Fort Selden, and New Mexico, the Territory would be without any units of Buffalo soldiers for the next six years.

The 9th Cavalry arrived at Fort Selden in 1876. Most of the men of the 9th Cavalry were former slaves. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the 9th Cavalry took part in many of the area’s most well-known battles and skirmishes including the Colfax County War in 1876 and the Lincoln County War in 1878. In 1879 and 1880 the 9th Cavalry played a major role in the pursuit of Apache leader Victorio. Eight men from the 9th Cavalry were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery in this campaign.

In February 1877, the U.S. Army ordered most of Fort Selden’s forces to other posts, including the Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th Cavalry, which transferred to Fort Stanton. Fort Selden was abandoned as a military post and its supplies were forwarded to Fort Bayard and Fort Stanton by early April.

Fort Selden was reactivated in 1880 when the railroad moved into the region and the 9th Cavalry returned. However, during the 9th Cavalry’s second posting to Fort Selden, none of the soldiers spent time at the fort. These men were sent to the Deming Station to protect the Southern Pacific Railroad construction crew and placed on detached service in Colorado’s Ute country.

In May 1888 the last full company of Anglo soldiers left Fort Selden and in August, 10 men from the 24th Infantry at Fort Bayard were sent to Fort Selden. From April 1888 to January 1891, a skeleton force of various troop detachments from the 24th Infantry remained at Fort Selden.

Life was difficult for the segregated Buffalo Soldier units who were the victims of racial tensions throughout New Mexico. In 1876, the *Mesilla News* reported three enlisted men of the 9th Cavalry were killed in a

shootout in a saloon in La Mesilla, south of Fort Selden.

After the telegraph reached Fort Selden a telegraph operator returned to the Fort drunk and refused to respond to the Buffalo Soldier on guard, asserting “his superiority as a white man.”

The letters of Lieutenant James H. Storey, a white officer who served at Fort Selden, provide glimpses of these racial attitudes. After two Anglo soldiers shot each other over one man’s affair with the other’s wife, Storey reported to his girlfriend, “I could not see the poor fellow die without a white face around him.”

In an incident that occurred at nearby Fort Cummings, 2nd Lieutenant Henry F. Leggett accused his African-American domestic servant of theft. Although no money was found on her person, she was ordered off the post and the Buffalo Soldiers of Company A mutinied. The accused men were taken to Fort Selden for a general court-martial. Corporal Robert Davis was tried for mutiny. His trial was based primarily on the testimony of Anglo officers. He was sentenced to a reduction in ranks, forfeiture of all pay and allowances, dishonorable discharge, and ten years confinement in a penitentiary in Missouri.

Rates of punishment for drunkenness and various instances of disorderly conduct at Fort Selden are similar between African-American and Anglo soldiers. During the fort’s final years, the skeleton crew of the 24th Infantry was frequently in trouble. Two were charged with theft, and the men regularly gambled. One killed a private after losing most of his money to him.