

January 2019

## Racial Ambiguity in the Borderlands: New Mexico's African American Soldiers, 1860-1922

Jacquelyne Anton  
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Anton, Jacquelyne (2019) "Racial Ambiguity in the Borderlands: New Mexico's African American Soldiers, 1860-1922," *History in the Making*: Vol. 12 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol12/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

## **Racial Ambiguity in the Borderlands: New Mexico's African American Soldiers, 1860-1922**

By Jacquelyne Anton

*Abstract: In the nineteenth century United States, African Americans faced severe forms of racism that manifested through institutions of slavery, segregation and discrimination. Antebellum and Civil War historians focus on African American resistance to white supremacy and oppression through various forms of resistance, some of which include violent revolts and the search for freedom in the North. With that being said, however, many historians seem to ignore the role of the US-Mexico borderlands in African Americans' contestation of the racist laws of the American North and South. This article examines African Americans' experiences in the US-Mexico borderlands of New Mexico during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to illustrate how they used the borderlands as a tactic to escape and negotiate the racism, segregation, and discrimination they encountered in the North and South. The racial ambiguity of the US-Mexico borderlands created a space where African Americans, through their military service, negotiated the white supremacy in the US.*

The racial ambiguity in the US-Mexico borderlands is not a contemporary creation. Historically, the US-Mexico borderlands have been characterized by racial ambiguity, however, during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the borderlands underwent dynamic political, social and economic transformations that affected the treatment of African Americans. The US-Mexico borderlands are a transregional territory where “the Mexican North

and the American South collided, conflicted, fused, confused and...offered a glimpse of new alternatives.”<sup>1</sup> In the nineteenth century, white American male notions of Manifest Destiny encouraged the spread of the American polity into Mexican territories and what would become the American West; this engendered the proliferation of white supremacy into borderland regions. Furthermore, the modernization endeavors undertaken by Porfirio Diaz and his *Científicos* brought racial ideologies—constructed by the Mexican elite—into the borderland region. Thus, the transnationalism of the US-Mexico borderlands transformed the region into a place where Mexican and American notions of race met and proliferated the fluidity of racial ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

The ideologies of Mexican President Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911), dominated the political, social, economic, and racial climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Mexico. In his attempts to bring Mexico into the world of modernity, Diaz formed a brain trust through the creation of the *Científicos*, who advised Diaz on governmental and political decisions. The *Científicos* were a group of intellectuals that advocated for the application of scientific methods to governmental problems. Their desire to modernize Mexico, through the increased employment of skilled workers, was rooted in racialized ideas in which they linked Mexico’s progress to notions of “whiteness.” Diaz and his *Científicos* believed that the addition of skilled workers would enable Mexico to undergo modernizing efforts through the creation of railroads, public transportation, and other industrial efforts that would increase Mexico’s economic standing. The *Científicos*—and by proxy Diaz—sought to improve the racial stock of Mexico through the addition of Europeans because they appraised them as a superior race and as skilled workers due to

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jacoby, “Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895,” in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, 209-240 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 231.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

their links to the American work ethic.<sup>3</sup> The *Cientificos* soon realized that Europeans preferred to settle in the American East, thus, they turned their modernizing sights on African Americans. They saw the lucrative cotton business in America as an example of African Americans' skilled labor. This led to their desire to have African Americans join the Mexican work force because they believed that African Americans were responsible for the economic success of the cotton industry. They viewed African Americans as American, rather than as African or black due to their perceived promise of capital gain for Mexico. The *Cientificos* surmised that African Americans had been assimilated into the American capitalist society and American work ethic through their unwilling participation in slave labor. The creation of racial ambiguity rooted in notions of whiteness and "Americanization," while beneficial for African Americans, allowed for the creation of perceptions of indigenous and Mexican laborers as unskilled workers; this engendered the devaluation of their labor and their subsequent racialization as an inferior group by the *Cientificos*. These notions empowered racial ambiguity to overtake the borderlands and provided a region in which African Americans could escape the racist laws of the Jim Crow South.

Simultaneously, in the American Southwest—formerly the Mexican Northwest—racial ideologies surrounding Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants were constructed.<sup>4</sup> The rapid increase of the Mexican population in the American Southwest led to the creation of negative racial ideologies regarding the Mexican people. Between the years of 1880-1900, the Mexican-born population of the border states increased from 66,312 to 99,969.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> According to Diaz and his *Cientificos*, Europeans had participated in the American work ethic due to their shared racial background.

<sup>4</sup> I do not include Texas in my discussion of the American Southwest. Texas is home to a specific racial hierarchy separate from the rest of the region. Many of the injustices against African Americans that were absent in the American Southwest were, in fact, present in Texas.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Bryan, "Samuel Bryan Analyzes Increases in Mexican Immigration, 1912," *The Survey*, September 1912.

The presence of a large Mexican population, most of whom were considered “white” due to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), necessitated the creation of racial ideologies that allowed for the subjugation of the Mexican population.<sup>6</sup> In order to oppress these “white” Mexicans, Anglo colonialist settlers in the American Southwest reconstructed perceptions of race based on white Anglo-Saxon visions of “optimal land use.”<sup>7</sup> Yvette Saavedra argues that white Anglos used visions of optimal land use—one’s ability to utilize the land to “successfully produce wealth and accumulate goods representative of that wealth”—to dispossess indigenous and Chicano/a peoples of their land and effectively reduce their class status since they deemed people of Mexican descent incapable of optimal land use.<sup>8</sup> White Americans sought to dispossess Mexican and indigenous peoples of their land since they considered those who previously worked the land incapable of taming these “fugitive landscapes.”<sup>9</sup> Anglo settlers deemed the agricultural methods employed by the Spanish imperial and Mexican colonial conquests, along with the indigenous population, as insufficient and incompatible with the concept of optimal land use.<sup>10</sup>

Once the people of Mexican descent lost their standing in the American classist hierarchy, “the decline in their status left them susceptible to the racial prejudice encountered by their lower-

---

<sup>6</sup> Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, U.S. Congress, Senate Executive Documents, 30<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 1847, no. 52. The Treaty allowed any Mexican citizen, on what was now American territory, to become American citizens. Due to the Naturalization Act of 1790, which restricted citizenship to “any alien, being a free white person” who had been in the U.S. for two years, Mexicans who accepted American citizenship were not considered legally white.

<sup>7</sup> Yvette J. Saavedra, *Pasadena Before the Roses: Race, Identity, and Land Use in Southern California, 1771-1890* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 123, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). This term was used in relation to the cycles of conquest—first by the Spanish, then the Mexican government, and ultimately by the US—which never fully succeeded.

<sup>10</sup> Imperial power refers to the Spanish imperial conquest of the Americas and colonial conquest refers to the Mexican colonial conquest of northern Mexico and the contemporary American Southwest.

class counterparts.”<sup>11</sup> In *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution*, Gerald Horne argues that, “the intermediate position of blacks in the [Southwest], between the white majority and the other ethnic minority [Mexicans] who were of even lower status than the blacks, is one of the special characteristics of the [Southwest] black experience”; due to the fact that African Americans occupied a higher position in the racial hierarchy in the American Southwest, they faced fewer obstacles of racial prejudice.<sup>12</sup> The construction of racial ideologies focused on the subjugation and oppression of those of Mexican descent, their active participation in winning the West, the suppression of indigenous resistance, and the policing of the southern border of America, enabled African Americans’ to utilize the racial ambiguity in the American Southwest.

In New Mexico, specifically, the simultaneous creation of two contradictory racial identities—Mexican American and African American—accentuated the complexities and contradictions within white supremacy.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the inability of the Mexican and American governments to enforce their rigid racial systems in their countries’ interior and borderlands permitted African Americans’ manipulation of race in the borderlands. The political reach of the respective nation-states’ governmental policies—in this case, the laws set in place for the enforcement of the rigid racial hierarchy—dwindled in the borderlands. Unlike political policies, ideologies—in this case notions of race—transcended borders and boundaries and infiltrated the borderlands of neighboring nation-states. Concurrently, the similarities between the Mexican and American systems of oppression—the

---

<sup>11</sup> Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes*, 142. “Lower-class counterparts” refers to peoples of Mexican descent that tended to be of a darker complexion and could not claim to be racially or politically “white.”

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Laura E. Gómez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 5. For more information on the creation of these racial ideologies, see *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race*.

devaluation of Mexican and indigenous labor—facilitated African Americans in asserting their claims to whiteness in New Mexico which enabled the destabilization of the foundations of white supremacy. This highlighted the fluidity of race in the borderland regions by emphasizing the flexibility and inclusivity of racial ideologies by providing African Americans a chance to “become white” since “here, ‘white’ usually meant ‘American’ and ‘American’ came to mean ‘white.’”<sup>14</sup> Gerald Horne argues that the borderlands, “contained a diverse ‘racial’ and ethnic mixture, far distant from the ‘black-white’ dyad that defined a good deal of the United States” that offered African Americans opportunities for a better life through their military service in New Mexico.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Negotiation of Racism and Discrimination in New Mexico**

In the post-Civil War years, military service provided African Americans a chance of economic stability in a society that did not recognize them as social or political equals. The deep-seated racism in the American South, coupled with America’s desire to “secure the West” engendered the movement of black regiments to the American West and Southwest. The absence of intolerant notions of race in the American Southwest provided African American soldiers a chance for improved economic, political, and social circumstances. Ultimately, the intensity of white supremacy in the American North and South coupled with the need for troops in the West, assisted their relocation to the borderlands where they worked as the defenders of Manifest Destiny and redefined whiteness.

During the years following the end of the Civil War, the army regiments stationed in New Mexico consisted of multiple companies of black soldiers, which included: The Ninth Cavalry Regiments, Twenty-fourth Infantry, Fifty-seventh Infantry, One Hundred Twenty-fifth Infantry, and the Thirty-eighth Infantry

---

<sup>14</sup> Horne, *Black and Brown*, 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

Regiments.<sup>16</sup> These regiments came to be known as the Buffalo Soldiers due to the likeness of their hair to the hair of a buffalo; while problematic, the term “Buffalo Soldier” is speculated to have originated from indigenous groups’ first encounters with black men.<sup>17</sup> In the post-Civil War years, black soldiers constituted approximately one-tenth of the army’s effective strength; there were roughly 3,600 black soldiers in the New Mexico Territory between 1866 and 1900.<sup>18</sup> In late 1917, five years after New Mexico’s annexation into the US as the 47<sup>th</sup> state, nearly 1,170 black soldiers were stationed at Camp Furlong in New Mexico. In 1920, there were 3,599 black soldiers and one black officer in Columbus, New Mexico alone.<sup>19</sup> These regiments were stationed in New Mexico in order to fight off the raids of the indigenous tribes in the region and “protect” the white settlers from these perceived threats. Their agency in the enforcement of white supremacy throughout the Southwest derived from their active participation in the removal of indigenous people in the borderlands. This simultaneously enabled the African American soldiers to capitalize on notions of whiteness through the subjugation of other “inferior” non-white groups. In *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race*, Laura Gomez states that in order for non-white groups to solidify their classification as white, they had to “act like whites, especially with respect to [other] non-white groups.”<sup>20</sup> This destabilized the racial hierarchy and allowed non-white groups—in this case African

---

<sup>16</sup> Monroe Billington, *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900* (Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Due to the negative racial connotations of the term “Buffalo Soldier,” I will refrain from using the term and will refer to these soldiers as African American soldiers.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Hardwick Hall, “African Americans with Confederate Troops in West Texas and New Mexico,” in *African American History in New Mexico: Portraits from Five Hundred Years*, ed. by Bruce A. Glasrud, 86-100 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>20</sup> Gomez, *Manifest Destinies*, 115.

Americans—to negotiate and transform their status within that hierarchy.<sup>21</sup>

As a means to defend white settlers from the raids of indigenous tribes, African American soldiers utilized and exploited the subjugation of indigenous groups to further their claims to whiteness. Despite the fact that many indigenous tribes resided in the contemporary American Midwest, African American soldiers stationed in the American Southwest were dispatched to combat the raids.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the American Southwest experienced raids throughout the nineteenth century. In the summer of 1869, the Ninth Cavalry embarked on a 42 day, 600 mile pursuit of the Kiowa and Comanche who had attacked ranches across Texas and New Mexico.<sup>23</sup> The expedition resulted in the hindrance of further raids; however, they were unsuccessful in their ventures to eliminate the threat of raids completely. In 1875, Lieutenant Colonel William Shafter, a white commander of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, led the Twenty-fourth Infantry, Twenty-fifth Infantry, and 220 officers from the Tenth Cavalry on a six-month mission across the more than 2,500 miles between Texas and New Mexico in order to destroy the Comanchero, Apache, and Comanche camps in the region.<sup>24</sup> The *Las Vegas Gazette*, a New Mexico newspaper, published an article in 1877 that detailed the ventures of the Ninth Cavalry in their suppression of Apache raids on the Hot Springs reservation. The article looked favorably upon the Ninth Cavalry and believed “equal success will attend them” in their future endeavors to fight the raids.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The states in the American Midwest were known as “Indian Territory.” These states include Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming.

<sup>23</sup> Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 170.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>25</sup> *Las Vegas Gazette*, May 12, 1877.

In 1885, the citizens of New Mexico took to their local newspaper to petition for the removal of Indian reservations in their territory:

The Chiricahua and Water Spring Apache Indians have once again broke off of their reservations and are again upon the annual raid through the territories of New Mexico and Arizona, carrying death and destruction in their paths, paralyzing the industries of the country, trading the development of its resources...Therefore, the people of New Mexico in mass petition the government of the United States to abolish those reservations so conveniently situated for the purpose of murder, robbery, and rapine, and remove the occupants thereof to Indian Territory or some other safe place which the government may deem proper.<sup>26</sup>

It is unclear whether the people of New Mexico were successful in their petition. Nevertheless, the newspaper article represented the contempt people of the American Southwest held for indigenous groups. The white settlers fostered detestation for the indigenous groups because of their incessant raids and incapability of optimal land use. This hailed the African American soldiers as the protectors of the American Southwest. While the soldiers faced criticisms discussed later, they also secured a position of relative standing in the racial hierarchy of New Mexico.

African American soldiers in the borderlands negotiated the rigid structure of the racial hierarchy—rooted in concepts of white supremacy—through their military service and interactions with the civilian population in New Mexico. Occasionally, newspapers in New Mexico voiced their support for black soldiers. In 1877, after New Mexico's African American soldiers spent five weeks fending off Indian raids, a local newspaper editor from Mesilla,

---

<sup>26</sup> James K. Metcalf, *Sierra County Advocate*, June 27, 1885.

New Mexico praised the soldiers for having earned “an enviable reputation wherever stationed” because they were under “perfect discipline” and always “quiet, sober, polite, and unobtrusive.”<sup>27</sup> This article emphasized New Mexico’s acceptance of African American soldiers, and countered Southern perceptions of African American soldiers which posited that they were unruly and incapable of the discipline necessary of a soldier. After an intense battle between the US army and Victorio, chief of an Apache band, Major Albert Morrow praised his men whom “all behaved gallantly through the entire campaign.”<sup>28</sup> He singled out five black soldiers in particular: Sergeants Thomas Fredericks and David Badie, Corporal Charles Parker, and Privates Isaac Holbrook and William Jones.<sup>29</sup>

In 1881, shortly after their departure from Fort Selden in New Mexico, a Las Cruces newspaper published an article that expressed their disappointment at the withdrawal of the African American troops. The newspaper stated that, “this part of the country has lost rather than gained by the change of troops.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in 1884, railroad workers went on strike which prompted the US Army to send black soldiers to Raton, New Mexico to work on the railroads alongside the white and Mexican railroad workers who did not participate in the strike. Bruce Glasrud argues that while people along the northern track in New Mexico—mostly Mexican and white Anglo men—regarded the deployment of African Americans as an insult, they “addressed no adverse remarks to the soldiers themselves.”<sup>31</sup> The absence of outright protest to the employment of African American troops demonstrated that while racism still existed in the Southwest, it

---

<sup>27</sup> “Post Returns, Fort Bayard.” *Mesilla Independent*, August 25, 1877.

<sup>28</sup> Billington, *Buffalo Soldiers*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Rio Grande Republican*, October 19, 1881.

<sup>31</sup> Monroe Billington, “Civilians and Black Soldiers in New Mexico Territory, 1866-1900: A Cross-Cultural Experience,” in *African American History in New Mexico: Portraits from Five Hundred Years*, ed. by Bruce Glasrud, 101-110 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 103.

was not volatile; white men could work alongside African American men without conflict. Once the situation in northern New Mexico was contained and the soldiers were ordered back to their post, the city mayor, the chief of police, and other prominent officials and citizens sent letters to Fort Bayard commenting on the “exceptional and highly commendable conduct of the black enlisted men.”<sup>32</sup>

After the Civil War, many discharged African American soldiers were denied their pensions; either a portion of the money was withheld, or they were denied their money entirely. In 1891, the *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican* newspaper published an article that detailed the efforts of the Grand Army on behalf of discharged African American soldiers who were denied their pensions.<sup>33</sup> The article states:

The Grand Army is evidently not going to permit the color line to interfere with the flourishing condition of that popular and worthy organization. The honorably discharged colored soldier is entitled to quite as much consideration as his brave white comrade. The recent national encampment did well in settling down that southern proposition to create a new department for ex-soldiers of the colored race.<sup>34</sup>

Within the discussion of the treatment of African American soldiers, the southern states advocated for the segregation and discrimination of said soldiers, however, those in New Mexico

---

<sup>32</sup> Zenas R. Bliss to Adjutant General, “Letters Sent by Fort Bayard,” September 6, 1894. In *Department of Colorado*. See also, *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>33</sup> The Grand Army was a fraternal organization composed of veterans of the Union Army, Union Navy, Marines, and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service who served in the American Civil War. They had a department stationed in New Mexico that attempted to secure pensions on behalf of discharged African American soldiers who were denied their pensions.

<sup>34</sup> *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, August 12, 1891.

avored the soldiers and advocated for their equality in treatment and payment. The soldiers' protection of the settlers and the region's racial ambiguity that contested the traditional concepts of white supremacy facilitated the New Mexican settler's supportive attitudes towards African Americans.

In 1894, Colonel Zenas R. Bliss—a white commander of the Twenty-fourth Infantry—commented on the exceptional conduct of his men: “I take pleasure in testifying to the excellence and satisfactory conduct and performance of duty by both officers and enlisted men of my command.”<sup>35</sup> In New Mexico, both the community and the superior officer commended African American soldiers for their hard work. During a time when the ideologies of white supremacy deeply entrenched much of the American continent, the lack of objection against the presence and enlistment of black soldiers supports the argument of a loose racial hierarchy in the borderland of New Mexico and its lack of racial prejudice toward African Americans. Throughout the late nineteenth century, eighteen African American soldiers received Congressional Medals of Honor—eleven of whom were from the Ninth Cavalry and eight of whom performed their “deeds of valor” in New Mexico—for their feats of heroism during the Indian Wars, in which they survived some of the most grueling ordeals in the history of these wars.<sup>36</sup> In comparison to the treatment of African American soldiers in the South, the treatment of African American soldiers in the Southwest was monumentally different. African American soldiers in the South faced blatant forms of racism and discrimination whereas African American soldiers in the Southwest were treated fairly well. In the late nineteenth century in the southern and northern states, African American soldiers encountered severe manifestations of racism within the army and from the civilians of nearby regions. White officers commanded the majority of all southern black troops and expressed intense distaste towards their assigned posts.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Bliss, “Letters.”

<sup>36</sup> Billington, *Buffalo Soldiers*, 108.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

*The Bedford Gazette*, a Pennsylvania newspaper, published an article in 1867 titled “A Talk with a Soldier” in which an unnamed man has a conversation with an unnamed discharged soldier. When they broached the topic of the participation of African American troops in the Civil War, the men stated:

“Did you go to war to free the negroes?”

“No, sir – we went to fight for our flag.”

“Could you have conquered without the aid of negro troops?”

“Do you mean to ask me if white men of the North are inferior to the black men of the South? Do you mean to insult me – to insult the army?”<sup>38</sup>

The article goes on to state:

“Which did the most service in the army, the niggers or the mules?”

“A mule is worth a dozen niggers, and is good for something now when the war is over, and a nigger is not. The mule can pay his way, the nigger can’t.”<sup>39</sup>

While Pennsylvania was a part of the Union and fought against the Confederates in the Civil War, those in the North were not ready to accept African American equality. Additionally, those in the North still held contempt for African Americans; they dehumanized and viewed them as a race lower than animals. In the North, African American soldiers confronted harsher and more intense racism and discrimination than those stationed in the Southwest.

Furthermore, in 1876, a South Carolinian newspaper published a detailed testimony of General Ord, a white commanding officer of an African American regiment, in the

---

<sup>38</sup> “A Talk with a Soldier,” *The Bedford Gazette*, April 26, 1867.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

*Yorkville Enquirer*, “The testimony of Gen. Ord...as to the character of the colored troops, is understood to express the opinion of army officers almost without exception.”<sup>40</sup> It continues to contend that, “Gen. Ord stated that the negro troops under his command cannot be depended upon, that their officers are unable to control them, and that white officers dare not leave their wives alone for fear of insult...Nothing could be more acceptable to the officers of the army than to have the colored troops disbanded.”<sup>41</sup> This newspaper article exemplifies the racist sentiments that circulated around the South during the late nineteenth century: African Americans were unfit to be troops and threatened the safety of white women. Focusing on their role as soldiers, the newspaper article emphasizes the belief that African Americans were unruly and could not be taught discipline. Sentiments such as these permeated newspapers in the North and South, however, were less frequent in the American Southwest.

While stationed at Fort Union, New Mexico, the Ninth Cavalry Regiment’s musical band, invited by Santa Fe’s music committee, performed at the city’s 1876 Fourth of July celebration. The band accepted the invitation and, after performing, impressed the residents of Santa Fe. The residents requested the relocation of the band to nearby Fort Marcy in order for them to be more readily available.<sup>42</sup> While the army did not grant the request, the city’s outright appreciation for the Ninth Cavalry Regiment band reflected the positive relationships between the African American bandsmen and Santa Fe residents. Prior to their performance in Santa Fe, the Ninth Cavalry’s band performed in Las Vegas, New Mexico. The *Las Vegas Gazette* published an article that praised the Ninth Cavalry’s performance: “The band of the Ninth Cavalry (Colored) favored the citizens of Las Vegas with excellent music last Wednesday evening. They were en route from Fort Union to Santa Fe, to participate in the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration in the latter

---

<sup>40</sup> *Yorkville Enquirer*, March 2, 1876.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Dale Frederick Giese, *Soldiers at Play: A History of Social Life at Fort Union, New Mexico, 1851–1891* (University of New Mexico, 1969), 38.

city. They are provided with number one instruments and are well trained musicians.”<sup>43</sup> Further indications of the positive race relations in New Mexico are represented by the Ninth Cavalry Regiment bands’ performance for President Rutherford B. Hayes during the 1880 presidential reception party as a part of his Great Western Tour. After their participation in the welcoming ceremonies and the reception party itself, the *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican* newspaper promulgated that the band rendered “beautiful and appropriate selections with taste.”<sup>44</sup>

The Twenty-fourth Infantry’s musical band further contributed to the contestation of the vestiges of white supremacy in New Mexico. Although stationed in Columbus, New Mexico from 1916-1922, the band frequently traveled to perform at different events. Glasrud contends that their performances at integrated events “helped foster harmonious race relations and the spirit of community while providing blacks with a sense of pride and vibrant social life.”<sup>45</sup> In 1889, a citizen in Silver City, New Mexico expressed his discontent of the employment of the Twenty-fourth Infantry band in political events since he believed that it competed with local bands, however, other residents ignored his complaints and continued to invite the band to perform.<sup>46</sup> In a newspaper advertisement, the editor described the Twenty-fourth Infantry band as “one of the largest and best in service. The musicians are all colored.”<sup>47</sup> It can be suggested that the editor simply praised the bandsmen to encourage local resident’s attendance, however, it nonetheless reflected the absence of uncompromising notions of white supremacy within New Mexico. In April 1891, the band marched to and from Deming, New Mexico and performed for President Benjamin Harrison who

---

<sup>43</sup> *Las Vegas Gazette*, July 1876.

<sup>44</sup> *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican*, November 1, 1880.

<sup>45</sup> Billington, “Civilians and Black Soldiers,” 102.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. See also, “Complaint of James A. Smith.” *Z. R. Bliss*. January 23, 1889.

<sup>47</sup> Bliss, “Letters.”

toured the area during his presidential campaign.<sup>48</sup> While there are no recorded responses by the president about the band's performance, the performance of the band—comprised of African American bandsmen—for the President of the United States is emblematic of the tolerant racial climate of the Southwest.

In June of 1917, the Twenty-fourth Infantry band performed at a dance hosted by the Red Cross to help raise funds to support the war effort for World War I. An article from a local newspaper, the *Columbus Courier*, stated that: “[t]his was the first time this band had been heard for a local affair and the music made by our colored boys was highly enjoyed by all.”<sup>49</sup> While negative racial ideologies of African Americans pervaded the general public's perceptions of their abilities, the slight praise given to the Twenty-fourth Infantry band demonstrated the consequences of the region's racial ambiguity. The Columbus Theater Orchestra formed in 1920 and consisted of African American servicemen from the Twenty-fourth Infantry Band, as well as members of the Columbus community. This indicates the exceptional racial tolerance of New Mexico; the citizens of New Mexico were willing and unphased by the racial integration of their community band. On September 17, 1920, the Columbus Theater Orchestra played at the rally for the Luna County Democratic Party in New Mexico. While information is unavailable on the Luna County Democratic Party's political stance on issues of race, the performance of the Twenty-fourth Infantry band at such an event symbolizes the loose racial ideologies that surrounded African Americans in the Southwestern borderlands. Regardless of the political stance of the Luna County Democratic political party, the performance of African American bandsmen at an important political event signified, at the very least, the acceptance of racial integration and African Americans, themselves.

In contrast to the welcoming nature of the Luna County Democratic Party, the Democratic parties of the American South

---

<sup>48</sup> Glasrud, *African American History in New Mexico: Portraits from Five Hundred Years*, 157.

<sup>49</sup> *Columbus Courier*, June 22, 1917.

expressed great discontent with the impending equality of African Americans. In 1891, *The Opelousas Courier*, a Louisiana based newspaper, published an article that detailed the laws of segregation passed by Texas and Arkansas which required that there be separate railroad cars for white and black citizens. The newspaper states that, “there seems to be no reason to doubt that all other States of the South will pass a similar law, and that the railroads this side of ‘the line’ will be compelled to provide separate accommodations for the races.”<sup>50</sup> It continues to state that, “the whites are unanimous and recognize the importance, and, indeed, the necessity for the law... The whites are willing to grant the negro all his legal and political rights, but they will not live on terms of equality with him and desire to be thrown with him as little as possible.”<sup>51</sup> Unlike the Luna Democratic Party who willingly invited African Americans to be a part of their campaign and, more importantly, invited them into a “white” space, the Democratic party of the South actively worked to restrict the equality of African Americans across the United States. The southern Democratic Party’s claim to grant African Americans all of their “legal and political rights” was a mere façade, since they actively segregated and discriminated against African Americans.

From 1916 to 1922, the Twenty-fourth Infantry Band performed at numerous events—both segregated and integrated—and symbolized a racial cooperation and understanding unique to New Mexico during a time shrouded in racial bias. Unfortunately, the increased positive diplomatic relations between the US and Mexico led to the withdrawal of multiple armed forces in New Mexico and, consequently, the Twenty-fourth Infantry band.

Despite their discharge from military service, many of the African American soldiers remained in New Mexico; economic advancements offered by agricultural jobs encouraged the soldiers to remain in the region.<sup>52</sup> The relatively lax racial climate advanced their access to jobs and improved their economic

---

<sup>50</sup> *The Opelousas Courier*, March 7, 1891.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Billington, “Civilians and Black Soldiers,” 84.

stability which encouraged their settlement in New Mexico. Moreover, it provided them with job opportunities in agriculture in a region characterized by a multiracial environment. There were 333 “non-white” stock raisers, herders, and drovers recorded in the 1890 New Mexico census. In 1910, there were six African American stock raisers and twenty-one stock herders and drovers recorded in the US Bureau of the Census.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in 1900 there were fourteen African American owned farms in New Mexico and by 1910, there were forty-eight.<sup>54</sup> The sheer number of African American owned farms in New Mexico demonstrated the improved quality of life that the Southwest granted African Americans.

While the number of African American owned farms in New Mexico is noteworthy, it is also important to note that this number could be far greater, however, the dry and arid landscape that characterized the geographic climate of New Mexico did not allow for such expansion, thus there were few farms. Unlike in the North and South, where the racial climate did not allow for many African American owned farms, in the American Southwest, it was not the racial climate that did not allow for an increase in African American owned farms, rather, the geographic climate. As a matter of fact, African American’s negotiations of white supremacy within the region resulted in fewer racial tensions and created a space where the soldiers had an impact on the society of New Mexico through their interactions with the civilian population. The positive opinions towards African Americans fostered by the New Mexico residents permitted the soldiers to negotiate notions of white supremacy and the racial ideologies that supported the discrimination of African Americans throughout the US.

Simultaneously during the early twentieth century, many southern white sharecroppers and landowners took advantage of

---

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *Racial Frontier*, 157. It is important to note that Chinese, Japanese, and Indians were included in these numbers; U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Population of the United States, 1890, Part III” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1897).

<sup>54</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Part III.”

African American agricultural workers. Due to the implementation of the Black Codes in the South, white landowners required African Americans to sign annual labor contracts. If they refused, they were arrested and hired out for work; this modern form of slavery served to reinforce the suppression of African Americans. Moreover, African American agricultural workers gave a portion of their crop to landowners as rent payment. African Americans faced a strict legal system that not only stripped them of most of their fundamental rights, but also restricted the few rights they were given. In addition to threats against their legal equality, African Americans endured threats to their lives. Over four thousand lynchings occurred in the United States from 1882-1968; African Americans accounted for 72.2 percent of the people lynched.<sup>55</sup> Nearly 79 percent of the lynchings happened in the South, however, the North witnessed and actively participated in lynchings as well.<sup>56</sup> The prevalence of lynchings in these areas is emblematic of the strict racial hierarchy in place in regions of the American North and South. While lynchings did occur in New Mexico, they predominantly targeted people of Mexican descent, not African Americans.

In the North, “self-righteous white racism, rapacious economic greed, and [a] deep-seated, irrational fear of blackness” permeated the region.<sup>57</sup> After the demise of chattel slavery, new legal and extralegal barriers to black equality began to take shape in the North through a system of Jim Crow laws.<sup>58</sup> In Philadelphia alone, African Americans were excluded from concert halls, public transportation, schools, churches, orphanages, and other public places.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, white Americans who sought employment, forced out skilled African American workers from their jobs.

---

<sup>55</sup> “History of Lynchings.” *NAACP*, [www.naACP.org/history-of-lynchings/](http://www.naACP.org/history-of-lynchings/).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981), 117.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> “Race-based Legislation in the North.” PBS. Accessed March 24, 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2957.html>.

Vincent Harding, author of *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, argues “white artisans and laborers usually guarded their realms of work against black applicants with a grim fury.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, African Americans often faced mob violence in the Northern states at the hands of both northern and southern white Americans.<sup>61</sup>

In August of 1869, *The Evening Telegraph*, a Pennsylvanian newspaper, reported the lynching of two African American men for “commit[ing] an outrage on a young white woman.”<sup>62</sup> The report details that a mob of white men surrounded a local jail that held the accused men, locked up the jailor, and kidnapped and murdered the two African American men. While I do not wish to discount the legitimacy of the woman’s report, white men often exploited the accusation of rape to validate the lynching of African American men in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. White Americans perpetuated the belief that African American men threatened white women’s purity and, subsequently, the authority of white men.<sup>63</sup> This fear resembled the testimony by General Ord in which he expressed his fear of leaving his wife alone around African American soldiers. Additionally, the mob of white men were neither questioned nor punished for their crimes. Not only were the African American men not granted trial, but the men who murdered them were never brought to justice. The mistreatment and lack of concern for the unlawful murder of the African American men emphasizes the mistreatment of African Americans in the North.

In New York in 1872, Howard, an African American man, was arrested and charged for the murder of a young unnamed

---

<sup>60</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, 118. White Southerners travelled into the Northern states to participate in mob violence against free or escaped African Americans.

<sup>61</sup> “Race-based Legislation in the North.” PBS.

<sup>62</sup> “Particulars of the Lynching of Two Negroes - Horrible Details of the Affair - The Transfer of Bonds,” *The Evening Telegraph*, August 21, 1869.

<sup>63</sup> William Carrigan and Clive Webb, “The Lynching of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848 to 1928,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 411–38.

white girl. Upon his arrest, a mob of white men surrounded the jail and attempted to lynch Howard, however, the Sheriff and military prevented them from doing so. The mob went on a violent rampage and “punish[ed] all of the colored persons they met.”<sup>64</sup> The mob returned to the jail later that night and a fight broke out between the mob and the military which resulted in the death of two members of the mob. The same article published by *The New York Herald* sympathizes with the mob: “This is a sad story altogether – the death of the child and the subsequent killing of her would-be avengers.”<sup>65</sup> These instances of mob violence represented the treatment of African Americans in the North; they were subjected to exclusionary and discriminatory laws and confronted the threat of mob violence daily. The sentiments of white superiority continuously disenfranchised the African American population in the southern and northern states. In contrast, in the American Southwest—and New Mexico specifically—African Americans experienced few barriers to racial equality.

In 1859, New Mexico enacted a Slave Code which restricted slave travel and limited the owners’ right to arm slaves. Ironically, New Mexico intended to use this code to preserve indigenous labor as the major group of enslaved workers rather than to oppress African Americans. Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that the utilization of the Slave Code actively disenfranchised African Americans. Population statistics from New Mexico in 1860 suggest that they were lax in enforcing the Slave Code:

The federal census of 1860 for New Mexico Territory shows fifty-three black inhabitants and eighty-two mulattoes. A contemporary extract from that census numbered ninety persons as “negros,” and...gives a figure of eighty-five blacks in New Mexico Territory in 1860... Slaves in the territory

---

<sup>64</sup> *The New York Herald*, January 3, 1872.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

ranged from less than ten to a high of fifty, with most members of Congress in their speeches estimating the number of slaves in the territory from ten to twenty-five.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, these figures indicate that most black residents in New Mexico were not slaves, rather, they were free people of color. Unlike the Slave Codes of the North and South, which served as a form of systematic slavery, the Slave Code of New Mexico attested their desire to subdue indigenous populations and their relative indifference with the racial status of African Americans. According to Slave Codes in the American North and South, slaves were not allowed to own property of their own, assemble without the presence of a white person, slaves that lived off the plantation were subjected to special curfews, no testimony could be made by a slave against a white person, and it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write.<sup>67</sup> The Northern and Southern Slave Codes worked far more towards the legal enslavement of African Americans than those in New Mexico which were hardly enforced. New Mexico's reluctance to fully enforce the Slave Codes—which only operated for three years—represented the malleable racial hierarchy that African American soldiers experienced in the American Southwest.

The racial diversity comprised of African Americans, Anglo Americans, and Mexicans, coupled with the racial ambiguity of the borderlands, constructed a space where African Americans could escape the racial injustice of the American North and South. While the borderlands provided a significantly better experience for African Americans, they were not exempt from white supremacy. Although the civilian populations of New Mexico largely accepted the presence of African American soldiers, they were not boisterous about their support of the troops.

---

<sup>66</sup> Glasrud, *African American History*, 48. These figures do not include African American soldiers stationed in the region.

<sup>67</sup> "Slave Codes." *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, [www.ushistory.org/us/6f.asp](http://www.ushistory.org/us/6f.asp).

Additionally, African American soldiers stationed in New Mexico experienced the negative consequences of white supremacy.

Even though the African American soldiers fought off Indian raiders and protected the white settlers, they were still widely considered a peacetime army because the United States was not engaged in international or domestic war. Their designation as a peacetime army caused hostility between the population of New Mexico and the African American soldiers. Even when the army successfully prevented an Indian raid or protected the Anglo population, the settlers' notions of race clouded their judgment; the soldiers were penalized for being a peacetime army and for being black. While some newspapers praised the African American soldiers, some also criticized the soldiers for their perceived insufficiency. The newspapers criticized the soldiers for arriving "too late" or not performing effectively enough, even if they operated as well as the predominantly white regiments.<sup>68</sup> In 1870, a local newspaper criticized the Ninth Cavalry of African American soldiers for their poor performance when they squashed an Indian raid:

The experiences through which the people of Southern New Mexico have passed during the past two months are sufficient to convince any sane man that the portion of the United States Army known as the Ninth Cavalry is totally unfit to fight Indians. . . . We simply state the concrete fact that negro companies in Southern New Mexico have been whipped every time they have met Indians, except when the instinct of self-preservation has caused them to run away just in time to keep from being whipped.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup>Glasrud, *African American History*, 78.

<sup>69</sup>"Thirty-Four," (Las Cruces, NM), November 12, 1879. See also, Billington, "Civilians and Black Soldiers," 80.

An unnamed white officer from the Ninth Regiment visited the newspaper editor and reprimanded him for his unfair critique of the Ninth Cavalry's performance, which prompted the editor's admittance that the black soldiers had "done better than we had been led to believe."<sup>70</sup> An article published a few months later from the same newspaper, however, stated that African American men lacked "the ambition necessary to the making of a good soldier" and were unable to "endure the hardships of mountain warfare."<sup>71</sup> The criticisms given by the newspaper editor reflected the racist notions of the nineteenth century that plagued much of the United States. In 1880, a cavalry detachment encountered a band of Indians who killed two captured privates. The commanding sergeant of the cavalry sent an African American private to the main company with a dispatch about the encounter. During his journey, a white rancher refused to lend the soldier a saddle for his mule. Monroe Billington states that this is an example of the open and latent racism of the late nineteenth century which had "curious ways of expressing itself."<sup>72</sup> While there was a destabilization in the notions of white superiority in New Mexico, the negative consequences of the perceived racial inferiority of non-white groups persisted.<sup>73</sup>

The latter portion of the nineteenth century witnessed the end of the Indian Wars that prompted the removal of the African American soldiers from New Mexico. Twelve of New Mexico's sixteen forts were abandoned between 1868 and 1891. In 1894, Fort Marcy was decommissioned and then in 1896, Fort Stanton was deserted. Throughout the years of 1900-1912, only two forts remained in New Mexico, both under the charge of African American soldiers.<sup>74</sup> The abandonment of these forts indicated an

---

<sup>70</sup> Billington, "Civilians and Black Soldiers," 81.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> For more information on African American soldier's resistance to notions of white superiority, see Monroe Billington, *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900* (Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1991).

<sup>74</sup> Billington, *Buffalo Soldiers*, 180.

end to the era of the black soldiers in New Mexico. While their presence did not radically alter the social and political climate of the region, the presence of black soldiers in New Mexico debased the constructed ideas of race and white supremacy. The racial ambiguity of New Mexico allowed the soldiers to enter this region and escape the violent forms of racism rampant in the North and South. In addition, it fostered African Americans' ability to claim whiteness, and in turn, the subjugation of other non-white groups which allowed them to benefit from the flexibility and inclusivity of racial ideologies of the Southwest that destabilized the very foundations of white supremacy.

## **Bibliography**

### **Secondary Sources**

- Billington, Monroe. *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900*. Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1991.
- Bryan, Samuel. "Samuel Bryan Analyzes Increases in Mexican Immigration, 1912." *The Survey*, September 1912.
- Carrigan, William, and Clive Webb. "The Lynching of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848 to 1928." *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 411–38.
- Giese, Dale Frederick. *Soldiers at Play: A History of Social Life at Fort Union, New Mexico, 1851–1891*. University of New Mexico, 1969.
- Glasrud, Bruce A., ed. *African American History in New Mexico: Portraits from Five Hundred Years*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013.
- Gómez, Laura E. *Manifest Destinies the Making of the Mexican American Race*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.
- Harding, Vincent. *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981.
- "History of Lynchings." *NAACP*, [www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/](http://www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/).

- Horne, Gerald. *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Jacoby, Karl. "Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895." In *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, ed. by Samuel Truett and Elliot Young, 209-240. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- "Particulars of the Lynching of Two Negroes - Horrible Details of the Affair - The Transfer of Bonds." *The Evening Telegraph*. August 21, 1869.
- "Race-based Legislation in the North." PBS. Accessed March 24, 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2957.html>.
- "Slave Codes." *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, [www.ushistory.org/us/6f.asp](http://www.ushistory.org/us/6f.asp).
- Taylor, Quintard. *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

### **Primary Sources**

- The Bedford Gazette*. "A Talk with a Soldier." April 26, 1867.
- Las Vegas Gazette*. July 1876.
- Las Vegas Gazette*. May 12, 1877.
- "Letters sent by Fort Bayard." Z.R. Bliss to Assistant Adjunct General, November 2, 1890. In *Department of Arizona*.

*Racial Ambiguity in the Borderlands*

“Letters Sent by Fort Bayard.” Zenas R. Bliss to Adjutant General. September 6, 1894. In *Department of Colorado*.

*Mesilla Independent*. “Post Returns, Fort Bayard.” August 25, 1877. Accessed November 28, 2018.

Metcalf, James K. *Sierra County Advocate*. June 27, 1885.

*Rio Grande Republican*. October 19, 1881.

*Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*. August 12, 1891.

*The New York Herald*. January 3, 1872.

*The Opelousas Courier*. March 7, 1891.

*Thirty-Four* (Las Cruces, New Mexico). November 12, 1879.

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, U.S. Congress, Senate Executive Documents, 30<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 1847, no. 52.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. “Population of the United States, 1890, Part III.” Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1897.

*Yorkville Enquirer*. March 2, 1876.

**Author Bio**

Jacqulyne Anton is a student at CSUSB. She will graduate in 2019 with a Bachelor’s degree in History, with a concentration in US History, as well as with a minor in Political Science. Upon graduation, Jacqulyne intends to pursue a Master’s degree in the field of History in order to become a college professor. She plans to continue her education and receive her doctorate in History, as well. Jacqulyne is a feminist activist who is passionate about issues such as gender equality, LGBTQ rights, interpersonal violence, mental health, and racial disparities. During her free time, Jacqulyne can be found traveling around the world with her close friend.



*History in the Making*