Exhibit chronicles history of Buffalo Soldiers

They were the guardians of the far-flung corners of the American West. Wearing the uniform of the U.S. Army, they protected settlers and kept the peace. They were the all-black units known as the "Buffalo Soldiers."

A photo exhibit that also includes uniforms and other memorabilia, titled "The Buffalo Soldiers" is on display now through Oct. 19 at the Lafayette Natural History Museum and Planetarium on Jefferson Street. The black-and-white photos span the period from 1886 to 1912 and show the men astride their mounts, standing in their ranks or just posing in small groups. The exhibit documents a little-known segment of American history.

"The Buffalo Soldiers originally came out of the fact you had black soldiers in the Union Army in the Civil War," said Bradley Pollock, a UL Lafayette instructor specializing in African-American history. "When it was over, there was a controversy in the Army about whether or not they should maintain black regiments. "That goes back and forth until 1869, when there was an Army reorganization act, which made it official. They had four regiments—two in the cavalry, the 9th and 10th Regiments and two in the infantry, the 24th and 25th Regiments."

Those regiments, consisting exclusively of black enlisted men and headed by a white officer, were assigned to guard the prairies in states like Montana and Wyoming and later moved into the southwestern states. They functioned as the only law in some isolated areas, hunting down and arresting criminals. They were also charged with fighting the Indians, who gave them the name by which they came to be known.

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