

NEH Application Cover sheet (FZ-292375)

Public Scholars

PROJECT DIRECTOR

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INSTITUTION

University of Alabama

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APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *Buffalo Soldiers and the Making of United States Empire, 1866-1917*

Grant period: From 2024-01-01 to 2024-12-31

Project field(s): Military History; African American History

Description of project: This book tells the story of the first Black regiments in the history of the US regular army, from their creation in 1866 to American intervention in the First World War. It recovers the critical role of Black regulars (or “buffalo soldiers”) in spreading US empire to the West, Caribbean, and Pacific. Yet as agents of state authority, those men often became targets of white supremacy, and when targeted by racist attacks, they could become exemplars of resistance—most consequentially in 1917 in Houston, Texas. A rebellion of Black soldiers against police brutality there led to the largest murder trial in US history and nineteen executions, hastening relegation of the four Black regiments to menial, peripheral tasks. The rise and fall of the Black regular testifies to a durable contradiction of American life, one of ongoing and urgent concern for the humanities: that a country so dependent upon people of color for national aggrandizement only unevenly offers them justice and safety.

REFERENCE LETTERS

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Buffalo Soldiers and the Making of United States Empire, 1866-1917

Narrative*Significance and Contribution*

What happens when a country asks pariahs to be patriots? For fifty years after the Civil War, soldiers in four Black regiments of the United States Army lived answers to that question. As national leaders hurried to consolidate and expand their reunited empire, Congress approved the largest standing force the U.S. had fielded in its history. This regular army included, for the first time, African American regiments—the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Infantry, and the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry—initially filled with hundreds of formerly enslaved men otherwise maligned in almost every corner of American society. As armed representatives of the state, the “Black regulars” found unusual equality in the army and performed critical roles in service to the country’s military aspirations. They helped secure U.S. empire in the transcontinental West and along the Mexican border, and then in the Caribbean and the Pacific. They became heroes in the Black press, and indeed, to many of their white officers, who endorsed them for combat decorations and sang their praises. For half a century, Black regulars aided in the enlargement of what expansionists by 1900 were calling the Greater United States.

But what might have been a path to equal treatment and patriotic credibility for Black soldiers instead inflamed white supremacist outrage. Over time, the fact of armed African Americans proved intolerable to many white people, from local citizens to military officials to some officers in the regiments. Here was the uniformed Black man’s burden—he was both *agent* and *target* of white supremacy and state authority. And when bigotry and violence became unbearable, some Black regulars took on a third role as *rebels* against Jim Crow. In the worst but not first rupture of these impossible contradictions, men of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry staged a rebellion against police brutality and racism in Houston, Texas, in August 1917.

My new book project, whose full title is *The Bullet or the Torch: Buffalo Soldiers and the Making of United States Empire* (under contract with Liveright/W.W. Norton), tells the epic, globe-spanning story of the rise and fall of the Black regiments. It centers them in a revised history of American empire and military growth during a pivotal half-century for both, following the Black regulars to the West, Cuba, Mexico, Hawai’i, and the Philippines. For five decades, the book argues, these men projected American power, attracted white supremacist violence, and responded with acts of both accommodation and resistance. Their story ends in Houston, where the rebellion of infantrymen led to the largest murder trial in U.S. history and the execution of nineteen Black soldiers. After Houston, the overlapping stories of Black service, the armed forces, and empire would move in new directions altogether. None of the Black regiments were granted the honor of fighting in the First World War. The Houston uprising hastened their relegation, long in the making, to the sidelines of U.S. military and imperial ambition.

Much previous work on the Black regulars—known to some Native peoples as “buffalo soldiers” and immortalized by the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in Houston—downplays the expansive meaning and impact of their service. A good deal of that scholarly literature records the movements of the Black regulars, honors their sacrifices, or sympathizes with their hardships—worthy projects, to be sure, but ones that understate the broader implications of Black service for American imperial and martial development. The most multidimensional account of the Black regiments may well be found in one of reggae star Bob Marley’s biggest hits. The posthumously released “Buffalo Soldier” mourned the Black regular’s place as both victim of diasporic exploitation and tool of empire (he was “stolen from Africa” and enlisted to “win the war for America”). According to Marley’s biographer and confidante, it was the awarding of combat medals to Black regulars for making war against Indigenous peoples that inspired the

song's sadness and outrage. My book likewise aims to put the contradictions of the Black regular back at the heart of national military and imperial history.

Telling that story matters because it exposes truths about the American past that continue to grip and divide the population. Events of the last fifteen years—above all the election of Barack Obama and his white nationalist successor—have generated both a reckoning with, and stubborn denial of, the significance of race to U.S. history. Through popular and academic dialogue, Americans have recovered the role of slavery in the rise of capitalism and universities; of white supremacy in celebrations of the Confederacy; of discrimination in residential and economic patterns; of prejudicial brutality in the policing of streets and neighborhoods; and of racist voter suppression laws in the improbable and antidemocratic electoral success of the political right.

The entangled stories of Black soldiers, militarization, and empire have been curiously underexplored in this environment—though recently the Houston case attracted a bit of attention amid a new memorial in San Antonio and a clemency campaign for the condemned men. Nevertheless, and despite several decades' worth of important work by scholars, the rise and fall of the Black regulars is a story that remains largely unfamiliar to general audiences. Almost all readers will know Marley's song, but few will know who the buffalo soldiers were, much less how, for a time, they helped shape the course and character of American empire. Broadcasting that story reinforces critical, durable dimensions of United States history—its messiness, its dependence on marginalized people, its resistance to straight lines and "progress"—that remain desperately uncomfortable for advocates of sentimental patriotism.

In his 1918 eulogy for the first thirteen Black men hanged after the Houston rebellion, W.E.B. Du Bois despaired that military service would ever square what he had identified fifteen years earlier as the two souls of Black folk. "They have gone to their death," he seethed. "Thirteen young, strong men; soldiers who have fought for a country which never was wholly theirs; men born to suffer ridicule, injustice, and, at last, death itself."¹ Those men had died as they lived, navigating not just the dual lives he'd named in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but triple lives, each following from the other: as agents of authority they became targets of white supremacy, and as targets of white supremacy they became exemplars of defiance.

Rediscovering the triple lives of Black regulars adds a critical chapter to the history of race rebellion in America. Though the book culminates with Houston—it marked an end to a particular period of U.S. military history—Black rebellion didn't start or stop there. Especially since the 1960s, tens of thousands of African Americans have revolted against inequality. Violence is often sparked, like in Houston, by police brutality, and often reflects, like in Houston, deeper oppression. Well into the twenty-first century, unfortunately, that cycle appears no closer to ending than it did on a muggy Texas night in 1917. Americans still inhabit the world the Black regiments made, and not just because those soldiers helped police and extend the empire's borders for half a century. The Black regular's dilemma lives on, persisting in a country that asks people of color to make sacrifices while only unevenly offering them citizenship rights, economic justice, and everyday safety—a country never wholly theirs.

Sources and Organization

This project is in part a work of archival excavation—drawing upon court-martial records, pension applications, and letters to the Black press, to give voice to the Black regulars and the communities from which they came—and in part a work of synthetic reinterpretation. In the latter case it aims to connect, amplify, and reimagine the historiographies of African American military service, United States empire, Black resistance to white supremacy, and dispossession and conquest in the West, Caribbean, and Pacific. Both the primary and

¹ "Thirteen," *The Crisis* 15:3 (January 1918), 114.

secondary sources will help recover the character of the Black regular's triple life as agent of empire, target of white prejudice, and author of resistance. I also will rely on scholarly works to tell those stories from the perspective of Native nations, Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Hawaiians, and Filipinos.

The book tracks the Black regular's rise and fall across fifteen chapters on subjects including a paymaster robbery in Arizona; the career of Black officer Charles Young; invasion of Comanche territory in the West; expeditions in pursuit of Mexican revolutionaries; the mobilization for war against Spain in 1898; the arrival of Black regiments in Cuba and the Philippines; a Black defection to the Filipino insurgency; fights with locals along the southern border, including the 1906 Brownsville episode; and, finally, the deadly rebellion in Houston. It situates those stories within the broader histories of American expansion and military growth from 1866 to 1917, a critical, transformational half-century for both. Buffalo soldiers were central to those transformations until the uprising in Houston accelerated their demotion to the margins of American military affairs.

Competency, Skills, and Access

I have written two books in my field of "war and society": *Love and Death in the Great War* (Oxford University Press, 2018), which won the 2020 President's Book Prize from the Society of Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (SHGAPE), and *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008). I aimed both of those books at broad audiences, but especially *Love and Death in the Great War*, which Oxford priced and marketed accordingly as a crossover title. Many of the reviews praised the book's accessibility, emotional energy, and narrative pulse along with its historiographical interventions, as did the SHGAPE committee's testimonial in the President's Book Prize announcement. Substantively, this new work on the Black regulars will join those first two books as part of my larger exploration of the development of militarism, antimilitarism, militarization, and empire from the 1860s to the present.

Thanks to an internal research grant of \$5,904, I'm currently compiling and analyzing materials from the National Archives and other repositories along with a large volume of secondary scholarship and digitized primary sources that will undergird the book. Much of this work will be finished before the NEH period of performance would begin (see Work Plan).

Final Product and Dissemination

The final product of this research will be the book itself. Though I intended both of my prior books for popular as well as academic audiences, I was determined to place this one with a commercial publisher to reach a much wider reading public. To that end, I secured the services of a literary agent and then a contract with Liveright/W.W. Norton, one of the most prestigious and successful trade presses in the United States. I'll be working with Senior Editor Dan Gerstle, who has a proven record of curating works of history with both wide reach and scholarly quality. Meanwhile I'm writing the book in an accessible, story-driven way, embedding arguments in the narrative of dramatic events and compelling characters rather than in academic discourse.

The manuscript is due to Liveright in December 2024, and I expect the initial run of (b) (4) to appear in 2025. As Dan Gerstle details in his letter of support, (b) (4), (b) (6)

Like other works of history published by commercial presses, my book will feature full, thorough, and precise documentation of sources in endnotes. Those citations will happen behind the scenes, as it were, for those interested in pursuing them, and won't in any way detract from the book's readability.

Buffalo Soldiers and the Making of United States Empire, 1866-1917

Work Plan

I am currently gathering, reading, and synthesizing secondary works relevant to this book project as well as identifying, compiling, and analyzing archival sources. The latter work is supported by an internal research grant of \$5,904. I have written a prologue and roughly two chapters and shared them with scholars in my field and my editor at Liveright/W.W. Norton.

I am seeking an NEH Public Scholars award to support full-time work on this book project for a duration of twelve months, starting in January 2024. Between now and that time, I expect to have all the research finished and about half of the fifteen chapters drafted—giving me the full calendar year of 2024 to devote to full-time writing ahead of my submission deadline with Liveright/W.W. Norton in December 2024 (I expect the book to appear in 2025). With shorter chapters than in my previous books, I will schedule that year of writing as follows:

January-March 2024: write chapters 8-9

April-June 2024: write chapters 10-11

July-September 2024: write chapters 12-13

October-December 2024: write chapters 14-15 and epilogue

December 2024: submit manuscript to Liveright/W.W. Norton

All writing during the NEH Public Scholars award period of performance will be done in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Buffalo Soldiers and the Making of United States Empire, 1866-1917

Bibliography*Primary Sources*

Black regulars' pension applications in Pension Records of the US Army (Record Group 15), National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).
Court-Martial records in Records of the Judge Advocate General's Office (RG 153), NARA.
Records of the US Army Continental Commands (RG 393), NARA.
Unit histories at US Army Heritage and Education Center; and US Army Center of Mil. History.
Fort Davis Historic Site files, Fort Davis, Texas.

Secondary Sources

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- Wooster, Robert. *The United States Army and the Making of America: From Confederation to Empire, 1775-1903*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021.

ANDREW J. HUEBNER

CURRENT AND PAST POSITIONS:

University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL
Professor, 2019 – present / Assoc. Prof., 2011 – 2019 / Assist. Prof., 2006 –2011.

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Lecturer on History and Literature, 2004 –2006.

Brown University, Providence, RI
Visiting Assistant Professor, 2004 – 2006.

EDUCATION:

Brown University, Providence, RI
Ph.D., History, May 2004 / A.M., History, May 1999. Dissertation: "The Embattled Americans: A Cultural History of Soldiers and Veterans, 1941-1982."

Northwestern University, Evanston, IL
B.A., History, June 1995.

AWARDS AND HONORS:

Organization of American Historians (OAH) Distinguished Lecturer, 2017-present.

Office for Research and Economic Development Award recipient (\$5,904), U. of Alabama, January 2022, for *The Bullet or the Torch: Buffalo Soldiers and the Making of United States Empire*.

President's Book Prize from the Society of Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (SHGAPE) for *Love and Death in the Great War*, 2020 (best book on Gilded Age and Progressive Era).

Research Grants Committee Award recipient, U. of Alabama, May 2008.

History Dept. Nominee for Joukowsky Dissertation Prize, Brown University, May 2004.

Wonderlic Dissertation Fellowship, Brown University, Fall 2003.

Grand Army of the Republic Diss. Fellowship, Brown University, Spring 2003.

PUBLICATIONS:

The Bullet or the Torch: Buffalo Soldiers and the Making of United States Empire
(under contract with Liveright/W. W. Norton).

Love and Death in the Great War (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

The Unfinished Nation (textbook), co-author with Alan Brinkley and John Giggie (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 10th ed., October 2021).

Dixie's Great War, co-ed. with John Giggie (Tuscaloosa: U. of Alabama Press, 2020).

The Cambridge History of War and Society in America, co-editor with Jennifer Keene (under contract with Cambridge University Press).

Race and Gender at War, co-editor with Lesley Gordon (under contract with University of Alabama Press).

"Gee!! I Wish I Were a Man: Gender and the Great War," in Kara Dixon Vuic, ed., *The Routledge History of Gender, War, and the U. S. Military* (Routledge, 2017), 68-86.

"Interchange: World War I" (author and co-organizer with Jennifer Keene), *Journal of American History* 102 (September 2015): 463-99.

"Lost in Space: Technology and Turbulence in Futuristic Cinema of the 1950s," *Film and History* 40.2 (Fall 2010): 6-27.

"The Conditional Optimist: Walt Disney's Postwar Futurism," *The Sixties* 2 (December 2009): 227-44.

"Rethinking American Press Coverage of the Vietnam War, 1965-1968," *Journalism History* 31 (Fall 2005): 150-61.

"Kilroy is Back: Images of American Soldiers in Korea, 1950-1953," *American Studies* 45 (Spring 2004): 103-29.

"Support Unseen: Rhode Island and the Vietnam War, 1965-1973," *Rhode Island History* 60 (Winter 2002): 3-25.

SELECTED INVITED TALKS:

"For Home and Country: An American Great War Love Story" (invited speaker), Institute on World War II and the Human Experience, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, Sept. 12, 2019.

"Love and Death in the Great War" (invited speaker), Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, Nov. 16, 2018.

"Slow Motion Romance: The Transatlantic Love Story of Mae and Eliga Dees" (invited speaker), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Oct. 31, 2018.

"America's Great War Romance: Love and Death, 1917-1919" (invited speaker), Chapman University, Orange, CA, Oct. 18, 2018.

"How to Tell a True War Story: The Romance of Mae and Eliga Dees" (invited speaker), National WWI Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, MO, July 10, 2018.



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September 10, 2022

National Endowment for the Humanities
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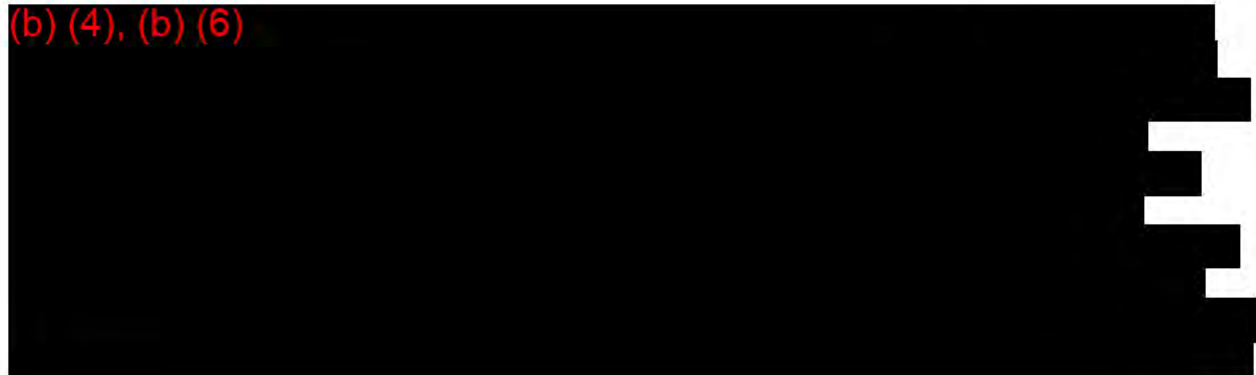
Re: Andrew Huebner's application for the Public Scholars Program

To Whom It May Concern:

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Best regards,

Dan Gerstle
Senior Editor
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22 January 2023

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Beth Bailey".

Beth Bailey
Foundation Distinguished Professor and
Director, Center for Military, War, and Society Studies



Brandeis University

January 23, 2023,

To Whom It May Concern:

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Brandeis University

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chad Williams".

Chad Williams
Samuel J. and Augusta Spector Professor of History and African and African American
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Brandeis University