To Ruby and Billy, for making the sacrifices and enduring the struggles of your time so that I could always pursue my dreams—no matter how foolish or frivolous.
Thank you, Mom and Dad.
THE STORY OF ONE YOUNG man who is not part of Expedition Denali, but could well be someday, shows the importance of bridging the adventure gap. Dwayne Smallwood, a nineteen-year-old student of environmental science at the Community College of Aurora in Colorado, spent the summer after his freshman year in 2011 helping to reestablish a colony of native plants to create a more diverse ecological landscape at Rocky Mountain National Park. Thanks in large part to Denver’s Environmental Learning for Kids program—ELK for short—Smallwood had spent much of his youth discovering the wonders of nature and many summers working in service to public lands, so a job with the National Park Service was a natural fit.

“I’ve got scars from clearing brush and building trails at Rocky Mountain National Park,” he told me with a smile and a hint of pride. The son of a working mother and an estranged father, Smallwood grew up in a poor urban neighborhood, surrounded by steel and
concrete, not mountains and trees. But thanks to ELK, he found a second home in nature. He hiked and went fishing, and he learned how to camp, cook outdoors, and sleep comfortably in a tent—all things most people who live close to the wilds of the Colorado Rockies take for granted. With the help of mentors like ELK cofounder Scott Gilmore, who were conscientious and caring, Smallwood acquired a profound appreciation and love of the wilderness. Now he wants nothing more than to work in a national park year-round.

“Scott basically brought me to the experience and said do whatever you want to do,” Smallwood said. “I can be a scientist, a business person, whatever, he said, just be successful. This is success for me, going down this path.”

Motivated by a strong desire to spend time in nature while working to protect it, he was determined to turn his childhood pastime into a worthwhile career. And judging from his enthusiasm for his work, he was well on his way toward the career in conservation that he wanted. “I want to work for the Colorado Division of Wildlife,” he says “or hopefully for the National Park Service.” Though that may not sound like such an unusual dream to some, it’s not a particularly common aspiration for a young black man.

Many would like to believe that race no longer matters when it comes to the career choices we make, where we live, where we play, or how we relate to the world around us. And for the most part, it doesn’t. Thanks to the hard work, courage, and sacrifices of previous generations, the institutions that once prevented people of color from participating in any activity they desired no longer exist. Institutionalized slavery, of course, is long gone, as is legal segregation and housing and employment discrimination. The racially motivated violence rampant throughout the 1960s—cross burnings and black men hung from trees—is a thing of the past. But what remains are cultural artifacts, social cues that define the unwritten sets of expectations we have for what people of a certain racial or ethnic background are supposed to do as part of “normal behavior.” For many minorities in this country, these expectations do not include embracing the outdoors, whether for sport or for work. Despite advances in so many other aspects of our society, there is a racial divide between those who participate in outdoor activities and those who don’t, a yawning chasm I call “the adventure gap.”

That observation is supported by statistics. The modern outdoor enthusiast is typically white, well educated, financially secure, and socially mobile. A 2010 Outdoor Recreation Participation survey conducted by the Outdoor Foundation reported that of 137.8 million US citizens engaged in outdoor activities, 80 percent were Caucasian, a trend that is also reflected in the demographics of those who chose wilderness protection as a career. The National Park Service reported in 2010 that white men occupied 51 percent of positions at that agency and white women, 29 percent. These numbers are similar to those of other land and resource management agencies, such as the Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service.

These statistics become significant when compared against the demographic profile of the nation as whole. According to Dr. Nina Roberts, an assistant professor and social scientist from San Francisco State University, though African-Americans represent 12.6 percent of the US population, they typically make up a lower proportion of national park visitors (around 5–6 percent, depending on the region). Even with a sharp increase since 2006, “minorities still remain well below the number of visits of their white counterparts in proportion to their population across the United States,” says Roberts.
THE ADVENTURE GAP

The adventure gap is further reinforced by the national media and popular culture, which still tend to portray most mountainers as relatively affluent, socially mobile Caucasians. Popular magazines, films, and commercial advertisements depict mountain climbers as square-jawed white men with blond hair and blue eyes. Obviously a reflection of the Northern European heritage from which contemporary mountain culture is derived, these images in media encourage the stereotype of what a mountaineer looks like. Americans across the racial spectrum view climbing and other outdoor activities as one of the “things white people do.” Year after year, statistics reveal that African-Americans are least likely, of all ethnic groups, to engage in outdoor recreation, to be members of conservation groups or to pursue careers in wildlife management. Few African-Americans can be counted among professional athletes in the sports of rock climbing, mountain biking, kayaking, or downhill skiing. And in the multibillion-dollar outdoor industry, the number of black senior executives can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

There is a link between recreating in the outdoors and wanting to protect it. People who spend time outdoors have the opportunity to appreciate its beauty and importance. Individuals across the nation and around the world who recognize the benefits of having access to fresh air, clean water, and open green space for their health and well-being will devote time and money to preserve those qualities. Having created loyal and long-standing relationships with the places they love most, they will pass their affection down to their children, establishing a legacy of stewardship that spans generations.

When people of color decide to climb, kayak, or ski, there is much more at stake than simply how people choose to spend their leisure time. The child who has never experienced the Grand Canyon, Devils Tower, Half Dome, the Painted Desert, or the Petrified Forest knows little about these places and can hardly be expected to feel invested in their preservation.

While there are, of course, many ways to spend time in nature, few require the commitment and dedication necessary to become even a proficient mountaineer. Climbing demands both physical and mental strength, as well as perseverance and sacrifice. Long expeditions far from home and family in some of the most hostile environments on Earth demand total commitment. Given the inherent and ever-present risk of injury or even death, climbing perhaps illustrates better than any other sport the passionate and intense relationship that can exist between human beings and the natural world. Pitting themselves against the elements, climbers test their limits and abilities to the utmost.

Passion alone isn't enough. Climbing also comes with a hefty price tag. Travel and gear are expensive—particularly mountaineering gear. The average consumer could easily spend $2,000 just to get set up with a traditional climbing rack, ice screws, ropes, ice axes, slings, crampons, rock shoes, and so on. Like the achievement gap that limits social mobility and access to higher education or better job prospects, the adventure gap is widened by limitations in financial resources. Even if you're not trying to outfit yourself as a technical climber, most forms of outdoor recreation involve some kind of gear, and that gear tends to be pricey. A simple outing to visit a park or take a hike typically requires gas and access fees. In fact an Outdoor Foundation survey reported that 61 percent of those who take part in outdoor recreation had personal incomes that exceed the national average of $41,000 per year.
In 2011 the National Bureau of Economic Research reported that African-Americans still lag behind in wages, bringing in about seventy-five cents for every dollar earned by whites. And though climbers typically lead a hand-to-mouth existence in pursuit of their sport, the “dirtbag” lifestyle likely has little appeal to emerging black professionals who might be the first in their families to attend college. And without the much-aspired-to earning potential or social mobility made possible by professional team sports like football, basketball, or baseball, few African-Americans will be drawn to climbing as a career or even a pastime.

Historical reasons may also account for why some African-Americans don’t take pleasure in outdoor experiences. After four hundred years of slavery and forced outdoor labor, African-Americans migrated en masse to major US cities after the Civil War and the end of slavery. Even more left the rural communities of the South during the Great Depression. Jim Crow laws and other forms of discrimination restricted movement and segregated minorities to urban enclaves until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. White supremacist groups typically perpetrated their acts of violence against minorities in wooded areas beyond city limits. Given this legacy, it’s no wonder that African-Americans have often preferred to remain close to home.

Social scientist Roberts is a woman of mixed ancestry who once worked for the National Park Service. Her firsthand and research experience confirms that many variables contribute to this complex issue.

"Factors such as perceived discrimination, socialization, and upbringing, fear of personal safety, concern about not having the right outdoor gear or equipment, and lack of knowledge and awareness," Roberts says, "are a few of the many reasons African-Americans provided for lack of visitation to outdoor environments."

Though segregation is no longer legal and hate crimes are rare, the adventure gap is still there, a mysterious cultural barrier forged in social memory. While African-Americans collectively enjoy greater freedom, as individuals they may not feel free to adventure widely. Without the safety of numbers and locked doors, people of color may feel more vulnerable in the wilds of nature. They may opt to stay home, denying themselves and, potentially, future generations the opportunity to establish and enjoy a comfortable relationship with the outdoors.

The real question is: Why does it matter? Do we really need more people appreciating nature? US national parks receive 218 million visitors per year. Many of the most popular sites, such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, are typically filled to capacity; in some ways we are “loving our parks to death.” Yet numbers aren’t the main issue. What matters most is having a breadth and variety of individuals who are fully invested in supporting and protecting the parks into the future.

Many demographers project that the US population will consist of a majority of people of color by 2050 at the latest. According to William Frey, a research professor in population studies at the University of Michigan, and others, it will happen sooner than that. “Because of the younger age structure (most minorities in the United States are under the age of twenty-five) and the somewhat higher fertility of new minorities in the United States, we may, by 2020, have a majority minority child population in the United..."
States,” Frey said in a radio interview. “And, of course, the Census Bureau has projected that by 2042, we’d have a majority minority total population—that is, less than 50 percent whites in the total population.”

If outdoor enthusiasts are indeed mostly white, then a shift to a “majority minority” population in the United States could mean bad news for the conservation movement. As the ultimate responsibility to preserve and maintain public lands falls to state and federal governments, environmental protection groups must persuade a majority of voters to advocate for legislation and funding that supports environmental efforts. But if these groups’ core constituency—affluent, well-educated white people—begins to shrink, so will their influence in the halls of Congress.

If this new demographic has little vested interest in environmental conservation, there will be fewer people to advocate for land and wildlife conservation and wilderness preservation.

Long term, therefore, the adventure gap and the problem of low minority involvement in outdoor activities could affect the preservation of the environment as a whole. The need for greater diversity in outdoor recreation is more than a matter of who’s out enjoying the wilderness. Inclusivity will be a critical factor in the continuing viability and influence of the environmental movement.

As Dwayne Smallwood works to restore native plants for the National Park Service, he brings more to the experience than merely his manual labor. As a person of color, he is an ambassador, paving the way for others to follow his lead and play a more critical role in protecting the environment.

“We’re making Rocky Mountain National Park look good!” he said as he pointed out his plant restoration project.

Smallwood was one of only two African-Americans on staff that season. But being one of very few people of color there makes little difference to him.

“It really doesn’t matter,” he says. “It was weird at first coming in because everyone else was second year. They’d all been here before. But they accepted me in and now they’re teaching me things.”

Though Smallwood is aware that he has a lot to learn, he has begun to carve out a place for himself in the profession of protecting public lands. He understands that his success at the National Park Service will depend not on his skin color but on his own dedication, hard work, and love of nature.

“Right now I’m just glad to wear the uniform,” he says. “It makes me official, like I’m part of the park.”

If we can agree that it is vital for the US population as a whole—regardless of race or ethnicity—to feel invested in the preservation of public land in general and the national parks in particular, then the question becomes: How do we actively engage and encourage young people like Smallwood to get involved?

Expedition Denali is one step. The project’s goal is not to correct past wrongs of racial oppression or to take a stand in the face of discrimination, but instead to celebrate the gift of freedom that exists today in the outdoors and to affirm a positive role for people of color in outdoor recreation and environmental conservation. Defying the cultural traditions of the past, they want to show their community that they can mount and successfully complete an expedition to the top of America.

MY OWN TRAJECTORY THROUGH OUTDOOR recreation began as it has for many young men, through the Boy Scouts of America.
Along with my friends and their dads, in 1975 my father Billy, my brother John, and I spent weekends tromping through the wilds of California’s Griffith Park. I had the privilege of growing up with the children of other community leaders who were paving the way for a better life. My dad was one of the first African-Americans to graduate from UCLA law school. He raised me to aspire beyond the racial strife and discrimination that were so pervasive just a decade earlier and that still continued in many parts of the nation. That early exposure to the outdoors led me eventually to mountaineering.

As a teenager I remember how surprised I was to see the night sky when camped at 10,000 feet near the summit of Mount San Bernardino. As a kid in LA, I grew up surrounded by the bright lights of the city, which obscured all but a handful of stars. But there on that mountain, high above the clouds, the view was astonishing; the sky was crowded with so many twinkling lights it overwhelmed the senses. As I lay there in my sleeping bag under those stars, I felt as though I were just a tiny speck in an infinite universe, and also part of something grand and utterly beautiful.

After graduating with a four-year degree from the University of California, Berkeley, I took a job as a retail sales clerk at REI and also took up rock climbing. I spent my days selling hiking boots and sleeping bags, and my lunch hours climbing short routes at Indian Rock in the Berkeley Hills. On the weekends I drove to Yosemite Valley to play on the granite walls near the great El Capitan.

For twenty years now I’ve enjoyed a career in the outdoor industry, first as a salesman and now as a journalist. I’ve written hundreds of articles for magazines, newspapers, and online publications. When I first started in outdoor recreation, I was one of very few people of color working for a leading clothing and equipment manufacturer. Trading primarily on my enthusiasm for the lifestyle, I was welcomed and encouraged to excel in my chosen profession—and though I don’t believe that being black necessarily helped my career, I’m fairly certain it didn’t hurt it.

Yet after two decades in the business, I see very few people of color entering the industry. Today, at national conventions, professional gatherings, and informal recreational events, I am usually the only black person there. And I can’t help but wonder how different the experience might be if there were more people in the profession who looked like me. Though I always find myself surrounded by friends and colleagues who share my passions and I never feel out of place, I also can’t help but wonder, “Where are all the black folks?”

As a journalist, I’ve tried to come to a better understanding of why this is still so and what factors apparently keep people of color from becoming involved in the activities I’ve come to love throughout most of my life. One day, something happened that made me realize exactly why finding the answer to this question was so important.

In January of 2009, I had the opportunity to interview Ken Burns, the documentary filmmaker, about his twelve-hour TV miniseries *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. When I asked him how he planned to reach people of color with his film, he explained that his depiction of national park history included several stories about the many contributions that African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Hispanics have made to the preservation of the wilderness. Nonprofit funding designed to encourage appreciation and a feeling of ownership of the national parks among minority groups across the country allowed Burns’s team to go into the inner cities to say, in his words, “Let me tell you about Captain Charles Young of the Buffalo
Soldiers, the first stewards and custodians of the national parks.” Burns said, “Before there was a park service, there was no money to take care of them and the cavalry was essentially maintaining order in many parks, particularly in California. In Yosemite and General Grant Park then, it was the African-American Buffalo Soldiers. It’s a wonderful heroic story.

In that moment my mind reeled at the revelation that a group of African-Americans had played a role in the preservation of national parks in the West and, in effect, in the creation of the National Park Service itself!

Many African-American youngsters learn about the Buffalo Soldiers, black men assigned to the Twenty-Fourth Infantry and the Ninth and Tenth Cavalleries of the US Army who rode the western range on horseback at the end of the nineteenth century. At the end of the Civil War, thousands of black soldiers still wore the blue Yankee uniforms. Rather than return to the southern states to become farmers or migrate to the industrial North to work in factories, a large number of these newly emancipated citizens continued their national service, reenlisting in the army as career soldiers. Many of them headed west.

In the years that followed, these black warriors distinguished themselves in the Indian Wars. Driven by a steadfast belief in Manifest Destiny, the US Army cut a bloody path from the east across the plains to the west, either systematically relocating or simply eradicating the Native American population to make way for white settlers to build their homes on captured territory. The Native tribes who encountered these ferocious and courageous men with black faces and woolly hair were reminded of one of their most sacred symbols—the buffalo—and, thus, called them Buffalo Soldiers.

LIKE OTHER CHILDREN, I’D GROWN up hearing stories about the Buffalo Soldiers. But after more than two decades as a professional in the outdoor industry and a lifetime of visits to California’s national parks, this was the very first time I had ever heard that the Buffalo Soldiers had spent any time there. I knew about Teddy Roosevelt’s historic meeting with John Muir at Glacier Point in 1903. That was the stuff of legend and a pivotal moment in the enduring history of Yosemite. But little did I realize that in the same year, more than four hundred African-American cavalry men had made the three-week journey on horseback from the Presidio in San Francisco to Yosemite to patrol the park and keep it safe. From the earliest days of Yosemite, these black men performed many of the same duties that national park rangers do today.

Burns’s documentary also introduced me to someone who would deeply affect the way I viewed my own legacy. Shelton Johnson has been for many years the only black ranger permanently stationed at Yosemite National Park. Today, he is also an accomplished writer and storyteller who pursued graduate studies in poetry before joining the National Park Service in 1981. As an interpretive ranger, Johnson has dedicated much of his career to sharing the Buffalo Soldiers’ story.

Johnson has a melodic voice and impeccable articulation, and he shares his passion for the outdoors in words that are nothing less than poetry. In a scene from the Burns documentary, Johnson describes an unforgettable day from his own experience in Yellowstone National Park.

“One of the last jobs I had at Yellowstone was delivering the mail on snowmobile,” he began. “There I was, in the world’s first national park, and I remember going down into Haden Valley. There were
bison crossing over the road, two-thousand-pound mammals crossing over the road. It was so cold; it was about sixty degrees below zero. And the bison, as they breathed, the air around them seemed to crystallize. And there were these sheets; these ropey strands of crystals kind of came flowing down from their breath. I saw them. They turned their heads and looked at me, and I remember thinking that had I not been on that machine I would have thought that I had been thrust fully back into the Pleistocene, back into the ice age."

I imagined what it would have been like at the turn of the century for the Buffalo Soldiers who might have come upon a similar scene of bison roaming over the land. Just as Johnson envisioned himself flung back into the prehistoric past, I pictured myself as an army private in 1903, wrapped in blankets and traveling through the snow on horseback in the middle of the Montana wilderness, perhaps to deliver the mail to a remote outpost. After years of war they must have thought that being awarded a duty station in the middle of the world's first national park was a dream. I felt for the first time a visceral connection to the past, a link between my own passion for the outdoors and the ancestral legacy of these black men who protected the parks so long ago.

Listening to Johnson, what struck me most profoundly was the realization that something had been missing from my life. The many years that I'd spent in nature suddenly took on new meaning as I discovered that men who looked like me—black men with whom I share an ancient blood relationship as well as the tainted history of slavery and racial oppression—were part of the great history of the national parks I love. I found myself a bit overwhelmed with emotion because—for the first time—I felt like I truly belonged. No longer was I just an individual who'd gotten hooked on climbing and the joy of the outdoors. I realized that I was part of a long legacy of people of color who had immersed themselves in the outdoors—a legacy that dates back to the parks' very first days.

"I felt like this was the first day, and this morning was the first time the sun had ever come up. And the shadows that are being cast right now is the first time that shadows have ever been cast on the Earth," Johnson said as he continued to describe the bison. "I was all alone, but I felt I was in the presence of everything around me and I was never alone. It was one of those moments when you get pulled outside of yourself into the environment around you. I felt like I was with the breath of the bison. As they were exhaling and I was exhaling and they were inhaling, it was all kind of flowing together. And I forgot completely about the mail! All I was thinking was that a single moment in a place as wild as Yellowstone, or most of the national parks, can last forever."

Burns sent me a copy of his documentary and I played that scene over and over again. As I continued to ponder and visualize the Buffalo Soldiers in Yosemite and Yellowstone, it became something of an obsession. What I came back to again and again was this: How was it possible that I had never heard this story? And if I hadn't heard it, how many others hadn't heard it either? My interest in the issue of diversity in outdoor recreation had finally snapped into focus. It became clear to me that the best way to understand how we got to where we are today is to first know where we came from. And to do that, I had to start at the very beginning.

FASCINATED BY THIS BLIND SPOT in my understanding of the past, I headed back to Yosemite for a history lesson. In late July of 2009, several months before the release of the national parks
documentary, I received an invitation to a series of press events to promote the forthcoming series. Over a long weekend I had the privilege of being one of a handful of reporters who followed Ken Burns around Yosemite on a scenic tour. Among the guests was none other than ranger Shelton Johnson.

During that visit, we had the good fortune to see Johnson in action. In a weekly summer presentation he gives to visitors at the Yosemite Theater, Johnson adopts the persona of a US Cavalry sergeant in a one-man stage show called The Forgotten Yosemite: A Buffalo Soldier Remembers. His performance brings to life the likely thoughts and impressions of a black man serving in a remote wilderness duty station at the turn of the twentieth century.

Dressed in a period uniform, Johnson took his place in front of the audience. He stepped onto the brightly lit stage playing a haunting melody on a wooden flute. The song and the instrument he played are reminiscent of his own Native American heritage, as well as that of the many aboriginal tribes that once populated the woods and mountains of Yosemite Valley. Wearing a classic Stetson hat bearing the crossed saber insignia of the regiment in which his character served, Johnson stood erect, swaying slightly to the gentle rhythm of the music. He also wore a blue woolen coat with shiny brass buttons; the bright yellow stripes on his sleeves signified his rank as a noncommissioned officer.

Johnson concluded his song with a long note, allowing the sound to fade into silence. His spell cast, he finally spoke, “That’s how I like to say hello."

In the folksy vernacular of the period, Johnson welcomed his guests, engaging the audience in the cheerful and cordial manner of a proud host. “How did you enjoy your walk through the park?”

asked with a broad smile. “Are these tall trees and high mountains, these sheer granite cliffs not magnificent! My name is Sergeant Elizy Bowman. Welcome, and I hope you enjoy your stay. I reckon you likely felt much the same way I did, the first time I came riding through the Central Valley with my company, Troop K, as we took up our duty station here in Yosemite. And I have to tell you, after years of fighting Cheyenne across the plains, the Spaniards in Cuba, and that long occupation of the Philippines, to be here under blue skies breathing this clean, clear air is nothing short of paradise.”

Johnson goes on to tell the story of another Buffalo Soldier, Charles Young, who was also the first black administrator of a national park. Racially motivated legislation was enacted beginning in 1876, the culmination of a decade of steady erosion of the liberties so hard fought for and won in the Civil War. So-called Jim Crow laws limited the freedom of blacks in the southern states of the former Confederacy and reinforced a nationwide perception of inferiority. These laws mandated segregation of most public facilities, including schools, restaurants, restrooms, and even drinking fountains for blacks and whites, resulting in broad patterns of discrimination that made social advancement for blacks all but impossible. Though not codified through legislation in the northern or western states, the “separate but equal” doctrine was nevertheless pervasive, dividing the races through segregated housing, biased lending practices at banks, and prejudiced hiring preferences in the workplace. One of the few institutions where African-American men could distinguish themselves and rise to prominence was the US Army. In their capacity as representatives of the federal government, they carried weapons and enforced the law of the land with unprecedented authority.
Although black soldiers served in segregated regiments, they were nonetheless given the opportunity and resources to rise through the ranks. Holding themselves to a much higher standard than the white officers expected of them, black enlisted men and noncommissioned officers were determined to prove that they were equal to their white counterparts in hard work, courage, and patriotism. Routinely given the toughest assignments—combat missions with little chance of survival or degrading, often humiliating, tasks—they went well beyond even the most ambitious expectations. The Army made it possible for aspiring black men of exceptional talent to assume positions of leadership. One man who did so was Charles Young.

The third African-American to graduate from the military academy at West Point, Charles Young was the son of a former slave. His father had earned his freedom through service in the US Army as a soldier during the Civil War. Young was a diligent and tenacious scholar, graduating from an otherwise all-white high school near the top of his class to earn himself entry to the prestigious military training college. Though Young suffered no end of torment at the hands of white upperclassmen who did everything possible to drive him out, he persisted and endured. Fortunately, he enjoyed the camaraderie of a fellow black cadet, John Hanks Alexander, who would become the first African-American in the US Armed Forces to hold a regular command position and the second black graduate of West Point.

Commissioned as a second lieutenant upon graduation, Young was assigned to the Tenth US Cavalry Regiment at Fort Robertson in Nebraska, the unit known by then as the Buffalo Soldiers. He later worked as a professor in the military sciences department at Wilberforce College in Ohio and then as an Army major during the Spanish-American War. In 1901 he was promoted to the rank of captain in the Ninth Cavalry Regiment.

In 1903, Young was appointed acting superintendent of Sequoia and General Grant national parks, the national parks being under the direct supervision of the US military at the time. That spring he led a regiment of five hundred Buffalo Soldiers on horseback from their base in the Presidio of San Francisco to set up operations in the parks. The first black administrator of a national park, Young proved to be quite effective in achieving the long-term goals of his assignment, despite limited funding and a short building season between the long winters of the high Sierra Nevada.

It’s estimated that Young and his men completed more work projects over the next several months than the previous military administration had in three years. The Buffalo Soldiers finished construction on the wagon road to the Giant Forest, where some of the world’s tallest trees have grown for millennia. They established the road to the base of Moro Rock, a popular tourist destination with an exquisite western view of Sequoia National Park. They built the trail leading to the summit of Mount Whitney, the tallest peak in the lower 48 states. And by August of that year, park visitors had clear access by wagon to what had been some of the most remote areas in the region. Many of the roads and trails they worked on are still in use today.

In addition to the hard work of road building, the Buffalo Soldiers patrolled the parks for poachers, fought wildfires, thwarted illegal loggers, and generally kept the peace as law enforcement officers. Although many white visitors to the parks resented taking orders from black men, the Buffalo Soldiers performed their duties with measured diplomacy, creating a solid sense of law and order in
the wilderness. They served their country in an exemplary manner, despite the racial turmoil of the era. It’s hardly a stretch to suggest that these early park rangers helped to set the standard of excellence for the institution that would in 1916 become the National Park Service.

“I always say that what separates any Buffalo Soldier from a white soldier is that the Buffalo Soldiers were always fighting on two fronts,” Johnson told me after his performance. “There was the enemy before them, and that enemy called racism that completely surrounded them every day of their lives. In spite of that fact, they did their duty even though they carried a far heavier burden. They worked harder than their counterparts. They had to, just to prove that they could do the work at all.”

Captain Young and his men made a lasting contribution to the preservation and even expansion of our nation's parks: Upon Young’s recommendation, the secretary of the interior, Ethan A. Hitchcock, sought acquisition of private land surrounding Sequoia and expanded the park boundaries. Such facts of history make it all the more surprising that so few African-Americans visit the national parks today.

“It’s doubly ironic to think that one hundred years ago there were more Africans or people of African descent in an official capacity in both Yosemite National Park and Sequoia National Park than there are today,” Johnson said. “Think about how much the world has changed. The Buffalo Soldiers were here before there was a Malcolm X, before there was a Martin Luther King, before Shirley Chisholm, before all of these people that we know so well. They were here before the Civil Rights Movement. They were here at a time when race relations were at their most abysmal.”

“So when I see myself wearing this uniform,” he continued, “I’m also making a challenge that people of my culture can be a part of this history too, and know we are part of this history. And that is the value of the Buffalo Soldier story. It is stating that at the very beginning of this great invention and this great contribution to world culture, which is America’s best idea, that we were part of it.”

Just a few years later, on March 25, 2013, President Barack Obama designated the home of Charles Young in Xenia, Ohio, as a national monument to honor his great work as well as that of the other men who served as Buffalo Soldiers.

“The National Park Service shall coordinate with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which manages the Presidio in San Francisco, and Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite national parks to commemorate the historical ties between Colonel Charles Young and his military assignments at those sites, and the role of the Buffalo Soldiers as pioneering stewards of our national parks,” Obama proclaimed.