

REMEMBERING *Yellowstone National Park's* FIRST African American Explorers

BY MICHAEL SCOTT VAN WAGENEN

CREATED in 1872, Yellowstone National Park is at the very heart of the United States' national park system. While the site's origin story and its champions have long been celebrated, the role African Americans played in the area's exploration remains largely forgotten due to their race, rank, and station. This is particularly true of the two African American trail cooks who participated in the first government-sponsored expedition of the region in 1870. Recorded only as "Nute" and "Johnny," these men shared in all the dangers and deprivations of their white companions, yet their stories languish in obscurity.¹ During the 1870s, the effacing of African American participation kept the focus on white exceptionalism at a time when the nation was divided over Reconstruction-era civil rights legislation. In the twenty-first century, however, the persistence of historical amnesia has driven a cultural wedge between the United States' growing minority populations and the governmental institutions tasked with preserving their histories. Rediscovering the lives of Nute and Johnny, therefore, provides a fuller understanding of western settlement and creates a bridge between federal agencies, such as the National Park Service (NPS), and their broader constituencies.

While Nute and Johnny were early settlers in Montana Territory, they were not the first African Americans to traverse the greater Yellowstone region. The first was an enslaved man named York, who accompanied Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery and, in 1806, stood on the banks of the Yellowstone River some ninety miles northeast of what eventually became the North Entrance to the national park. The second was a formerly enslaved mountain man

named Jim Beckwourth, who traveled extensively through the Rocky Mountains in the 1820s, exploring, trapping, and trading. Beckwourth remained in the region for over four decades, serving as a war chief to the Crow (Apsáalooke) Nation, a guide, and an Indian agent. His travels along the Yellowstone River brought him close to, if not inside, the future national park. The general notoriety of these men's exploits ensured their preservation in the historical record.² This was not the case for the cooks and packers who were a vital part of exploration expeditions in the 1870s. Though less well-documented than the experiences of white Americans, their roles were important to the overall success of these ventures in bringing the nation's attention to the wonders of Yellowstone.³

The formation of Montana Territory in 1864 was closely tied to the Civil War and post-war Reconstruction. For a decade, Radical Republicans in Congress had labored for the eradication of slavery, but as the war entered its final years, they began pursuing more controversial goals of racial equality and universal male suffrage. Republican senator Morton S. Wilkinson of Minnesota proposed changing the language of Montana's organic act to remove voting restrictions on African American men. The ensuing heated debate ended with a compromise limiting the ballot box to male "citizens," which, while not excluding African Americans specifically, delayed their suffrage until the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 (the same year Wyoming Territory was created). While Montana Territory was far from a racial utopia, less entrenched policies undoubtedly played a role in attracting recently emancipated African Americans into the new territory.⁴

Now the world's most famous geyser and an icon of Yellowstone National Park, Old Faithful was named by members of the 1870 Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition to the upper Yellowstone. Among the men on that excursion were two African American cooks, Newton "Nute" Nicholas and Johnny Butler. The scarcity of information on Nicholas's and Butler's experiences points to the omission of African American perspectives from the exploration history of the American West.

F. J. Haynes, photographer. Library of Congress 3c06671u or



Following the Civil War, a growing fascination with the early accounts of mountain men like John Colter and Jim Bridger—who reported strange geothermal features at the headwaters of the Yellowstone River—revitalized Americans’ interest in Western exploration and settlement. In 1869, Montana Territory residents David E. Folsom, Charles W. Cook, and William Peterson traversed the northern half of the modern-day park and glimpsed a few of its iconic features, including the Lower Geyser Basin, Mud Volcano, Yellowstone Lake, Grand Canyon, and the Upper and Lower Falls of the river. Cook and Folsom penned an account of their journey but found eastern publishers skeptical of their discoveries.⁵

The surveyor general of Montana Territory, Henry Dana Washburn, however, had faith in Cook and Folsom. After hearing their stories and reading their journals, Washburn organized an official expedition of adventurers and political appointees, accompanied by soldiers, packers, and cooks. In August of 1870, nineteen men headed into the wilderness of the modern-day state of Wyoming for five weeks of exploration and mapping.

The Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, as it became known, played a pivotal role in federal interest in the region. Indeed, it was the group’s fantastical reports and amateur sketches of geothermal features that prompted Congress to send out an official federal exploration party the next year. The report from the Hayden Geological Survey of 1871, supported with photographic evidence, contributed significantly to the unprecedented establishment of Yellowstone National Park months later.⁶

Mountains in the new park were named for expedition leaders Henry Washburn, Nathaniel P. Langford, and Lieutenant Gustavus Doane, whose accounts have since been widely publicized. In contrast, the party’s two African Americans have received no recognition despite these men’s contributions to the mission’s overall success. In fact, no contempo-



Among the first non-Native men to venture into the region that would become Yellowstone National Park was David Folsom (n.d.), who explored the region in 1869 with Charles Cook and William Peterson. Folsom and Cook’s accounts of the unique landscape and unusual topography impressed Henry Washburn and set in motion future surveys of the area.

National Park Service Archives, YNP 02953



Montana Territory’s surveyor general, Henry D. Washburn (1869), organized the 1870 exploration into the Yellowstone region. Most of the nineteen individuals who joined the party were men of significant political or economic standing in Montana Territory.

Artist unknown. Nathaniel P. Langford, *Diary of the Washburn Expedition*

rary account mentioned their full names, instead referring to them only by their first names.

Before restoring visibility to these forgotten men, it is worth considering the value of such an undertaking. Since the founding of the English colonies, Europeans and their American descendants have celebrated their many foremost accomplishments. From “first white settler” to “first white child born,” official histories have commemorated Anglo hegemony over native lands and peoples. As inheritors of these racial and cultural biases, nineteenth-century chroniclers continued to champion white “firsts” as they documented the exploration of America’s western frontier. More recent studies of “collective memory” have revealed the value of understanding not just what individuals and societies remember, but also what they have chosen to forget.⁷

The initial step in recovering the lives of Nute and Johnny involved a detailed investigation of the handwritten territorial census records of 1870. In addition, county, state, and federal bureaucracies grew in the postbellum period, ensuring that some traces of the men would remain in the historical record for later discovery. Approximately 186 African Americans were enumerated in Montana's territorial census that year. This number, while about equal with Wyoming, dwarfed the other surrounding territories of Idaho, North Dakota, and South Dakota, which had 60, 24, and 70 African American residents respectively.⁸ Nute proved to be the easier of the two to find, as only one African American in the territory had that first name. Newton Nicholas (also recorded as Nichols and Nicholson), a twenty-two-year-old, biracial Virginian, lived in Jefferson City and listed his occupation as "cook." Johnny posed a more difficult challenge as the census recorded several African American men named John in the territory in 1870. Only one, however, listed his occupation as a cook: John Butler of Virginia City.⁹ Another expedition participant, Cornelius Hedges, noted in his diary that Johnny returned to the territorial capital of Virginia City after the journey, substantiating the conclusion that John Butler was indeed the second cook.¹⁰

The lives and experiences of these two men were typical of many African Americans in Montana Territory. Nicholas was born in Virginia around 1850. His name does not appear as a "free person of color" in the State of Virginia Census of 1860, so it is likely that he was born into slavery. Further evidence of his enslaved status includes the fact that his birth year changed across the handful of documents where his name appeared, perhaps because Southerners kept few birth records of enslaved people. The 1870 and 1910 censuses list him as "mulatto," while the 1880 and 1900 censuses initially record his race as white, only to be corrected to "black," suggesting that he was likely a light-skinned man of biracial heritage. As a trail cook, he would have both prepared food and handled horses, perhaps pointing to a childhood spent as a house slave, laboring in the vicinity of the kitchen and stables. Nicholas appeared to be comfortable working and living with whites throughout his

life, further implying his exposure to both white and black cultures from an early age.¹¹

Growing up enslaved in antebellum Virginia would have provided few opportunities for Nicholas. The chaos of the Civil War and Reconstruction offered little more. Like many African Americans who moved west in the late 1860s, Nicholas likely did so in search of more opportunities. This post-war exodus saw the African American population in the West increase from approximately five thousand in 1860 to twenty-five thousand a decade later.¹² The 1870 census, which was recorded as Nicholas prepared to leave on the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, listed him as living with the Merriman family, who had moved to the territory from Indiana. He was also the only African American recorded as living in Jefferson City. Nicholas likely had some education when he arrived in the territory, as the 1870 census indicated he was able to read. Furthermore, by 1880 he had learned to write. Such skills were handy for

More recent studies of "collective memory" have revealed the value of understanding not just what individuals and societies remember, but also what they have chosen to forget.

cooks who needed to read labels and recipes. At the time of the census enumeration, he had accumulated an estate valued at \$125, a decent sum for a laborer living in a remote mountain town.¹³

The census also provided background information on John Butler. He was born in Pennsylvania around 1840, where he enjoyed the limited benefits of free people of color in the state. Butler migrated to the Montana Territory before 1870. In Virginia City, he lived with a poor white laborer named George Smith. Given their economic status, it is likely that the two men shared the rent on a small home. It was not unusual for whites and African Americans to live together in Montana Territory at this time. The census documented several examples of such domestic relations and bore witness to the racial cooperation required to survive in the austere region. Unlike Nicholas, Butler could neither read nor write. His lack of education may have put him at a disadvantage during the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, as leaders chose the younger Nicholas as head cook.

19	8							
20		Nicholas Butler	22	M	Cook	135		Pa
21	9	9	Harding	20	M	20	3000	Pa
22	11	10	Washburn	21	M	20	500	Canada

Newton Nicholas was listed as “mulatto” on Montana’s territorial census for Jefferson City, where he was employed as a cook in 1870. He would have been just twenty-two years old at the time of the Washburn expedition. No known photograph of Nicholas or Butler exists. U.S. Bureau of the Census, enumeration for Jefferson City, Jefferson County, Montana Territory, 1870

Literacy, however, may not have been the primary deciding factor. Racial prejudice and pseudoscience of the time placed biracial individuals in a higher station over darker-complexioned people.¹⁴

Records from the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition remain silent on how the cooks and packers were recruited. Still, those who accompanied the group would have been skilled and intrepid considering the physical dangers they faced passing through territory inhabited by violent outlaws and indigenous warriors provoked by government abuses. It is likely that Butler found his employment through fellow explorer Nathaniel Langford. Langford and Butler both lived in Virginia City, then the territorial capital. The fact that the two returned home together at the end of the venture indicates more than proximity between the two. However Nicholas and Butler found their employment, they signed on for one of the most exciting exploring parties in the history of the American West. Their presence not only challenges the notion that all western explorers were white men from the East, it also raises questions about group hierarchy and dynamics.¹⁵

The Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition of 1870 named and documented many of the amazing geological and geographical features of what is now Yellowstone National Park. As such, its participants are frequently recognized as the “discoverers” of

Yellowstone. An oft repeated, yet dubious, account further credits the explorers with creating the idea of national parks in the United States while sitting around a campfire near the confluence of the Firehole and Gibbon Rivers. Such myth-making remains a part of the nation’s celebratory collective memory, but like the expedition itself, it invites further investigation to better understand the complexity of the Reconstruction-era West.¹⁶ Unquestionably, their accomplishments paved the way for the United States to send in an official survey party the next year and set the land apart as the country’s first national park in 1872.

A better story of the venture comes in the form of its fascinating participants. Henry Dana Washburn, surveyor general of Montana Territory, headed the group. He had served as a general in the Civil War and as a U.S. congressman from Indiana during early Reconstruction. His body was racked with tuberculosis when he took the helm of the expedition at the age of thirty-eight, and he would die weeks after the group’s return. While serving in the U.S. House of Representatives he earned the reputation of being a Radical Republican. This radicalism manifested itself in his ideas about racial and gender equality. His egalitarian views damaged his political career, however, and he accepted the position of surveyor general for Montana Territory in 1869 to escape the controversy he created in his home state of Indiana.¹⁷

24	202	277	Harris	R. W.	37	"	"	3000	Pa
25	203	278	Wright	W. S.	36	"	Expresman	150 800	N. Y.
26	204	279	Butler	John	31	"	Cook		Pa
27			Smith	Geo	16	"	Saborce		Pa
28	205	280	Butler	Geo	25	"	Mission		Pa

Following the exploration into Yellowstone, Johnny Butler returned briefly to Virginia City, possibly with Nathaniel Langford, before leaving Montana for Pennsylvania soon after.

U.S. Bureau of the Census, enumeration for Virginia City, Madison County, Montana Territory, 1870

When Washburn arrived, he found a territory riven with bitter post-Civil War political divisions. While a majority of Montanans hailed from northern states, most registered voters were Democrats, allowing former Confederates and Northern “Copperhead” sympathizers considerable influence in territorial politics. As a territory, Montana fell under the control of the Radical Republicans in Congress. At the time of the journey, Radical Republican James Mitchell Ashley served as the federally appointed governor, having recently replaced President Andrew Johnson’s moderate appointee Green Clay Smith, who left the contentious territory before resigning his post altogether. The growing strength of the Democrats, combined with persistent differences of ideals between moderate and Radical Republicans, further weakened the northern bloc, exposing the territory’s small African American community to legislative restrictions on their civil rights.¹⁸

Washburn, as a Radical Republican, drew from like-minded individuals for his exploration party. Expedition co-founder Nathaniel Langford, for example, had also made a name for himself in local Republican politics. A brilliant man of considerable ego, Langford proved himself a powerful figure during Montana’s violent “vigilante days,” when certain citizens took “law and order” into their own hands, resulting in the hanging of twenty-four horse thieves, rustlers, and other perceived troublemakers. Langford kept the best written record of the journey, which wove together vivid anecdotes of the comical, tragic, heroic, and fantastic. President Ulysses S. Grant rewarded Langford’s efforts by appointing him as the first superintendent of Yellowstone National Park.¹⁹

Seven prominent citizens of the territory traveled with Washburn and Langford on the expedition, and they spent forty days in Montana and Wyoming Territories, mapping and noting their observations. They included Truman C. Everts and Cornelius Hedges (former Lincoln political appointees); Warren C. Gillette, Benjamin C. Stickney Jr., and Jacob Smith (successful merchants); Walter Trumbull (son of a Republican senator); and Samuel T. Hauser (banker). A cavalry detachment consisting of Lieutenant Gustavus Doane, Sergeant William Baker, and privates William Leipler, George W. McConnell, Charles Moore, and John Williamson from Fort Ellis provided protection for the group. Two packers, Charles

Reynolds and Elwyn Bean, and cooks Newton Nicholas and John Butler rounded out the party.²⁰

From their written accounts, the white explorers seemed to accept the African Americans into their company. This could in part be due to white approval of African Americans serving in the difficult and unglamorous job of trail cook, but the degree of civility shown by the exploration’s chroniclers demonstrates a sense of racial progressivism. For example, the white men referred to Nicholas and Butler as “colored,” “African,” or in one case “unbleached American citizens of African descent” rather than the common pejoratives of the time. Nonetheless, they also sometimes paternalistically referred to the men as “boys,” dashing any idea that they were regarded as fully adult men on equal footing with white men. The general amiability perhaps reflected the group’s common northern roots. Out of the seventeen white members of the expedition, ten came from northern states, three had immigrated to the United States from foreign countries, one hailed from a border state, and the remaining three originated from unknown locales.



Like Washburn and Lieutenant Gustavus Doane, Nathaniel P. Langford (above, ca. 1872) had a mountain in Yellowstone National Park named in his honor. Langford also became the first superintendent of the park. MHS Photograph Archives, Helena 943-404

Throughout the forty-day expedition, the band of adventurers and their military accompaniment feared having their horses stolen by Crow warriors or rustlers and took turns on nightly guard duty, as depicted in this sketch.

Artist unknown. From Nathaniel P. Langford, "The Wonders of the Yellowstone," *Scribner's*, May 1871



At least five members fought for the Union during the Civil War.²¹

Montana and Wyoming Territories, as elsewhere in the West, however, had plenty of racial animosity. While African Americans may have enjoyed some degree of respect from Northerners, American Indians subsisted at the bottom rung of Montana society and were perceived as unpredictably violent and invariably dangerous. Just weeks prior to the expedition's start, dozens of Crow warriors, angered by Sioux attacks and forced reductions of their lands, fled into the Gallatin and Yellowstone Valleys. Whites in Helena believed that these "renegades" would massacre the explorers, whose journey extended well into the heart of Crow treaty lands. Heightening tensions among the group was fear of white rustlers and highwaymen along their chosen route. In fact, the threat of death loomed so great that several initial members dropped out before even leaving Helena. Outfitting and staffing the party proved such a challenge that only Montana's bravest or most impetuous dared to go.²²

The expedition left Helena on August 17, 1870, but the initial foray ended in embarrassment as packs fell off the backs of the horses. After this unpromising beginning, the packers better secured their equipage, and the group left town. East of the Gallatin Valley, the party slowly wound its way southward along the Yellowstone River. When the explorers left the Bottler Ranch (near present-day Emigrant) on the

morning of August 23, they traveled through territory that had been seen by few non-Native people. The group crossed into the modern-day park near the North Entrance. From there they chose an eastern route around Yellowstone Lake, mapping each new formation and curiosity they encountered. On at least two occasions they ran into the Crow warriors they had hoped to avoid. According to Langford, the American Indians appeared curious at seeing the interlopers so deep in their lands but left the anxious explorers alone. The party also encountered rustlers and highwaymen, who had turned the rough countryside in the Yellowstone region into their sanctuary.

Each day provided a new adventure and a new discovery for the men. Early on they began to notice the unusual geothermal features of the region. Acting like excited children, the explorers barely survived a number of mishaps when they broke through the thin crust around scalding pools and climbed into active geysers.²³ As they meandered around the region, the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition named many of the major tourist attractions in modern Yellowstone National Park, including the Grand Canyon, the Upper and Lower Falls, Old Faithful, and nearly all of the geothermal features of the Upper Geyser Basin.²⁴

In spite of the dramatic beauty around them, the loss of one of their members dampened the mood of the expedition. Truman C. Everts became disoriented after his horse bolted and stranded him in the forest

on September 10. The group searched the area in vain. Running short on supplies and believing that Everts had been killed by the Crows or highwaymen, the men chose to move on. In actuality, Everts remained alive and wandered alone for thirty-seven days before a small search party from Helena found him clinging to life and nursed him back to health.²⁵

Eight of the explorers kept journals of their adventures in Yellowstone. Notwithstanding the broad coverage, very little detail survives about Nicholas and Butler. Ironically, Nicholas's dog, Booby, ends up better documented than either his master or Butler and even appears twice in the artwork used to illustrate the expedition. Thomas Moran created a woodcut for *Scribner's Monthly* that showed the dog and an unnamed explorer looking at the Beehive Geyser in the Upper Geyser Basin. Langford's *The Discovery of Yellowstone National Park* showed the dog crossing a river with the men. No identifiable African Americans appeared in any of the existing artwork. Printers produced these works for a mass market of Americans who persisted in the dream of Manifest Destiny, the myth of the "white West," and racial hierarchies that privileged white settlers. This type of minimizing or erasure of ethnic participants in Western history persisted into the twentieth century.²⁶

At the end of the trip, Nicholas and Butler returned to their respective homes in late September 1870, with only the faintest of recognition in the journey's documentation. One can only imagine how their friends and neighbors received the stories of geysers and other geothermal features. It would be another year before photographs would prove the rumors true once and for all. No doubt some of those people who heard Nicholas's or Butler's accounts of the "wonderland" must have suspected the cooks had

told them just another camp story. Regardless of how these two men's tales were received, the details of their lives after the Yellowstone adventure are helpful to understanding the larger African American experience in Montana Territory.

After his service in the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, Newton Nicholas chose to stay in the territory. Census enumerations, city directories, vital records, and written histories of the white Montanans with whom he lived give some clue to his life after his service. In the 1870s, Nicholas moved in with Welsh merchant-turned-farmer J. D. Thomas in the Prickly Pear Valley. By 1880, Thomas employed six farmhands, including Nicholas. The 1890 census burned in a fire, creating a large gap in information about Nicholas's life. By the turn of the century, however, he was living across the Prickly Pear Valley with Henry Monroe, a rancher from Michigan. Monroe's operation no doubt employed many men at its prime, as the ranch made a name for itself through the production of alfalfa and grain as well as its breeding of "fine horses." Nevertheless, by 1890 Monroe had sold most of his land and retired to a stone house on a small corner of the original ranch. Nicholas remained



Yellowstone's rugged landscape and geothermal features, such as the precariously thin mineral crusts created by geysers, presented new dangers to the expedition. Such risks were shared fully by the two cooks, yet the only mention of how they handled such hazards is a brief note in Langford's account of Nute sewing moccasins to protect his dog's feet from lacerations. Artist unknown. From Nathaniel P. Langford,

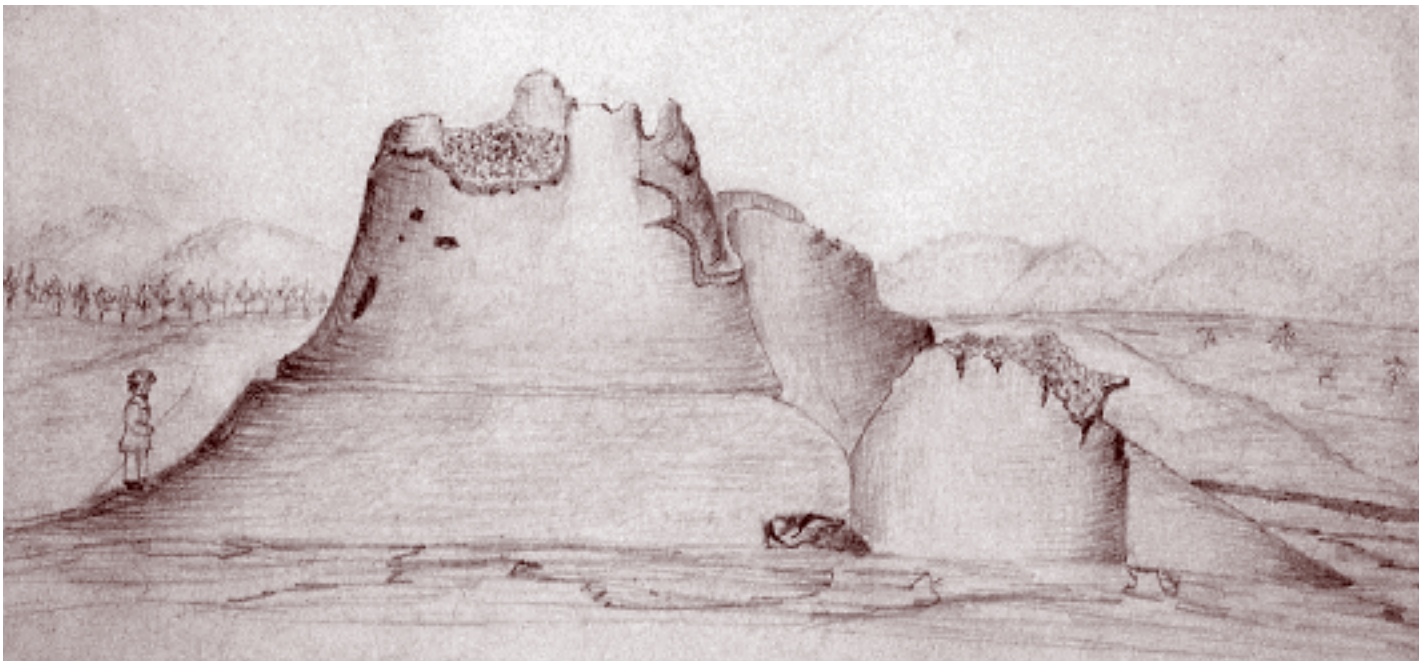
"The Wonders of the Yellowstone," *Scribner's*, National Park Service, YNP 03145

with him and probably cooked and helped with the remaining horses and crops.²⁷

After Monroe died in 1903, Nicholas moved out of the Prickly Pear Valley to the growing town of Great Falls, Montana. In 1910, he lived on Jackson Street with an African American man named Harry Travis, who had moved to the state from Missouri. The change in Nicholas's life corresponded with larger trends happening in the African American community. While the African American population in Montana increased tenfold, from 183 to 1,834 in the years between 1870 and 1910, their overall portion of the population had dropped from nearly 1 percent to 0.2 percent over those four decades. Furthermore, Great Falls' segregationist policies relegated its approximately two hundred African American citizens to the ten-square-block Southside District. Nicholas does not appear on the municipal census of 1913, but city directories from 1915 and 1918 show him living and working as a cook at a boardinghouse located at 109 7th Street North, which was owned by Henry Monroe's widow, Mary Jane Pepworth Monroe. This house was well north of the Southside District, so Nicholas either received special permission to live there or walked several blocks to work each morning. In 1920, Nicholas, now in his seventies, continued his work at Monroe's boardinghouse.²⁸

Sometime after the summer of 1920, Nicholas's fortunes and health took a downturn. After developing dementia, he left Monroe's employ and moved into the Cascade County Poor Farm. The facility afforded indigent residents of the county a dignified place where they could live out their remaining days while performing menial tasks. A five-acre garden surrounded the three-story brick home situated near the Missouri River, and one can imagine that Nicholas kept up his work preparing food as long as his frail faculties allowed. On May 3, 1923, the forgotten explorer died. Ironically, his death record gave a clearer image of the man than any document made during his life. The county coroner listed Nicholas as five feet, ten inches tall, weighing 160 pounds, with black eyes and gray hair. His age was estimated at eighty-five, which was around ten years older than he likely was. The *Great Falls Tribune* noted on May 5 that the O'Connor Funeral Home would hold a service in his honor before his interment at the potter's field in Calvary Cemetery in Gibson Flats. His exact gravesite remains unknown.²⁹

Learning more about John Butler and his life proved more difficult. His name was common among African American men, and John Butlers of a similar age appear in census records around the nation. Nonetheless, there is only one who was born in



The cone of Castle Geyser captured the imagination of expedition member Walter Trumbull. While several men created sketches documenting the journey, neither of the two African American cooks appears in any of these illustrations.

Walter Trumbull, artist. National Park Service, YNP 03106

Omission of African Americans from the story of the westward expansion of the United States has created a disconnect between the national parks and the constituents they are supposed to serve.

Pennsylvania. Assuming that this is the Yellowstone cook, it appears he did not remain long in the West. Ten years following the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, this John Butler worked as a laborer in the town of Bristol in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The 1900 census noted that he had moved to Philadelphia, been married to a woman named Rebecca since 1862, and fathered a son one year after the expedition. Whether his brief adventure in the West was meant as a means to earn money for his family or undertaken in hopes of creating a permanent home, Montana Territory ultimately offered Butler little incentive to stay, and he soon returned east. Increasing segregation placed undue pressure on African Americans in the territory, most of whom were limited to employment as cooks, ranch hands, household servants, barbers, and porters. A comparison of the 1870 and 1880 censuses reveals that 75 out of 105 African American heads of households left Montana Territory that decade. After 1900, Butler disappeared from the historical record altogether.³⁰

Newton Nicholas and John Butler were but two of the many forgotten individuals in the American West. In spite of their participation in the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, they slipped quietly into the shadows of larger events and personalities. Still, the stories of their lives remain significant. Their trials, struggles, and successes were typical of many African Americans in their situation. Nicholas assimilated into white society and found a niche that supported him throughout his long life. Butler, on the other hand, ultimately found the West unfulfilling. In the end, these two men symbolize the thousands of forgotten African Americans who sought a home in the Rocky Mountain territories during the years following the Civil War only to find that powerful southerners and their northern supporters continued to restrict the civil rights and economic opportunities of racial minorities in the frontier West as elsewhere. The persistence of a belief in white supremacy and the growing desire for postbellum sectional reconciliation further pushed the needs of African Americans into the margins of national politi-

cal discourse. Aiding this process was their exclusion from the histories of this time.³¹

Omission of African Americans from the story of the westward expansion of the United States is more than just a disservice to the historical record; it has created a disconnect between the national parks and the constituents they are supposed to serve. President Barack Obama acknowledged this problem when he established the Reconstruction Era National Monument (now designated a National Historical Park) in Beaufort, South Carolina, in 2017. The park offers an interpretation of “the advance, and then the sometimes-violent rollback, of citizenship rights for African-Americans.” The NPS originally attempted to create the park in 2001, but opposition by groups such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans temporarily sidelined the project. When Obama announced the new park (along with two sites related to the Civil Rights Movement), he declared, “I have sought to build a more inclusive National Park System and ensure that our national parks, monuments and public lands are fully reflective of our nation’s diverse history and culture.”³²

This intention fell in line with NPS goals outlined in a 2011 diversity self-study to dedicate agency resources to racial and ethnic inclusivity. The study found that only 22 percent of park visitors were racial minorities, yet they represented 39 percent of the overall population of the United States at the time. Drawing attention to that disparity during the preparation for the NPS centennial, an editorial in the *New York Times* asked, “Why Are Our Parks So White?”³³

Despite its goals, in 2016, when the United States celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the NPS, park administrators, staff, and public historians remained concerned about the underuse of the system by the nation’s racial minorities. While the NPS has identified a number of reasons for low minority visitation rates, from high admission costs to safety concerns, a general lack of awareness of the agency and its services seemed to be the primary impediment. Among the groups surveyed, African Americans had the lowest per capita attendance,



Inspired by the Washburn expedition's reports, photographer William H. Jackson accompanied the Hayden Geological Survey in 1871 to photograph Yellowstone's otherworldly features, including Jupiter Terrace at Mammoth Hot Springs (above). What Nute Nicholas and Johnny Butler thought of the geysers, bubbling mud pots, and hot springs remains a mystery. Nicholas resided in Montana until his death at the Cascade County Poor Farm in 1923, while Butler disappeared from the public record after 1900. W. H. Jackson, photographer. Library of Congress, 68723u

averaging a mere 7 percent of park patrons compared to their representing 12 percent of the population in 2009. In its self-study, the NPS suggested that rangers identify resources within their respective parks “relevant to interpret stories of African American success.” This has required interpretive staff to reconsider the history of their sites and look for bridges to underserved communities.³⁴ Ultimately, such connections will strengthen the agency, enrich the visitor experience, and broaden all Americans’ understanding of the important, but overlooked, histories of people of color.³⁵ In this light, the roles played by Newton Nicholas and John Butler in the early exploration of Yellowstone represent a cultural and historical link between the NPS and an underserved community that the organization is trying to reach. Undoubtedly, there is still much work to be done.

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Notes

Abbreviations used in the notes include Montana Historical Society Research Center and Archives, Helena (MHS); and *Montana The Magazine of Western History* (Montana). Unless otherwise noted newspapers were published in Montana.

Remembering Yellowstone

(VAN WAGENEN)

1. Aubrey Haines, *The Yellowstone Story: A History of Our First National Park*, 2 vols. (Yellowstone National Park, WY: Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, 1977), 279–89.

2. York's role in the expedition is documented in Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific With Lewis and Clark* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1985); and Darrell M. Millner, "York of the Corps of Discovery: Interpretations of York's Character and His Role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104:3 (Fall 2003): 302–33. Beckwourth dictated his autobiography in 1856. Thomas D. Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout, and Pioneer, and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians. With Illustrations. Written from His Own Dictation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856). See also Elinor Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth: Black Mountain Man and War Chief of the Crows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972). Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 104.

3. The Hayden Geological Survey of 1871, which paved the way for the creation of the national park system, included an African American or Mexican American packer named only as "José." An important study that begins after the establishment of the park is Lee Whittlesey, "A Brief History of Black Americans in the Yellowstone National Park Area, 1872–1907," *Annals of Wyoming* 69:4 (Fall 1997): 13–20. A comprehensive study of the African American experience in the western United States is Taylor's *In Search of the Racial Frontier*. For Montana specifically see Barbara Carol Behan, "Forgotten Heritage: African Americans in the Montana Territory, 1864–1889," *Journal of African American History* 91:1 (Winter 2006): 23–40.

4. For surveys of the Reconstruction era see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); and

Eugene H. Berwanger, *The West and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981). Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 121.

5. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 1:91–101.

6. Haines included a useful survey of the expedition in *The Yellowstone Story*, 1:103–40. There are nine known accounts of the expedition written by participants: Gustavus Doane, *Battle Drums and Geysers; the Life and Journals of Lt. Gustavus Cheyney Doane, Soldier and Explorer of the Yellowstone and Snake River Regions*, eds. Orrin H. Bonney and Lorraine Bonney (Chicago: Sage Books, 1970); Truman Everts, *Lost in the Yellowstone: Truman Everts's Thirty-Seven Days of Peril*, ed. Lee H. Whittlesey (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995); Warren Gillette, "Diary of Warren Caleb Gillette, Aug. 7 to Sept. 27, 1870," SC 243, MHS; Samuel Hauser, "Diary of Samuel T. Hauser, Aug. 17 to Sept. 4, 1870," Coe Collection, mss. no. 249, Bienecke Library, Yale, New Haven, CT; Cornelius Hedges, "Diary of Cornelius Hedges, Jun. 24, 1870, to Oct. 16, 1871," Ace. 2165, Drawer 15, MHS; Nathaniel P. Langford, "Wonders of the Yellowstone," *Scribner's Monthly* 2: 1 & 2 (May and Jun. 1871): 1–17 and 113–28; Nathaniel P. Langford, *Diary of the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition to the Yellowstone and Firehole Rivers in the Year 1870* (St. Paul, MN: J. E. Haynes Co., 1905); Walter Trumbull, "The Washburn Yellowstone Expedition, No. I," *Overland Monthly* 6:5 (May 1871): 431–37; Walter Trumbull, "The Washburn Yellowstone Expedition, No. II," *Overland Monthly* 6:6 (June 1871): 489–96; Henry Dana Washburn, "Journal," original in possession of Lee Parsons, Indianapolis, IN.

7. I explore the social, political, and racial implications of collective memory and amnesia in Michael Scott Van Wagenen, *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S.–Mexican War, 1848–2008* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

8. "African American Populations and Surrounding States." Montana's African American Heritage Resources, <http://svcalt.mt.gov/research/AfricanAmerican/ContiguousStatesPopulation.pdf>.

9. U.S. Census Bureau, Montana Territorial Census of 1870, Jefferson County, Jefferson City: 1; U.S. Census Bureau, Montana Territorial Census of 1870, Madison County, Virginia City: 18. During Family Search's original data extraction of the Montana Territorial Census of 1870,

John's surname "Butler" was incorrectly recorded as "Butter." Although a careful examination of the original census entry shows that the enumerator's distinctive long-stroke "t" crossed through the "l," creating the confusion, many online sources continue to perpetuate this error. The 1870 census is publicly available at www.familysearch.org.

10. Hedges, "Diary," 42.

11. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage & My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 34–35. The classification of race, especially that of multiracial people, remained entirely at the discretion of the census taker. See Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 68.

12. Behan, "Forgotten Heritage," 24; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 103–33.

13. U.S. Census Bureau, Montana Territorial Census of 1870, Jefferson City: 1. The enumeration date was Jul. 18, 1870, approximately one month before the expedition.

14. U.S. Census Bureau, Montana Territorial Census of 1870. A search of U.S. Colored Troops in Civil War records failed to turn up a definitive match for Butler. See Wood, *Black Scare*, 67.

15. See Hedges, "Diary," 42. It is significant to note that Langford himself makes no mention of this in his account. This is not particularly surprising given the tone of his writings, which tend to glamorize his own personal contributions to the expedition. See Langford, *Diary*, 119–20.

16. Langford first recorded this origin story in his 1905 edited journal. See Langford, *Diary*, 117–18. Aubrey Haines first questioned the validity of the account in Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 1:129–30. National Park Service historians Lee Whittlesey and Paul Schullery have since convincingly challenged the "campfire myth"; nonetheless, the legend persists. See Lee Whittlesey and Paul Schullery, "Yellowstone's Creation Myth," *The George Wright Forum* 15:3 (1998): 80–87; Paul Schullery and Lee H. Whittlesey, *Myth and History in the Creation of Yellowstone National Park* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

17. Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "WASHBURN, Henry Dana, 1832–1871," <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biobdisplay.pl?index=W000172>. Lee Parsons is currently writing a biography of Washburn and provided the basic information about

Washburn's political history. Lee Parsons, e-mail message to the author, Nov. 26, 2002.

18. Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 92–111; Berwanger, *The West*, 195–99.

19. Langford's activities earned him a place in nearly all narratives of Montana's vigilante period. He published his memoirs of that turbulent time in 1890. See Nathaniel P. Langford, *Vigilante Days and Ways* (Missoula: University of Montana Press, 1957). Malone et al., *Montana*, 78–82.

20. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 2:448–49.

21. Behan, "Forgotten Heritage," 29. References to the cooks include Langford, "Wonders," 2; Langford, *Diary*, 1; Walter Trumbull, "The Washburn Yellowstone Expedition," *Overland Monthly* 6: 5 & 6 (May & Jun. 1871): 431. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 2:430–38. The participants who did not fight in the Civil War either lived abroad, had already emigrated to the western territories, or had not reached military age.

22. Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 1:105–9; Langford, *Diary*, xii–xiii; W. Turrentine Jackson, "The Washburn-Doane Expedition into the Upper Yellowstone, 1870," *Pacific Historical Review* 10:2 (Jun. 1941): 191–92. The Crow ceded lands in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. Those territorial reductions began to be enforced in 1870, which exacerbated tensions between the Crow and federal authorities. Thomas W. Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliaries with the United States Army, 1860–90* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 39–41. The exploring party actually encountered both Native Americans and rustlers during the expedition. The military presence or general lack of aggression kept the sides from engaging. See Langford, *Diary*, 6 and 12. The members' journals paint a vivid picture of the diverse personalities that made up the group. Some characters seem more heroic while others appear foolhardy. See Langford's diary in particular.

23. Useful summaries of the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition include Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 1:108–34 and Jackson, "The Washburn-Doane Expedition," 189–208.

24. Langford, *Diary*, 6 and 12; *Helena Daily Herald*, Oct. 3, 1870. For naming specifics see Lee H. Whittlesey, *Yellowstone Place Names* (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 1988).

25. His memoirs of the event are recorded in Everts, *Lost in the Yellowstone*.

26. The men who kept journals or wrote memoirs of the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition are Henry Dana Washburn, Nathaniel Langford, Gustavus Doane, Truman C. Everts, Walter Trumbull, Warren Gillette, Samuel Hauser, and Cornelius Hedges. References to the dog and its role in the expedition are found in Langford, *Diary*, 22–23 and Haines, *The Yellowstone Story*, 1:126. Moran's illustrations are printed in Langford, "Wonders," 126 and Langford, *Diary*, 3. For other examples of the whitening of the history of the West see John W. Ravage, *Black Pioneers: Images of the Black Experience on the North American Frontier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997), xvii–xxi, 12; and William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971) 32–33.

27. U.S. Census Bureau, Montana Territorial Census of 1880, Enumeration District 19: 24; U.S. Census Bureau, Montana State Census, 1900, Enumeration District 161: 15; Joaquin Miller, *An Illustrated History of the State of Montana* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1894), 256. In 1900, Nicholas was the only employee left with Monroe.

28. A boom in the coal mining industry created tremendous growth in the town until the 1920s. Malone et al., *Montana*, 241–42, 337–38. U.S. Census Bureau, Montana State Census of 1910, Enumeration District 167: 7; "Mapping Historic Places." Montana's African American Heritage Resources, <https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/AfricanAmericans/Places/Sanborns>; "Montana—Race and Hispanic Origin: 1870–1990," Montana's African American Heritage Resources, https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/shpo/AfricanAmerican/CensusData/MontanaRace_HispanicOrigin1870_1990.pdf; C. E. Hubbard and A. L. Frank, *Municipal Census Directory Company of Great Falls, Montana* (Great Falls, 1913); *Great Falls Montana City Directory 1915*, U.S. City Directories, 1822–1995, Ancestry.com; *Great Falls Montana City Directory 1918*, Ancestry.com; Montana State Census of 1920; Miller, *An Illustrated History*, 256. Monroe kinship was further established by family-submitted pedigree charts at Familysearch.org.

29. Diane Green, "Cascade County Poor Farm," *Treasure State Lines: Great Falls Genealogical Society* 38:1 (May 2013): 2–14; Cascade County Coroner's Book, 343; Cascade County Cemetery Register, Great Falls, MT; *Great Falls*

Tribune, May 5, 1923; T. F. O'Connor Co. Burial Book, 69. O'Connor Funeral Home in Great Falls is still in operation, and I am grateful for the company's willingness to open its records to me.

30. Behan, "Forgotten Heritage," 25–29; U.S. Census Bureau, Pennsylvania State Census of 1880, Enumeration District 129: 23; U.S. Census Bureau, Pennsylvania State Census of 1900, Enumeration District 391: 7; Malone et al., *Montana*, 84–85, 95–98.

31. Malone et al., *Montana*, 110–113; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 604.

32. Jennifer Schuessler, "President Obama Designates First National Monument Dedicated to Reconstruction," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/01/12/arts/president-obama-designates-national-monuments-to-civil-rights-history.html.

33. Patricia A. Taylor, Burke D. Grandjean, and James H. Gramann, *National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public 2008–2009: Racial and Ethnic Diversity of National Park System Visitors and Non-Visitors*, Natural Resource Report NPS/NRSS/SSD/NRR—2011/432 (Washington DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2011); Glenn Nelson, "Why Are Our Parks So White?" *New York Times*, Jul. 10, 2015; other similar examples include Associated Press, "Park Service Celebrates 100 Years, Seeks Minorities' Support," *Boston Herald*, Aug. 24, 2016; Bill Theobald, "Coalition Pushes for More Diversity in National Parks," *USA Today*, May 9, 2016; "National Park Service Hopes to Convince Minorities That This Land Is Their Land, Too," PBS.org, Aug. 24, 2016, www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/park-service-celebrates-100-years-seeks-minorities-support.

34. Taylor et al., *Comprehensive Survey*, 10, 18.

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