Black history matters. This special digital issue of *Montana The Magazine of Western History* focuses on African American history in Montana and the diversity of Black experiences in the West. Well-known African Americans like York, enslaved by William Clark and member of the Corps of Discovery, or country music star Charley Pride spent time in Montana, but it is less famous African Americans who significantly shaped Montana’s history from territorial days into the twenty-first century. African Americans homesteaded, worked in mining camps, wrangled cows, founded businesses, built neighborhoods and cultural institutions, served in the armed forces, raised families, and advocated for civil rights. Black women worked as maids, nurses, and librarians, ran for public office, and formed civic organizations. But, as elsewhere in the United States, they built their communities within the framework of racial inequality inherent to the larger African American experience.

We draw attention to this history with a selection of articles from the past two decades of *Montana The Magazine of Western History* along with excerpts from two MHS Press books, *Beyond Schoolmarms and Madams: Montana Women’s Stories* (2014) and *Border to Border: Historic Quilts and Quiltmakers of Montana* (2009).

This issue opens with a biography of Sarah Gammon Bickford. Born into enslavement, she later became a leading businesswoman in Montana, owning the Virginia City Water Company from 1902 until her sudden death in 1931. In 2012, the State of Montana inducted Bickford into the Gallery of Outstanding Montanans in the Capitol Rotunda. Following this biography, John Langellier’s “Buffalo Soldiers in Big Sky Country, 1888–1898,” examines the history of Black soldiers in Montana, often referred to as “Buffalo Soldiers,” including the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Infantry and the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry. From Fort Missoula to Fort Keogh to San Juan Hill and the Philippines, these troops shaped Montana’s history and that of the world. After their service, many remained in Montana and built dynamic Black communities.

Next are the stories of two notable women homesteaders who left indelible marks on their rural communities. Agnes “Annie” Morgan homesteaded near Philipsburg in the early 1890s, and her cabin is now owned by the U.S. Forest Service as the Morgan-Case Homestead. Bertie Brown settled near Lewistown in 1898 and filed a homesteading claim near Brickyard Creek in 1907, proving up in 1912. She raised chickens, grew vegetables, and distilled a county-famous moonshine reputed for its quality even during Prohibition.

Helena’s Black community, largely built by retired Buffalo Soldiers and their families, flourished during the early twentieth century. Anthony Wood explores their contributions in “After the West Was Won: How African American Buffalo Soldiers Invigorated the Helena Community in Early Twentieth-Century Montana,” arguing that soldiers who mustered out at Fort Harrison helped build the economic and social fabric of the city into the 1930s through newspapers, businesses, social clubs, and pressure for equal rights. At its height in the early twentieth century, over four hundred African Americans lived in Helena, most of whom worked in the service economy. A variety of factors drew most Black residents away from Helena by the 1940s.

We follow this article with three short pieces on women. Mamie Anderson Bridgewater came to Helena after marrying Samuel Bridgewater, a Buffalo Soldier. She worked as a matron at the Fort Harrison Veterans Hospital. Octavia, their daughter, became a nurse and, during World War II, joined the Army Nurse Corps, earning the rank of first lieutenant. Bridgewater returned to Helena after the war and...
worked in St. Peter’s Hospital’s maternity depart-
ment until her retirement in the 1960s. Octavia also
served as the treasurer of the Montana Federation of
Colored Women’s Clubs beginning in 1971. Formed
in 1921, the Colored Women’s Clubs sought “to
courage true womanhood” and to “promote inter-
est in social uplift,” with the cause of civil rights as
their main mission. Finally, Emma Louise Riley Smith
was a well-known and talented quiltmaker. Born in
Arkansas, she moved to Liberia with her family as a
young girl. She returned to the United States, first
making her way to Butte and then living in Lewistown
and Great Falls. Several of her quilts are in the Mon-
tana Historic Quilts Project collection of the Montana
Historical Society, and her quilts are featured as part
of this digital issue.

The next article, “Born to Be Published: Ivan
Doig and Taylor Gordon” by Laura Ferguson, dis-
cusses the life of singer E. Taylor Gordon from White
Sulphur Springs, who went on to a musical career
during the Harlem Renaissance and then published a
memoir of his life, Born to Be. In the late 1960s, Mont-
ana author Ivan Doig interviewed Taylor Gordon
and later used details of Gordon’s life as a basis for
a character in his novel Prairie Nocturne. After Gor-
don’s death in 1971, Doig ensured that the family’s
papers were archived at the Montana Historical
Society. Gordon’s sister, Rose, had a less public but
equally fascinating life as a business owner, nurse and
physiotherapist, talented singer, and prolific writer
for the Meagher County News. Rose Gordon offered
numerous memorial tributes to the citizens of White
Sulphur Springs and was known as White Sulphur
Springs’s “heart and historian.” A short biography
of Jacobs is included in this special issue, and MHS Press is publishing a biography of Rose,
A Black Woman’s West: The Life of Rose B. Gordon by
Michael Johnson in 2021.

Many Montana cities had thriving Black commu-
nities, and Great Falls was no exception. Two articles
highlight this history. Alma Smith Jacobs was born in
Lewistown, and her family moved to Great Falls. She
attended Talladega College and Columbia University,
earning bachelor’s degrees in sociology and library
science. She returned to Great Falls and eventually
became the head librarian of the Great Falls Public
Library, before becoming the Montana State Librar-
ian in 1973. Her sister, Lucille Smith Thompson, was
a reference librarian at Montana State University,
and together they co-authored a catalog of resources
biography of Jacobs is Ken Robison’s “Breaking
Racial Barriers: ‘Everyone’s Welcome’ at the Ozark
Club, Great Falls, Montana’s African American Night-
club,” which describes the history of the Ozark Club
in the Southside district of Great Falls, a “Colored”
social club that opened in 1909. During Prohibition,
the Ozark Club served soft drinks above the table and
alcohol with a wink and a nod, while offering gam-
bling on the side. As Great Falls’s Black population
expanded with World War II, the Ozark Club saw a
rise in patronage, operating under the motto “Every-
one’s Welcome,” catering to an interracial crowd, and
featuring a talented house band. The Ozark Club was
a pivotal space for community formation and took
the lead in welcoming everyone in the community,
building ties throughout the city.

To conclude, Kate Hampton of the State His-
torical Preservation Office reports on the past fifteen
years of Montana’s African American Heritage
Resources Project and its future. Two historiographic
essays consider the state of the field of Western
African American History, with Quintard Taylor’s
classic 1996 essay, “From Esteban to Rodney King:
Five Centuries of African American History in the
West,” arguing for the place of Black history in New
Western history. Herbert Ruffin II demonstrates the
fruitfulness of that approach and updates us on the
state of the field in “African Americans in Western
Historiography Since 2000,” discussing new works,
directions, and goals for historians today.

While reminiscing about her life in White Sulphur
Springs from 1883 to 1968, Rose Gordon wrote, “It is
a great adventure to be born with dark skin.” Beyond
remembering Black individuals who called Montana
home, this issue is an invitation for students, research-
ers, and historians to delve more deeply into African
American history in Montana and the West, a history
too often overlooked and undervalued. As Michael
Van Wagenen wrote in his Summer 2020 Montana
article, “Undoubtedly, there is still much work to
be done.”

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