



Bruce A. Glasrud, ed. *Brothers to the Buffalo Soldiers: Perspectives on the African American Militia and Volunteers, 1865-1917*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011. viii + 246 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1904-6.

Reviewed by Jennifer Keene

Published on H-SHGAPE (April, 2012)

Commissioned by Julia Irwin

Uncovering the Unknown Soldier: Black Militias, 1865-1917

Too often original and innovative work published in lesser-known journals receives little attention from scholars. *Brothers to the Buffalo Soldiers* does a great service to the field of African American military history by assembling a host of articles originally published in state-oriented history journals that detail the experiences of black militias between 1865 and 1917. Individually, these articles originally appeared as case studies that illuminated an unknown part of a state's history or military history. Collectively, however, they make a strong case that historians have erred in focusing exclusively on the experiences black regular army troops, the "buffalo soldiers" mentioned in the title. What emerges from these essays is a new appreciation for the important role that black militias played in their communities. Their public, uniformed presence challenges the conventional view that blacks were immediately marginalized once Reconstruction ended. Instead black militias, local military organizations political in origin and purpose, thrived throughout the South until the turn of the century.

Unfortunately, the anthology gets off to a slow start by beginning with the volume's two weakest components—the introduction, and the article by Otis A. Singletary. Rather than outlining the main themes and arguments and synthesizing the array of articles to follow, Glasrud settles for the unsatisfying approach of simply summarizing the main points of each individual essay. This leaves it solely to the reader to draw connections and trace the evolution of the field over time, the contradictions or tensions among the various essays, and possibilities for future research. This poses an immediate problem with the selection of Singletary's as the opening essay. Singletary was a pioneer in drawing attention to the existence of black militias during the Reconstruction era, and for this reason alone deserves inclusion in the volume. His sources, however, came primarily from white accounts, which colored the conclusions he drew

about the role the militias played as "an aggressive political instrument" in breaking up "political rallies of the opposition" (p. 25). The bigger issue is that Singletary concludes that black militias, as law enforcement arms of Radical Reconstruction southern state governments, died out when Reconstruction ended. The rest of the essays that follow essentially contradict this conclusion, demonstrating that black militias continued to thrive in parts of the South until the turn of the century. This is not to argue against the inclusion of Singletary's essay but to suggest instead that the volume would be better served by an introduction that instructed the reader on where to place the Singletary article in the evolving historiography on the subject.

The subsequent essays reveal the amazing vitality and variety evident in the black militias that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Roger D. Cunningham points out in his essay on black volunteers in Virginia, "by the mid-1880s, the militia of nineteen states and the District of Columbia, including every former Confederate state except Arkansas, incorporated black units" (p. 34). In contrast to the Reconstruction era, when black state militias were created as protective forces for unpopular state governments, these subsequent black militias thrived because they served as mostly ceremonial, fraternal units. "Democratic control of southern state governments apparently reduced fears of black militiamen," and boosters of the New South also championed their formation to usher in a new era of peaceful racial relations, Alwyn Barr argues in "Black Militia of the New South: Texas" (p. 74). Reading through the case studies of black militia units in Virginia, Texas, Illinois, Alabama, and North Carolina reveals some surprising details about black political engagement in the post-Reconstruction era. In some localities blacks had obtained enough political clout to lobby successfully for the creation and maintenance of black militias. It is not

too surprising to learn that factions of the Democratic and Republican parties courted the black vote in the Chicago area. These essays reveal, however, that the pre-*Plessy v. Ferguson* black vote was considered important enough in Alabama, North Carolina, and Kansas to lead to the formation of black militias. As Marvin Fletcher points out, “local political conditions had a great deal to do with how many blacks could serve, and at what level in the command structure” (p. 140). In Richmond, for example, the election of the *Richard Planet* newspaper editor John Mitchell to the city council paved the way to secure funds for an armory for the city’s black militia.

These essays tackle the question of what motivated black men to join these peacetime units (social status, camaraderie, desire to exhibit manly vigor, the chance to hold a commission, obtaining skills for community self-defense, keeping alive the Civil War military experience). Community support from both blacks and whites was essential to their success. Black militias engaged in almost constant fundraising to pay for uniforms, armories, arms, and training facilities within the black community. They also needed to avoid unduly antagonizing whites, who continued to harbor doubts about black men receiving training in firearms. The black militia’s official duties mostly involved public drilling and marching in celebratory parades (usually behind white units). Only rarely did law enforcement officials use them to control public disturbances, and always in the black community. Taking part in the civic rituals of their communities enabled black men to assert their membership in the body politic and was a way to press forward the claim for civil rights throughout the South by taking an active part in public life. “African Americans demonstrated their belief that equality of military service would carry with it equal access to the public space in which to act out one form of responsible citizenship and disciplined manhood—the formal parade down city streets,” asserts Eleanor L. Hannah in “A Place in the Parade: Citizenship, Manhood, and African American Men in the Illinois National Guard, 1870-1917” (p. 87).

The second part of the anthology focuses on the experiences of black volunteers during the Spanish-American War, flushing out a portrait of black military participation that usually highlights the role of black regular army troops. The survey article by Marvin Fletcher provides a solid overview, pointing out that Massachusetts went so far as to integrate a black company into the volunteer regiment it raised. William Gatewood examines the

debate among black Kansans over whether they should fight as part of a segregated army, with some viewing “an independent Cuba as a haven for black Americans desirous of finding economic opportunities and relief from racial discrimination” (p. 174). Securing commissions for black officers became a key point of contention throughout the Spanish-American War. In Richmond, for instance, Mitchell organized a “no officers, no fight” campaign in the pages of the *Richmond Plant*, a plea that led to near mutinous conditions in the Sixth Virginia. At the same time, faulty racial notions facilitated the creation of black volunteer “immune” regiments to occupy Cuba. Black and white leaders erroneously believed that African Americans had a natural resistance to malaria and yellow fever, an mistaken view that sent thousands of black soldiers to Cuba under white officers, where hundreds fell ill and some died. When the war ended African Americans were sorely disappointed in their efforts to use valiant wartime military service to reverse the downward spiral in racial tensions at home.

To a certain extent, black militia units thrived when only the local community was involved. The Spanish-American War thrust the national spotlight onto these units. The bad press given to the few instances of troubles within black militia units, along with the overall rise of Jim Crow laws, lynching, and hardening of racial animosities, spelled the death knell for most black militia by the early twentieth century.

These case studies illustrate the innovative piecemeal work underway to uncover the black militia experience. These essays focus primarily on the local histories, not the national story, that required intense detective work within city and state archives to unearth. While interesting on their own merits, their value for historians of the Gilded Age, New South, and African American history lies primarily in the larger pattern of black political participation they reveal. In this sense, these essays form part of a new wave of scholarship that is challenging the notion that all black political and civic participation ceased after Reconstruction. Works by Jane Dailey, Kevin Gaines, Glenda Gilmore, Grace Hale, Martha Hodes, and Robin D. G. Kelley have begun reformulating our views of the New South and Gilded Age as an era of ongoing black political participation amid racial violence and economic disempowerment. Black militias are an important part of that story, and this collection of essays should stimulate future research into this long-neglected aspect of black community life.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Jennifer Keene. Review of Glasrud, Bruce A., ed., *Brothers to the Buffalo Soldiers: Perspectives on the African American Militia and Volunteers, 1865-1917*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. April, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33096>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.