

African American Involvement in World War I ^[1]

The Great War and Global Change

by Sarajane Davis, North Carolina Government & Heritage Library, 2020

What were some of the key components shaping African American life in NC in the early twentieth century?

The beginning of the twentieth century is often referred to as the nadir of U.S. race relations. The nadir refers to the lowest point in a person or organization's existence. Many historians use nadir to describe the worst period in African American history. Some identify this period as the end of the 1800s through the early 1900s. For African Americans, this was a period of intense racial violence and few opportunities for economic and educational security.

In the rural South, many African Americans were tenant farmers and sharecroppers. It was common for landowners to refuse to give African Americans an equal part of the profits earned from the crops they harvested. Individuals and families began migrating to cities for better economic opportunities. In North Carolina, this looked like African Americans relocating from rural parts of the state. Some people moved to cities like Durham to work in tobacco factories. Although there was still economic inequality there was the hope of better prospects.

However, the country and the world changed in 1914. On July 28th World War I, also known as the Great War, started. For the first two years, the United States pledged to remain neutral. In the early part of 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked congress to declare war on Germany. He cited Germany's military activity in the Atlantic ocean and the destruction of U.S. ships. On April 6, 1917, the U.S. officially entered the war.

What were some of the ways African Americans contributed to the war effort at home and abroad? What conditions did African Americans return home to in the United States?

African Americans contributed to the war efforts in many ways at home and abroad. There were over 380,000 African American soldiers in the entire U.S. military. A quarter, or 25%, of the 86,000 North Carolinians who served in World War I were African Americans. They fought in segregated troops and dealt with prejudice within the Army. For some this included having to do labor duties like cleaning up after other soldiers. White officers discriminated against and hurled racial slurs African American soldiers.

At home, African Americans made significant economic contributions to The Great War. Many individuals and families purchased war bonds to support the military effort. African Americans also provided crucial labor in factories. African Americans working in tobacco factories kept North Carolina's main industry operational.

The war ended on November 11, 1918, what is now called Armistice Day. African Americans likely expected to return home to a more equal society. Some may have believed that their sacrifices in the war would guarantee more citizenship rights than before. Instead, they found increased racial tensions when they returned to the United States. African Americans remained disenfranchised and unable to take part in political processes. The African American community endured segregation and the threat of racial violence.

World War I was a significant turning point in modern global history. There was great loss of life and the war reordered global politics. For African Americans, the end of the war showed the limits of democracy in the United States. African Americans did not accept the continued abuse and dehumanization. The injustice inspired the next wave of the African

American freedom struggle. It led to the birth and development of the New Negro generation. This generation of activists fought for racial equality throughout the 1920s and 1930s. They prioritized economic rights and better paying jobs. They wanted access to better education opportunities. These activists elevated African American culture and worked to stop racial violence.

Concluding questions:

- *What protections or privileges do you think should be available to war veterans?*
- *What can you and your classmates do to honor veterans from past wars?*
- *How might you all be able to support all veterans today?*

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People:



Lieutenant James Timothy "Tim" Brymn ^[7]

WWI Soldier, Musician, and Jazz Composer, from Kinston, N.C.

First Lieutenant James William Alston ^[8]

Graduate of the first class of African American Army Officers trained at Fort Dodge, IA in WWI, from Raleigh, N.C.

For Teachers:

African American Soldiers In World War I ^[9]

Lesson Plan

Edsitement

Fighting for the Right to Fight ^[10]

Middle School Classroom Guide

National WWII Museum

The Experiences of African Americans in World War I ^[11]

Lesson Plan

The Ohio State University Teaching Institute

Primary Sources:

RETURNING SOLDIERS



WE are returning from war!
THE CRISIS and tens of
thousands of black men
were drafted into a great
struggle. For bleeding France and
what she means and has meant and
will mean to us and humanity and
against the threat of German race ar-
rogance, we fought gladly and to the
last drop of blood; for America and
her highest ideals, we fought in far-
off hope; for the dominant southern
oligarchy entrenched in Washington,
we fought in bitter resignation. For
the America that represents and
gloats in lynching, disfranchisement,
caste, brutality and devilish insult—

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[12] "Returning Soldier" [12]

Editorial by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Crisis*, May 1919

African American Soldiers in World War I [13]

Primary Source Set and Teaching Guide

Digital Public Library of America

Blacks in the Military [14]

Primary Sources from the National Archives

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