

The Education and Training of Seven African American U.S. Army Officers for World War I and its Aftermath

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"...It was the inspiration and influence of the University of Illinois that led me into the study of law. It was here that I made the lone dissent by Justice John M. Harlan in Plessy v. Ferguson my cause celebre... (Blakely & Shepard, 2006, p. 19-20)"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educational history is helpful for academics because the past contains examples for applying theory in the classroom. Academics can easily use theorists like Michele Foucault and Karl Marx to discuss concepts of power and alienation in the classroom and further discussions about modern society. For example, by using the lived experiences depicted in memoirs and biographies of African Americans (known as Black Americans) for this study, these theoretical concepts can become more personal and less abstract, especially when discussing American segregation of the late 19th and early 20th century. By narrowing the focus to World War I, academics can further highlight the impacts of segregation in a wartime environment. This perspective can include both civilian education and U.S. Army military training to illustrate the accumulation or construction of knowledge required by African Americans to survive the war and its aftermath. The segregation of this era is not limited to African Americans; examples in this study also come from other societies like the French segregationist treatment of their colonial peoples. Using history to enhance current events enables students to understand the background behind the events, similar to genealogists studying a family tree to discover links to the present.

INTRODUCTION

Before this research, there was little readily available information on what Black American civilian volunteers and former noncommissioned officers endured at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, to become commissioned U.S. Army infantry and medical officers for World War I. The significance of this research is that the month-by-month events depicted at the infantry and medical Officer Training Camps at Fort Des Moines in 1917 helped fill this lack of information by highlighting the challenges faced by the men who lived through the U.S. Army experiment to train Black officers. The experiment was to see if Black Americans, long stigmatized as inferior, second-class citizens, possessed the ability to lead troops in the complex environment of military combat operations without direct U.S. Army White commissioned officer supervision as previously practiced. The research focuses on seven Black Americans: John Brother Cade, Earl Burrus Dickerson, William Holmes Dyer, Charles Hamilton Houston, George Washington Lee, James Brad Morris, and Louis Thompkins Wright. The seven gentlemen received attention in this study due to large amount of surviving historical artifacts they left behind about their experiences before, during, and after the war.

The research study argues that by building upon or scaffolding their U.S. Army training on their prior college education, the seven could overcome the hegemony of White American power of oppression and alienation to become U.S. Army officers and influential community leaders after the war. For example, the most famous of the seven, Charles Hamilton Houston, became a lawyer after the war and accomplished the groundwork

to overturn the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court decision with the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision ending Federally recognized segregation in American schools. The Plessy case provided the legal foundation for the segregationist environment the seven contended with throughout their lives. Their success allowed them to personify W. E. B. Du Bois' touted Talented Tenth concept. The talented tenth was the idea that the top ten percent of Black Americans armed with a liberal arts education would lead the remainder of the race forward into greater prosperity. The research is essential to the academic discussion of the era because it provides specific details into the lived experiences of seven men that academics can provide their students as examples of the impact of segregationist policies that still directly link to the modern world. In addition, the material on other militaries the seven interacted with, like French colonial troops, provides comparative examples of discriminatory practices outside the United States.

METHODS

Readily available information lightly touched on how the camps functioned without much detail on the military training environment the over one-thousand Black American volunteers endured to become commissioned U.S. Army officers in 1917. To rediscover this environment the study examined the civilians who attended both camps. Historical artifacts left behind narrowed the focus to seven specific graduates of both camps, who left the most surviving information in the form of memoirs and biographies. After consulting literature about how other historical figures are presented in published works, a historical narrative format emerged as the best way to present this research.

Examination of the seven gentlemen picked for the study expanded to their college and medical school education before Fort Des Moines. This research, grounded in primary source historical artifacts like existing college catalogs from 1914-1917, soon revealed a common thread: a lack of funding was a direct result of segregationist policies experienced by each of the seven regardless of their family economic background. As the segregated minority, Black Americans were pushed by the power of White society into an environment of limited opportunities. The limitation arose from not being allowed to compete within the larger American society and only work within the Black community. Therefore, even with a college education, a Black person rarely found ways to continue practicing their newly earned college skills to make enough money to improve their standard of living. Using this system, segregationists maintained a status quo against Black Americans to keep them economically depressed. Research turned to why these segregationist policies flourished in America. The answer for this study was the 1896 Supreme Court decision in Plessy vs. Ferguson allowing states to segregate their populations based on race.

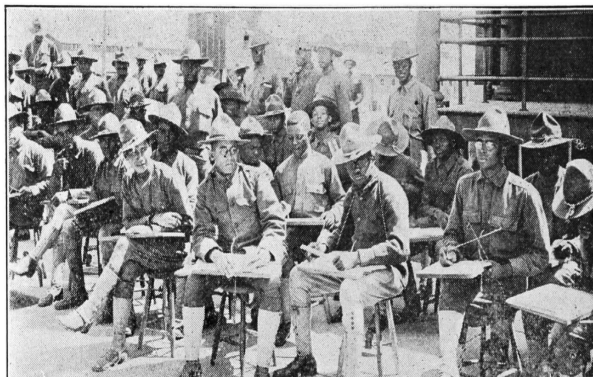
Further research on limited funding and Plessy revealed why Black Americans considered becoming involved in World War I. The reason that emerged was the chance to earn respect as first-class and not second-class citizens in American society and improve their standard of living by becoming members of the elite U.S. Army officers corps. Previously, only a few Black Americans attended West Point to earn commissions and become part of this select group. However, organizations like the NAACP recognized the need for more officers to satisfy the command-and-control requirements of the expanding U.S. Army for World War I that West Point could not provide. The NAACP, therefore, began promoting the idea of commissioning more Black officers to command Black troops negating the old

"The curriculum at Fort Des Moines was tough. Both academics and physical training demanded a maximum effort... (Morris, 1999, p 36)"

policy of White officers commanding Black troops. The campaign for more Black officers touted by the NAACP and others gave birth to the experiment conducted by the U.S. Army to see if a larger group of Black Americans could receive training to command troops in combat.

The result of the campaign and the location for the experiment was the infantry and medical Officer Training Camps at Fort Des Moines. To satisfy the information requirements of the study,

research trips within the United States revealed the detailed month-by-month activities of life at Fort Des Moines for the seven featured gentlemen. These trips included visits to the United States National Archives collection in Maryland, the United States Military Academy Archives and Special



This image appears to depict a group of Fort Des Moines Infantry Training Camp Seventeenth Provisional Training Regiment (17th PTR) candidates participating in an outdoor classroom environment. This image is in the public domain. (Thompson, 1917, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/>)

Collections in West Point, New York, and the Kautz Family YMCA Archives at the University of Minnesota. These trips also revealed why so many men left the camp voluntarily and why the number of men who started and graduated, previously thought to be fixed, is actually controversial, with multiple sources stating different information. Research turned to what happened to the men after graduating and joining the elite commissioned officer ranks. Again, research trips to the State Historical Society of Iowa Museum along with the National World War I Museum and Memorial and overseas to the museums and monuments around Verdun, France, revealed the necessary insight of how these officers worked with their new draftee troops. This insight highlighted how the U.S. Army training program for World War I had to change to a more hands-on equipment manipulation process because of the large amount of new industrialized equipment entering the war compared to previous wars like trucks, tanks, artillery and aircraft. To use this new equipment the U.S. Army needed literate civilians they could train to be military problem-solvers. The study therefore, examined how the U.S. Army used psychological testing to determine literacy rates of draftees entering service and the fitness of commissioned officers to continue their service in the Army. Memoirs and biographies of the seven filled in any missing areas in the historical narrative, including their combat service in the trenches of France and activities after the war in their respective contributions to American society. A result of the research revealed that by becoming members of the officer's corps, the seven earned enough social capital or clout within both the Black and White communities to overcome some aspects of segregationist discrimination and have a voice in the future of American society. The most famous of the contributions was by Charles Hamilton Houston, who embodied the talented tenth concept by laying the groundwork for the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that overturned the American segregationist schooling policies of Plessy vs. Ferguson.

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, this research brought together over 100 primary and 120 secondary sources to help bridge the gap of previously limited information and provide a deeper understanding of Black American lives before, during, and after World War I. The information presented is grounded in historical artifacts covering significant aspects of the lived experiences of the seven featured gentlemen. The research highlights how they dealt with the segregationist laws and policies of the time in

"...a common citizenship is the rock foundation on which we must build—in that common citizenship, discrimination based on color and class must disappear...in that common citizenship the great democratic hopes of the past 150 years must be realized and accomplished... ("Executive," 1959, p. 2)"

both their civilian and military careers. The information is not comprehensive, so it is not leading to any established truth. Instead, it presents the information in a narrative format for readers and academics to construct their knowledge and draw relevant examples as background for any discussion concerning contemporary societal issues. The importance of this research filling a knowledge gap is acknowledged by both the U.S. Army Center for Military History and the National World War I Museum and Memorial who requested copies of this study.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a few recommendations for academics reading this material. First, as stated, please use the material as examples to illustrate the impact of segregationist policies on any minority group. Black Americans are not the only example presented; French colonial practices during this period also exemplify the effects of segregationist discrimination. Second, historians and museum curators can use the material to improve their displays depicting Black American life during the period. For example, the information presented for the 92nd Division can help create or enhance interactive maps of the movements of the division in France. Finally, genealogists can use this information to continue their research into the lives and accomplishments of the seven or others presented in the study to develop a more detailed picture of the past. A final thought is the preservation of historical documents. This research made it apparent that more needs to be done with archival preservation because some paper material utilized in the study crumbled to the touch. Local libraries and museum archives need support to digitize documents for future generations to enjoy.

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