**North Carolinians and the Great War**

**North Carolinians and the Great War: The Impact of World War I on the Tar Heel State**

**Introduction to the Home Front**

**II. African Americans**

To this generation of African Americans, World War I provided an important opportunity to prove to white America their worth as citizens and thus their moral claim to more rights and opportunities. Like many African Americans in North Carolina, William James Edwards and Robert Russa Moton, two black Alabamans, for example, viewed the war in such terms. Beyond the question of race, black North Carolinians were as patriotic as their white neighbors and ready to commit to the war effort.

African Americans served their state and nation both at home and abroad during the war. A few prominent black North Carolinians felt it was hypocritical, however, for African Americans to sacrifice to make the world safe for democracy while forced to endure Jim Crow conditions at home. At the beginning of the war, some white editorialists worried that German spies might use similar arguments to stir up disloyalty amongst the African American population. The state's black leaders quickly dispelled such fears, however. Instead, they rallied their communities to conserve already scarce resources and to dip into already meager savings to help the war effort. In fact, Kate M. Herring, the director of Publicity for the North Carolina War Savings Committee noted that black North Carolinians "have bought and have pledged to buy War Savings Stamps far more extensively in comparison with their ability than the white people."

African American labor also contributed to the war effort and tried, with limited success, to use the war to better their economic lot. Black men and women helped to keep North Carolina's tobacco factories running during the war. They also tried to obtain better, higher paying jobs in textile mills, shipyards, and other war industries that had been vacated for the duration of the war by white men. Long-standing practices of occupational segregation and discrimination, however, hampered black advancement.

Black workers usually found little sympathy from the new government agencies that were supposed to ensure fair treatment of all wartime workers. In eastern North Carolina, the state and federal governments instituted a kind of forced labor system on African American farm workers. A new "Work or Fight" program required black women and any black men unfit for military service to work for whichever white farmer or planter local officials assigned them to for whatever wage the employer deemed fit.

In addition to their economic contribution to the war effort, African American men accounted for nearly one-quarter of North Carolina's military role (142,505 of the 480,491 men registered for the draft in the state and 20,350 of the 86,457 Tar Heels mustered into service.) The fact that these numbers roughly parallel the African American percentage of the population suggests that local Selective Service boards were not so discriminatory in their application of the draft as they were in the Deep South. There, local draft boards sometimes protected white men by registering black draftees in their place.

Both the U.S. Army and Navy relegated black servicemen to segregated companies commanded by white officers. African American troops also endured the added burdens of the Army's discriminatory supply and pay policies.

The experience of World War I changed the African American community and race relations across the country, and to a lesser extent in North Carolina and the South, over the next decade. After the Armistice in November 1918, many African Americans heeded W. E. B. DuBois' charge not just to return from fighting, but to "return fighting" against Southern racism. At an Emancipation Day ceremony in Raleigh in January 1919, a crowd of 3,000 passed resolutions condemning lynching and attacking segregation. Through the 1920s, the annual commemorations of emancipation as well as the Armistice ending World War I remained occasions for rallies. Editorials in the black press in Durham and Raleigh frequently called for improvements in, if not an end to, the Jim Crow system.

White North Carolinians listened with concern to the outbursts of black protests after the War, but they managed to preserve both white supremacy and the myth that black North Carolinians were contented with legal segregation and Jim Crow. North Carolina's postwar reconsideration of racial relations and racial policy took place in the context of the nationwide "Red Scare" between 1918 and 1921, touched off by fears of communist and foreign subversion.

North Carolina did not experience the waves of abuse of black veterans and lynching of black men that swept across the South and, with one notable exception, was spared the race riots that erupted elsewhere in the country at the end of the war. The exception occurred in Winston-Salem on November 17, 1918. A white female textile worker claimed she had been raped and beaten by black man. Police apprehended a suspect; an out-of-town vagrant, who protested his innocence. As was the pattern in such cases across the South, a white lynch mob converged on the jail intent on meting out their own rough justice. The beleaguered constables found an unusual and unwanted ally in a contingent of armed black men who rushed in to fend off the white mob. In the ensuing riot, five men were killed and several black businesses and homes were destroyed. The Forsyth County Home Guard, bolstered by Home Guards from around the state, intervened after a few days to restore order. The black vagrant survived and was proven innocent.

For the most part, after World War I, local race relations and racial policy in North Carolina were determined, as they had been before the war, by the "better classes" of both races; black and white businessmen, educators, and civic leaders who would meet to ensure that the channels of civil communication and white philanthropy remained open, while the underlying structure of segregation and discrimination remained intact. It would take another world war in the 1940s to widen the cracks in that foundation and the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s to tear down the edifice of segregation, discrimination and disfranchisement.

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