

LVHS History Notes – February 2025

Lancaster's Black Servicemen in World War I

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During World War I, African Americans comprised about 10% of the U.S. population and about 13% of the Armed Forces. Approximately 370,000 African Americans served in segregated military units, mostly in supply, construction, and other support roles. When the U.S. entered the war in April 1917, there were four established all-Black regular Army regiments accepting enlistments mainly into labor and service battalions. In late 1917, the Army's only World War I Black combat units, the 92nd and 93rd Divisions, were formed and about 40,000 men ultimately fought in France. African Americans were allowed to serve only in limited positions in the Navy and Coast Guard such as cooks, stewards, and coal room workers and they were completely barred from the Marines.

The Lancaster Virginia Historical Society (LVHS) has identified 366 World War I veterans from Lancaster County, including 127 African Americans. These Black servicemen, most under age 30, were generally assigned to service battalions, the Pioneer Infantry, Depot Brigades, or the Quartermaster Corps, regardless of their prior careers or training. The stateside and warfront work of these units included setting up camps, cooking meals, digging trenches, clearing battlefields, constructing fortifications, building and repairing roads, bridges, and railways, and loading, unloading, and transporting massive amounts of supplies.

LVHS has copies from the Library of Virginia of questionnaires from the 1919 Virginia War History Commission that were completed by 15 of Lancaster's Black servicemen, providing information about these men and their experiences. Most were single and only one of the married men had children. Very few had gone to school past the eighth grade and some had no formal schooling at all. The majority were farmers, oystermen, or fishermen, although a few were industrial laborers. Nearly all of them were sent overseas.

These are some examples of the survey questions and answers:

Q: What was your attitude toward military service in general and toward your call in particular?

A: "I felt it was my duty and didn't have any hesitancy in going." Presley Burrell, Bertrand, fisherman and oysterman; Private, Army Engineers (colored), Service Battalion at Camp Humphreys VA.

Q: What were the effects of camp experiences in the United States upon yourself—mental and physical?

A: "Made a man of me." Frank Corbin, Millenbeck, oysterman; Private, Army Engineers (colored), Service Battalion cement worker at a camp in England.

Q: What were the effects upon yourself of your overseas experience?

A: "It made me feel as if I ever reach home that I would know how to treat it." John J. Webster, Mollusk and Millenbeck, concrete worker and fisherman; Private, Army Engineers (colored), Service Battalion Cook in France.

Q: If you took part in the fighting, what impressions were made upon you by this experience?

A: "That it was necessary but an awful duty." Vivian Grimes, Millenbeck, oysterman and farmer; Private 1st Class, Artillery (colored) in Argonne, France.

A: "It made me aspire to higher ideals." Garfield Jackson, Millenbeck, oysterman; Private, Army Engineers (colored), Service Battalion in France.

Q: What has been the effect of all these experiences as contrasted with your state of mind before the war?

A: "Nothing more than the memory of those days and scenes." Eddie Jones, Ottoman, farmer and oysterman; Private, Army Engineers (colored), Service Battalion, stationed in Swanscombe, Kent, England when German war-planes attacked.

To learn more about this research, or if you have veteran information to share, please contact the LVHS Dunton Library for Genealogy and History at LancasterVaHistory.org or 804-462-7280.



World War I soldiers James Oliver Brown, Eddie Jones, and Elegers F. Sydnor of Lancaster County

Photos courtesy of Library of Virginia, Virginia War History Commission Collection
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