ABSTRACT

O'CONNOR, KAITLIN ROSE TRAINOR. "Jim Crow & G.I. Joe: The 54th Coast Artillery Regiment in North Carolina." (Under the direction of Dr. David Zonderman).

In October and November 1941, the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment trained along the sandy remains of Confederate Fort Fisher. Today, North Carolina Historic Sites preserves and interprets Fort Fisher's Civil War and World War II history. Interpretation of this all-Black unit centers on their regimental motto: Per Ardua or "Through Difficulties." Historians at the site cultivate an inspiring story of African American soldiers overcoming military obstacles and the burdens of Jim Crow regulations. Through difficulties the regiment flourished. My research reveals a more complicated history. The 54th Regiment indeed exceeded military expectations for Black troops, however, segregation laws and difficulty of their assignment were not the biggest obstacles to the soldiers. Racism became the chief burden for the 54th Coast Artillerymen in North Carolina.

For nine months, white and Black people exchanged blows on a home front racial war in the Lower Cape Fear region. White soldiers, officers, policemen, elected politicians, and civilians perceived this Black combat unit as a threat to the racial order. They utilized politics, law enforcement, media, and violence to uphold their values of segregation, inequality, and white supremacy. African American soldiers and their civilian allies challenged racial stereotypes and countered physical and verbal abuse. They endeavored to create *their* vision of democracy, one that stretched beyond the ballot box and afforded dignity, opportunity, and respect for all.

The history of civil rights activism by the 54th Coast Artillerymen creates a richer, more accurate story of progress and pushback in the long struggle for racial justice within our nation. "Jim Crow & G.I. Joe: The 54th Coast Artillery Regiment in North Carolina" provides a

foundation for new interpretations of wartime activism and resistance. This study also invites public historians at Fort Fisher State Historic Site to reimagine how they can leverage this regiment's history in a broader discussion of both civil rights activism and the perfection of our democratic society.

© Copyright 2023 by Kaitlin O’Connor

All Rights Reserved

Jim Crow & G.I. Joe: The 54th Coast Artillery Regiment in North Carolina

by
Kaitlin O'Connor

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Public History

Raleigh, North Carolina
2023

APPROVED BY:

Dr. David Zonderman
Committee Chair

Dr. Alicia McGill

Dr. Katherine Mellen Charron

DEDICATION

To the patriots who voice the necessary questions about who we are as a people.

"In the days ahead we must not consider it unpatriotic to raise certain basic questions about our national character." -Martin Luther King, Jr.[1]

---

[1] Martin Luther King, Jr, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 141.

BIOGRAPHY

Kaitlin O’Connor grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. As an undergraduate student at N.C. State University, Kaitlin interned at Fort Fisher State Historic Site for two summers where she became interested in a career in historic sites. While there, Kaitlin researched the African American soldiers at Fort Fisher in the Civil War and World War II. She earned her bachelor's degree in history in 2017. After graduation, Kaitlin worked as a paralegal in Raleigh, Charlotte, and Chapel Hill. While she found the work interesting, she knew she wanted to pursue a career in public history.

In 2021, Kaitlin began studying public history as a non-degree student at N.C. State University. She was admitted into the graduate program that fall where she studied historical interpretation, cultural resource management, and African American public history. During a class on the Civil Rights Movement, Kaitlin wanted to further investigate how Americans fight for a more just democracy and society. She decided to merge her passion for Fort Fisher’s African American history with the civil rights movement as her topic for her master’s thesis.

While in graduate school, Kaitlin worked as an educator at Historic Oak View, a Wake County Park located in Raleigh, where she learned how to apply historical scholarship and public history theory to site-specific interpretation. As part of a class project, Kaitlin had the opportunity to work under Dr. Alicia McGill on a community project designed to document and preserve the history of the Northeast Community of Wake Forest, North Carolina. That community project inspired Kaitlin to pursue community connections and outreach in her professional and personal life.

In 2022, Kaitlin accepted a position as the Education and Outreach Coordinator at Fort Fisher State Historic Site. In this role, Kaitlin works to expand and diversify the site’s educational programming. She has partnered with other historic sites, regional museums, and community organizations to tell a more inclusive history of Fort Fisher and the greater Wilmington, N.C. region. Kaitlin also serves as a committee member on the American Indian, True Inclusion, and America at 250: When Were We Us subcommittees for N.C. Historic Sites. In 2023, she was appointed chief writer and editor of permanent exhibits for Fort Fisher State Historic Site's new interpretive center opening in 2024.

Kaitlin lives in Wilmington with her husband, Chris, and their dogs, Bailey and Libby.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am incredibly grateful to the many scholars, advisors, and mentors who helped me transform from an average student to a thriving public historian. Dr. David Zonderman, thank you for your consistent, calming guidance throughout my graduate career. You turned any stress or pressure I may have felt down a few notches while increasing my confidence in my own academic abilities after each conversation. I am grateful that you agreed to serve as my thesis chair. Dr. Katherine Mellon Charron, I count my lucky stars that I enrolled in your Civil Rights history course my first semester of graduate school. You helped transform the way I think about history, memory, and writing. Thank you for your amazing, detailed feedback on my thesis. Dr. Alicia McGill, thank you for showing me how to become a better scholar committed to community service. I apply that scholar-service mentality constantly in my work and research. I also appreciate your willingness to fill in as an emergency substitute on my thesis committee.

I would also like to thank other scholars who helped and inspired me in my journey. Dr. Dean Bruno and Dr. Daniel Bolger, my undergraduate classes with you both ignited my passion for history and shaped the way I think about our field. I also want to thank Dr. Blair Kelley, Dr. Tammy Gordon, Dr. John French, and Dr. Brent Sirota for their roles in sharpening my academic skills.

Mr. John Moseley, your fingerprints are all over my graduate degree and early career. Thank you for your mentorship from my first internship to my first year as a public historian at Fort Fisher State Historic Site. I learned so much in graduate school, but I feel I’ve learned just as much from working with you. I am grateful you trusted me to take up the mantle and tell the story of the 54th Coast Artillery. May we continue to do their legacy justice.

I would also like to thank my family. Thank you to my parents Melissa and Ed O’Connor who worked hard to put me on this path. I hope I make you proud. To the late John and Nancy Johnson, my grandparents-in-law, who generously provided me a place to stay during my summer internships and took great interest in my work. To all my family that agreed to proofread and provide feedback on my thesis, I hope you only sort of regretted saying yes.

Finally, to my husband, Chris. You took on more than your fair share of our partnership these past two-plus years so I could thrive. We both know I was never *that* busy that I couldn’t have done more of the dishes. I appreciate your belief in me when mine wavered and your willingness to listen to me talk and talk about the same small part of my thesis for months on end. Thank you for your hard work and sacrifices so my dreams can come true. You’ve made me a better thinker, writer, and more importantly, a better person.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1: “We desire to be soldiers but will not tolerate being the brunt of the hangover from slavery” 17

CHAPTER 2: “They Knew We Were Good” 39

CHAPTER 3: “For Democracy to Flourish…” 61

CONCLUSION 76

REFERENCES 78

APPENDICES 88

- Appendix A: Map of the Lower Cape Fear 89
- Appendix B: 54th Coast Artillery Regiment Lineage 90

INTRODUCTION

Less than three weeks after his regiment transferred to Camp Davis, North Carolina, Sergeant Ulysses Joiner reached his breaking point. He had already served about two months with the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment in the Deep South at Camp Wallace, Texas. But here, in southeast North Carolina, Joiner believed white southern soldiers might take his life. Armed white military policeman harassed and assaulted Black soldiers without consequence. He wrote to his mother on June 4, 1941, "Dear Mother, The conditions under which colored troops have to live in N.C. is outrageous. They catch colored and Northern White Troops, because they are unarmed and beat them unmerciful."

As a noncommissioned officer, Joiner felt responsible for the morale and safety of his men. He reported these physical and psychological abuses to his chain of command and reminded them of their duty to their soldiers. "I have talked too much and I am afraid I will pay with my life," Joiner concluded.[1] A few weeks later, another noncommissioned officer in the 54th Regiment reported that the Ku Klux Klan in nearby Wilmington called a meeting to discuss the arrival of African American soldiers in the area.[2] Throughout their nine months in North Carolina, Jim Crow regulations methodically oppressed the G.I. Joes in the 54th Regiment. Members of the Regiment endured prejudice, violence, and lies at the hands of white soldiers and civilians. The soldiers' responses challenged white supremacy and inspired future civil rights activism.

---

[1] The letter was written anonymously and the author has not been formally identified in the archives. However, the letter references a note written to Mary Greenfield and asks the mother to coordinate with her. The content of these notes suggest they are written by the same person (Sergeant Ulysses Joiner). Anonymous Soldier in Company D to Mother, June 4, 1941, Folder 001535-008-0628, Camp Conditions [1940-] 1941, Papers of the NAACP, Part 09: Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, Series A: General Office Files on Armed Forces' Affairs, 1918, 1955, Library of Congress, accessed via ProQuest History Vault, https://www.congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-008-0628&accountid=12725 (hereafter cited as Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP).

[2] Iva Bluford to Mother, July 9, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.

***

In December 1940, the War Department announced plans for an artillery base in Holly Ridge, North Carolina. The Army planned for two African American units at Camp Davis – the 99th and 100th Coast Artillery Regiments. Military contractors built segregated recreation, housing, and training facilities for the Black troops. In April 1941, the War Department announced that the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment would transfer from Camp Wallace to Camp Davis. The 54th arrived in North Carolina the following month. Though the existing Black facilities were woefully insufficient for three full regiments, the military contractors prioritized completion of the white regimental facilities on post. While press officials reported the camp was over ninety percent complete, African American soldiers would not receive a library or theater until August. Off base they faced similar problems. White troops travelled freely to local beaches as well as clubs and bars in Wilmington; local whites banned Black soldiers from their businesses and beaches. Black Wilmingtonians offered up the local high school as a temporary recreation center for the summer while Black business owners at Sea Breeze beach resort opened their facilities to the servicemembers. Still, the exclusion of Black G.I.s from most locations open to white troops fostered frustration, boredom, and conflict.

Segregation policies on and off base helped reinforce systemic racism and inequality. Approximately one-quarter of the 54th Regiment's 1,558 Black enlisted soldiers never experienced these Jim Crow regulations firsthand before. They spent their formative years in states without *de jure* segregation policies. The new soldiers underwent baptisms of fire with sudden, yet mundane, enforcements of segregation in Texas and North Carolina. Even for the roughly 1,200 soldiers born and raised in the South, the sting of discrimination cut deep. Yet segregation laws were only part of the systemic oppression that African American soldiers endured in North Carolina. All the while, white North Carolinians proudly boasted of racial progress and harmony within their Southern state. State and local officials funded Black education and supported limited economic opportunities for African Americans. But these "progressive" white North Carolinians maintained a clear racial hierarchy. When Black combat soldiers rallied against racism, white civilians and soldiers reinforced white supremacy through enforced segregation, the media, and acts of violence. Within weeks of the 54th Regiment's arrival in North Carolina, white military policemen attacked Black noncommissioned officers. Some even taunted the northern born African Americans, reminding them that they were now in the South where white men reigned supreme.[3]

Black soldiers responded by challenging racism through their military duty, appeals to civil rights organizations and the federal government, and through community connections. Many white Army officers expected that Black men would fail in combat roles like infantry and artillery. They believed Black men were unintelligent, cowardly, and unable to follow orders under pressure. Members of the 54th Coast Artillery surprised their training officers. They received top marks in nearly all their training exercises and frequently outperformed the white regiments. The artillerymen also forged relationships with fellow soldiers and Black Wilmingtonians. The soldiers supported one another, speaking out against oppression and violence. Black Wilmingtonians advocated for resources and support for the African American soldiers in town and back at Camp Davis. The soldiers and their civilian allies frequently wrote to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the War Department for relief from racial injustice.

---

[3] Ulysses Joiner and George Harvey to Mary, July 5, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.

Perhaps most importantly, these soldiers leveraged growing national conversations on democracy and oppression. In 1940, the federal government ramped up national defense in response to the growing Second World War. Americans watched as anti-democratic nation-states toppled sovereign and democratic countries. Democracy itself seemed at risk. African Americans rightly identified that democracy was indeed in trouble, but not solely from the threat of the Axis Powers. Segregation, racism, and voting restrictions prevented people of color from participating fully in American politics, economics, and society. One member of the 54th Regiment complained, "If this is a true democracy, then give us things that are undemocratic."[4] Most of the artillerymen believed their duty to democracy went beyond their service. They also fought against Jim Crow to create an inclusive, true democracy at home.

***

As the 54th Coast Artillerymen and their allies called out discrimination and "undemocratic" racial norms on and off base, white segregationists and local politicians upheld the region's long-entrenched white supremacist culture. They leveraged white Southerners' fears of "inherently violent" Black men while threatening and even enacting violence of their own. These tactics served the local white populous so well in 1941 because they worked perfectly in generations past. Historian Margaret Mulrooney argues that white Wilmingtonians "replicated old patterns of behavior" from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars "as a way to resolve mounting conflicts over race, place, and memory."[5] This was especially true in November 1898, when white supremacists stuffed ballot boxes, violently drove out duly elected Black and white city officials in the interracial Fusionist alliance – composed of Republicans and Populists – destroyed Black property, and killed at least a dozen innocent Black civilians.

---

[4] Anonymous letter, undated, Folder 101101-011-0209, Discrimination in the armed forces Camp Davis North Carolina [4] 1941-1944, African Americans in the Military Part 1: Subject Files of Judge William Hastie Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War A-C, Records of the Secretary of War, National Archives, College Park, MD., accessed via ProQuest History Vault, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=101101-011-0209&accountid=12725 (hereafter cited as Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie).

[5] Margaret M. Mulrooney, *Race, Place, and Memory: Deep Currents in Wilmington, North Carolina* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 112.

The Wilmington Massacre, also known as the Wilmington Coup D'état, ignited after Alexander Manly, the Black editor of the Wilmington *Record*, rebuked the dangerous myth that Black men sexually preyed upon white women in an editorial published in August 1898. He countered that Black men largely did not want sexual relationships with white women and, if they did, they were overwhelmingly consensual.[6] White Wilmingtonians promised to lynch Manly in response. White manhood, particularly for Southerners, required them to protect the "honor" and purity of white women. However, this chivalrous duty served merely as an excuse to protect white political and economic interests and maintain power. In short, in 1898 white supremacists argued that Manly's bold editorial proved not the hypocrisy of white men who raped Black women at an exceedingly disproportionate level – the conclusion the author intended – but that white Wilmingtonian men had allowed "Negro rule" to overcome their politics and their homes. Moreover, any white man who did not vote for the Democratic Party in the future put his wife and children at risk. The violence of the 1898 Massacre, they argued, was therefore justified self-defense or an unpleasant necessity to prevent the continued evil of African Americans in positions of social and political equality.[7]

The 1898 Massacre may have been sparked by white outrage over perceived threats to white women's purity, but the local masterminds of the incident planned for a political and social takeover before Manly's editorial hit the newsstands. That summer, white vigilantes utilized white newspapers' reports of lawlessness among African Americans to patrol the Black neighborhoods in the name of protecting the city. In reality, the men were simply looking for any hint of violence to instigate their coup d'état. When Black Wilmingtonians supported the *Record* after Manly's editorial, white leaders argued that they were taking steps towards an uprising.[8] After the Massacre, whites spun the events as a "race riot" and placed blame on African Americans for the community unrest.[9] White Democrats, meanwhile, seized control of local politics and restored white power by stripping local African Americans from positions of power, wealth, and influence in the city.

---

[6] H. Leon Prathr Sr., "We Have Taken a City: A Centennial Essay," in David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
[7] Glenda E. Gilmore, "Murder, Memory, and the Fight of the Incubus," in Cecelski and Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed,* 73-94.

Decades later, memories of the 1898 Massacre still loomed large in Wilmington. Generational trauma and fear of repeated assaults against the Black community continued to haunt survivors of the original attack, as well as their children and grandchildren. Though white North Carolina politicians adopted a "progressive" racial policy around the turn of the twentieth century which promoted segregated education and economic opportunities for African Americans, whites maintained white supremacy when they thought necessary through violence, rhetoric, and isolated power.[10] In the early twentieth century, Black Wilmingtonians largely focused their attention on industry and education improvements within the Jim Crow system. Some of those advances included creating a community hospital, renowned schools, and even forming labor organizations.[11] Institutional white supremacy, however, went largely unchallenged. Bertha Todd, a prominent Black Wilmingtonian, argues that this "1898 Mentality" in town resulted in caution, fear, and conservatism among local African Americans.[12]

---

[8] Mulrooney, *Race, Place, and Memory,* 131-132.

[9] Prather Sr., "We Have Taken a City, 15-42.

[10] John L. Godwin, *Black Wilmington and the North Carolina Way: Portrait of a Community in the Era of Civil Rights Protest* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 17-19.

[11] Godwin, *Black Wilmington,* 29-32.

[12] Kenneth Robert Jankens, *The Wilmington Ten: Violence, Injustice, and the Rise of Black Politics in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 5.

When African American soldiers threatened the racial hierarchy of the port city in 1941, white Wilmingtonians copied the rhetoric and tactics from 1898, stopping short of murder. In August 1941, after an incident between Black soldiers and white military policemen over bus segregation turned into a brawl, the county Register of Deeds Adrian Rhodes declared, "We haven't forgotten the race riots of 1898…"[13] The elected leader warned that history might repeat itself if the Black soldiers failed to yield.[14] That week, the local white press reported that an unidentified Black soldier assaulted a fifteen-year-old white girl at Camp Davis. The teenager lived with her father who worked as a construction engineer for the post.[15] Suspiciously, this was the sole alleged sexual attack by a Black soldier at Camp Davis reported in the newspapers, and it occurred just as local whites demanded greater control over policing and disciplining "problematic" Black troops. Thus, white Wilmingtonians once again leveraged minor and alleged incidents of physical and sexual attacks by Black men against whites as justification for violence designed to uphold white supremacy within the local society.

***

World War II had not been the first time the United States prepared for and fought in an international conflict pitched as a war to preserve democracy. In 1917, the nation entered the Great War in support of our democratic allies France and Great Britain. Leading civil rights activists urged for greater African American participation in the war. Joel E. Springarn, the white chairman of the board of directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), argued for officer commissions for Black men in segregated regiments. Because the NAACP was an interracial organization opposed to segregation on principle, his proposal generated controversy. With adequate support from college-aged Black men, however, Spingarn successfully lobbied the War Department to create a segregated African American officers' training camp at Fort Des Moines, Iowa.[16] W.E.B. Du Bois, the foremost Black scholar in the nation and a NAACP official, hoped the Great War would mirror the Civil War; he believed African American soldiers could help secure greater freedom for the race through their full participation in the war. Du Bois wrote editorials in his *Crisis* magazine calling for full support among African Americans for the war effort. Both Spingarn and Du Bois were integrationists and disappointed that the white-led War Department refused to desegregate the armed forces. Still, the men argued that when African American troops proved themselves within the segregated military, Black soldiers and, by extension, Black Americans would secure greater leverage to demand civil rights. [17]

---

[13] "Army Promises All Assistance To End Rioting," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 20, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876405318 (accessed January 26, 2022).
[14] "Negro Soldiers Draw City's Fire," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 19, 1941.
[15] "Smith To Probe Assault On Girl," *News & Observer*, August 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651461260 (accessed September 21, 2021); "Police Abandon Attacker Hunt," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876405238 (accessed September 21, 2021).

This logic made sense. According to scholars of militarism and citizenship, for hundreds of years western societies have intimately linked military service with social status and civil rights. As Sylvester Johnson argues, "militarism – risking death and taking life through war – has been rendered through a political theology of sacrifice, sovereignty, and political community to endow military soldiers with a uniquely powerful and intensified membership in the nation."[18] Christopher Parker notes that military service was especially meaningful for African Americans. "To whites and blacks alike, military service signified loyalty, but to blacks it also represented their membership in the national political community, something that for much of American history has been contested." Therefore, Parker continues, "insofar as these men had demonstrated their loyalty to the nation," the democratic tradition of military service meant "they were entitled to have a voice in politics that sought to sustain it. Thus, the citizen-soldier tradition…equates military service with political equality."[19]

---

[16] Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience during World War I* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 60-66.
[17] Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial,* 61-62; Chad Williams, "World War I in the Historical Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois," *Modern American History* 1 (March 2022), 8-9.
[18] Sylvester A. Johnson, "African Americans, the Racial State, and the Cultus of War: Sacrifice and Citizenship," *Social Text* 34, no. 4 (December 2016), 41.

Du Bois and like-minded advocates, therefore, believed that if African Americans participated as willingly and fully as whites, they would demonstrate they were, in fact, just as American as whites.[20] But time and time again, whites abused Black soldiers and denied substantial civil and social rights as veterans. While leaders like Spingarn and Du Bois called for African Americans to serve and agitate within the segregated system, some African Americans were critical of setting aside their work against the Jim Crow regulations during the war.[21]

During World War I, Black soldiers repeatedly clashed with local whites when they acted in any way perceived as insubordinate or "uppity" by white supremacists. In August 1917, the Houston Riot began when white civilian policemen arrested Sara Travers, a Black woman, who refused an illegal, warrantless search of her home. Corporal Charles Baltimore, a Black military policeman, tried to intervene to protect Travers, who was taken into custody in unsuitable public clothing for the time. Baltimore reminded the white policemen that since he also had authority over the area, Travers could be released to his custody. The white officers attacked the soldiers for interfering. Rumors spread at nearby Camp Logan that the white soldiers murdered Corporal Baltimore for asserting his authority as a Black military policeman and that a white mob was assembling to attack the Black troops on the post. Tired of the daily racial abuse, over one hundred African American soldiers seized munitions, marched to town, and shot over two dozen white people in Houston as an act of self-defense, they claimed. Historian Adriane Lentz-Smith argues, “The soldiers of the 24th Infantry held themselves up as ideals of African American manhood: masterful, courageous, and undeniably tied to the nation. By retaliating against the abuses heaped on them by white Houstonians, the soldiers saw themselves – and others saw them – as using manhood to claim their citizenship.”[22]

---

[19] Christopher Parker, "War and African American Citizenship, 1865-1965: The Role of Military Service," in Lawrence D. Bobo et. al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Citizenship, 1865-Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 429; Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy* (Pinceton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 67.
[20] Williams, "World War I in the Historical Imagination," 8-13.
[21] Rawn James, Jr., *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 1-30.

African Americans continued to claim their citizenship after the Armistice in November 1919 ended the World War, but their efforts were continually contested by racist whites. Lentz-Smith writes, “World War I permanently altered African American lives. The war did not generate the New Negro…[Rather,] the war placed American white supremacy in sharp relief even as it steeled black people’s resolve to grab for the democracy they had talked so much about.”[23] Conflict came to a boiling point during the Red Summer of 1919, where hundreds of white and Black Americans clashed in cities across the nation. In Wilmington, a fight on a trolley car in January 1919 led to white law enforcement and the Wilmington Light Infantry – the organization that comprised most of the foot soldiers in the 1898 Massacre – to search all African American shipyard workers.[24]

Across the nation, racial violence against African Americans increased after the war as white Southerners reinforced the racial hierarchy. The Ku Klux Klan resurged throughout the South and spread to other areas, particularly the Midwest. Over a million Black Southerners had moved north in the 1910s as part of the Great Migration in search of better lives and economic opportunity away from Jim Crow and its violence. Following the Armistice, Black Americans struggled to comprehend how the war for democracy created a *less* democratic society within their victorious nation. Du Bois contemplated the historical and political significance of the failure of the African American cause in his writings for decades to come.[25]

---

[22] Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 43-78.
[23] Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 208.
[24] Mulrooney, *Race, Place, and Memory*, 172-173.

In response to the failures during the First World War, African American militarism shifted just prior to the United States' involvement in World War II. Historian Richard Dalfiume notes, "When the war crisis of the 1940s came along, the bitter memories of World War I were recalled [and] there was a built-in cynicism among Negroes toward the democratic slogans of the new war."[26] This time, African Americans refused to put the fight for citizenship behind their wartime duty as civilians and soldiers. "In World War II, most Negroes looked upon the earlier stand as a great mistake," Dalfiume writes. "The dominant attitude during World War II was that the Negro must fight for democracy on two fronts – at home as well as abroad."[27] Thus Black soldiers continued their long tradition of military service with a new emphasis on combating discrimination *while* fighting a world war.

This dual purpose became known as the "Double Victory campaign." The *Pittsburgh Courier* coined the term in February 1942, though the ideals behind the paper's slogan spread far beyond its readership. Abundant scholarship discusses the Double Victory or "Double V" campaign of World War II. As Haley O'Shaughnessy notes, "The Double V was not to safeguard traditional American society, but to establish the national legitimacy that African Americans needed to reshape it into a more inclusive society."[28] Harvard Sitkoff writes that Black soldiers and civilians resented the government and businesses for excluding them from meaningful national defense jobs and military service. Sitkoff further argues that Blacks "become even more impatient with second-class citizenship and determined to assert themselves…The fatigue…fed the boiling racial cauldron" that exploded in the post-war activism for voting rights and full citizenship.[29] Historian Thomas Guglielmo adds that soldiers "became ever more convinced that America could and must change and that they would be the primary agents of that change." When the war ended, he continues, many Black veterans "quickly became indispensable leaders, organizers, and foot soldiers in the surging postwar civil rights struggles."[30]

---

[25] *See* Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 206-237; Williams, "World War I in the Historical Imagination," 8-22.
[26] Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968), 92-93, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1894253 (accessed September 6, 2021).
[27] Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years,'" 95.
[28] Haley D. O'Shaughnessy, "The Double Victory Campaign and the Black Press: A Conservative Approach to 'Victory' at Home and Abroad," *Inquiries Journal* 7, no. 2 (2015), 3.

Though the term had not yet been penned, members of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment embraced a fight for "double victory" during their national defense training in North Carolina. In just ten months between May 1941 and February 1942, the artillerymen forced concessions from white Southerners and the white-run military that eased – though not erased – the burdens of Jim Crow. Further, Black soldiers and civilians could "prick the conscience of white America" by drawing similarities between segregation and Nazi Germany.[31] Mary Bluford, the mother of Sergeant Iva Bluford, 54th Regiment, wrote "our boys who are willing to sacrifice their time and probably their lives for what we are told [is] 'democracy.'" She then compared the treatment of the Black regiments at Camp Davis to "southern slavery or Hitlerism."[32] As this thesis shows, other soldiers and civilians launched similar critiques against the United States even before the nation formally entered World War II in December 1941. The words and actions of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment and their allies, therefore, informed conversations on the meaning and extent of "democracy" within the United States. Just as importantly, the shortcomings and failures of the 54th artillerymen reveal the intransigence of white supremacist policies and mindsets, as well as the lack of a full federal commitment to uphold the nation's democratic ideals in practice.

---

[29] Harvard Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War," *The Journal of American History* 58, no. 3 (Dec., 1971), 668-670, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1893729 (accessed September 6, 2021).
[30] Thomas A. Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 381-382.
[31] Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968), 94, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1894253 (accessed September 6, 2021).
[32] Mary Bluford to Roy Wilkins, November 7, 1941, as Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.

***

These historical lessons should shape interpretation of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment and World War II era activism in Wilmington, North Carolina. Not only does the history of the artillerymen's fight for democracy create a broader, richer local history of the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement, it also can inform current political and historical conversations about civil rights and racial progress. As a public historian, I am deeply concerned about political misuse of the past, particularly when doing so justifies policies or mindsets that perpetuate injustices within my community. Wilmington's public history institutions have yet to fully interpret the region's Civil Rights Movement history and legacy. Meanwhile, the community – and the nation – debates if or how the history of white supremacy should be taught and commemorated in schools and public spaces. Further, people of color in the region disproportionally receive less educational funding per capita, are arrested at a higher rate, and hold less wealth than their white counterparts.[33] I argue that the region needs a more complex, richer history of the successes and failures of the Civil Rights Movement to expose and combat the last remaining roots of systemic white supremacy.

I make this argument within the academic foundation of the long civil rights movement, first articulated by historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall in her 2005 *Journal of American History* article "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." Hall proposed a new framework for interpreting the Civil Rights movement, one with a "more robust, more progressive, and *truer* story – the story of a 'long civil rights movement.'" Hall's long civil rights movement expanded on the public memory and perception of the so-called classical Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which separated progress on civil and voting rights from the push for social and economic justice. In this intellectual segregation, the Civil Rights Movement became a feel-good story because federal legislation ended Jim Crow regulations in 1964 and Black disfranchisement in 1965. In contrast, Hall explains, "by placing the world-shaking events of the classical phase in the context of a larger story, I want to buttress that representational project and reinforce the moral authority of those who fought for change." Specifically, she argues that scholars should broaden their study of activism and resistance to include the 1930s through the 1970s to appreciate both the political and economic struggles for justice.

---

[33] Emma Dill, "'A tale of two economies': Report shows Wilmington area's racial, gender inequality," *Wilmington StarNews*, September 30, 2021, https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/2021/09/30/wilmington-north-carolina-economic-disparities-race-gender-inequality-housing-costs-cape-fear/8418599002/ (accessed March 17, 2023).

"At the same time," Hall continues, "I want to make civil rights harder. Harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain."[34] Hall's chief concern was how the "New Right," the conservative rebrand that emerged in the late 1970s after the successes of civil rights legislation and integrationist court rulings of the 1950s-1970s, shifted the narrative of racial progress from collective responsibility and structural racism to one that dismisses any remaining inequality as resulting from the personal failures of African Americans. Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, New Right politicians promoted "colorblindness" to eviscerate the limited civil rights gains – particularly in the realm of economic justice – that the nation had achieved. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush argued that race-conscious systems designed to alleviate the burdens of systemic racism betrayed the very spirit of the Civil Rights Movement and thus must be eliminated. "Clearly," Hall states, "the stories we tell about the civil rights movement matter; they shape how we see our own world." She then posits the need for a longer interpretation of civil rights activism, one rooted in decades-long struggle across geographic, racial, economic, and gender lines, that would create the "primary sources of [ongoing] human action."[35] Similarly, I advocate for new public interpretation of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment in North Carolina because their history and legacy further reveals the long, complicated fight to create a more equitable democratic society. The story of this regiment, in combination with other moments of the long civil rights movement, can become a blueprint for how Wilmingtonians interpret their history and act within our community.

---

[34] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (Mar., 2005), 1235, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3660172 (accessed July 18, 2017).

***

The structure of this thesis reflects the push and pull between civil rights activists and segregationists. In Chapter 1, I demonstrate how white Southerners utilized verbal and physical abuse to demonstrate their power and superiority over the Black 54th artillerymen within the Jim Crow system. Limited as they were, the Black soldiers fought back by creating moments of refuge within the African American community and appealing to civil rights leaders in the NAACP and War Department for any relief from the excessive violence they endured.

Chapter 2 expands upon the resistance by the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment in the summer and fall of 1941. The soldiers repeatedly earned top marks in their training exercises at Camp Davis, North Carolina and the post's segregated live-firing station, Fort Fisher. The men gained more confidence in their worth, which inherently threatened the racial hierarchy of the region. Some Black soldiers even directly resisted segregation during a bus riot in August. In response, white reporters and politicians in Wilmington smeared the reputation of the African American troops with misleading and false claims about crime to justify further policing and oversight of the men.

---

[35] Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1236-1238.

In Chapter 3, I focus on how public historians can utilize the 54th Coast Artillery's history in response to public debates on institutional racism, education, and racial inequality. Specifically, the chapter makes recommendations for new interpretive projects such as exhibits and community programming that relate the regiment's history to a broader historical narrative on the Civil Rights Movement and our democratic society. My interpretive proposals are overwhelmingly centered on actions for Fort Fisher State Historic Site, the location of Camp Davis's outpost in World War II, because the site staff are currently developing new, permanent exhibits and reimagining the site's interpretive approach and reach.

CHAPTER 1: "We desire to be soldiers but will not tolerate being the brunt of the hangover from slavery"

During the early 1920s, senior officers and historians at the Army War College compiled reports on inefficiencies in previous wars for the War Department in preparation for future operations. Major General Hanson Ely chaired a committee that examined the role of African Americans within the Army. "In past wars the negro has made a fair laborer," the report stated. "As a technician and a fighter he has been inferior to the white man."[1] The officers' report admitted that Black men were physically capable of combat roles, but they believed they lacked the discipline, courage, and intelligence required under fire. "He is by nature subservient…[and] is most susceptible to the influence of crowd psychology," the report asserted. "He can not control himself in the fear of danger to the extent the white man can. He has not the initiative and resourcefulness of the white man."[2]

Ely's committee concluded that Black men failed as combat soldiers in the World War and now must earn any significant future combat assignments under strict supervision of white officers. Until that time, he continued, Black enlisted men should serve in combat support roles. The committee wrote "The door should not be closed against the negro…He should be given a fair opportunity to perform the tasks in war for which he is qualified or may qualify himself under a sound plan of organization, training and leadership. He should be measured by the same standards applied to the white man."[3]

---

[1] H.F. Ely, Memorandum For the Chief of Staff: Employment of negro man power in the war, November 10, 1925, FDR Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/tusk_doc_a.pdf/4693156a-8844-4361-ae17-03407e7a3dee (accessed November 21, 2022), 5.

[2] Ely, Memorandum For the Chief of Staff, 4.

[3] Ely, Memorandum For the Chief of Staff, 5.

When another world war broke out overseas, War Department officials swiftly rejected calls by a vocal minority for racial integration in the military. They insisted that the racial hierarchy within the military must remain intact. Historian Thomas Guglielmo explains how military leaders justified continued segregation and discrimination in the service. "For army leaders, it was the 'racial conditions that exist in civil life' and the 'social relationship between negroes and whites which has been established by the American people through custom and habit' over many years. To disregard these 'realities' by mixing black and white troops, leaders reasoned, would destroy the efficiency, discipline, and morale of US fighting forces…"[4] But the resistance to integration went beyond concerns of interpersonal violence or military inefficiency in mixed-race regiments.

If the Army formed units without regard to race, more African Americans would be assigned to combat arms. But in the infantry, artillery, and the like, successful Black soldiers could disprove the myths of their cowardness and inferiority. If Black soldiers withstood the test of combat as well as whites, they might argue they proved themselves as worthy citizens deserving of greater economic, social, and political access.[5] Some white Southerners feared that military training even within segregated regiments threatened their safety.[6] If thousands of Black men learned how to defend themselves, whites worried they might fight back against racist abuse. This had long been a concern of enslavers and white supremacists throughout American history.

As some whites resisted integration and expanded opportunities for African Americans in the military, Northern Black voters rallied for policy change within the War Department. The

---

[4] Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 113-114.
[5] Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, 61; Johnson, "African Americans, the Racial State, and the Cultus of War," 41.
[6] James T. Taylor, "Letter Box," *Herald-Sun*, July 24, 1940, https://www.newspapers.com/image/786425158/ (accessed November 15, 2022).

African American population in the North had grown so much during the Great Migration that politicians from both parties came to recognize them as an important voter demographic in national elections. In the 1940 presidential election, Northern Black voters insisted on greater representation of African Americans within combat roles. Some called for integrated regiments because, as an arm of the federal government, the military and its bases were not beholden to local segregationist policies. The military, they argued, could lead the way to national integration. But even within segregated units, the military provided important economic and social opportunities. Soldiering was first and foremost a steady job with secure housing – at least while the nation remained out of the war. If the nation entered the war, combat soldiers would undoubtedly prove their loyalty to the nation and validate their manhood. These characteristics would give Black combat veterans greater confidence to secure their political and civil rights.[7]

Northern Black voters criticized President Roosevelt's lackluster stance on civil rights. About three months before the election, the editorial board of the *Pittsburgh Courier* noted "It may be that President Roosevelt is profoundly concerned about the plight of the colored citizen but he has never indicated such a concern 'for the record.'" Worse still, they argued, Roosevelt never acted to ease their suffering. "Today the Negro voter is completely disillusioned, and if the President does not know it now, he WILL know it on the morning of November 6, 1940."[8] Roosevelt's Republican challenger, Wendell Willkie, promised integration of the military and desegregation in the nation's capital.[9]

---

[7] Parker, "War and African American Citizenship," in Bobo et. al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Citizenship*, 429; Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 235-236.

[8] "The President and Precedent," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 31, 1940, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40842702 (accessed November 28, 2022).

[9] Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy," 663-664.

If enough Northern Black voters cast ballots for Willkie, Roosevelt might lose his bid for reelection. In response to growing criticism from the Black electorate, and in an effort to secure their votes, Roosevelt quickly made numerous moves to expand opportunities for African Americans in the military. Colonel Benjamin O. Davis was promoted to Brigadier General, thus becoming the Army's first Black general. As Commander-in-Chief, Roosevelt also expanded Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs at Black colleges and universities, and he appointed lawyer and civil rights activist William Hastie as a civilian aide to the Secretary of War.[10] Roosevelt further lobbied Congress for anti-discrimination language in the new Selective Service and Training Act of 1940.

The president also directed the Army to increase its proportion of African American troops to match the proportion of African Americans in the nation. Furthermore, the Army opened all its branches – including combat operations and aviation – to Black soldiers in segregated outfits.[11] Northern African Americans rewarded Roosevelt with their votes which helped secure his third term in office. As part of these ongoing changes, the Army activated new all-Black combat regiments comprised primarily of draftees from around the nation. The 54th Coast Artillery Regiment was activated on February 10, 1941.[12] The new regiment joined a rapidly growing military that remained officially at peace but prepared fully to enter the Second World War, if somehow drawn into the conflict.

***

---

[10] Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy," 664.

[11] Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 28-29.

[12] "Units Planned At Fort Bragg," *Charlotte Observer*, February 11, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/617702006 (accessed December 17, 2021); William C. Gaines, "Coast Artillery Organizational History, 1917-1950" *Coast Defense Journal* 23, no. 2, 26.

The 54th Coast Artillery was formed with a cadre from the 76th and 77th Coast Artillery Regiments at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina. These seasoned non-noncommissioned officers arrived in Texas on March 6, 1941. The cadre and their white officers were tasked with training the drafted junior enlisted soldiers. The War Department issued race-conscious draft calls that severely limited the number of African American draftees. The few who were selected by the local draft board still needed to pass a medical and psychological assessment administered by military personnel. Military examiners across the nation routinely and disproportionally deemed Black men unfit for service.[13] These discriminatory practices sparked criticism among some Americans. For example, in February 1941 a concerned citizen who identified themself only as "H.H." wrote to the editor of Pottstown, Pennsylvania's *Mercury*, "The Army's prejudice against colored troops is one of the numerous stupidities that should be abandoned in the interest of sound national defense."[14]

Isaac Jackson, a Texas native, was drafted into the 54th Regiment in March 1941. At thirty-three, he felt settled and uninterested in joining the military. Jackson's father passed away when he was young, leaving his mother to raise six children on her own. Jackson helped where he could though his options were limited. He recalled picking cotton for $0.50 per day as a young teenager. At fifteen, Jackson left his family to start his own life. He found odd jobs in construction and the railroad industry. Jackson later spoke about the bigotry he lived through in his childhood with a Californian newspaper reporter, stating "It wasn't no good thing;" that white men could physically attack or kill a Black man for even looking at a white woman. He also recalled non-violent discrimination, claiming his education "didn't amount to much" due to segregated schools.[15] Jackson remained skeptical that military service would be any less hostile than civilian life.

---

[13] Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 40-58.

[14] "Negroes in the Army," *Mercury*, February 12, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/48932841/ (accessed November 14, 2022).

At least as a civilian, Jackson went home to a Black community that served as a support network against racist policies and people. Military service required him to leave behind that sanctuary and submit constantly to white officers. Jackson, like other African Americans, felt reluctant to serve in the latest war for democracy. As one citizen remarked, "Every Negro who faced the guns at Metz to 'save democracy' in the last war will remember how much 'democracy' he got when he came back home. Why, they lynched Race soldiers in the South and beat them up in race riots in the North [after the World War]."[16] But refusal to comply with his draft orders carried jail time. Jackson reluctantly reported for duty at Camp Wallace in Hitchcock, Texas, with full knowledge of the unending racism of Jim Crow awaiting him in the army.

Approximately twenty-five percent of the 54th Coast Artillery grew up outside of the Jim Crow South. When these non-Southern selectees travelled to Texas for duty, they encountered segregation for the first time.[17] William Jackson later recalled "On the way [to Houston] we had to catch a bus. So, we sat on the bus…sat right behind the driver of the bus – which was empty at the time."[18] Jackson and his friend settled in and continued their conversation. The bus driver cut in, "You boys will have to go to the back of the bus." Jackson turned to the white driver and responded, “No, this is fine, thank you, we like it right here.” Jackson remembered that he and the driver went back and forth like this for a few exchanges until the driver threatened to call the police to remove the men forcibly from the front of the bus.[19] Jackson undoubtedly heard about segregation before he travelled South, but he did not understand its thoroughness. He believed that since the bus was empty, he could sit up front. Once the driver threatened to call the police, the men angrily relocated to the back of the bus. The immediacy and relentlessness of Southern segregation shocked the new Northern soldiers.

---

[15] Kathy Kreiger, "The Black Person Had It Rough," *Santa Cruz Sentinel,* February 8, 1997, https://www.newspapers.com/image/81310528 (accessed October 3, 2020).

[16] Revels Cayton quoted in Rawn James, Jr., *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 85.

[17] Part of the twenty-five percent were born in the South but moved in early childhood. Therefore, some of the soldiers might have experienced Jim Crow before as a child. But their arrival in Texas as soldiers marked the first time in at least a decade and the first time as adults that they lived under Jim Crow.

[18] The Better Part, "54th Coast Artillery Regiment," *KMVT* video, 28:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46ZQQ00-agk&list=LL&index=2&t=1409s&ab_channel=KMVT (accessed September 18, 2019).

In March 1941, both William and Isaac Jackson found themselves in the Jim Crow Army. Northern Black voters and civil rights activists pushed Washington politicians into expanding opportunities in the military for African American men. They hoped even these limited changes would collectively elevate Black Americans. But white soldiers and civilians fought progress at every turn. If transformation of race relations in the military (and, by extension, the nation) stood a chance, Black soldiers and their allies had to seize their opportunities.

***

White soldiers could not limit the number of Black troops on base or restrict them from combat roles. They could, however, uphold the racial hierarchal tradition of both the South and the Army. Isaac Jackson, William Jackson, and hundreds of other African American selectees of the 54th Coast Artillery were subjected to racism from the moment they arrived at Camp Wallace. Base commanders, not the War Department, implemented racial restrictions on their posts.[20] The new $3,000,000 training center featured ample living and recreational facilities for white soldiers. Black soldiers, on the other hand, had virtually no options for off-duty activities on base.[21] The camp's commander put white comfort over fairness or functionality by developing white facilities before any for the Black soldiers.

---

[19] The Better Part, “54th Coast Artillery Regiment,” *KMVT*.
[20] Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 216.

With limited recreational options available at Camp Wallace, members of the 54th frequently travelled off post. Some took the bus about an hour away into Houston while others travelled fifteen minutes down the road to the Galveston beaches. Local businessmen and politicians in Galveston resented the sudden influx of Black soldiers. Though the men obeyed segregation laws, white Galvestonians still felt threatened by their presence. The memory of the 1917 Houston Riot in which African American soldiers shot and killed white civilians still lingered in their collective conscious. Would this new generation of Black soldiers, if provoked, commit similar acts of violence against them? White Galvestonians further feared Black troops in the region would have negative effect on the local economy. Galveston regularly attracted hundreds of wealthy, white tourists. Advertisers and travel columnists described the Galveston beach resort as "one of the finest in the world" with water sports, music halls, and majestic scenery.[22] Since the early twentieth century, coastal towns like Galveston had transformed into profitable vacation oases. In the South, local governments and private business sold their idealized image of the South – genteel, world-class, and white. African Americans could serve white patrons but were prohibited from joining them.[23] Local whites feared that the Black troops in Hitchcock would devalue their resort and ruin the ambiance of the idyllic Southern retreat.

---

[21] "First Selectees Arrive At New Camp Hitchcock," *Victoria Advocate*, March 16, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/440277045 (accessed January 15, 2023).

[22] See, for example, "Galveston Isle Is an Able Host," *Detroit Free Press*, April 7, 1940, https://www.newspapers.com/image/97743491/ (accessed January 11, 2023); Bill Gray, "Visitors From The Land Of The Prairie Schooners Find Delight In Galveston's Cosmopolitan Flavor," *Angelo Standard-Times*, September 2, 1940, https://www.newspapers.com/image/781440495 (accessed January 11, 2023).

[23] For more on racial segregation and hierarchy in Southern beach resorts, see Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: How Black Beaches Became White Wealth in the Coastal South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012); For more on how Southern tourist centers capitalized on idealized Southern history and culture, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 184-226.

Worse, the presence of Black soldiers nearby might lead potential tourists to have second thoughts and chose another destination for their vacations.

City officials finalized plans for a new $1,400,000 whites-only amusement pier funded by federal loans and municipal bonds. The project required state legislative approval for construction into the Gulf of Mexico.[24] White Galvestonians believed that Black soldiers threatened the permit. They feared that any potential conflict between the Black soldiers and white civilians might find its way into the national press. African American papers like the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Baltimore Afro-American* closely followed the growing Black regiments while white controlled papers often covered race-based disturbances.[25] Asking white tourists and locals to respect the Black soldiers never crossed their minds. Instead, powerful white Galveston residents fought to remove the soldiers altogether to preserve their public image and their chance at funding for the new pier. The locals allegedly complained that Black soldiers "were a menace to the beaches and the social prestige of this Southern resort mecca" and petitioned the War Department for a transfer of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment out of Camp Wallace.[26]

Nearly one month after the first selectees arrived at Camp Wallace, the War Department announced a transfer for the 54th Regiment.[27] The *Pittsburg Courier* inquired about the reason for the relocation with the department. The paper's Texas reporter found the timing of the move suspicious. "According to the information we received, the transfer was instigated by white citizens of the town…who said they did not want Negroes in that area," *Courier* editor William Nunn wrote to William Hastie. After the War Department's press secretary dodged the question in their initial written response to the newspaper, later the Bureau of Public Relations Director for the U.S. Army insisted that the transfer was routine and regimental moves were common.[28] The 54th Regiment transferred to Camp Davis in Holly Ridge, North Carolina on May 19, 1941.[29]

---

[24] Wise Adams to Honorable William Pickens, March 18, 1941, Folder 101101-013-001, Discrimination in the armed forces Camp Wallace, Texas, 1941-1943, African Americans in the Military Part 1: Subject Files of Judge William Hastie Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War A-C, Records of the Secretary of War, National Archives, College Park, MD., accessed via ProQuest History Vault, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=101101-013-0001&accountid=12725, accessed via ProQuest History Vault (hereafter cited as Camp Wallace Folder, William Hastie Collection).

[25] *See* O'Shaughnessy, "The Double Victory Campaign."; Paul Alkebulan, *The African American press in World War II: toward victory at home and abroad* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

[26] The *Courier* reporter is quoted here. "Courier Seeking Probe By War Dept.," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40058310/ (accessed August 3, 2021).

[27] "Negro Regiment Gets Camp Davis Transfer," *News & Observer,* April 18, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651376427 (accessed December 17, 2021).

The soldiers anticipated another rough reception by white North Carolinians, but the depth of abuse they endured at Camp Davis and nearby Wilmington shocked them. An anonymous soldier wrote, "Whites can treat colored soldiers in any shape form or manner and nothing is done by the commanding officers."[30] He continued "A major of this battalion even went so far as to call the waiters in the mess as lightin' and smoke. The soldier asked not to be referred to as such but as soldier. The major then retorted, 'if I had this nigger in civilian life, I would break his neck. The idea of a nigger talking to me like that.'"[31] The soldiers endured similar racist remarks from white officers, enlisted personnel, and civilians alike.

Camp Davis's senior officers further conveyed their belief in white supremacy in minor actions like duty assignments. The officers disproportionally assigned menial labor tasks to

---

[28] Major General Robert C. Richardson, Jr. to William H. Hastie, May 21, 1941, Folder 102613-015-0277, Press M-Z, November 1940-March 1943, African Americans in the Military Part 1: Subject Files of Judge William Hastie Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War A-C, Records of the Secretary of War, National Archives, College Park, MD., accessed via ProQuest History Vault, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=102613-015-0277&accountid=12725 (hereafter cited as Press M-Z Folder, William Hastie Collection).
[29] H.R. Gowan, Report of Headquarters Second Battalion 54th C.A., June 30, 1943, Box 336, U.S. Army Unit Records, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS.; "Regiment Arrives From Texas Camp," *The Carolina Times*, May 22, 1941, https://www.newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn78002169 (accessed January 23, 2022).
[30] Anonymous letter, undated, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.
[31] Anonymous letter, undated, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

Black soldiers. "Negro soldiers are made to work at the warehouses both night and day without receiving food on their return at night," an anonymous soldier complained. "Negroes are made to do all of the work while white soldiers of the same rank are put over them as Simon Legree."[32] Here, the anonymous writer referenced the antagonist in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the novel, enslaver Simon Legree brutally tortured enslaved people on his plantation. The character's name became shorthand for cruel and heartless people in positions of authority over their victims.[33]

Verbal assaults, disproportional labor assignments, and Jim Crow regulations frustrated the men in the 54th Regiment. But the physical violence enacted upon them from military policemen (MPs) enraged them. On June 4, 1941, just two weeks after the unit arrived in North Carolina, Sergeant Ulysses Joiner wrote to his friend Mary Greenfield in Detroit that white military police in Wilmington harassed and assaulted soldiers in the regiment on two occasions. According to Joiner, three MPs stopped Private Willie Lane on the streets of Wilmington. One ordered Lane to fix his collar and tie. Lane's shirt was missing the top button because Black soldiers often received inferior quality uniforms. He instead pinched his collar together and tightened his tie. "Then one M.P. said 'That Black Bastard did not fasten his collar,'" Joiner wrote, "and they with guns on their sides and black jacks in their hands attacked Willie beating him over the head, then made him get into their Reconnaissance car, and took him out in the woods and beat him unmercifully," Joiner reported.[34] The assault left Lane bald in the spots struck by the billy clubs, his jaw swollen, and his facial nerves numb. The MPs attacked Lane simply because they could. Once the MPs gave their final blow, one asked Lane "Now you Black Son of a Bitch how do you like Dixie?"[35]

---

[32] Anonymous letter, undated, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.
[33] *See* R.B. Jenkins, "Simon Legree: A Study in Matricide," *Interpretations* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1982), https://www.jstor.org/stable/23241524, 41-42.
[34] Ulysses Joiner and George Harvey to Mary, July 5, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.

Sergeant Joiner also shared Sergeant Willie T. Hill's story with Greenfield. On one of his first trips to Wilmington from camp, Hill rode on a bus with belligerent white soldiers. "The M.P. started calling the colored boys all sorts of names, and got the other white troops to join them." Pestered by racist remarks, Sergeant Hill finally reacted. Hill punched one of the white aggressors. MPs quickly swarmed Hill who then grabbed one policeman's gun, likely in an act of self-defense. Outnumbered by white soldiers, Hill was forced to drop his weapon and submit to an arrest. The MPs "took him to jail and kicked him in his privates and beat him worse than they did Lane," Joiner noted. When the enlisted men in the 54th Regiment brought incidents like these to the attention of their commanding officer, Colonel Oscar Warner, he simply replied "I concur in the MPs seeing their duty and doing it."[36] An anonymous soldier echoed the resentment for the white commanders' lack of sympathy. "Instead of putting a end [*sic*] to such atrocious treatment…they seem to get a fiendish delight out of knowing that these individuals have given vent to their sadistic inhibitions."[37] White MPs and officers continually used rank, authority, and violence against Black soldiers at Camp Davis and in Wilmington.

These white soldiers likely viewed the 54th Coast Artillery as a threat in part because of their operational excellence. Since their days in Texas, the 54th Coast Artillery excelled in nearly every task placed before them. Iva Bluford boasted "They hate us because we outshone them better than any other regiment in Texas on anything the Army required us to do. We had the highest intelligence rating of all the boys that were in Camp Wallace…"[38] Within two weeks of its arrival in North Carolina, the regiment conducted full-scale maneuvers in the woods. The soldiers practiced setting up communications and weaponry under standard tactical orders of operations. The training continued for over a week and all batteries eventually participated. Soldiers marched five miles with full field packs and rifles, stopped for a lunch break and a swim in the ocean, and returned five miles back to base. In other drills, white officers inspired inter-battery competition with rewards for camouflage and marksmanship.[39] "It is unusual for an organization to go into the field so soon after its organization," the media liaison officer informed the press in June 1941.[40] While the white officers told the press that all Camp Davis regiments trained with similar pace, the 54th Coast Artillery exceeded expectations. "Since coming [to Camp Davis]," the *Wilmington Morning Star* reported, "the outfit has set a remarkable training pace, one that has earned favorable comment on all sides."[41]

---

[35] Ulysses Joiner and George Harvey to Mary, July 5, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.
[36] Ulysses Joiner and George Harvey to Mary, July 5, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.
[37] Anonymous to Mother, June 4, 1941, Camp Conditions 1940-1941, Papers of the NAACP.
[38] Iva Bluford to Mary Bluford, July 9, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

The 54th Regiment quickly understood they were unwelcomed in North Carolina. "As bad as Texas was I only wish I had staid [*sic*] there," Iva Bluford lamented. "All the boys have the same feeling."[42] Sergeant Joiner and a few other noncommissioned officers felt the weight of their duty to the enlisted men serving under them. They advocated for their men by speaking out to their white officers about their treatment. Joiner confided in a letter to his mother written just weeks after his regiment settled into Camp Davis, "I am on the spot as I am looked on as dangerous because the boys look on me as their only protection because I am not afraid to tell these officers about them neglecting their duty [to the Black soldiers]."[43] Non-commissioned officers in the Army worked closely with junior officers in training and field operations. In a well-functioning regiment, the officers listened to the concerns brought by their sergeants. Instead, Joiner felt threatened. “I have talked too much,” he wrote, “and I am afraid I will pay with my life.”[44] With no recourse available within the military chain of command, Joiner and others petitioned the War Department itself for help.

---

[39] "Coast Artillery Unit Stages First Review," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 28, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40059042/ (accessed December 9, 2022).

[40] "Camp Davis Unit Begins Maneuvers," *Wilmington Morning Star*, June 2, 1941, https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn78002169/1941-06-02/ed-1/seq-1/ (accessed April 15, 2022).

[41] Coast Artillery Unit Stages First Review," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 28, 1941.

[42] Iva Bluford to Mary C. Bluford, July 9, 1941.

[43] Anonymous to Mother, June 4, 1941, Camp Conditions 1940-1941, Papers of the NAACP.

***

In October 1940, President Roosevelt appointed Judge William Hastie as the civilian aide to the Secretary of the War Department. Hastie, an African American civil right activist, initially balked at the offer. He feared the position was created only to placate the Black community. During World War I Emmett Scott filled a similar role; however, Scott had little authority to make any changes in the department. Hastie only took the post after careful consultation with prominent Black legal activists like Thurgood Marshall. He vowed to utilize his post to push for integration within the armed forces and to investigate discrimination against Black soldiers.[45] As part of his official duties, Hastie routinely investigated reports of racism and abuse against African American servicemembers. He received countless letters directly from soldiers or through third parties like the NAACP. Thanks to Hastie’s dedication, soldiers found an advocate within the federal government.

In June 1941, Sergeant Joiner mailed two letters about the conditions African Americans endured in North Carolina to Greenfield and his mother. He pleaded with his friend, “I am about to put my life and the lives of many soldier boys into your hands to try to get us some help. You must act…” He then requested that she “publish this story…to try and have us sent out of Carolina.”[46] Joiner asked Greenfield to share the stories of military police violence against Hill and Lane with the local Black press and NAACP chapter in Detroit in hopes that those organizations would attract the attention of Hastie and the War Department. The women published Joiner's letters in the *Detroit Tribune,* with names redacted to protect the soldiers.[47] In July, the Detroit NAACP forwarded Joiner's two letters to Hastie. Dr. James McClendon, the branch president, humbly requested that Hastie launch "a thorough investigation of these alleged beatings…and that something should be done immediately to stop the same."[48] Hastie quickly responded, informing Dr. McClendon that he already heard the complaints about the military police officers in Wilmington.

---

[44] Anonymous to Mother, June 4, 1941, Camp Conditions 1940-1941, Papers of the NAACP.

[45] Phillip McGuire, *He, Too, Spoke for Democracy: Judge Hastie, World War II, and the Black Soldier* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 10-12.

[46] Ulysses Joiner and George Harvey to Mary, July 5, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.

Regardless of how Hastie learned about the abuse prior to Dr. McClendon's letter, he wasted no time. "We have been assured that the…situation has been corrected," Hastie responded. The War Department investigated the abuses and took corrective action in North Carolina. "I am advised that Negro Military Police are now being used in Wilmington, and that the selection and training of the Military Police force is proceeding with a view to achieving efficiency without brutality," Hastie informed Dr. McClendon.[49] Through this small letter-writing campaign, members of the 54th Regiment effectively lobbied for a noticeable change in military policy at Camp Davis. While not a perfect solution, complaints against white MPs in Wilmington dried up for a time.

The NAACP and William Hastie continued to counter racial violence however and whenever possible. Both the civil rights organization and the civilian aide to the Secretary of War hoped for full integration within the military. When senior Army officers declared that war was not the time for such a social experiment, they elevated and investigated Black soldiers' claims of inequal and unjust treatment.[50] Throughout World War II, Black soldiers utilized vital lifelines in Hastie and the NAACP to call out racism and, on occasion, improve their conditions within the Army.

---

[47] "Charges M.P.'s Beat Soldiers in Southern Camps," *Detroit Tribune*, June 28, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/891091618 (accessed March 27, 2023).

[48] James J. McClendon, M.D. to William H. Hastie, July 23, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[49] James J. McClendon, M.D. to William H. Hastie, July 23, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

Joiner's willingness to speak out turned the red hot racism against Black soldiers at Camp Davis to a duller but ever present ember. White soldiers still enforced segregation on the base and spewed racist remarks towards the African American troops, but violent assaults dissipated. Troubles with white civilians, however, persisted. Home to a thriving Black community just forty-three years prior, Wilmington's white society had upheld white supremacy since the 1898 racial massacre, which overthrew the democratically-elected biracial government.[51] Black Wilmingtonian Edward Lee Haynes said his father taught him how to act around white people to stay safe. "If I went to a white person's house," for example, "he always told me to go to the back and take my cap off."[52] "If you went into some of the stores, they would have water fountains, some stating 'white' fountain and 'black' fountain…" local resident Rebecca Smith recalled about segregation in Wilmington. "If you went to the bus station when I was a child and you wanted something as common as a hot dog and a soda," she continued, "you had to go to the back of the bus station" for service.[53]

Black Wilmingtonians understood the message behind the facility signs for the different races. "You were not looked upon as having full rights that all other citizens should have. We should be treated differently," Lillian Smith recalled. "That was what the sign was."[54] Haynes understood white people would not want to be seen with a Black person waiting on their front step. Charles Bryant Jr. stated "You were born under certain conditions. You knew how things are…You knew, of course, that things were wrong, but you find – you live with it."[55] Soldiers in the 54th Regiment experienced the same daily indignities as African American Wilmingtonians. Even without violence, white locals sent a clear message. "You've got to teach a nigger in uniform that he's still a nigger," white Southerners proclaimed.[56]

---

[50] Guglielmo, *Divisions*, 40-58.
[51] David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
[52] Chris Stewart, Interview with Edward Lee Haynes, July 12, 1993, Behind the Veil Oral History Project, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, N.C., https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07021 (accessed April 10, 2022).
[53] Chris Stewart, Interview with Rebecca Smith, July 13, 1993, Behind the Veil Oral History Project, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, N.C., https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07039 (accessed April 10, 2022).

The 54th Coast Artillerymen found refuge from Jim Crow in the company of other Black civilians and soldiers. People could relax and express their full humanity in a way that simply was not possible under the watchful eye and clenched fist of white segregationists. Black soldiers and locals bonded over church services, shared meals, and community programs. Just as importantly, the civilian allies played vital roles in advocating for the Black servicemembers.

In March 1941, as the 54th Regiment's new selectees reported for duty in Texas, St. Stephen African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church of Wilmington hosted the all-Black American Legion chapter for a rally that encouraged community support for the growing military presence in the region. The meeting featured "every patriotic, fraternal and church organization in city," including sororities, the Young Men's club, the Colored Masonic Lodges of Wilmington, and Williston High, the all-Black school.[57] Hundreds of local Black men, women, and children filled the church pews to capacity. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Brown, the white officer scheduled to assume command of the 99th and 100th all-Black Coast Artillery Regiments, addressed them. Brown had served as a military ambassador to Belgium when Germany invaded in 1940. He then followed the Nazi Army as a military observer through most of that year. Brown told the crowd he witnessed firsthand the divisive effects of German racial and religious propaganda. "We must not allow this to happen to us," Brown proffered, "As American citizens, we should be born of that spirit which says, 'What can I do for my country?'"[58] Brown and the Black leaders then asked for the audience members' help through opening their homes, businesses, and churches to the incoming Black soldiers.

---

[54] Sonya Ramsey, Interview with Lillian Smith, July 19, 1993, Behind the Veil Oral History Project, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, N.C., https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07038 (accessed April 10, 2022).

[55] Rhonda Mawhood, Interview with Charles Larrington Bryant, July 12, 1993, Behind the Veil Oral History Project, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, N.C., https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07005 (accessed April 10, 2022).

[56] Quoted in Guglielmo *Divisions* 223.

[57] "Negroes To Hold Patriotic Meet," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 2, 1941, www.newspapers.com/image/876389628/ (accessed December 14, 2022).

Black troops had no designated space ready for them in Wilmington. Local African Americans stepped up when white officials refused. "The Board of Education lent the use of the Auditorium of Williston High School for a recreation center for Negro soldiers during the summer," a prominent Black Wilmingtonian noted.[59] The 54th Coast Artillery's regimental band and orchestra frequently performed at Williston High. Members of the orchestra played for "some of the best known dance bands in the country," the *Wilmington Morning Star* reported.[60] The old professionals enjoyed playing with locals and Wilmingtonians loved hearing them perform. In September 1941, the community hosted 300 troops for Negro Soldier Day. Members of the 54th, 99th and 100th Coast Artillery regiments gathered with host families for church services, games, and shared meals. The soldiers and civilians enjoyed the program so much that the community hosted at least one more Negro Soldier Day one month later.[61]

---

[58] "Brown Addresses Negro Gathering," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 3, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876389725 (accessed January 17, 2023).

[59] Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor [Jr.], August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[60] "54th CA Musical Units Will Present Concert," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 2, 1941, https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn78002169/1941-08-02/ed-1/seq-6/ (accessed December 16, 2022).

[61] "Colored Soldiers Day Plans Are Under Fire In Wilmington," *Carolina Times*, August 30, 1941, https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn83045120/1941-08-30/ed-1/seq-4/ (accessed September 19, 2021); "2nd Soldiers Day Plans Underway At Wilmington," *Carolina Times*, October 11, 1941, https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn83045120/1941-10-11/ed-1/seq-5/ (accessed September 19, 2021).

If they were not in Wilmington, soldiers travelled to local beaches in their free time.[62] White soldiers rotated between Fort Caswell, Fort Fisher, Wrightsville, and Carolina Beaches.[63] Black soldiers visited Sea Breeze, a popular African American resort for wealthy and working-class people across the state. Musicians like Nat King Cole performed in the dance halls, which helped inspire the town's nickname "Bop City."[64] On evenings without live bands, people gathered around the juke box and danced the night away. "So many soldiers were coming to Sea Breeze that businesses could barely provide adequate meals and restrooms," one businessowner later commented.[65] The African American beach resort provided a welcomed escape from Jim Crow regulations. Sea Breeze became a second home for the 54th Regiment. At least one soldier fell so in love with a local woman he met at Sea Breeze that he tied the knot.[66]

As important as these moments of leisure and sites of retreat were for the soldiers, the local Black community also became an important ally for troops in their struggle against Jim Crow. Leaders pressed local and national officials for equitable treatment for all soldiers. Dr. R.R. Taylor relayed a message to the War Department in August 1941 through his son who lived in Washington D.C. Dr. Taylor informed the department that while white soldiers enjoyed recreational facilities in town courtesy of the county and city, the center for Black soldiers "has not been built in spite of everything that colored people and white organizations and individuals could do to have the city and county do what had been promised and for which the appropriation had been made." When the War Department announced plans to establish Camp Davis in

---

[62] "Moline Man Tells Camp Experiences in North Carolina," *Dispatch*, August 1, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/341274471/ (accessed September 20, 2021).
[63] Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor, August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.
[64] Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours*, 172.
[65] Jennifer J. Edwards, "A Color Line in the Sand: African American seaside leisure in New Hanover County, North Carolina" (Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 2003), 30.
[66] Ann Hertzler, Interview with Dorothy McQuillan, *Oral Histories*, Federal Point Historic Preservation Society, Carolina Beach, N.C., November 10, 2011, https://federal-point-history.org/tag/dorothy-mcquillan/ (accessed April 15, 2022).

November 1940, Wilmington and New Hanover County officials funded and constructed a $10,000 recreational facility in town for white soldiers. Repeatedly in his letter, Taylor stressed that Black Wilmingtonians stretched themselves thin providing for the troops. Despite their "commendable efforts," Taylor hoped the War Department might compel the local officials into action. "The colored soldiers visiting the city on leave have therefore no place other than the gymnasium…to spend his leisure [except] the beer parlors and brothels and such inadequate places as the colored people themselves are able to provide," he wrote.[67] About a week later, William Hastie's assistant Truman Gibson Jr. assured Dr. Taylor that Hastie's staff were fully investigating this inequality.[68] Inefficiencies in the federal government delayed construction of all four planned USO huts for white and Black soldiers until October.[69] During the delay, however, white troops accessed more of the city's existing businesses and resources while segregationist policy restricted Black troops.

***

Dr. Taylor admired the Black soldiers. "They …are quick to learn, obedient, tireless in their work, go beyond these things required, as they are anxious to learn, amenable to discipline and with all, good soldiers. Not once has a Negro soldier been heard to express the hope that his term of service will soon expire…He is thoroughly saturated with patriotism and loyalty."[70] Though the men remained committed to their duty, some questioned the character of their country. "We as Negro soldiers cannot believe in our country being an arsenal of democracies but as a concentration camp for cruel and biased whites," one skeptical Camp Davis soldier protested.[71]

---

[67] Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor, August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[68] Truman K. Gibson Jr. to Dr. R.R. Taylor, August 26, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[69] "USO To Build Here At Once," *Wilmington Morning Star*, October 4, 1941, https://newspapers.com/image/87640959 (accessed March 8, 2023).

[70] Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor, August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

Black soldiers at Camp Davis listened as military and civilian officials argued that American soldiers helped make the world safe for democracy. They believed in their abilities as soldiers, but scoffed at the idea that they lived in a "democracy." Black Americans defined democracy broadly, connecting to American ideals of personal freedom and protected liberties. They argued that Jim Crow policies were inherently undemocratic as they restricted the rights of African Americans.[72] For them, the separation and sanctioned racism by white Americans was just as undemocratic as voting restrictions.

Frustrated as they were about the prospect of fighting a war for a democracy that they never fully experienced, the Black soldiers recognized the war also afforded them unique opportunities to speak out against Jim Crow. "If this is a true democracy then give us things that are undemocratic," one Black soldier at Camp Davis wrote, "We desire to be soldiers but will not tolerate being the brunt of the hangover from slavery that is so prevalent in this man's South."[73] This mindset drove their actions in everything from military drill to anti-racism resistance.

Before the *Pittsburgh Courier* published James G. Thompson's letter to the editor entitled "Should I Sacrifice To Live Half-American?" in January 1942 and the paper launched its "Double Victory Campaign," Black Americans like those in the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment were already fighting a two-front war – one in preparation of national defense and one against racism at home. Black Americans battled against the strict racial hierarchy through community connections and written appeals to the federal government. They gained some traction. Through their outspoken appeals to officers, community leaders, and the War Department, the 54th Regimental soldiers limited physical violence by white military police officers. White segregationists, however, proved resistant and aggressive. They repressed racial progress in and out of the military. Rhetoric of the war aside, white Americans remained just as determined to secure their view of American democracy – one rooted firmly in white supremacy.

---

[71] Anonymous letter, undated, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[72] Thomas Sugrue, "Hillburn, Hattiesburg, and Hitler: Wartime Activists Think Globally and Act Locally," in Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, *The Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 92-93.

[73] Anonymous to Mother, June 4, 1941, Camp Conditions 1940-1941, Papers of the NAACP.

CHAPTER 2: "They Knew We Were Good"

Private Haymond Alexander recalled that despite the relentless prejudice hurled their way, soldiering "was our job, and we looked forward to it like that." Sergeant Winfred Bonner simply remembered, "We were good."[1] Whatever bravado they exuded they earned. One military official reported that the 54th Coast Artillery "has the enviable reputation of being the first in most everything that takes place." The regiment completed nearly all their training benchmarks before any other unit at Camp Davis. More pointedly, the enlisted men typically outperformed other Black *and* white regiments.[2] According to Sergeant Bluford, the white soldiers at Camp Wallace, Texas hated the 54th Regiment because they excelled in their duties. Whites in North Carolina, it seemed, also hated Black men outshining them. White Southern soldiers expected comfort, priority, and superiority because – as one Black soldier complained – in the Jim Crow South "white was right." Time and time again, white soldiers and civilians reminded the Black troops "you know where you are now" and upheld the racial hierarchy through segregation, abuse, and violence.[3] Confident Black soldiers assured of their self-worth and value to the nation threatened the ingrained white supremacy baked into the very fabric of Wilmington.

In July 1941, a New Hanover County grand jury recommended an increase in the region's law enforcement. The jury stated, "It has come to our attention that with the influx of negroes including colored troops who are congregating in large numbers in certain sections of the city, the Police department with its present inadequate force cannot cope with the situation in an efficient manner."[4] On occasion, fights broke out between Black soldiers and civilians in town. An NAACP investigator even reported some bitterness growing among young Black Wilmingtonians towards the Black soldiers. "The trouble with colored soldiers and colored civilians," Attorney Curtiss Todd wrote, "is soldiers have money to spend on the women and the women follow the money. Men resenting having their women taken from them by the soldiers."[5] Investigator Todd, William Hastie, and locals all recognized that insufficient recreational facilities for African American troops caused the tensions. Rather than dig into the coffers to complete the soldiers' USO hut, local officials sensationalized minor indiscretions of bored, young Black soldiers.

---

[1] James E. Garcia, "'We Were Good': For black soldiers, Pearl Harbor a door out of 'whites only' world," *Austin American-Statesman,* December 7, 1990, https://www.newspapers.com/image/364156214/ (accessed October 5, 2021)

[2] *Historical and Pictorial Review, Antiaircraft Training Center: Camp Davis, North Carolina, 1941* (Baton Rouge, LA: Army and Navy Pub. Co., 1941); "Coast Artillery Unit Stages First Review," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 28, 1941.

[3] Anonymous to Mother, June 4, 1941, Camp Conditions 1940-1941, Papers of the NAACP.

That summer, the Army stationed African American troops within Wilmington city limits at Camp Gibbins. The Army converted federal property along Eighth Street between Church and Nun Streets into the temporary camp. Camp Davis officials likely assigned men from the 54th, 99th, and 100th Coast Artillery Regiments to Camp Gibbins because the post was nestled in the African American neighborhood of Brooklyn and because white officers still disproportionally assigned labor details to Black troops.[6] The soldiers, fresh from weapons certification, stockpiled supplies for the upcoming Carolina Maneuvers scheduled for October and November.[7] With soldiers of color now living within Wilmington, and hundreds more still travelling to town regularly on leave, civilian and military police stretched themselves thin to uphold Jim Crow regulations. The Black soldiers, keenly aware of their important role as warriors in a two-front war for democracy, fought back.

---

[4] "Grand Jury Recommends Large Police Force Here," *Wilmington Morning Star*, July 24, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876402831 (accessed January 14, 2023)

[5] Curtiss Todd to Walter White, September 17, 1941, Camp Conditions 1940-1941, Papers of the NAACP.

[6] "Auditorium Is Approved By F.R.," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 30, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876392647 (accessed January 26, 2022).

[7] Christopher R. Gabel, *U.S. Army GHQ Maneuvers of 1941* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), 48.

On August 7, 1941, soldiers waited at the Wilmington bus depot at Second and Grace Streets for rides back to Camp Davis. Only a handful of buses made the roughly eighty-minute round trip from Wilmington to Camp Davis. Military police enforced segregated lines, meaning whites boarded before any Black man regardless of when the men respectively arrived at the depot. Often, African American soldiers waited multiple bus cycles for a seat. Members of the 100th Coast Artillery resisted when a white MP ordered them to the back of the segregated line. M.P. Monts escalated with force, striking one soldier with a billy club. Private Robert Jackson pinned Monts's arms back while Monts reached for his firearm, stopping him.[8] In the scuffle, an unidentified Black soldier punctured Monts's shoulder with an ice pick. Around thirty-five other white and Black soldiers exchanged blows before civilian and military police broke up the skirmish.[9] Camp Davis soldiers spoke out against Jim Crow before, but this marked the first time Black troops physically resisted segregation policy.

The Associated Press broadcasted the incident to partners around the country. "Military policemen on duty…said that the stabbing obviously was an aftermath of a free-for-all fist fight between white and Negro soldiers at the depot," the AP reported.[10] Minor details in the report varied from paper to paper, but Americans across the country learned that two Black soldiers pinned down and stabbed a white military policeman in the shoulder. Rioting soldiers also destroyed bus windows and upholstery. Southern papers also claimed the fight broke out when "Negroes refused to accept the Jim Crow seats in the back of a Seashore Transportation Company bus."[11] Military police arrested a dozen Black soldiers and, some papers stated, turned clubs and water hoses on the men to restore order. Back at Camp Davis, all 4,500-plus Black soldiers of the 54th, 99th, and 100th Coast Artillery Regiments were confined to their quarters while the military police presence doubled. The AP report ran in white newspapers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, California, Pennsylvania and beyond.[12] The sensational story, however, blurred fact and fiction.

---

[8] "Camp Davis 'Trouble Reports' Stretched, Courier Men Find," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 23, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40059673/ (accessed April 15, 2022).
[9] "Military Policeman Stabbed by Negroes," *Charlotte Observer*, August 7, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/617705606/ (accessed September 20, 2021)
[10] "Military Policeman Stabbed by Negroes," *Charlotte Observer*, August 7, 1941.
[11] "Negroes at Davis Kept to Quarters," *News & Observer*, August 8, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651457318 (accessed September 21, 2021).

Camp Davis's commanding officer Brigadier General Crawford and the colonels in charge of the Black troops upheld Jim Crow segregation on post and expected their soldiers to adhere to those policies in Wilmington. In response to the bus depot protest, the camp's leadership increased African American military police patrols in town, provided additional transportation back to Camp Davis, and ordered that Black MPs oversee Black soldiers.[13] But after several meetings with city officials, Crawford recognized that white Wilmingtonians created a bigger story from the minor protest than necessary. "The First Army is opening a depot for the army maneuvers in Wilmington, which will be manned by colored troops. The Wilmington authorities don't want them, and it seems possible that they are trying to play up every incident in which a colored soldier is involved to back up their desire to cut down the number of colored troops in this area," the general wrote.[14]

African Americans also recognized the media fix. About two weeks after the bus depot fight, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that "contrary to newspaper reports there was no serious outbreak among colored and white soldiers stationed at nearby Camp Davis…" Investigative reporters interviewed an intelligence officer and public relations officer from Camp Davis, both of whom "vigorously denied that 14 colored soldiers were arrested at the scene of the affray and that the colored troops were ordered confined to their quarters."[15] Even William Hastie recognized that white city leaders worked against the Black soldiers. "The municipal officials at Wilmington are undoubtedly hostile toward the colored soldier," he wrote, "…[they] are disposed to make a political issue of the Negro soldier."[16]

---

[12] "Negro Soldiers Are Segregated, Their Leaves Cancelled," *Victoria Advocate*, August 7, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/440268026 (accessed September 21, 2021); "Camp Davis Disorder," *The Herald-Sun,* August 7, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/786451731 (accessed September 21, 2021); "Races at Camp Davis Also Segregated," *The Long Beach Sun*, August 7, 1941 https://www.newspapers.com/image/721890636 (accessed September 21, 2021); "New Race Riot Harasses Army," *Pittsburgh Press*, August 7, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/147688606 (accessed September 21, 2021).

[13] Wade H. Haislip, Memorandum for the Deputy Chief of Staff, August 21, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[14] Haislip, Memorandum for the Deputy Chief of Staff, August 21, 1941.

Sensational news coverage about the Black troops continued. In mid-August, white papers reported on more violence allegedly committed by Black soldiers stationed at Camp Davis. "Approximately 300 Negro soldiers and as many civilians were involved in the fighting which started when a bartender refused to serve beer to a Negro soldier who the bartender said was drunk," the Associated Press reported.[17] Wilmington City Manager James Wallace charged that the Army insufficiently policed their soldiers and noted that white city and state police officers had to break up the fight.

Meanwhile, the press reported that an unidentified Black soldier assaulted a fifteen-year-old white girl at Camp Davis. The soldier allegedly "approached her, placed his hands over her mouth...and took her into some bushes" where the girl managed to free herself and run away.[18] The teenager lived with her father who worked as a construction engineer for the post. Wallace and the Wilmington city attorney William Campbell called the Army's punishments for Black soldiers woefully inadequate. Campbell told reporters "Something must be done about this situation. We simply cannot allow such things to continue."[19] Since Reconstruction, white Southerners had upheld white women as symbols of white purity and virtue. Throughout the region, allegations of sexual assault by a Black man against a white woman was especially heinous because it represented African Americans corrupting the white race and seizing power from whites. In Wilmington, the allegation – the first and only of its kind published in newspapers during the tenure of the 54th in North Carolina – harkened back to the gendered politics at play when white supremacists overthrew the local white-Black Fusionist government, installed themselves in positions of power, and massacred an unknown number of Black Wilmingtonians in November 1898. Though Campbell and other politicians were not threatening a massacre, they utilized suspect reports of Black lawlessness to justify increased control over local African Americans, just as their predecessors had just forty years prior.

---

[15] "Camp Davis 'Trouble Reports' Stretched," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 23, 1941.

[16] William Hastie to Walter White, October 23, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[17] "Meeting Today on Riots of Negroes," *News & Observer*, August 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651461260 (accessed September 21, 2021).

[18] "Smith To Probe Assault On Girl," *News & Observer*, August 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651461260 (accessed September 21, 2021); "Police Abandon Attacker Hunt," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876405238 (accessed September 21, 2021).

The *Wilmington Morning Star* published other comments from top local officials. New Hanover County Sheriff C. David Jones stated "if the soldiers, both white and colored, are properly disciplined at the camp, they will make good soldiers while on leave" in Wilmington. Adrian Rhodes, the Register of Deeds, said "We haven't forgotten the race riots of 1898, when there was so much trouble between whites and negroes."[20] By that, he meant that white Wilmingtonians remembered they had once been forced to act to protect themselves against "dangerous" African Americans. Rhodes's reference at best, therefore, represented a concern that tensions would boil into interracial violence. At worst, he hoped to intimidate soldiers into submission with veiled threats, or even outright acts, of violence.[21] Black Wilmingtonians had also not forgotten the viciousness of that seminal moment at the turn of the century; the collective "1898 Mentality" still traumatized them and often limited their willingness to agitate for civil rights. Black soldiers in Wilmington, particularly those from the North, were more prone to confront the Jim Crow system. Therefore, they represented a greater threat to white Wilmingtonians.

---

[19] "Negro Soldiers Draw City's Fire," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876405238 (accessed January 26, 2022).
[20] "Army Promises All Assistance To End Rioting," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 20, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876405318 (accessed January 26, 2022).
[21] "Negro Soldiers Draw City's Fire," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 19, 1941.

Since their arrival in North Carolina, the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment represented a threat to Jim Crow. In her study on memory and race in Wilmington, historian Margaret Mulrooney argues that in the 1940s whites "imagined a black insurrection" instigated by Black soldiers and took measures "to suppress it before it began."[22] While law enforcement officials used physical violence to maintain the racial hierarchy, public officials used the power of their position to sway public perception of the troops. The Black soldiers gained a reputation within Camp Davis and the local Black community as peaceful, successful soldiers with the occasional alcohol or boredom fueled conflict with locals.[23] However, pro-segregationist, white-run newspaper editors excessively covered conflicts between law enforcement and Black troops, routinely blaming the Black men for the disturbances. The sheriff, register of deeds, and city manager, in turn, portrayed *all* Black soldiers as disruptive, insubordinate, and menacing.

Dr. H.H. Taylor, an African American, commented, "The real motive behind this apparent campaign of misrepresentation and exaggeration in these [newspaper] clippings [is] the removal of Negro combat troops" from Wilmington.[24] "This would apply particularly to those in the combat regiments as artillery,"[25] he continued. "I do not believe there would be any objection to keeping the labor or service companies." White Wilmingtonians perceived Black artillerymen as threats to their society.[26] Combat soldiers by virtue of their unique self-sacrifice for democracy commanded respect and an honored place in the nation.[27] Thanks to their training, they were not easy targets of intimidation and violence, the essential ingredients to maintaining the racial hierarchy. Further, some of these Black soldiers had already successfully lobbied the federal government for concessions and relief from Jim Crow. Black MPs now patrolled the Black Wilmington neighborhoods. What might they change next? City officials therefore concluded they could not risk more Black combat troops living in the community.

---

[22] Margaret M. Mulrooney, *Race, Place, and Memory*, 199-200.

[23] *See* "Review at Camp Davis Proves Success," *Wilmington Morning Star*, June 22, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651416007 (accessed August 17, 2021); Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor, August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[24] Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor, August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[25] Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor, August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

***

Ongoing reports of Black soldiers' misdeeds coupled with extensive coverage of how Camp Davis and city officials would address this "problem" influenced some local whites' perception of the 54th Regiment. In September 1941, the unit prepared for a training mission at Fort Fisher, a live-firing outpost south of Wilmington. Camp Davis press officers reported that the regiment would be the first to train at the old Confederate post.[28] Contractors had not yet completed a segregated artillery range, Technical Sergeant William Rice explained, "so they sent us down to Fort Fisher…to have the colored personnel fire their first shots."[29] Whites living nearby protested to the county commissioners, sending six representatives to ask the politicians to stop the transfer of the Black troops. They threatened to take matters into their own hands if the Army sent the 54th Regiment to Fort Fisher.[30] The county sheriff assigned a deputy to protect local white residents and their property. These threats may have delayed the unit's movement to Fort Fisher. They originally were scheduled to arrive on October 1st but did not arrive until the second half of the month.[31]

---

[26] Dr. R. R. Taylor to R.R. Taylor, August 20, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.
[27] Parker, "War and African American Citizenship," 429.
[28] "Old Fort Fisher," *Greenville News*, September 30, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/187896257/ (accessed April 4, 2022).
[29] Natalie Marie Fousekis, Interview with Bernice Rice and William Rice, December 9, 1995 K-0081, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
[30] "Fort Fisher Group Asks Police Guard," *Wilmington Morning Star*, September 23, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876408446/ (accessed April 4, 2021).

Once they finally reached Fort Fisher, members of the 54th Regiment began extensive battle service practice. As coast artillerymen, the soldiers defended strategic shorelines from enemy ships, planes, and amphibious landing assaults. On this month-long operation, soldiers practiced tracing and firing upon moving targets across the sea and sky. For the first twelve days, the men conducted intensive artillery drills in which crews tracked moving targets in the ocean.[32] Soldiers then spent six days sub-caliber firing the smaller 37mm guns mounted to the top of their standard 155mm artillery piece. Army training regulations mandated that gun sections complete at least one service practice with 200 rounds of ammunition. On a separate day, the men completed the official service practice at targets between 500 and 2,500 yards.[33] Once the regiment mastered the 37mm, they graduated to the big guns. For ten days, the artillerymen fired live 155mm rounds at targets 9,000 to 12,000 yards away along the coastline and offshore in the ocean. All fifteen men in each gun section carefully coordinated their movements under the commands of their respective battery executive, a Black noncommissioned officer.[34]

Throughout the fall, Wilmington's white leaders continually smeared the reputation of the African American soldiers. Even the white Army officers grew frustrated with the excessive bad coverage of Black troops in Wilmington. Major Alexander Wannemaker commented "We are very proud of the results we are attaining here," and that he hoped there was "a real opportunity to publicly demonstrate to the world what can and is being accomplished with and for the Negro Soldier."[35] The necessary training operations at Fort Fisher provided a unique opportunity to restore the image of Camp Davis's most promising Black regiment among white Wilmingtonians. The post's press office invited the media to observe on the 54th Regiment's artillery practice in mid-November 1941.

---

[31] "54th Coast Artillery Begins Off-Shore Target Practice," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 25, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40066417 (accessed August 31, 2022); "Davis Coast Artillery Prepares For Gun Drill," *Wilmington Morning Star*, October 14, 1941, https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn78002169/1941-10-14/ed-1/seq-2 (accessed August 31, 2022).

[32] "54th Coast Artillery Begins Off-Shore Target Practice," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 25, 1941.

[33] War Department, *Technical Manual: Seacoast Artillery Target Practice TM 4-235* (Washington: War Department Publication, 1942), 8-9.

[34] War Department, *Coast Artillery Field Manual: Service of the Piece 155-MM Gun (G.P.F.) FM 4-25* (Fort Monroe, VA: Army Field Printing Plant, 1944), 9-12.

White North Carolinians contextualized progress of African Americans within the legacy of the Confederacy. While watching the regimental drills, the *Wilmington Morning Star* reporter pondered, "The fort's defenders would have been cast in a different role if, by a stretch of imagination, they had had the fire power and the accuracy of the 155's which were fired…on the same hallowed ground."[36] When Black combat soldiers threatened the racial hierarchy in Wilmington, whites responded with verbal and physical attacks. But along the isolated ruins of the Confederate fort and under control of their white officers, the Black soldiers appeared serviceable and even valuable to the nation. "The 54th Coast Artillery pump[ed] huge projectiles at targets out in the Atlantic with unerring accuracy," the *Rocky Mount Telegram* reported.[37] The *News & Observer* of Raleigh observed "Battery A must have done very well" and applauded their "brief but impressive show of fire power and accuracy."[38] Even the local *Wilmington Morning Star* commented, "For an untrained crew it would have been disconcerting to carry out orders while another 155 war bursting with a tremendous roar only a few feet away. But the 54th crews went through their climactic test with finesse of veterans."[39]

---

[35] Alexander J.H. Wannemaker to William H. Hastie, October 15, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[36] "Big Guns Boom at Fort Fisher," *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 15, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876413804/ (accessed March 19, 2023).

[37] "Fort Fisher Active Again," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, November 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/375059896 (accessed April 15, 2022).

[38] "Guns Thunder Once More At Historic Ft. Fisher," *News & Observer*, November 16, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651567434 (accessed April 15, 2022).

These pro-segregationist papers seemingly contradicted their earlier reporting on the dangers of the Black troops in Wilmington. In fact, the intense training schedule and isolation from white law enforcement officials who routinely harassed the Black troops afforded the men greater freedom to focus on their military duty over their civil rights activism. Further, the enlisted men of the 54th Regiment studied the fort's Civil War history. Confederate soldiers fired large cannons at Union Navy blockaders that threatened commerce of the rebelling states. The 54th Artillerymen likewise trained to destroy offshore enemies. One Black soldier drew considerable praise from local whites for his poem that tied the history of the Civil War fort to the work of his outfit.

Corporal Herman C. Henderson evoked the defensive mission of the Confederate fort throughout his poem. "A stage your breast has been/Where in war's drama played contending men; / The spirit of Lamb yet haunts your thickets green / And in the page of history is seen."[40] He even played on the nostalgic importance of Fort Fisher, writing "You yet shall span / Through dying years in the memories of man." Henderson then claimed his unit carried on the warrior spirit associated with the old fort, "Another age has come with dangers new, / A nation's forced to arm with force undue."

Henderson argued the 54th Regiment stood ready for the fight. "And to your shores, the unledging [*sic*] youth retire, / Loud ring your hills with echoes of their fire / As on the once embattled shores they stand / And send their volleys o'er the wave-washed sand." In the Civil War, Fort Fisher served as a final battleground in a war over freedom in America. Now, Henderson concluded, soldiers fired guns over Fort Fisher in an ongoing effort to protect American democracy. "So long as freedom struggles to survive, /…So long shall salvos 'gainst your billows beat / And reverberations, reverberations meet, / And with each you'll swell with pride to be / A proud defender of democracy."[41] White segregationists interpreted Henderson's poem as praise for the Confederacy and perhaps as a sign that African Americans recognized the "noble" cause of the South in the Civil War. The *Camp Davis Protector* and the *Wilmington Morning Star* ran the piece in December 1941. Meanwhile, Henderson subtly asserted that his regiment continued the fort's military tradition and fulfilled the role of defenders of democracy.

---

[39] "Big Guns Boom at Fort Fisher," *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 15, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/651567434 (accessed April 15, 2022).

[40] "Lamb" refers to Colonel William Lamb, the senior Confederate officer at Fort Fisher for most of the Civil War. Lamb commanded the Confederate troops during the battles of Fort Fisher in December 1864 and January 1865. Federal troops captured Fort Fisher on January 15, 1865.

At Fort Fisher, the Black soldiers demonstrated the finesse and skills of African American combat soldiers. By every account, it seemed, they succeeded. "They knew we were good," Sergeant Bonner recalled.[42] White Wilmingtonians may have started coming around to the idea that Black men could serve in combat, but they still resisted any racial progress on the home front. Meanwhile, Black soldiers, civilians, and even some white officers continued their fight against the undemocratic, racist policies in the South. As the 54th finished their training at Fort Fisher, prominent Black Wilmingtonians gathered in support of the struggling soldiers.

***

The local police force, however, continually hounded the Black troops stationed at Camp Gibbins. About a month after the bus depot riot, law enforcement officials further weaponized their officers. Chief Casteen reported that his department "is, for the first time, prepared for any ordinary riot or public demonstration that may occur" after "the need for such equipment has become more and more apparent within the past few months."[43] The Wilmington police department secured riot gear and gas canisters. They prepared for mobilization against "disruptive" Black troops. [44] White Wilmingtonians continued their campaign to paint Black troops as a menace to white society. The white press covered seemingly every incident between Black troops and police or civilians. The *Wilmington Morning Star* reported in November 1941 "City police were again called to quell a disturbance at Camp Gibbins early Sunday morning when the arrest of a negro soldier caused other soldiers to start a minor riot." If the success of the 54th Artillerymen at Fort Fisher helped change white people's perception of combat soldiers among whites, it failed to prevent the over-policing of Black troops in town. At a distance, Black soldiers benefited the nation. But in their own city, the activist-minded men posed a real threat to the racial status quo.

---

[41] Herman C. Henderson, "Fort Fisher," in "Ft. Fisher Poem Penned By Negro," *Wilmington Morning Star*, December 13, 1941, https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn78002169/1941-12-13/ed-1/seq-5/ (accessed March 24, 2022).

[42] Garcia, "'We Were Good,'" *Austin American-Statesman*. December 7, 1990.

Black Wilmingtonians, who lived closest to Camp Gibbins and welcomed thousands of African American soldiers into their community, lobbied the War Department for further support of the 54th, 99th, and 100th Regiments. In November, a group of prominent Black citizens met in private to contemplate their options. They authorized one man to write to Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, and request a meeting in Washington D.C. "There is at this camp a [Colonel] E.D. Brown whom from all evidence is…sincere in his efforts with Negro soldiers as attested by Gen. B.O. Davis under who he once served." The group hoped White would support their efforts in campaigning for Brown's promotion to Brigadier General and commander of Camp Davis.[45]

---

[43] "Police Receive Gas, Riot Guns," *Wilmington Morning Star*, September 23, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876408458 (accessed January 27, 2023).

[44] "Police Aid In Quelling Camp Gibbins Fighters," *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 4, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876412583 (accessed January 27, 2023).

Colonel Brown commanded the 19th Training Group which consisted of the 99th and 100th Regiments, and earned considerable respect for his fair treatment of Black troops. In November, rumors circulated in Wilmington that Brown would assume command of the 54th Regiment as well. H. Carl Moultrie, an African American in Wilmington, took the opportunity to praise and support Brown. "Permit me to extend a hearty congratulations to you for the very excellent work you are doing among the Negro soldiers of your regiment," he wrote. "I am sure that men like you in command of Negro troops will pull out of the Negro his ability to be a soldier, a credit to the entire country. You should know that your work among these men is being highly lauded among the citizens of Wilmington in contact with them daily."[46] J. Otis Smith informed White that Brown's promotion "will mean so much not only to the men at Camp Davis but to the Negro soldiers throughout this Southern land."[47]

While Colonel Warner of the 54th Regiment had advocated for the minimal improvements necessary for the health of his soldiers, he ignored reports of MP violence against his men. Brown, by contrast, "enjoyed a consistently good reputation for protecting his men against unfair treatment" Hastie stated.[48] Brown proudly ensured his soldiers received excellent training. "We continue to write mighty good history here, such as, for instance…The 19th Group has the highest shooting enlisted man of the camp…The headquarters of the 19th Group has qualified 100 percent marksmen. One battery…probably has the highest percentage of qualified markmen [sic] in camp."[49] Despite the community support for Brown, the Army made its own decisions. In November the War Department replaced Colonel Warner with Colonel Robert Carswell. The following month, Colonel Brown was transferred to New York and Carswell assumed command of the 19th Training Group, thus merging all Black regiments under one chain of command.[50]

---

[45] J. Otis Smith to Walter White, November 12, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.
[46] H. Carl Moultrie to Richard D. Brown, November 13, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.
[47] J. Otis Smith to Walter White, November 12, 1941, Camp Conditions Folder, Papers of the NAACP.
[48] William Hastie to Roy Wikins, November 4, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

***

Local activism and training halted after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The Army mobilized thousands of soldiers around the country for deployment overseas and protection of the home front. Soldiers in the 54th Regiment learned they might deploy to Europe. "When Pearl Harbor was bombed, we had already eight months of training in artillery. We were one of the few outfits that were ready when the war happened," William Jackson recalled. "So, we left Camp Davis, North Carolina in February '42 on the way to Germany and apparently something happened down in Santa Barbara beach or harbor – that they thought it might have been a submarine or bomb."

On February 23, a Japanese submarine launched a failed bombardment on oil reserves held in Ellwood, just outside of Santa Barbara, California. The Imperial Navy caused no major damage or loss of life.[51] The following day, military intelligence officers warned of imminent further attacks by the Japanese upon the West Coast. In the early morning hours of February 25, radar controllers noticed unidentified objects offshore of Los Angeles and issued warnings to nearby antiaircraft artillerymen. Nervous soldiers manned their guns. A few opened fire into the night sky, believing they spotted enemy aircraft. In reality, the Japanese had not launched an attack on California that night. Jitters among soldiers and civilians turned the false radar reading into the so-called "Battle of Los Angeles."[52] Between the real and rumored attacks, fear of an invasion of the mainland grew.

---

[49] Robert D. Brown to William H. Hastie, November 18, 1941, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[50] "Col. Brown Going to Gotham Post," *Wilmington Morning Star*, December 11, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876417039/ (accessed January 30, 2023); "54th Coast Artillery Now Attached to 19th Davis Training Group," *Wilmington Morning Star*, December 24, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876418413/ (accessed January 30, 2023).

[51] "Shells From Sub Fired At Ellwood Oil Plant by Japs," *Santa Maria Times*, February 24, 1942, https://www.newspapers.com/image/629634463 (accessed January 31, 2023).

In response, the 54th transferred to California to protect the coast. The three battalions left North Carolina on February 28, 1942.[53] "We had batteries from... Santa Cruz to Monterey Bay [and] Obispo Beach," Jackson said.[54] For the first time since their unit's inception, these men lived outside of the Jim Crow South. Soldiers recalled that the Californian whites overwhelmingly welcomed them. "The townfolk were glad to see us. I guess they figured, 'These are my protectors, so I'll be nice to them," Haymond Alexander recalled.[55] Some white Californians even opened their businesses and offered rides to the Black troops. Alexander claimed "It was somewhat like a second heaven" after the direct racism they endured in Texas and North Carolina.[56] But some white Californians turned their noses at their new protectors.

In April 1942, the Army stationed part of the regiment at Phelan Park in Santa Cruz. Nearly overnight, the Santa Cruz County's African American population exploded from eighteen to hundreds of people. When later asked about how the white locals reacted to this influx, Isaac Jackson said "Santa Cruz had never seen so many black people before…They didn't know what to do."[57] Just weeks after the Black soldiers settled into their new post, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reported that "a plea was made to Santa Cruz city council members [on April 20th] by Mrs. Frank Horan that a list of Santa Cruz eating places and barber shops refusing to serve negro soldiers be made." According to Doris Horan, a middle-aged white woman from Michigan, three restaurants refused service to the soldiers.[58] Horan hoped such a list would shame and discourage segregation or, at least, help the Black soldiers navigate the town. Mayor Edwin Rich informed her, "The city has no power to force merchants to conduct their business in any certain way."[59] Mayor Rich's flat rejection to help coordinate information about which businesses discriminated against Black patrons reflected the city's long history of permitting racial intolerance. While some locals openly welcomed the troops, their acceptance was tested when some soldiers chose to settle in Santa Cruz after the war. When one veteran purchased a home in a traditionally white neighborhood – Santa Cruz had no ordinances prohibiting African Americans from certain developments – the white neighbors set fire to the home and threatened the buyer by saying "this is a white neighborhood and [we] intend to keep it that way."[60]

---

[52] Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II* Volume I "Plans and Early Operations January 1939 to August 1942," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 282-286.
[53] Gaines, "Coast Artillery Organizational History," *Coast Defense Journal*.
[54] Garcia, "'We Were Good,'" *Austin American-Statesman*. December 7, 1990.
[55] Garcia, "'We Were Good,'" *Austin American-Statesman*. December 7, 1990.
[56] Garcia, "'We Were Good,'" *Austin American-Statesman*. December 7, 1990.
[57] Kreiger, "The Black Person Had It Rough," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, February 8, 1997.

The regiment's Second Battalion remained in California just five months. In July 1942, the War Department announced it would soon transfer the soldiers to Fort Macon, North Carolina. Whites in nearby Atlantic Beach and Morehead City protested. U.S. Congressman Graham Barden and Governor J. Melville Broughton appealed to the Chief of Staff General George Marshall. Broughton informed General Marshall that "I earnestly hope these plans will be immediately reconsidered."[61] On August 1, the Acting Chief of Staff Joseph Nerey responded to the governor on behalf of General Marshall. He stressed that the 54th Regiment was the only available unit to guard the fort. "The War Department is fully aware of the problems which might arise as the result of assigning the 54th Coast Artillery to this duty. These problems are not peculiar to North Carolina but are apt to arise anywhere in the United States where negro troops are stationed," Nerey countered. "So far we have been fortunate in preventing any critical situations in this respect. This can be attributed to the state of discipline, morale and spirit which has been instilled in our negro units," he concluded.[62]

---

[58] U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Federal Census, 1940, https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/70096718:2442 (accessed November 23, 2021).
[59] "Council Hears Plea for Negroes," *Santa Cruz Sentinel,* April 21, 1942, https://www.newspapers.com/image/55343571 (accessed November 5, 2021).
[60] "Winkle Avenue Fire Is Definitely 'Arson,'" *Santa Cruz Sentinel,* November 12, 1951, https://www.newspapers.com/image/60470528/ (accessed November 18, 2021).
[61] J.M. Broughton to George Marshall, July 30, 1942, Box 1633.3, J. Melville Broughton Papers, North Carolina Archives, Raleigh, N.C. (hereafter Broughton Papers).

The Second Battalion arrived at Fort Macon on August 3. Congressman Barden capitulated, "Apparently there is nothing further we can do about this matter." But others refused to give in. White locals continued to send letters of protest to the governor. Broughton promised one racist local "we will continue our efforts to get a change made in the location of troops guarding this area."[63] Meanwhile, the soldiers' excellent discipline and commitment to their duty continued in Fort Macon. They remained in North Carolina for one month. Their short stay cannot be blamed on the white protestors, however. Once again, the Army recognized their skills as combat soldiers. In February 1942, The War Department had selected the regiment to guard California because they were the best unit available when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. In August 1942, the United States had military opened land operations in the Pacific Theater thus the Army needed to send infantrymen and support artillerymen. The Second Battalion returned to Ford Ord, California temporarily. Within a month, the battalion boarded a transport ship for the South Pacific.[64]

The Second Battalion provided fire support for infantry assaults during numerous Pacific Theater island hopping missions. They protected the airfield at Espiritu Santo, which served bombers attacking Guadalcanal. There, the Second Battalion withstood occasional bombing raids by the Japanese with no casualties reported. In early 1944, the Army redesignated the Second Battalion of the 54th Coast Artillery as the 49th Coast Artillery Battalion. In February 1944, the artillerymen relocated to Bougainville and subsequently took on more combat responsibilities. The Battalion transferred from combat support artillery to field artillery operations.[65] The Second Battalion earned the distinction as the first Black artillery unit to engage directly in combat operations in the South Pacific while deployed in Bougainville.[66] They also saw action in Papua New Guinea in over 400 destruction, neutralization, and harassment missions as field artillerymen. In March 1944, Japanese forces directly targeted their position in Papua New Guinea. The 49th Artillerymen countered with their 155mm guns. Their actions earned the Battalion six Bronze Stars and a commendation from the XIV Corps Artillery commander. Two soldiers were killed in action and three were wounded.[67] The Battalion remained active in the South Pacific through the end of the war.

---

[62] Joseph Nerey to Governor Broughton, August 1, 1942, Broughton Papers.
[63] J.M. Broughton to G. Oaksmith, August 17, 1942, Broughton Papers.
[64] Gowan, Report of Headquarters Second Battalion 54th C.A., June 30, 1943.

***

African Americans at Camp Davis and within Wilmington continued to challenge Jim Crow policies after the 54th Regiment transferred out of the state. In July 1942, Hortense Houston Young, the African American librarian for Camp Davis, wrote to William Hastie in the War Department complaining of segregation on post. Young recalled receiving instructions from Colonel Sampey that she and other civilian employees in the Black section of camp "under no circumstances were we to socialize with the enlisted men on Post. He stated that we were considered as officers in our positions here…and the order must be rigidly adhered to." So, when Young went to the movie theater reserved for the Black troops, she sat in the front among the white officers. To her surprise, an usher asked her to segregate herself and sit among the enlisted men, which would violate Sampey's instructions. Young stated she had sat in the officers' section of the theater before because of the non-fraternization order and refused to sit among the enlisted soldiers. Instead, she left the theater. "Now I am embarrassed, humiliated, discriminated against and segregated at the theater on the Post," Young informed Hastie. She charged that the actions of the white usher "diametrically opposed" commands from senior officers and "leaves doubt as to the ability of this particular officer in charge of theaters to uphold the Democracy he has been charged to defend."[68]

---

[65] John Moseley, "'Through Difficulties': A Brief History of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment," unpublished manuscript, August 2021, 54th Coast Artillery Folder, Fort Fisher State Historic Site Collections, 2-3.

[66] "Combat Units Face Enemy," *Pittsburgh* Courier, March 18, 1944, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40055731/ (accessed January 31, 2023).

[67] Moseley, "'Through Difficulties,'" 3-4.

In July 1943, Governor J. Melville Broughton dedicated the U.S.S. *John Merrick* in the Wilmington Shipyard. The new vessel bore the name of the influential African American Durham businessman and founder of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. Far from a moment of racial unity, white officials marked a white-washed version of Merrick's legacy along the waters where the lifeless victims of the Wilmington Massacre had floated some forty-five years prior. Historian Timothy Tyson notes that Broughton painted Merrick's life "as a cautionary tale about the perils of black political activism," and claimed Merrick succeeded because he worked within the racial hierarchy. "Forty-five years later," Tyson continues, "warning of the same kind of confrontation [as 1898], the state's leading Democrat singled out for condemnation 'radical agitators,' impressing upon them the need for a civility grounded in unquestioning acceptance of white domination."[69]

---

[68] Hortense Houston Young to William H. Hastie, July 21, 1942, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

[69] Timothy B. Tyson, "Wars for Democracy: African American Militancy and Interracial Violence in North Carolina during World War II," in Cecelski and Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed*, 268-269.

While Governor Broughton encouraged African Americans to stay in line, Wilmington police officers brutally reinforced the racial hierarchy. As the launch party broke up, people walked out of the shipyard and found disgruntled Black people just getting off a city bus. They boarded in time to catch the ceremony, but the driver instead took them to a police station. According to the passengers, Mamie Williamson boarded the bus and sat "in the only empty seat" behind the driver, which violated segregation laws. At the next stop, a white man boarded and the driver demanded that Williamson vacate the seat. Instead, she stated she would leave the bus if the driver refunded her money. The bus driver refused and took everybody to the police department where officers boarded the vehicle and beat the woman in front of all its passengers. Historian Margaret Mulrooney reports that the law enforcement officials "finally dragged her inside the police station, leaving the prisoners on the bus for nearly forty-five minutes until an officer 'with a drawn revolver' boarded and ordered the driver to take them to the shipyard."[70] The patriotism and activism first exhibited by the 54th, 99th, and 100th Coast Artillery Regiments helped spark bolder acts of defiance and cast out the so-called "1898 Mentality." This, in turn, provoked harsh responses from white authorities invested in maintaining the status quo in North Carolina.

***

The 54th Regiment excelled as soldiers while protesting overt and systemic racism in the Jim Crow South. By the time the regiment left Camp Davis, the soldiers had gained recognition for their military acumen among Black and white people alike. Their activism, however, yielded comparatively few results. Despite their equating Jim Crow racial abuse to their Axis enemies and their appeals to the federal government for intervention, white supremacy remained encoded in law and in hearts. Isaac Jackson later commented “It’s always been that way. It ain’t got no better.”[71] Still, their protests inspired future civil rights activism among Wilmingtonians. Even so, World War II laid an important foundation for African Americans and future civil rights activists. As Haymond Alexander stated, the war was “the best thing that happened to blacks…It gave you the freedom to begin to say ‘I am somebody.’”[72]

---

[70] Mulrooney, *Race, Place, and Memory*, 201-203.

---

[71] Sandy Lydon, “The integration of Santa Cruz County,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, January 19, 1992, https://www.newspapers.com/image/71826603 (accessed November 18, 2021).

[72] Garcia, “‘We Were Good,’” *Austin American-Statesman.* December 7, 1990.

CHAPTER 3: "For Democracy to Flourish…"

Cameron Art Museum rests on part of the Civil War battleground of Forks Road in Wilmington. In 2021, the museum unveiled *Boundless*, a permanent statue of U.S. Colored Troops along the battlefield trail. The cultural curator Daniel Jones leads tours of the trail and *Boundless* sculpture that, in part, connect the U.S. Colored Troops' history with ongoing conversations about Civil War commemorations and symbols. Through his work, Jones found that community members want to have conversations about public memory and race, and that they just need a place to do so. My research aims to strengthen and broaden those conversations within the Wilmington community. This microhistory on the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment not only expands our understanding of military activism, it also provides a new platform for public interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement.

Museums, historic homes, and preservation societies in the greater Wilmington region largely focus on 18th and 19th century history. Traditionally, these sites celebrate the port city's prominent connection to the Revolutionary War or Civil War and focus on wealthy white men.[1] In recent decades, history institutions and community organizations have created new exhibits and programming on the region's expansive African American history and the white supremacist coup d'état of 1898. However, there has been very little public interpretation of 20th century civil rights activism. Further, ongoing public debates on systemic racism, critical race theory, and racial inequality cannot be fully addressed without an examination of our recent past.

***

Since the release of Nikole Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project* in 2019 and the national 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in response to extra-judicial executions of Black people, Americans have hotly debated our nation's racial history and whether we still suffer from systemic oppression. For a fleeting moment after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, many white Americans began to reckon with their biases and white privilege.[2] However, by mid-summer, President Trump's Department of Homeland Security issued a blanket statement that called the overwhelmingly peaceful protests violent and destructive. In reality, police officers made arrests in only five percent of protests and escalated to less-than-lethal weapons like tear gas in only about three percent of Black Lives Matter events.[3] Regardless, President Trump repeatedly called the protests destructive and even made statements in support of violence against anti-racism protestors.[4] Seemingly as quickly as white Americans reflected on their role in systemic racism, they found justification for our society and justice system to remain the same.

---

[1] *See* Mulrooney, *Race, Place, and Memory.*

Right-wing pundit Christopher Rufo believes that as the terms "cancel culture" and "woke" are losing their divisive, politicizing edge in conservative circles, critical race theory is now "the perfect villain."[5] This legal theory emerged in response to the failures of the Civil Rights Movement as legal scholars criticized colorblindness and other liberal failures of the courts. Critical race theory, in short, is "a study of hegemony: how domination can persist without coercion," Angela P. Harris writes. Since its inception, scholars in other academic fields have built upon the theory to explore its impact in the boarder society.[6] By contrast, Rufo has written articles claiming that critical race theory is divisive, race-obsessed, and un-American. His reports quickly gained the attention of Fox News host Tucker Carlson and, by extension, President Trump. Conservative media and Trump's administration latched onto critical race theory as a justification to implement conservative reforms in education and other fields.[7] It soon had its intended effect. In June 2021, hundreds of protestors packed the New Hanover County Board of Education meeting in response to growing concerns that local schools taught critical race theory and focused on systemic oppression. Some supported curricula focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion across academic subjects, while others claimed diversity initiatives were a front for teaching critical race theory. They argued the theory prioritizes skin color over character.[8]

---

[2] Book sales on anti-racism subjects topped bestselling charts. *See* Jemina McEvoy, "Sales of 'White Fragility' – And Other Anti-Racism Books – Jumped Over 2000% After Protests Began," *Forbes,* July 22, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/07/22/sales-of-white-fragility-and-other-anti-racism-books-jumped-over-2000-after-protests-began/?sh=e79539303d83 (accessed April 19, 2022).

[3] Erica Chenoweth, "This summer's Black Lives Matter protestors were overwhelmingly peaceful, our research finds," *Washington Post,* October 16, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/16/this-summers-black-lives-matter-protesters-were-overwhelming-peaceful-our-research-finds/ (accessed April 19, 2022).

[4] Philip Bump, "Over and over, Trump has focused on Black Lives Matter as a target of derision or violence," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/01/over-over-trump-has-focused-black-lives-matter-target-derision-or-violence/ (accessed April 19, 2022).

[5] Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "How A Conservative Activist Invented The Conflict Over Critical Race Theory," *Annals of Inquiry*, June 18, 2021.

[6] Angela P. Harris, "Critical Race Theory," *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2, no. 5, 266.

As conversations about race and history remain inherently political and controversial, issues stemming from or worsened by racial inequality plague the community. While inflation and rising housing costs affect all Wilmingtonians, the Cape Fear Inclusive Economy Report from 2021 shows that approximately thirty percent of the region's Black residents live below the federal poverty line, compared to about twelve percent of whites. Further, people of color on average make tens of thousands of dollars less than the average white male worker in the Cape Fear region. Black residents also remain less likely to receive a quality education that properly prepares them for competitive, well-compensated employment opportunities.[9] In addition to economic inequality, Black Wilmingtonians still struggle against a policing system that disproportionally targets them. Local law enforcement officers remain three times as likely to charge a Black person with a crime as a white person. Black people "are not going to get the same chance as a white person gets downtown," Black local Daquan Peters commented. "We don't have the economic power to make charges go away like white people do."[10]

---

[7] Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "How A Conservative Activist Invented The Conflict Over Critical Race Theory," *Annals of Inquiry*, June 18, 2021.

[8] Alexandria Sands, "Opposing political groups spar over critical race theory, transgender rights at school board meeting," *Port City Daily*, June 9, 2021, https://portcitydaily.com/local-news/2021/06/09/opposing-political-groups-clash-at-school-board-meeting-over-critical-race-theory-transgender-rights/ (accessed March 17, 2023).

[9] Emma Dill, "'A tale of two economies': Report shows Wilmington area's racial, gender inequality," *Wilmington StarNews*, September 30, 2021, https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/2021/09/30/wilmington-north-carolina-economic-disparities-race-gender-inequality-housing-costs-cape-fear/8418599002/ (accessed March 17, 2023).

Current racial justice activists in Wilmington acknowledge the need for historical understanding in racial equality. Support the Port, a 501(c)(3) charity, aims to "create a culturally and economically healthy community by preserving and promoting Wilmington's rich Black history." Support the Port volunteers clean and renovate houses, provide meals, and support diverse history education in schools centered on Wilmington's once-thriving Black community.[11] The New Hanover County Community Remembrance Project encourages local students to develop projects rooted in the history and legacy of the 1898 Massacre. Organizations like these educate people on the systemic legacies of white supremacy and aim to empower the community to overcome that lasting oppression. Their historical interpretation, however, largely excludes twentieth century activism for racial equality and civil rights.

Public historians have an obligation to help educate students and adults on our shared history. In the current political and educational crisis surrounding topics of race, history, and memory, public historians at museums and historic sites can play a crucial role. The public has long considered museums to be credible sources for information and education.[12] Therefore, our sites should act as community conversation spaces, where the public can learn about and debate responses to racial inequality. My research on the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment expands our understanding of wartime civil rights activism in the Cape Fear region. I believe this microhistory will facilitate a more accurate, more inclusive, and more complex narrative about Wilmington, World War II, and American democracy.

---

[10] Kevin Maurer, "By the numbers: Black people in Wilmington are three times more likely to face charges," *Port City Daily,* September 9, 2020, https://portcitydaily.com/local-news/2020/09/09/by-the-numbers-black-people-in-wilmington-are-three-times-more-likely-to-face-charges/ (accessed March 17, 2023).
[11] "About Us," *Support The Port*, www.supporttheport.com/about (accessed March 17, 2023).
[12] *See* "Museums and Trust 2021," *American Alliance of Museums,* September 30, 2021, https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/ (accessed April 19, 2022).

By examining the actions of the 54th Regiment within the context of a long civil rights movement, we find that civil rights progress was limited, inconsistent, and vulnerable. African Americans in the 54th Regiment successfully challenged racial stereotypes about Black manhood and military capabilities during their live-fire exercises at Fort Fisher. The 54th also helped transform how the U.S. Army perceived and utilized Black soldiers in the war. These small victories were significant in their own right. "Of all the agencies that addressed racial policy," historian Lauren Sklaroff writes, "the War Department displayed the most conservative posture on racial issues."[13] After the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, military leadership prioritized proficiency over race, selecting the 54th Regiment for assignment in California and the Pacific Theater. While the War Department broadly maintained a racial hierarchy and excluded African Americans from most positions within the armed services, the combination of the 54th Regiment's skill and timing of the attack forced the rigid department to bend.

The 54th Regiment never achieved the same success among white Wilmingtonians. The local press and politicians perceived the Black troops as a threat to their social order. Racist whites across the country recognized that African Americans' heightened participation in the war effort would, in the words of Historian Neil Wynn, "encourage 'uppity niggers' and moves towards social equality."[14] White Southerners rallied to support and defend *their* vision of

---

[13] Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the 'Negro Problem' during World War II," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (Dec., 2002), 959-960, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092347 (accessed February 7, 2023).

[14] Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War Revised Edition* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishing, 1993), 99.

American democracy - one that preserved and celebrated Jim Crow and white supremacy. Historian Jason Morgan Ward argues that "Throughout the war, Southern conservatives slandered black soldiers to undermine demands for racial equality...Whether complaining to military officials or criticizing black servicemen, Southern leaders amplified their constituents' wartime anxieties and deployed them to refute the demands of civil rights activists."[15] Resistance by white Wilmingtonians, therefore, limited Black soldiers' progress during World War II.

Even still, wartime activism meaningfully contributed to African Americans' political and social consciousness. The war for democracy abroad amplified African Americans' criticism of white America's near-complete exclusion of people of color from government, economics, and society. Richard Dalfiume noted that among African Americans "Hope was evident in the growing realization that the war provided the Negro with an excellent opportunity to prick the conscience of white America."[16] Empowered by wartime debates and economics, civil rights and racial equality group memberships exploded during World War II. Neil R. McMillen conducted oral history interviews with Mississippi World War II veterans in the 1990s. He found that World War II "provided new perspectives on ancient white wrongs and ultimate black possibilities."[17] The war years thus inspired renewed activism for social and political equality. Black soldiers and civilians alike celebrated their roles as "true defenders of democracy" and demanded that their fellow citizens treat them as Americans, not the "hangover of slavery."

---

[15] Jason Morgan Ward, "'A War for States' Rights': The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory," in Kruse and Tuck, *Fog of War,* 133.

[16] Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years,'" 94.

[17] Neil R. McMillen, "War and Black Memory: World War II and the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement," in Robert Geoffrey Jenson and Andrew Wiest, eds., *War in the Age of Technology: Myriad Faces of Modern Armed Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 284.

While African Americans failed in these wartime demands, protests continued and evolved during the 1940s and the following decades.[18] During the classical Civil Rights Movement, activists finally achieved political equality and gained legal protections against racial discrimination. Still, the fight for just treatment continued beyond the 1960s. Thus, the long civil rights movement framework and the microhistory of the 54th Regiment opens the door for ongoing public conversations about race, equality, and our democracy. Public historians in Wilmington can cultivate these debates through new programming, partnerships, and exhibits sponsored by Fort Fisher State Historic Site.

***

In 2022, Fort Fisher State Historic Site broke ground on a new interpretive center due to open in May 2024. The new facility "will allow us to showcase more to our visitors, additional space and exhibit areas, to tell the Fort Fisher story that much better, that much more complete," the site's public information officer stated.[19] The permanent exhibit hall will center on this unifying theme: Fort Fisher served as a strategic military post in wars that redefined our nation. The servicemembers, laborers, and civilians tied to this site helped transform our landscape, our history, and our democracy. The current interpretive center narrowly focuses on Civil War and World War II military history. In contrast, the new center will include exhibits on Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. Thus, the new space and the new interpretive theme will lend themselves to deeper interpretation and conversations on race and equality in our nation.

---

[18] Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years,' 106; Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War Revised Edition*, 136.

[19] Gareth McGrath, "This Wilmington-area historical site is so popular it's getting a new visitors center," *StarNews*, November 7, 2022, https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/local/2022/11/07/fort-fisher-historic-site-to-get-new-visitors-center/69578530007 (accessed March 17, 2023).

During the Civil War, military policy on African American "contrabands," enlistment of Black men into U.S. Colored Troop regiments, and emancipation in federally occupied Southern territory often transformed socio-political issues of race into military calculations. In a war sparked by rebellious states choosing loyalty to slavery over country, debates over the future of slavery circulated with Union military victories and defeats. During World War II, the nation rallied against the threat of fascism by the Axis Powers. The war for democracy and human rights abroad put a spotlight on race relations at home. Further, the military's refusal to integrate the armed forces or fully utilize its African American service members and civilians in national defense kept the armed forces central to debates on economic and civic equality. Both wars thus sparked new debates over who counted as American and if the federal government and white Americans owed any further rights to minority groups.

The soldiers in the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment spoke directly into these debates. They trained to preserve democracy through military force and agitated for fuller democracy within the United States. Their story reflects a broader movement within the African American community of the 1940s for Double Victory. African Americans protested unjust treatment, inequitable labor and economic opportunities, and government sanctioned racial violence. Members of the regiment wrote about the racial injustice and prejudice they suffered. One Black soldier at Camp Davis commented, "They teach the soldiers that Hitler is a scoundrel but never as lift a hand to alleviate the plight of the Negro soldiers in this town."[20] Loved ones decried the unfair treatment of soldiers who sacrificed for democracy. Others asked plainly, "Should I sacrifice my life to live half American?...Will American be a true and pure democracy after this war?...Will Colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past?"[21] The campaign for Double Victory went beyond voting rights for disenfranchised Black Southerners. The words and actions of the 54th Coast Artillery presented in the new visitor center will challenge visitors to consider what a true democracy looks like and who are its champions.

---

[20] Anonymous letter, undated, Camp Davis Folder, Files of Judge Hastie.

A fuller interpretation of the history and legacy of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment within the permanent exhibit collection will also create a foundation for deeper interpretation of civil rights activism within the greater Cape Fear region and within other North Carolina historic sites. The protests of these artillerymen helped spark a civil rights revolution in the mid-twentieth century. Historian Richard Dalfiume called World War II the "forgotten years of the Negro Revolution." These important years of activism are overlooked in both regional interpretation of World War II and within North Carolina Historic Sites' exploration of civil rights activism. New partnerships and travelling exhibits can rectify this.

In September 2020, Wilmington became the nation's first official World War II Heritage City. Each road sign welcoming people to town proudly announces this distinction. However, to date, literature on World War II in Wilmington glosses over African American soldiers at Camp Davis. No work discusses the multitude of protests against Jim Crow racism from the soldiers and civilians throughout the war. While all who sacrificed in the military and on the home front deserve ample recognition and praise, we must be careful not to uncritically exalt Americans who preserved white supremacy while supporting the war effort. The history and legacy of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment, along with other Black regiments and civilian activists of the war years, should therefore be integrated into World War II heritage days and exhibits in town. A pop-up travelling panel exhibit on wartime civil rights activism and resistance, for example, would address this gap in local World War II interpretation. The mobile exhibit may be hosted by Cameron Art Museum, the Hannah Block Historic USO & Community Center, the *USS North Carolina* Battleship Museum, the Maritime Museum at Southport, and other local museums and cultural heritage sites in the region. The exhibit can also travel to special World War II heritage programming hosted at Fort Fisher State Historic Site and the now-abandoned remains of Camp Davis.

---

[21] James G. Thompson, "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31, 1942, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40066943 (accessed February 21, 2023).

Fort Fisher State Historic Site's interpretive mission still centers on miliary history and the socio-political issues connected with the Civil War and World War II. As such, the site lacks the interpretive directive to contextualize and interpret fully the long civil rights movement. However, Fort Fisher State Historic Site can partner with other historic sites and organizations to broaden its interpretive reach. Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum & Historic Site in Gibsonville, Guilford County, North Carolina interprets African American education in the 20th century as well as the civil rights movement through the lens of its students and educators. The interpretive staff at Charlotte Hawkins Brown Historic Site have expressed interest in creating new interpretative platforms such as field trip programming and a temporary exhibit that explores Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown's work as a civil rights advocate in the 1920s-1950s. While members of the 54th Regiment fought against Jim Crow in and out of uniform, Dr. Brown spoke out against discrimination and civil rights restrictions. Partnership between these two sites will facilitate deeper conversations about race and the civil rights movements at both sites.

Dr. Brown was born in 1883 in Henderson, North Carolina but spent her formative years in Massachusetts. She returned to the Old North State in 1901 and soon founded the Palmer Memorial Institute, a school devoted to training and educating poor rural African Americans. The Palmer Institute started as an agricultural and vocational training center for rural African

American children. Brown and her staff also instructed students on dress, personal grooming, and etiquette in hopes that they would challenge the racial stereotype that Black people were inherently inferior to white people. The school gained national attention and support from both Black and white liberal donors. In short order, Brown shifted the education from job skills to college preparation.[22]

As the United States beefed up its national security in 1941, Governor J. Melville Broughton of North Carolina formed a Defense Council. Broughton selected Dr. Brown and five other African Americans for the seventy-six-person council.[23] The governor formed the council of civilians, elected officials, government employees, and community leaders to coordinate civilian defense projects. The governor likely included prominent African American educators and businessmen as an appeasement to the state's Black population. The national defense effort would require support from *all* citizens, and appointing a small number of Black representatives to the council would signify to Black North Carolinians that they could contribute, but only within the segregated and subordinated framework of the Jim Crow system. The council existed to address financial and labor problems in the state's growing civilian and military defense industry. During the initial meeting, the six Black councilmembers pledged that Black North Carolinians would support the defense program. C.C. Spaulding of Durham asked that African Americans receive an integral part of the council's work and, in turn, the state's defense work.[24] Spaulding, Brown, and the other African American council members hoped their white colleagues would consider their experience and opinions during debates. They also advocated for equitable representation of Black laborers in defense projects.

---

[22] "Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown," North Carolina Historic Sites, website, https://historicsites.nc.gov/all-sites/charlotte-hawkins-brown-museum/history/dr-charlotte-hawkins-brown (accessed February 27, 2023).
[23] "76 Named By Broughton On N.C. Defense Council," *Wilmington Morning Star*, June 14, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/876399979 (accessed February 26, 2023).
[24] "Governor Seeks To Coordinate Independent Defense Projects," *The Herald-Sun*, June 19, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/786664504 (accessed February 26, 2023).

Throughout the war, Dr. Brown gave public speeches in support for greater economic and social equality for African Americans. In 1943, Brown spoke to a coalition of voters in New York on discrimination in the United States. She hoped to raise support for defense jobs for Black women. Throughout her speech, she referenced the nation's ongoing battle for democracy abroad and struggle for true democracy at home. She declared "There can be no world democracy and no lasting peace until American people lead by example [in] their crusade for world brotherhood that includes the darker races of the world…" Brown called out legal restrictions on Black people, stating "I truly feel that until you have loosened the shackles that bind Negroes as a whole and Negro women in particular…and so long as you refuse to open the doors of labor even with this nation at war, when every man and woman is needed for total effort, you are demonstrating the very Hitlerism you are seeking to destroy."[25] Brown thus echoed the same sentiments of democracy and equality expressed by African American soldiers at Camp Davis in 1941 – though from the relative safety of a northern state. Brown continued speaking out against Jim Crow regulations and systemic oppression of African Americans until her retirement in the late 1950s. Therefore, this partnership between Fort Fisher and Charlotte Hawkins Brown Historic Sites will facilitate greater depth in each site's interpretation of World War II and mid-century civil rights activism by expanding the geographic and temporal scope of interpretation.

---

[25] Charlotte Hawkins Brown, "The Importance of Overcoming Discrimination, Especially Among Negro Women," 1943, Folder 17, Charlotte Hawkins Brown Papers, 1883-1961, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

Although these permanent and travelling exhibits provide new avenues of education, visitors may not immediately change their understanding of the past after reading them. Studies show that some visitors attend museums only to "reinforce what we think we know about how the world works and our place in it."[26] Often these visitors do not extensively engage with interpretation; it does not take long to find confirmation of their assumptions about their world. These exhibits directly challenge the story of linear civil rights progress presented in most middle and high school history courses. While we hope the new interpretation will challenge how visitors perceive racial justice and civil rights, we must acknowledge that visitors rarely transform their historical knowledge from one museum visit. Barbara Little and Paul Shackel argue that "museums should recognize that visitors use museums to build their own capacities for transformation that may or may not happen." In other words, visitors *might* reconsider their views when the museum "provides a safe way to try out other ideas, other ways of being."[27] First, people must imagine that things might be different than how they believe them to be. Museums therefore allow necessary "identity exploration" that may lay the groundwork for changing people's thoughts about the past.

While exhibits and artifacts help present different perspectives on the past, some visitors may still project their misguided understanding of the past onto these curated spaces. Further, in exhibits designed to connect the past with current political challenges, visitors may romanticize how people handled challenges in the past better than people today. For example, The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan preserves an apartment complex that immigrants dwelled in between the 1860s and 1930s and aims to create support for modern immigrants. The staff observed that visitors projected their romanticized perceptions of the past and previous immigrants onto the preserved space. They overheard visitors making comments about how immigrants of the past were harder workers, more eager learners, and otherwise better than today's immigrants.[28] When the public interacts with exhibits on the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment and early civil rights activism, they may conclude that the systemic oppression that the soldiers endured ended with federal civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s. Or, they may draw false comparisons between mid-century activists and modern activists for racial justice.

---

[26] Barbara J. Little and Paul A. Shackel, *Archeology, Heritage, and Civic Engagement: Working Toward the Public Good* (Walnut Creek: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 188-189.
[27] Barbara J. Little and Paul A. Shackel, *Archeology, Heritage, and Civic Engagement*, 188-189.

Consequently, public historians should build upon exhibits with diverse conversations on this complex history. Interpreters at Fort Fisher State Historic Site should plan corresponding public panel discussions and dialogues on systemic oppression, racial justice, and democracy as they debut the new exhibit on the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment. Programming on modern connections to the civil rights movement will provide more opportunities for visitors to continue identity exploration as scholars and activists discuss their experiences with these topics. Just one months after the new interpretive center opens in May 2024, museums and historic sites across the nation will participate in Civics Season 2024. Civics Season spans from Juneteenth to July 4 annually. The museum coalition Made By Us initiated Civics Season in 2021 as a "new tradition" designed to engage young adults, civic leaders, and historians with conversations centered on independence, celebration, and democracy. "Civics Season is the time where we reflect upon America's past while reimagining the limitless possibilities that the future of our nation holds," Civics Season co-designer Jasmine Lewis states. Over 300 historic sites and museums participated in 2022. Made By Us encourages participating organizations to develop conversation-based, engaging programming that bridges history with contemporary civic responsibility and challenges.[29] A panel discussion between civil rights movement scholars, experts on the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment, and Wilmington area activists for racial justice would connect this World War II history with ongoing debates on democracy, inequality, and race in ways that allow the public to explore perspectives with careful guidance to dissuade people from unfairly projecting their biases or misunderstandings upon the subject.

---

[28] Maggie Russell-Ciardi, "The Museum as a Democracy-Building Institution: Reflections on the Shared Journeys Program at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum," *Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008), 44.

***

Though the 54th Coast Artillery remained in southeastern North Carolina for just ten months, they made an indelible mark on history. Their resistance and activism brought small changes locally and empowered Black soldiers to imagine more for themselves. While African Americans always recognized the hypocrisy in a nation that supposedly supported freedom overseas while oppressing its citizens of color, the spotlight on the war against oppression abroad sparked new arguments and new attention to the racial discrimination within the nation. The 54th soldiers challenged the racial hierarchy and inspired future civil rights activism. They helped transform American democracy. The 54th Coast Artillery, therefore, deserves proper commemoration within the Wilmington community. Such interpretations should follow in the soldiers' footsteps and help perfect our union. "In order for democracies to flourish," scholars Liz Sevcenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi write, "the institutions that make up civil society must be constantly proactive about moving democracy forwards…Museums can play an important role in strengthening civil society by engaging people in the dialogue about contemporary civic issues and in sharing opportunities for public involvement in those issues."[30]

---

[29] "Join us for Civic Season 2023," Made By Us, Digital Flyer, accessed via www.thecivicsseason.com/join (accessed February 26, 2023); "About Civics Season," Zoom Meeting Broadcast, Made By Us, February 21, 2023.

[30] Liz Sevcenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi, "Sites of Consciousness: Opening Historic Sites for Civic Dialogue," *Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008), 11.

CONCLUSION

"Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but Black people did…For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best."
-Nikole Hannah-Jones, 1619 Project

The story of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment in North Carolina helps expand our understanding of civil rights activism. The soldiers' achievements were limited and often temporary. After they wrote letters to the NAACP and War Department about the brutality of white military policemen, Camp Davis officials tasked African American military policemen with overseeing the Black troops. When members of the three Black regiments protested segregated transportation to base, the bus contractor added more vehicles to alleviate the taxing wait time but maintained segregation. Even when the War Department selected the Second Battalion for deployment overseas, the all-Black unit was utilized only as combat support and artillerymen for two years. Jim Crow policy stood for another twenty years. Unjust racial oppression remains intact long after the 1960s.

Remarkably, despite all they endured, the 54th Coast Artillerymen displayed incredible patriotism. They loved not what the country was in 1941 but the promise it held. They worked diligently to protect the United States while also struggling to transform it into a true democracy. Their definition of "democracy" extended beyond a representational form of government. They believed systemic oppression and racial violence were inherently undemocratic. For civil rights advocates in the 54th Regiment, a true democracy also afforded *all* Americans personal dignity and just treatment, regardless of their background or race. Activists continued this struggle for justice into the 1950s, '60s, and beyond. In 1968, for example, Martin Luther King Jr. penned his thoughts on the new phase of activism after passage of voting and civil rights legislation. He insisted the fight was not over. "Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness."[1] Therefore, proper interpretation of this regiment's history requires us to reckon with the failures of the long twentieth-century civil rights movement and consider what changes remain necessary for our nation to finally excise the "hangovers from slavery" that still burden Americans of color.

Often, museum professionals interested in these civic conversations sanitize their programming so that nothing may be perceived as political. "But politics, if we understand it as 'the often conflicting interrelationships among people in a society,' is fundamental to democratic culture and democratic processes. Politics *is* civic engagement," scholars Liz Sevcenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi counter.[2] Interpretation on the 54th Regiment should cultivate diverse public dialogue on systemic racism and anti-racism activism in the past and present. By embracing these difficult and contentious conversations, museums "send a message that what we value as a society is the democratic process that shaped our history, and what we hope for the future is the active participation of *everyone* who has a stake in the future – including those people who have been on the margins of the democratic process in the past – in shaping that future by engaging in civic dialogue about the issues that matter to them."[3] In doing so, we honor the history and legacy of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment.

---

[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here*, xviii.
[2] Sevcenko and Russell-Ciardi, "Sites of Consciousness," 11.
[3] Sevcenko and Rusell-Ciardi, "Sites of Consciousness," 11.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Archival Material

Camp Conditions [1940-] 1941. Papers of the NAACP. Part 09: Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces. Series A: General Office Files on Armed Forces' Affairs, 1918, 1955. Library of Congress. Accessed via ProQuest History Vault. https://www.congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001535-008-0628&accountid=12725.

Discrimination in the armed forces Camp Wallace, Texas, 1941-1943. African Americans in the Military Part 1: Subject Files of Judge William Hastie Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War A-C. Records of the Secretary of War. National Archives. College Park, MD. Accessed via ProQuest History Vault, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=101101-013-0001&accountid=12725.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown. "The Importance of Overcoming Discrimination, Especially Among Negro Women." 1943. Folder 17. Charlotte Hawkins Brown Papers, 1883-1961. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. Harvard University.

Ely, H.F. Memorandum For the Chief of Staff: Employment of negro man power in the war. November 10, 1925. FDR Presidential Library and Museum. https://www.fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/tusk_doc_a.pdf/4693156a-8844-4361-ae17-03407e7a3dee (accessed November 21, 2022).

Gowan, H.R. Report of Headquarters Second Battalion 54th C.A.. June 30, 1943. Box 336. U.S. Army Unit Records. Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library. Abilene, KS.

J. Melville Broughton Papers. North Carolina Archives. Raleigh, N.C.

Press M-Z, November 1940-March 1943, African Americans in the Military Part 1: Subject Files of Judge William Hastie Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War A-C, Records of the Secretary of War, National Archives, College Park, MD., accessed via ProQuest History Vault, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=102613-015-0277&accountid=12725.

Newspapers

Angelo Standard-Times

Austin American-Statesman

Carolina Times

Charlotte Observer

Daily Dispatch

Detroit Free Press

Detroit Tribune

Greenville News

Herald-Sun

Long Beach Press

Mercury

News & Observer

Pittsburgh Courier

Pittsburgh Press

Port City Daily

Rocky Mount Telegram

Santa Cruz Sentinel

Santa Maria Times

Victoria Advocate

Wilmington Morning Star

Interviews & Oral Histories

The Better Part. "54th Coast Artillery Regiment." *KMVT* video, 28:58. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46ZQQ00-agk&list=LL&index=2&t=1409s&ab_channel=KMVT (accessed September 18, 2019).

Fousekis, Natalie Marie. Interview with Bernice Rice and William Rice. December 9, 1995. Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007. *Southern Historical Collection*. Wilson Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Hertzler, Ann. Interview with Dorothy McQuillan. November 10, 2011. Federal Point Historic Preservation Society. Carolina Beach, N.C. https://federal-point-history.org/tag/dorothy-mcquillan/ (accessed April 15, 2022).

Mawhood, Rhonda. Interview with Charles Larrington Bryant. July 12, 1993. Behind the Veil Oral History Project. Duke University Center for Documentary Studies. Durham, N.C. https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07005 (accessed April 10, 2022).

Ramsey, Sonya. Interview with Lillian Smith. July 19, 1993. *Behind the Veil Oral History Project*. Behind the Veil Oral History Project. Duke University Center for Documentary Studies. Durham, N.C. https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07038 (accessed April 10, 2022).

Stewart, Chris. Interview with Edward Lee Haynes. July 12, 1993. Behind the Veil Oral History Project. Duke University Center for Documentary Studies. Durham, N.C. https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07021 (accessed April 10, 2022).

Stewart, Chris. Interview with Rebecca Smith. July 13, 1993. Behind the Veil Oral History Project. Duke University Center for Documentary Studies. Durham, N.C. https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvnc07039 (accessed April 10, 2022).

Military Publications & Government Records

Historical and Pictorial Review, Antiaircraft Training Center: Camp Davis, North Carolina, 1941. Baton Rouge, LA: Army and Navy Pub. Co., 1941.

U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Federal Census, 1940, https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/70096718:2442 (accessed November 23, 2021).

War Department. *Coast Artillery Field Manual: Service of the Piece 155-MM Gun (G.P.F.) FM 4-25.* Fort Monroe, VA: Army Field Printing Plant, 1944.

War Department. *Technical Manual: Seacoast Artillery Target Practice TM 4-235*. Washington: War Department Publication, 1942.

Secondary Sources

Scholarly Articles

Dalfiume, Richard M. "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution." *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 1 (June 1968): 90-106. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1894253. Accessed September 6, 2021.

Gaines, William C. "Coast Artillery Organizational History, 1917-1950." *Coast Defense Journal* 23, no. 2.

Gilmore, Glenda E. "Murder, Memory, and the Fight of the Incubus" in David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson. *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. 73-94.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3660172 (accessed July 18, 2017).

Harris, Angela P. "Critical Race Theory." *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences,* 2, no. 5.

Jenkins, R.B. "Simon Legree: A Study in Matricide." *Interpretations* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1982). 41-44. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23241524.

Johnson, Sylvester A. "African Americans, the Racial State, and the Cultus of War: Sacrifice and Citizenship." *Social Text* 34, no. 4 (December 2016): 41-70.

O'Shaughnessy, Haley D. "The Double Victory Campaign and the Black Press: A Conservative Approach to 'Victory' at Home and Abroad." *Inquiries Journal* 7, no. 2 (2015).

Prather Sr., H. Leon. "We Have Taken a City: A Centennial Essay" in David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson. *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. 15-42.

Russell-Ciardi, Maggie. "The Museum as a Democracy-Building Institution: Reflections on the Shared Journeys Program at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum." *Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008): 39-52.

Sevcenko, Liz and Russell-Ciardi, Maggie. "Sites of Consciousness: Opening Historic Sites for Civic Dialogue." *Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008): 9-15.

Sitkoff, Harvard. "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War." *The Journal of American History* 58, no. 3 (Dec., 1971): 661-681. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1893729.

Sklaroff, Lauren Rebecca. "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the 'Negro Problem' during World War II." *Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (Dec., 2002): 958-983. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092347 (accessed February 7, 2023).

Sugrue, Thomas. "Hillburn, Hattiesburg, and Hitler: Wartime Activists Think Globally and Act Locally," in Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck eds. *The Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 87-102.

Tyson, Timothy B. "Wars for Democracy: African American Militancy and Interracial Violence in North Carolina during World War II," in David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson. *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998: 253-276.

Wallace-Wells, Benjamin. "How A Conservative Activist Invented The Conflict Over Critical Race Theory." *Annals of Inquiry*. June 18, 2021.

Williams, Chad. "World War I in the Historical Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois." *Modern American History* 1 (2022), 3-22.

Wynn, Neil A. "War and Racial Progress: The African American Experience during World War II." *Peace & Change* 20, no. 3 (July 1995): 348-363.

Books

Alkebulan, Paul. *The African American press in World War II: toward victory at home and abroad.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.

Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Craven, Wesley Frank and Cate, James Lee. *The Army Air Forces in World War II.* Volume I "Plans and Early Operations January 1939 to August 1942." Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.

Gabel, Christopher R. *U.S. Army GHQ Maneuvers of 1941.* Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992.

Godwin, John L. *Black Wilmington and the North Carolina Way: Portrait of a Community in the Era of Civil Rights Protest*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000.

Guglielmo, Thomas A. *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

James, Jr., Rawn. *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military.* New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013.

Jankens, Kenneth Robert. *The Wilmington Ten: Violence, Injustice, and the Rise of Black Politics in the 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

Kahrl, Andrew W. *The Land Was Ours: How Black Beaches Became White Wealth in the Coastal South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012.

Lentz-Smith, Adrienne. *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Little, Barbara J. and Shackel, Paul A. *Archeology, Heritage, and Civic Engagement: Working Toward the Public Good*. Walnut Creek: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

McGuire, Philip. *He, Too, Spoke for Democracy: Judge Hastie, World War II, and the Black Soldier*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

McMillen, Neil R. "War and Black Memory: World War II and the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement," in Robert Geoffrey Jenson and Andrew Wiest, eds. *War in the Age of*

Technology: Myriad Faces of Modern Armed Conflict. New York: New York University Press, 2001: 263-291.

Mjagkij, Nina. *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience during World War I.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011.

Mulrooney, Margaret M. *Race, Place, and Memory: Deep Currents in Wilmington, North Carolina*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018.

Parker, Christopher S. *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Parker, Christopher. "War and African American Citizenship, 1865-1965: The Role of Military Service." In Bobo, Lawrence D. et. al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Citizenship, 1865-Present.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Ward, Jason Morgan. "'A War for States' Rights': The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory" in Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck *The Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 126-144.

Wynn, Neil A. *The Afro-American and the Second World War Revised Edition.* New York: Holmes & Meier Publishing, 1993.

Other Secondary Sources

American Alliance of Museums. "Museums and Trust 2021." September 30, 2021. https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/ (accessed April 19, 2022).

Bump, Philip. "Over and over, Trump has focused on Black Lives Matter as a target of derision or violence." *Washington Post*. September 1, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/01/over-over-trump-has-focused-black-lives-matter-target-derision-or-violence/ (accessed April 19, 2022).

"Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown." North Carolina Historic Sites. Website. https://historicsites.nc.gov/all-sites/charlotte-hawkins-brown-museum/history/dr-charlotte-hawkins-brown (accessed February 27, 2023).

Chenoweth, Erica. "This summer's Black Lives Matter protestors were overwhelmingly peaceful, our research finds." *Washington Post*. October 16, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/16/this-summers-black-lives-matter-protesters-were-overwhelming-peaceful-our-research-finds/ (accessed April 19, 2022).

Dill, Emma. "'A tale of two economies': Report shows Wilmington area's racial, gender inequality." *Wilmington StarNews*. September 30, 2021. https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/2021/09/30/wilmington-north-carolina-economic-disparities-race-gender-inequality-housing-costs-cape-fear/8418599002/ (accessed March 17, 2023).

Edwards, Jennifer J. "A Color Line in the Sand: African American seaside leisure in New Hanover County, North Carolina." Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 2003.

Made By Us. "About Civics Season." Informational Zoom Meeting. February 21, 2023.

Made By Us. "Join us for Civic Season 2023." Digital Flyer. www.thecivicsseason.com/join (accessed February 26, 2023).

Maurer, Kevin. "By the numbers: Black people in Wilmington are three times more likely to face charges." *Port City Daily*. September 9, 2020. https://portcitydaily.com/local-news/2020/09/09/by-the-numbers-black-people-in-wilmington-are-three-times-more-likely-to-face-charges/ (accessed March 17, 2023).

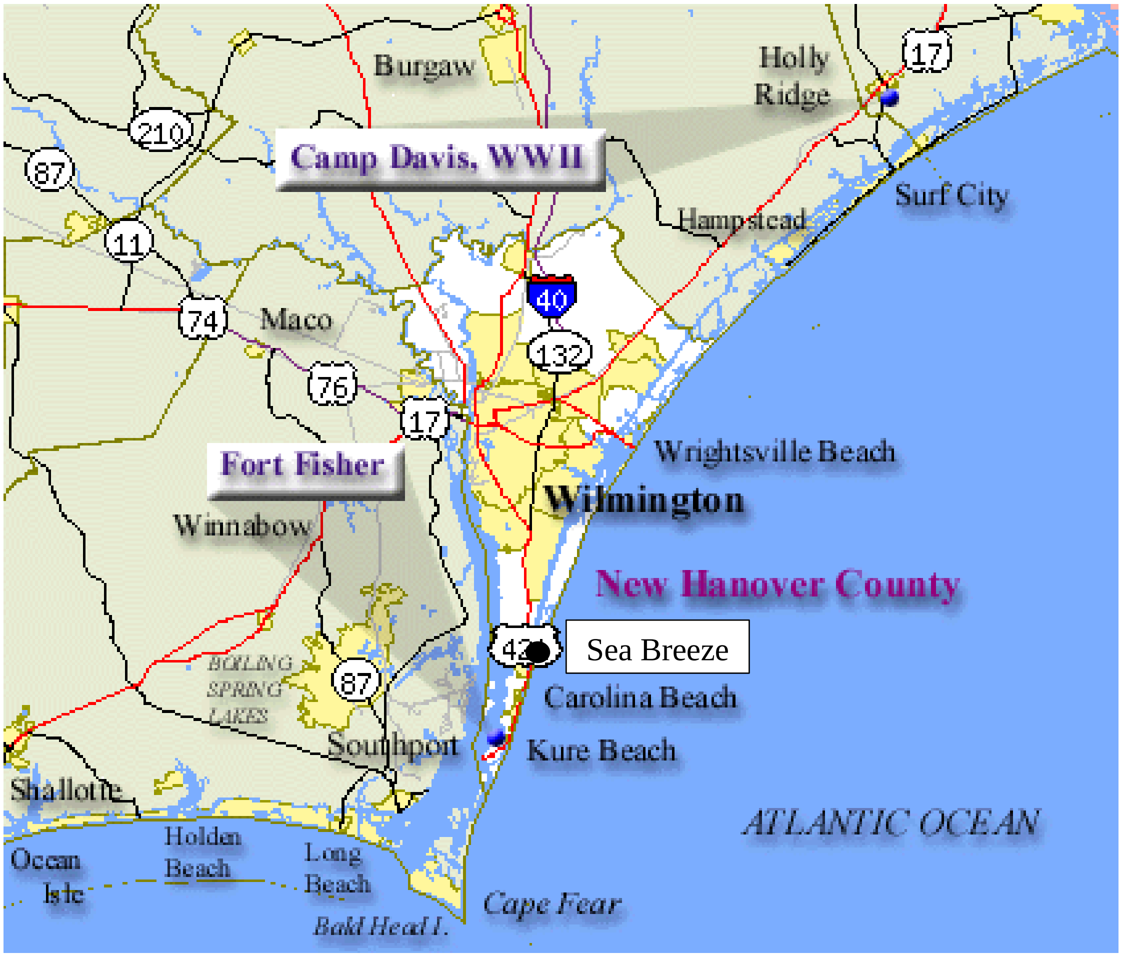
McEvoy, Jemina. “Sales of ‘White Fragility’ – And Other Anti-Racism Books – Jumped Over 2000% After Protests Began.” *Forbes*. July 22, 2020. https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/07/22/sales-of-white-fragility-and-other-anti-racism-books-jumped-over-2000-after-protests-began/?sh=e79539303d83 (accessed April 19, 2022).

McGrath, Gareth. “This Wilmington-area historical site is so popular it’s getting a new visitors center.” *StarNews*. November 7, 2022. https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/local/2022/11/07/fort-fisher-historic-site-to-get-new-visitors-center/69578530007 (accessed March 17, 2023).

Moseley, John. “‘Through Difficulties’: A Brief History of the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment.” Unpublished manuscript. August 2021. 54th Coast Artillery Folder. Fort Fisher State Historic Site Collections.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Map of the Lower Cape Fear


Burgaw
Holly Ridge
17
210
87
Camp Davis, WWII
Surf City
Hampstead
11
40
74
Maco
132
76
17
Wrightsville Beach
Fort Fisher
Winnabow
Wilmington
New Hanover County
421
Sea Breeze
BOILING SPRING LAKES
87
Carolina Beach
Southport
Kure Beach
Shallotte
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Holden Beach
Ocean Isle
Long Beach
Cape Fear
Bald Head I.

Map provided courtesy of Fort Fisher State Historic Site.
Marker for Sea Breeze superimposed onto map by author.

Distances:
Fort Fisher to Camp Davis: 50 miles
Downtown Wilmington to Camp Davis: 35 miles
Downtown Wilmington to Fort Fisher: 20 miles
Camp Davis to Sea Breeze: 44 miles
Fort Fisher to Sea Breeze: 8 miles
**distances are an approximation.*

Appendix B: 54th Coast Artillery Regiment Lineage

54th Coast Artillery (Colored) Regiment

December 16, 1940 The 44th Coast Artillery (CA) Regiment redesignated as the 54th CA Regiment (Colored).

February 10, 1941 Unit activated at CA Replacement Center, Hitchcock, Texas from cadre of soldiers in the 76th and 77th CA (Anti-Aircraft) Regiments at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Replacement Center later renamed Camp Wallace.

May 19, 1941 Regiment transferred to Camp Davis, North Carolina.

February 22, 1942 1st Battalion (Bn), 54th CA assigned to Fort Cronkhite, California.

The 2nd and 3rd Bns also transfer to Fort Cronkhite on unspecified dates in late February 1942. From there, the 54th CA split into smaller batteries and were assigned to forts and posts along the northern California coast.

August 3, 1942 2nd Bn transferred to Fort Macon, North Carolina.

September 3, 1942 2nd Bn temporarily assigned to Fort Ord, California as preparation for deployment to the Pacific Theater.

October 5, 1942 2nd Battalion deployed to the South Pacific.

April 1, 1944 2nd Bn redesignated 49th CA Bn (Colored).

April 19, 1944 1st and 3rd Bn reorganized. 1st Bn redesignated 606th CA Bn (Colored) and transferred to Camp Livingston, Louisiana. 3rd Bn redesignated 607th CA Bn (Colored) and transferred to Camp Rucker, Alabama.

August 3, 1944 606th and 607th Bns CA inactivated.

January 1946 49th CA Bn inactivated at Finschhafen, New Guinea.