Welcome to…

The Color of Freedom

Lesson Plan

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Black Servicewomen in World War II
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Grades
Middle School: 6 – 8 grades
High School: 9 – 12 grades

Estimated Time
1–2 class periods

Standards of Learning
Common Core:
CCSS.ELA.LITERACY.RH.6-8.4, 8.6, 9-10.2, 10.3, 10.4, 10.6, 10.7, 11-12.2, 12.4, 12.6

Virginia:
USII.1a, c, d; VUS.1a, c; VUS.11d

National Council for the Social Studies Standards:
NCSS.D2.His.1.9-12 • NCSS.D2.His.3.9-12 • NCSS.D2.His.1.6-8

Materials Needed
• Background Reading
• PowerPoint Presentation
• Resource Packet
  • Primary Sources with Analysis Questions
  • Profiles of Courage Template for Post-Lesson Activity
• Video Clip: "The Six Triple Eight: No Mail, Low Morale"

Background Reading
• Setting the Stage: Essential Understandings

Lesson Activities
• Historical Overview with PowerPoint Presentation and Discussions
• Activities
  • Primary Source Analysis using Resource Packet
  • Video Clip: "The Six Triple Eight: No Mail, Low Morale"

Post-Lesson Activity
• Profiles of Courage Research Activity
And Still, They Served: Black Servicewomen in World War II

This program examines the critical roles that Black servicewomen played in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II. Nearly 9,000 African American women served throughout the United States and in England under racially segregated and discriminatory conditions. Black servicewomen trained in all-Black units and were permitted only to compose a certain enlistment quota. They served largely in support roles and in positions of menial and manual labor. They were barred from the same advancement opportunities given to white women and almost entirely prohibited from serving overseas. And still, they served. Moreover, in their support of achieving Allied victory in 1945, Black women realized a link between promoting civil rights for African Americans in the Armed Forces and on the home front.

Learning Objectives
Students will analyze primary sources, participate in discussions, and conduct small-scale research to learn about the experiences of Black servicewomen in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II. Students will explore how the status and treatment of Black servicewomen reflected the larger social status of African Americans at the time. They will establish connections to the history of the civil rights movement and women’s history in the mid-20th century.

Members of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion participate in a VE Day parade. World War II • Women’s Army Corps (WAC) • Birmingham, England. Military Women’s Memorial Collection.
Background Reading

This information provides a summary of the history of racial segregation and discrimination in American society and the U.S. military. Teachers may use this to establish historical context for discussing the experience of African American women in the military during World War II.

Setting the Stage: Essential Understandings

At the end of the American Civil War (1861–1865), the United States ratified the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished slavery and granted African Americans the rights of citizenship. Contempt for recently emancipated African Americans began during the Reconstruction of the southern states in the 1870s. In the decades that followed, state and local governments, mostly in the South, passed laws that restricted their rights. These laws included racial segregation in public spaces as well as poll taxes and literacy requirements that prevented many Black Americans from voting.

Established in the 1890s, “Jim Crow” was a system of laws meant to exert white supremacy over recently emancipated African Americans. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that the principle of “separate but equal” did not violate the 14th Amendment, allowing segregation in places like schools, transportation, and restaurants, even though segregated facilities were not, in fact, equal. Segregation, suppression of voting rights, unequal treatment under the law, and intimidation persisted for decades.

In 1954, the Supreme Court reversed the Plessy decision in Brown v. Board of Education, which outlawed segregation in public schools. Efforts to achieve integration were prolonged and difficult in the face of backlash and violent protest. Ten years later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation in public facilities, followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which allowed the federal government oversight in state and local elections to protect voting rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 provided further measures against discrimination. These laws also were met with violent resistance as civil rights activists fought for years to put them into practice.

The history of segregation and inequality for African Americans in the U.S. military mirrored American society. Black Americans, free and enslaved, have served both voluntarily and through force since before the American Revolution, whether they were compensated or recognized for their service and sacrifice. They fought alongside white soldiers in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. During the Civil War, Congress authorized Black soldiers to form units known as the United States Colored Troops.

The U.S. Armed Forces have existed as both an oppressive and uplifting institution for Black Americans. Black service historically has been marred by racism and inequality, but Black service members have also found their service to be of value, providing opportunities, upward mobility, and satisfying careers.

During World War I, Black servicemen and servicewomen were strictly segregated from white service members, largely excluded from combat roles, and relegated to serving in support positions like cooks, janitors, launderers, and in supply and quartermaster. These practices continued through World War II.

Black service members, politicians, activists, and civilians on the home front played vital roles in achieving equality in the military. In 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 mandating equal treatment and opportunities in the military, although the Armed Forces did not fully racially integrate until 1954.
Introduction

- When the United States entered World War II, there were many opportunities for Americans to support the war effort. Communities collected scrap metal, aluminum cans and rubber. Consumers rationed gas, food, and clothing. Individuals bought war bonds. Men and women worked in factories, defense plants, and with organizations like the American Red Cross.
- Those who enlisted in the military held a wide variety of jobs at home and overseas. Black Americans in the military, however, were not allowed the same opportunities as white Americans.
- Women in general were not allowed in combat roles, but their work in other jobs, from nursing to communications, intelligence, and mechanics, was crucial to the war effort. Black women also did not have the same opportunities and status as white women. And still, these women served, made valuable contributions, and advanced the cause of racial and gender equality in the military and in American society.

Discussion

Ask students to think about what they know about the history of Jim Crow, segregation, and discrimination against African Americans. Also think about social perceptions of women’s roles leading up to World War II.

Questions to ask:

- What kinds of jobs do you think servicewomen performed in the military?
- Do you think women had the same jobs as men?
- Why or why not?
- What do you think were some of the hardest obstacles that Black women had to overcome while serving in the military?
Historical Overview

1. **Answering the Call: The Double V Campaign**

   - On January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a famous speech in which he called for increased American aid to the Allies in Europe to fight the Axis Powers. Roosevelt proclaimed that by helping Great Britain, the United States was fighting for universal freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. In 1941–42, the War Department advertised the “V for Victory” campaign begun by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to drum up support for the war effort.

   - As America entered World War II after the Japanese attack on the Navy base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, African Americans across the nation answered the country’s call to enlist in the military, knowing that they would be serving in segregated units and support roles and largely barred from combat.

   - Since little had changed with race relations after World War I, many felt alienated from the war effort and were reluctant to enlist or to work in defense plants and factories. Having experienced discrimination and inequality in the Armed Forces, many World War I veterans were not inclined to sacrifice their lives again for a country that did not value them. It was difficult for many to embrace Roosevelt’s vision of extending America’s freedoms throughout the world when Black Americans were denied freedoms and equality at home.

   - Still, the Allies could not reach victory in World War II without Black support, and the Black press revived efforts to convince African Americans to serve by connecting civil rights and military service.

   - The Black press promoted the Double V Campaign. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, in conjunction with members of the Black community, revised the “V for Victory” slogan to appeal directly to Black Americans. No longer was it just one “V” for “Victory in Europe.” The Double V Campaign promoted the idea that through military service and working in defense plants and factories on the home front, African Americans could achieve victory by defeating fascism abroad and by defeating racism in the United States.

   - The Double V Campaign was highly influential and far reaching. Black newspapers across the country published the slogan and appealed to both Black men and women to find ways to support the war effort.

**Discussion**

Ask students to think about the challenge of being asked to help defeat fascism abroad while facing racism at home in the United States.

- Why would it be difficult to accept this?
2. Free a Man to Fight: Opportunities for Women in World War II

Women across the nation also answered the country’s call to help support the Allied war effort. The War Department offered avenues of service to women in every branch of the Armed Forces. Hundreds of thousands of women served across branches and in factories to “free a man to fight.”

- The Army created the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), which later became the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), an official part of the Army
- The Navy created the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES)
- The Army Air Corps created the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP)
- The Marines created the Women’s Marines
- The Coast Guard created the SPARS (Semper Paratus “Always Ready”)

- The Army and Army Nurse Corps permitted Black women to enlist in 1942 and 1943, followed by the Coast Guard and the Navy in 1944. The Army Air Corps and the Women Marines did not allow Black women to enlist at all for the duration of World War II.
- About 7,100 Black women served within the WAC, Army Nurse Corps, WAVES, and SPARS. Through perseverance and resilience, Black servicewomen made significant achievements, broke barriers, and set precedents. They helped pave the way for women’s formal inclusion into the Armed Forces and helped promote civil rights for African Americans in both the military and American society.

3. Joining the Jim Crow Army

- The Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) first permitted Black women to enlist in 1942. In 1943, the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) was established as an official part of the Army. The WAC trained its first class of officers at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. Of 440 officer candidates, only 40 were Black (honoring the 10% Black quota assigned by the War Department). Three of those “First Forty,” as they were called, included Charity Adams Earley, Harriet West Waddy, and Dovey Johnson Roundtree. After completing their officer training, these women went on to perform a variety of duties, and Roundtree worked to recruit other Black women to join the WAC.
- Roundtree had a tough job ahead as she set out to visit cities around the United States to convince young Black women to join the segregated Army.
4. Black Servicewomen at Work in the United States

Regardless of the service branch in which they were enlisted (Women’s Army Corps, Army Nurse Corps, Navy, or Coast Guard), Black servicewomen performed a variety of jobs. Quite often, they were relegated to support roles such as secretaries, cooks, launderers, janitors, and manual laborers. Still, others drove vehicles and worked as mechanics, photographers, stenographers, and medical and dental assistants.

- The branches stationed Black servicewomen at many bases and military installations around the continental United States, including Fort Des Moines, Fort Knox, Fort Devens, and Fort Huachuca. Fort Devens Black WACs were relegated to entirely menial labor assignments, working in the base hospitals and cleaning. They went on strike in 1944 and refused to go to work and four women were court martialed.
- Black women who enlisted experienced racism from white officers and systematic segregation. They were excluded from venues that were reserved for whites who were enlisted and were denied service in public, despite wearing the uniform.
5. Treating the Enemy:
Black Women in the Army Nurse Corps

- Black nurses were stationed in the United States and abroad during World War II where they were assigned to work at hospitals caring for injured Black servicemen and often, German prisoners of war (POW).

- Notable military hospitals in which Black nurses served included Camp Livingston, Louisiana, and Fort Bragg, North Carolina where they treated Black servicemen in segregated hospitals, and Camp Florence, Arizona, where they treated German POWs.

- These nurses worked what they considered second-rate assignments, lived separately from whites, and were refused service in public when not on the job.

- Many Black nurses were deeply troubled by their assignment to care for enemy soldiers instead of wounded Americans.

Discussion
Why would Black nurses feel betrayed by their assignment to care for German POWs?

6. Black Servicewomen Stationed Abroad

- Most Black servicewomen were denied overseas service, although some Army nurses were sent overseas.

- The 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion was the only unit of Black WACs that served overseas during the war. This group of over 800 women worked under the command of Major Charity Adams Earley, who was one of only two Black WACs to reach the rank of Major. They were sent to Birmingham, England, in 1945 and tasked with sorting through a massive, two-year backlog of mail that filled several airplane hangars to the ceiling. The 6888 (Six-Triple-Eight) sorted millions of pieces of backed up mail for servicemen and military personnel in just three months by working shifts around the clock.
Activity: Video

Documentary: “The Six Triple Eight: No Mail, Low Morale”

Major Charity Adams Earley noted in 1990:

“I wanted us to do as good a job as I thought we had done at Fort Des Moines. That’s how I thought of it, doing the job well. Although I didn’t know what the job was and I didn’t know where I was going when I left the States, I knew that, and this is a premise that I have used in the Army and any place else, given the same opportunity and training, I’m sure I can do as well as anybody else. (22:55)"

Discussion

If you were in MAJ Adams’ position, would you be able to accept instructions like she received to go somewhere without knowing the destination or assigned duties for which you are unaware? What would inspire you to agree to serve?
7. A Vessel for Civil Rights

- African Americans had long associated civil rights with military service, believing that if they served the United States alongside white Americans, they could effectively demonstrate their loyalty to the country. White Americans, in turn, would extend civil rights and the full benefits of citizenship to Black Americans out of gratitude. This mentality brought many African Americans into military service in World War I, but their hope never came to fruition.

- Despite the skepticism of some about serving, civil rights activists, most notably Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, established compelling connections between civil rights and military service and used this rhetoric to aid military recruitment efforts. Viewing service as a vessel through which Black Americans could achieve civil rights at home, Bethune vocally advocated for equal treatment and opportunity for Black servicemembers, particularly women.

Bethune envisioned civil rights coming about via a few ways:

- Make Black servicewomen visible in the Armed Forces by promoting recruitment. It would be more difficult for the military to ignore their arguments to promote civil rights if many women supported this effort.

- Create a superior corps of Black women officers to demonstrate their leadership abilities. Officer training in the Women’s Army Corps was partially integrated. If Black officer candidates could demonstrate effective integrated training, perhaps the WAC would consider desegregating the enlisted corps.

- Moreover, if women could demonstrate effective desegregated military service, perhaps this would show that desegregation could work on the home front, too. This was a more prevalent argument in post-war years.

- Except for the 10% of Black women in the Army who served as officers, the military did not mix Black and white servicewomen during World War II.
Conclusion

- After the war ended in 1945, Black veterans returned home to a nation that was unwilling to return to the normalcy of Jim Crow. President Harry S. Truman and military leadership faced domestic and international pressure to address the "race issue" in the United States. The rest of the world knew of the racial inequality and unrest and it was a stain on America’s reputation in many ways. Therefore, in the years following World War II, the federal government and the military examined the idea of desegregating its forces.

- Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, mandating desegregation of the Armed Forces. For six years following this order, the military branches implemented this policy, some quickly and others gradually and begrudgingly. America’s servicewomen desegregated their ranks far more quickly than the men.

Discussion

Ask students to recap some of the greatest challenges that African American women faced while serving in World War II.

Questions to ask:

- Do you think their contributions to the war effort helped to advance equality in the military and at home in the United States?
- What did you learn about civil rights and women’s history during World War II?
- How can you connect what you learned to other time periods?

Post-Program Activity

Activity: Profiles of Courage

Students conduct small-scale research after the conclusion of the lesson. They create a profile of a Black servicewoman in World War II in the form a baseball card. The baseball card template is at the back of the Resource Packet. Distribute printed or digital copies of the template.

1. CPT Della Raney (Army Nurse Corps)
2. MAJ Charity Adams Earley (Women’s Army Corps)
3. LTJG Harriet Ida Pickens (WAVES)
4. 2LT Elinor Powell (Army Nurse Corps)
5. CPT Dovey Johnson Roundtree (Women’s Army Corps)
6. Ensign Frances Wills (WAVES)

After the profiles are complete, group students according to the woman they researched. Students share their findings and present their profiles as a group to the class.
Further Reading

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**Setting the Stage:**
**Essential Understandings**

**Military Resources: Blacks in the Military**
National Archives

**Historical Overview of Racism in the Military**
Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute

**A Brief History of Jim Crow**
Constitutional Rights Foundation
https://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/a-brief-history-of-jim-crow

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**1. Answering the Call:**
**The Double V Campaign**

**FDR and the Four Freedoms Speech**
Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum
https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms

**What Was Black America’s Double War?**
Henry Louis Gates, Jr. – PBS
https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-was-black-americas-double-war/

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**4. Black Servicewomen at Work in the United States**

**Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took On the Army During World War II**
Sandra M. Bolzenius (2018)

**The Black Women Soldiers Who Demanded Opportunities**
Sandra M. Bolzenius, November 15, 2018
https://www.whatitmeanstobeamerican.org/engagements/the-black-women-soldiers-who-demanded-opportunities/

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**5. Treating the Enemy:**
**Black Women in the Army Nurse Corps**

**The Army’s First Black Nurses Were Relegated to Caring for Nazi Prisoners of War**
Alexis Clark – Smithsonian Magazine, May 15, 2018
https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/armys-first-black-nurses-had-tend-to-german-prisoners-war-180969069/

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**6. Black Servicewomen Stationed Abroad**

**The SixTripleEight: No Mail, Low Morale**
February 10, 2021
https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/the-sixtripleeight-6888th-battalion

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**7. A Vessel for Civil Rights**

**The Extraordinary Life of Mary Mcleod Bethune**
July 30, 2020
The National World War II Museum
https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/mary-mcleod-bethune
Appendix: Sources for Images

SLIDE 3
Poster stamp promoting the V for Victory campaign
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Forrest James Robinson, Jr. Accession Number: 2018.233.18
https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/im612185

SLIDE 4
Double V Campaign
https://www.newspapers.com/topics/world-war2/double-v-campaign

SLIDE 5
“Good work, sister: we never figured you could do a man-size job!” America's women have met the test! / Packer.
https://www.loc.gov/item/97515638/

For Your Country’s Sake Today - For Your Own Sake Tomorrow. National Archives (44-PA-820)
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/514315

SLIDE 6
Green, R. (1943) You are needed now--Join the Army Nurse Corps--Apply at your Red Cross recruiting station / Ruzzie Green. United States, 1943. Library of Congress.
https://www.loc.gov/item/90714994/

Free a Man for Fighting Duty, Enlist Now in the WAVES. Bango Public Library Digital Commons.
https://digicom.bpl.lib.me.us/ww1_posters_recruit/21/

Crandell, B. & United States Army. Recruiting Publicity Bureau, F. (1943) Are you a girl with star-spangled heart?--Join the WAC now!--Thousands of Army jobs need filling! / Bradshaw Crandell, 1943. [Recruiting Publicity Bureau United States Army] Library of Congress.
https://www.loc.gov/item/90712746/


SLIDE 7
Company 2, 3rd Regiment, First WAC Training Center, Fort Des Moines, Iowa, July 24, 1944.
Military Women’s Memorial Collection.

SLIDE 8
"Lt.(jg.) Harriet Ida Pickens and Ens. Frances Wills, first Negro Waves to be commissioned. They were members of the final graduating class at Naval Reserve Midshipmen's School (WR) Northampton, MA.", 12/21/1944.
National Archives (80-G-297441).
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/520670

SLIDE 9
Mary McLeod Bethune at a luncheon at the First WAC Training Center, Fort Des Moines, Iowa, with Captain Dovey M. Johnson on the right. [Between 1943 and 1945]. Library of Congress
https://www.loc.gov/item/2003652504/

SLIDE 10
Auxiliaries Ruth Wade and Lucille Mayo (left to right) further demonstrate their ability to service trucks as taught them during the processing period at Fort Des Moines and put into practice at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, December 8, 1942.
National Archives (111-SC-162466).
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/531153

SLIDE 11
U.S. Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, Virginia.

U.S. Army Women's Museum, Fort Lee, Virginia.
SLIDE 12
“WAAC cooks prepare dinner for the first time in new kitchen at Fort Huachuca, Arizona.”
National Archives (111-SC-162454).
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/531152

SLIDE 13
U.S. Army nurses, newly arrived, line the rail of their vessel as it pulls into port of Greenock, Scotland, in European Theater of Operations. National Archives (111-SC-192605-S).
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/531204

SLIDE 14
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/531495

SLIDE 15
“Somewhere in England, Maj. Charity E. Adams and Capt. Abbie N. Campbell, inspect the first contingent of Negro members of the Women’s Army Corps assigned to overseas service.” National Archives (111-SC-200791)
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/531249


SLIDE 16

SLIDE 17
The 6888: No Mail, Low Morale
Lincoln Penny Films (2017)

Two choices to choose from available from our website:
Option A: 9 minute clip of the movie
Option B: 16 minute clip of the movie
Password: Vaught

Or, if you would like to purchase the full film:

SLIDE 18
https://www.loc.gov/item/2004662601/

SLIDE 19
Executive Order 9981, July 26, 1948; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives
https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=84#