



African American Soldiers Labor for Victory

African American World War I Troops

Lesson by Paul LaRue

Objective: Introduce students to the role and contributions of African American World War I Soldiers

Grade Levels: Middle or High School

Content Area: Social Studies

Time Allotment: 1 class period

Connections to Ohio Model Curriculum

Social Studies- High School American History Content Statements: 2, 4, 13, 15, 17

Skills: analyze artifacts (specifically photographs), close reading, cause and effect of historical events, use of primary sources

Vocabulary: Pioneer Infantry, dug out, A.E.F, Camp Sherman, 369th Infantry, segregation, institutional racism, stevedore

Teacher Tip: This lesson may be used for Veterans Day, Black History Month or as a Blizzard Bag assignment. This lesson may also be used in conjunction with [Searching for Homer Lawson: African American WWI Combat Troops](#).

Steps in Strategy:

- 1.) Have students view Photograph #1 below
 - a.) Ask students: what does Pioneer Infantry (from the headstone) mean?
 - b.) This may be done as a short writing prompt or as a class discussion
- 2.) Have students complete Reading #1 and Reading #2
- 3.) Have students complete short quiz below (may be done as a class)
- 4.) Wrap-up: discuss Photograph #1:
 - 813th Pioneer Infantry means this was an African American World War I Veteran. What World War I Veterans are buried in your local cemetery? Are any of the World War I Veterans African American?



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5.) Extension Activity or extended reading: pages: 65 - 66 from *The Crisis* (June 1919), See below.

Evaluation: Student Questions and Answers

1.) The Pioneer Infantry Regiments were modeled after regiments in what countries?

Answer: France and England

2.) Ludlow Luther is detached from his Engineer regiment and sent to serve in what combat regiment?

Answer: 369th (Harlem Hellfighters)

3.) From Reading #2: A Soldier's Letter: what is the significance of the date of the letter?

Answer: It was written one month before the end of the war, which was November 11, 1918.

4.) From Reading #2: A Soldier's Letter: what is his one regret?

Answer: He wanted to see and do more

5.) What was the purpose of the soldier's letter?

Answer: Let his family and friends at home know that he and other local soldiers were alive and well

Research topics for a student, or the entire class:

1.) Research other letters written by African American World War I Soldiers. Search online, archival newspapers and other local sources

2.) Identify and research the lives of African American World War I Veterans buried in your local cemetery

3.) Research and write biographies of all World War I Veterans buried in your local cemetery

4.) Organize a ceremony to honor a local African American World War I Veteran. The ceremony could be held at school as an assembly for Veterans Day or during Black History Month.



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Photograph #1

Location: Washington Cemetery, Washington Court House, Ohio (2016)





Reading #1

The majority of the nearly 400,000 African American World War I soldiers served in labor regiments. Institutional racism and segregation limited opportunities for African American soldiers in the army. Labor regiments performed a variety of important duties. The duties included building roads and trenches. Soldiers worked as stevedores, moving war materials such as ammunition, food and fuel. These regiments were called engineering or labor battalions. Soldiers in these regiments were trained as infantry and could find themselves in combat.

Pioneer Infantry regiments were based on the French and British construction/combat regiments. The United States Army created nearly forty Pioneer Infantry regiments. The Pioneer Infantry regiments 801st-816th were composed of African American soldiers.

The 813th Pioneer Infantry was organized at Camp Sherman, located near Chillicothe, Ohio. The 813th was composed of African American men from Ohio, Pennsylvania and other nearby states. The regiment arrived in France in late September 1918. The regiment was sent to the St. Mihiel Sector and worked repairing roads often under enemy fire. Following the Armistice, the regiment continued to work filling shell holes, salvaging equipment and re-burying the dead.

Soldiers in labor regiments made the ultimate sacrifice; Charles Emerson was born in Gallipolis, Ohio and worked as a barber in Columbus before entering the service. Emerson served in the 317th Engineers Company B. Private Emerson was killed in an accident in the line of duty August 13, 1918 and was buried in France. Private Ludlow Luther was a native of Cincinnati, Ohio. Luther served in the 317th Engineers Company C. Luther was detached from his regiment and served in the 369th, the famed Harlem Hellfighters. Ludlow Luther was killed in action July 15, 1918 in the Champagne-Mame campaign. Private Luther's body was returned to Cincinnati in 1921. These men served and sacrificed for their country.

Reading #1 Sources:

- 1.) *The United States in the First World War: An Encyclopedia*
By Anne Venzon
- 2.) *The U.S. Army in World War I Orders of Battle*
By Richard Rinaldi



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3.) *Philadelphia in the World War 1914 – 1919*

Published for The Philadelphia War History Committee by Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co. (1922)

4.) *The Gold Star of Victory Memorialized*

Edited by Marksbury and Lambertson

5.) Ohio Graves Registration Cards



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Reading #2: A Soldier's Letter

A.E.F. October 11, 1918

Dear Friend,

Just a few lines to let you know Sgt. Lee and I are among the living. Having a fine trip so far. I am nearing the firing line every day but the closer we get the more we feel like getting a Hun. I am now in a dug out. I can look out the door and see the air duals, they are very interesting. Just to see our boys bring down the Huns from the air. Of course they get about one of ours to every ten we of theirs. I am now soldiering under an officer who used to be with Major R. G. Allen from home and he is a fine officer too. In fact we have very good officers with us. But I think lots of him because he is a nice officer and one of Major Allen's friends. I just returned from where Sgt. Lee is in camp, and he said we had neglected writing you so I just had the time this evening.

Not once do I regret this trip only want to see and do lots more than I will be able to do. I saw lots of the boys from home, among them Percy Lee, Roscoe L. Vivens and Wilbur Baker probably their people will be glad to hear from them.

They are fine and dandy just as fat as can be; only one thing was it looked as though the barber had gone on strike with us all- ha, ha.

But we all expect to be home and have Father Bryant to shave us up and good message for Easter morning as this old fuss will soon be settled up. Oscar Williams, Eddie Smith, Joseph Bealey, Chas. Cole and Raymond Sanders are well and send best regards to all.

Love to all inquiring friends.

From,

Aronold A. Jones & Sgt. Lee
Hdgrs. Co. 802 Pioneer Inf.
A.E.F.



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NOTE: Corporal Arnold A. Jones was born in Washington Court House, Ohio. Corporal Jones served in the 802nd Pioneer Infantry which served in France from September 1918-June 1919. Corporal Jones was honorably discharged July 7, 1919.

Reading #1 Source:

The County Organ, Volume 3, No.12, December 1918

- *The County Organ* was an Ohio African American newspaper. It stated "Devoted to the interest of the Negro of Fayette County."



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Photograph #2:

Private Charles Emerson

317th Engineers Co. B

Killed in the line of Duty: August 13, 1918



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Resource #1:

American Battle Monuments Commission

The American Battle Monuments Commission oversees twenty five permanent American military cemeteries, and twenty seven federal memorials, monuments, and markers in sixteen foreign countries. The Commission has a database of the approximately 218,000 American Military Personnel buried overseas, including 35,374 military personnel from World War I. The World War I military personnel include: 30,922 interred overseas, and 4,452 commemorated on tablets as Missing in Action. Private Charles Emerson is buried in the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, an American military cemetery in France. Below is an example of the data available from the American Battle Monuments Commission, and the link to the American Battle Monuments Commission:

<https://www.abmc.gov>

Charles Emerson

World War I



Rank	Private, U.S. Army
Unit	317th Engineer Regiment, 92nd Division
Entered Service From	Ohio
Date of Death	August 13, 1918
Buried	Plot D Row 26 Grave 24 Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery



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Photograph #3:

National Colors of the 802nd Pioneer Infantry, 95th Infantry Division



Source: Ohio Memory

<http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/flags/id/668/rec/3>



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Extension Activity or Extended Reading:

One of the best contemporary accounts of the Pioneer Infantry Regiment was written by W.E.B. Du Bois for an article titled: "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War", from the June 1919 issue of *The Crisis*, pages 65 – 66. The article follows.

The 805TH (Pioneer Infantry)

... To illustrate the kind of work which the stevedore and pioneer regiments did, we cite the history of one of the pioneer Negro regiments: Under the act of May 18, 1917, the President ordered the formation of eight colored infantry regiments. Two of these, the 805th and 806th, were organized at Camp Funston. The 805th became a Pioneer regiment and when it left camp had 3,526 men and 99 officers. It included 25 regulars from the 25th Infantry of the Regular Army, 38 mechanics from Prairie View, 20 horse-shoers from Tuskegee and 8 carpenters from Howard. The regiment was drilled and had target practice. The regiment proceeded to Camp Upton late in August, 1918, and sailed, a part from Montreal and a part from Quebec, Canada, early in September. Early in October the whole regiment arrived in the southern end of the Argonne forest. The men began their work of repairing roads as follows:

- A- First 2,000 meters of Clermont-Neuvilly road from Clermont road past Apremont;
- B- Second 2,000 meters of Clermont-Neuvilly road, Charpentry cut-off road;
- C- Locheres crossroad on Clermont-Neuvilly road, north 2,000 meters, roads at Very;
- D- Clermont-Neuvilly road from point 1,000 south of Neuvilly bridge to Neuvilly ammunition detour road at Neuvilly, Charpentry roads;
- E- Auzeville railhead, Varennes railhead; railhead work at St. Ju in and Briquenay;
- F- Auzeville railhead, Varennes railhead, roads at Montblainville, roads at Landros-St. George;
- G- Roads at Avocourt, roads at Sommerance;
- H- Roads at Avocourt, roads at Fleville;
- I- Construction of ammunition dump, Neuvilly, and railhead construction between Neuvilly and Varennes and Apremont, railroad repair work Match and St. Juvin, construction of Verdun-Etain railroad from November 11;
- K- Railhead details and road work Aubreville, road work Varennes and Charpentry;
- M- Road and railhead work Aubreville, road work Varennes

The outlying companies were continually in immediate sight of the sausage balloons and witnessed many an air battle. Raids were frequent.

A concentration had been ordered at Varennes, November 18, and several companies had taken up their abode there or at Camp Mahout, but to carry out the salvage program, a re-distribution over the Argonne-Meuse area had to be affected immediately.



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The area assigned the 805th Pioneer Infantry extended from Boulton-aux-Bois, almost due south to a point one kilometre west of Les Islettes; thence to Aubreville and Avocourt and Esnes; thence to Montfaucon via Bethincourt and Cuisy; thence north through Nantillois and Cunel to Bantheville; thence southwest through Romagne, Gesnes and Exermont to the main road just south of Fleville; and then north to Boulton-aux-Bois through Fleville, St. Juvin, Grand Pre' and Briquenay.

The area comprised all of the Argonne forest, from Clermont north and the Varennes-Malancourt-Montfaucon-Romagne sections. More than five hundred square miles of battlefield was included.

A list of the articles to be salvaged would require a page. Chiefly they were Allied and enemy weapons and cannon, web and leather equipment, clothing and blankets, rolling stock, aviation electrical and engineer equipment. It was a gigantic task and did not near completion until the first week in March when more than 3,000 French [train] carloads had been shipped.

For some weeks truck transportation was scarce and work was slow and consisted largely in getting materials to roadsides.

As companies of the 805th neared completion of their areas they were put to work at railheads where they helped load the salvage they had gathered and that which many other organizations of the area had brought, and sent it on its way to designated depots.

With the slackening of the salvage work, the regiment found a few days when it was possible to devote time to drilling, athletics and study. School and agriculture books were obtained in large numbers and each company organized classes which, though not compulsory, were eagerly attended by the men.

Curtailed of this work was necessitated by instructions from Advance Section Headquarters to assist in every way possible the restoration of French farmlands to a point where they could be cultivated.

This meant principally the filling of trenches across fields and upon this work the regiment entered March 15 with all its strength, except what was required for the functioning of the railheads not yet closed.



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Extension Activity/ Extended Reading Source:

Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War." *The Crisis*, June 1919.

This article by W.E.B. Du Bois provides an excellent account of African American military service in World War I. The entire article can be downloaded from the [Modernist Journals Project](#)



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Additional Resources:

- 1.) United States World War One Centennial Commission:
<http://www.worldwar1centennial.org>
- 2.) Ohio Memory - World War I in Ohio: <http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm/wwi>
- 3.) WWI in Ohio Union Bibliography: <http://www.ohiohistoryhost.org/wwibib/>
- 4.) *Searching for Homer Lawson: African American World War I Combat Troops* Ohio World War I Centennial Committee Lesson Plan: <http://www.ohiohistoryhost.org/ohiomemory/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Searching-for-Homer-Lawson-Lesson-Plan.pdf>
- 5.) Ohio History Connection: The African American Experience in Ohio 1850 - 1920 "Colored Stevedores Lauded by Tyler":
<http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/html/page1595.html?ID=7867>
- 6.) Library of Congress: African American Odyssey: The American Negro in the World War:
<https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=gcmisc&fileName=ody/ody0702/ody0702page.db&recNum=0&itemLink=/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart7.html@0702&linkText=9>
- 7.) American Battle Monuments Commission:
<https://www.abmc.gov/>
- 8.) The French Government: World War I:
<http://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/en/article.php?larub=78&titre=first-world-war>
- 9.) The American Legion: <http://www.legion.org>
- 10.) Veterans of Foreign Wars: <http://www.vfw.org>



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This lesson plan was written by Paul LaRue. A retired thirty-year high school social studies teacher, Paul has received numerous state and national teaching awards. He serves as a member of the Ohio World War I Centennial Committee.



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