Sweetheart pendant with portrait of a soldier
Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Alan Laird

The Colored Man is No Slacker, 1918
Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

A Blue Star flag in the window meant that a family member was serving in the military
Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Alan Laird

The National Museum of African American History and Culture

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN WORLD WAR I
At Home and Abroad
World War I

July 1914 to November 1918

This war was a significant transformative global event. Fought mostly in Europe, it was a bloody struggle for control and territory between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy and the United States). The two sides were supported by their colonies across Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as well as other allied countries.

At the dawn of World War I in 1914, U.S. laws subjected African Americans to segregation, servitude and mob violence that included brutal acts of lynchings. Further, as part of an agricultural economy devastated by boll weevil infestations across the American South, sharecropping kept many destitute and in a constant state of penury. And, the military was completely segregated and unequal.

After the US joined the War in 1917, W.E.B Du Bois wrote “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.”

Editorial, The Crisis, July 1918

EXPLORE MORE

To learn more about African Americans in the military:
Visit Double Victory: The African American Military Experience on L2: s.si.edu/2AuMSzr

To learn about African Americans and World War I: s.si.edu/2YGuqvs

Unless noted otherwise, all photos featured are from the collection of the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture.
What did women do?

It was not just men who heeded Du Bois’s call to fight for democracy. Although they could not enlist, African American women played a crucial role.

Preserving Family and Communities

Women had the challenging job of maintaining the family while soldiers served. They kept the memory of fathers alive with children by hanging pictures on the wall or sitting them on the mantel. Mothers and wives showed their patriotism and support by placing a blue star flag in the window, signifying that the household had a service member fighting for democracy.

Soldiers gave sweethearts and wives pendants with their picture inside so they would always be remembered.

“I’m sacrificing when I stay, At home where you have been And toiled daily that you may, Help the right cause win

—From War Poems, written by African American sisters Ada Tess Peters (age 18) and Ethel Pauline Peters (age 17) and published in 1919.
Advancing Social Justice and Civil Rights

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell were two outstanding women who championed the rights of African American soldiers during and after the war. They were engaged as private citizens and through a number of civic organizations. Both were among the group who founded the NAACP.

The NAACP

Formed in 1908 in response to rampant anti-black violence, its aim was to secure the rights guaranteed in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution. During WWI the NAACP worked to prevent mistreatment of African Americans in the military.

The Crisis

In 1910 W.E.B. Du Bois founded the official journal of the NAACP, *The Crisis*. It discussed critical issues confronting the African American community and shared the intellectual and artistic work of people of color. In its first decade, *The Crisis* focused on vital issues like lynching and World War I.
Ida B. Wells
Ida B. Wells was born enslaved in Mississippi. Orphaned at 16, she dropped out of school to take care of her siblings. She moved her family to Memphis, where she became a teacher and journalist. She became a staunch anti-lynching activist in 1892 after three of her friend were lynched in Memphis. She was a founding member of the NAACP. However, due to philosophical differences she left and became a leader in the National Equal Rights League (NERL).

In September of 1918 The Appeal (a St. Louis based paper) outlined NERL’s desire to abolish “caste, segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching with the nations warring with Germany in the final settlement of world conditions.” In October of the same year, The Chicago Defender wrote that the “Equal Rights League launches campaign” [...]directed by Mrs. Ida B. Wells Barnett [...]to encourage the election of delegates to attend the Peace Conference at the end of the war[...]”

The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.
–Ida B. Wells

EXPLORE MORE
To learn more about the formation of the NAACP:
Visit Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom:
The Era of Segregation 1876–1968:
s.si.edu/2UMFG8t

Want to know more about Ida B. Wells?
Look for the yellow teacup.
Mary Church Terrell

Mary Church Terrell was an educator, a sought-after public speaker, and a self-described dignified agitator. In 1895 she co-founded and became the first president of the National Association of Colored Women. Unlike predominantly white suffrage organizations, however, the NACW advocated for a wide range of reforms to improve life for African Americans.

Terrell spent much of World War I doing activist work through a variety of organizations. The NACW used its large membership and national influence to assist in the war effort. After the war, Terrell spoke out against the treatment of the returning soldiers.

"As colored people read and heard the utterances of those in power, who pledged themselves so unalterably and ardently to the cause of liberty for all mankind throughout the War, they did not dream that after the conflict was ended, they would not be allowed to enjoy the fruits of a movement which had so quickened the public conscience and touched the Nation’s heart."

—Speech by Terrell, “The Racial Worm Turns,” circa 1920

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Read the Museum Blogs:

The Revolutionary Practice of Black Feminisms: s.si.edu/3hxzSBB

5 You Should Know: African American Suffragists: s.si.edu/2Y4Dn2W
American Red Cross
The American Red Cross Motor Service, founded in 1917, provided transportation support to canteens, military hospitals, and camps, and was involved in the campaign against the influenza outbreak of 1918. Most volunteers were women, who typically used their own cars.

Nursing
It is estimated that some 1,800 black nurses were certified by the Red Cross for duty with the military, but none were called up until the final days of the war, when the Spanish Influenza pandemic swept the world and the medical help was desperately needed. A small number of American Red Cross African American nurses were called up to serve in the Army Nurse Corps in the United States, but none were sent overseas.

“Each of us did contribute quietly and with dignity to the idea that justice demands professional quality for all qualified nurses.”
—Aileen Cole Stewart

YMCA
The YMCA had a headquarters in Paris that offered support to two hundred thousand black soldiers on duty overseas, though for much of the war they were served by only three black woman volunteers—Helen Curtis, Addie W. Hunton, and Katheryn M. Johnson.

In France, they managed African-American leave stations (where soldiers’ leave paperwork was processed), canteens where soldiers ate and drank and hostess houses where soldiers socialized. The women welcomed the troops by giving them home-cooked meals, listening to them, organizing wholesome entertainment and maintaining the houses.

“…”
—We Return Fighting
This booklet is inspired by *We Return Fighting*, a temporary exhibition that interprets the life experiences of African Americans during the World War I era (1913 to 1920). Though the foundation of the exhibition is the African American military experience from 1917 to 1919, the exhibition offers an inclusive non-military experience focusing on the social, cultural, political, economic and intellectual lives of African Americans before, during and after World War I.

*(image above)* Nine of the first 18 African American women to serve in the Army Nurse Corps are pictured at Camp Sherman, Ohio, ca. 1919. Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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Created in partnership with

The National Museum of African American History and Culture opened September 24, 2016, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Occupying a prominent location next to the Washington Monument, the nearly 400,000-square-foot museum is the nation’s largest and most comprehensive cultural destination devoted exclusively to exploring, documenting and showcasing the African American story and its impact on American and world history. For more information about the museum, visit nmaahc.si.edu, follow @NMAAHC on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat—or call Smithsonian information at 1-844-750-3012.