

# CURTIS LARK PRIVATE U.S. ARMY

## WORLD WAR I 1892 - 1952

WRITTEN BY ABBI SMITHMYER  
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

**DRAFT** THIS IS A WORK-IN-PROGRESS  
FOR TEMPORARY DISPLAY ONLY



A new draftee reports to Camp Upton, New York, in 1917. NARA

**Curtis Lark was born on May 10, 1892**, in Belton, Anderson County, South Carolina, to African American parents Ebenezer and Emma (Miller) Lark. He was the second oldest of a large family of 13 children, with one older brother, five younger sisters, and six younger brothers.

Both of Curtis Lark's parents came from humble and modest backgrounds. With 37 percent of Anderson County's 1860 population enslaved and fewer than 200 free Blacks in the county at the time, it is likely both of Curtis' parents were born into slavery. However, the end of the Civil War and the introduction of programs such as the Freedmen's Bureau brought new possibilities for people like Curtis' mother. There were 15 teachers who educated poor Whites and African Americans where she grew up, which is likely how she learned to read and write.

Despite these opportunities, Southern resistance to Reconstruction made life difficult for the Larks. Curtis and his family had to navigate South Carolina's strict Jim Crow laws, which kept Black Americans from fully participating in the economic, social, and political systems afforded their White counterparts. Often, African Americans continued to live and work on the plantations owned by their former enslavers. Known as sharecropping, this practice was likely how Curtis' father supported the family. Ebenezer

worked as a farmer on rented land, and by 1896 the family resided on Mr. J. T. Green's property, which was situated near two cotton gins. The Larks continued to live on rented farmland throughout Curtis' youth. Employment disadvantages were not the only things African Americans had to navigate. From 1894 to 1911, at least five Black men were victims of lynching in Anderson County, harbingers of the racial violence that cast a shadow on Curtis' adolescence.

Curtis witnessed Anderson County's transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy at the turn of the 19th century. By the age of 18, he was still living in Belton, which developed its economy around the railroad and cotton production. Some of the largest cotton mills in South Carolina were established around Belton and provided a source of employment for individuals like Curtis, albeit with caveats. Although they presented an escape from the manipulative practice of sharecropping, Belton's cotton mills were segregated and paid African American workers lower wages in comparison to White laborers.

By 1917, 25-year-old Curtis had moved to nearby Greenville, South Carolina, an important textile and railroad city. Both the Columbia & Greenville Railroad and the Atlanta & Charlotte Air Line Railway met in Greenville, forming part of the Southern Railway System. The burgeoning city's many textile mills and busy railroad junction provided opportunities for Curtis, who worked as a railyard fireman for the Knoxville Concrete Company. During this period, Curtis worked hard to man coal-fired engines, used to power large hoists that moved heavy equipment and supplies to and from the railway cars.

The United States' 1917 entry into World War I brought massive changes for both Curtis Lark and Greenville. The city was selected for the establishment of a temporary cantonment site to train federalized National Guardsmen. Named for Revolutionary War hero John Savier, the camp went on to train an estimated 100,000 men from South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee in infantry skills, gas defense, trench digging, and machine gun use. Just as Greenville could not escape the expanding global conflict, neither could Curtis. Despite Curtis claiming a draft exemption due to his care of a child under the age of 12, he was inducted into military service on July 19, 1918, at Camp Jackson, South Carolina. Although it is unclear who he was caring for, the local draft board's decision to induct Curtis correlates with statistics as Black men were more frequently drafted compared to White men in World War I.

Segregation dogged Curtis' military service, as South Carolina vehemently opposed racially integrated training facilities. Following basic training,



An unidentified soldier in a telephone and telegraph battalion. Black troops were usually assigned to rear echelon roles and denied opportunities for combat. NARA

discrimination prevailed. Most African Americans were placed into labor battalions because White military officials believed Black draftees were incapable of combat roles. One officer noted that "Reserve labor battalions are composed of colored soldiers who, on account of their lack of intelligence, are not capable of performing any other class of duty." These racist beliefs led to Curtis' assignment to Company C of the 429th Reserve Labor Battalion.

While over 200,000 African Americans served overseas during the First World War, the 429th served domestically. Curtis' domestic service was not unique, as approximately 46 percent of African American doughboys never left the United States during World War I. These servicemen were tasked with loading and unloading ships, building roads, digging ditches, and other forms of construction. At no U.S. location were these roles in higher demand than the Port of Embarkation in Newport News, Virginia. Established in 1917, the Port of Embarkation ensured the United States could ship hundreds of thousands of troops, equipment, and supplies overseas. So many soldiers and personnel in one area meant the U.S. Army needed to construct military camps to house troops like Curtis.

Due to the military's segregationist policies, Camp Alexander was established separately to house African American soldiers in Newport News. It was named for Lieutenant John H. Alexander, the second Black graduate of the United

# CURTIS LARK



A White soldier berates two Black comrades during an unknown incident, probably in France. Several racially charged incidents occurred at Camp Alexander during Curtis Lark's service there. NARA

States Military Academy at West Point. The sprawling camp was built along the east bank of the James River and was big enough to house nearly 10,000 African American soldiers and personnel.

Like many military camps of the era, Camp Alexander had various amenities beyond basic military necessities. The YMCA built a large structure for the garrison to enjoy movies, religious lectures, baseball, football, volleyball, and other recreational activities. The camp's baseball team was a popular source of entertainment, going undefeated in 1918 and becoming the African American champions of Virginia in 1919. A voluntary band was also organized and composed of 40 men equipped with regulation instruments. They were soon recognized as one of the best African American bands within the United States. Although it is unclear what activities Curtis took part in, he likely experienced new opportunities—and took pride in the accomplishments of his fellow soldiers—while serving at Camp Alexander.

As has been noted by historians from W.E.B. DuBois to present scholars, discrimination and racial prejudice cast a pall over Black military opportunities during the war, and Camp Alexander proved no exception. Contemporary U.S. military reports argued that White officers at the camp were “necessary to afford proper and efficient supervision over the negro laborer, as the colored personnel of labor battalions is the lowest type of the common negro laborer.” Another example of racially motivated abuse occurred when a Black sergeant reported a White officer for yelling racial slurs at soldiers. Rather than reprimand the White officer, the military arrested the

sergeant, claiming he tried to incite mutiny among the African American troops. Black servicemen also faced violence outside Camp Alexander's boundaries. In September 1918, an African American soldier was accused of stealing money from a local photography studio. Once the police arrived, two officers “jumped on this soldier and beat him down with clubs.” While it is unclear if Curtis was ever victim to direct attacks, this racial prejudice no doubt shaped his military experience and the morale of the 429th.

After World War I's conclusion and his honorable discharge from the military on January 24, 1919, Curtis Lark left his home state of South Carolina and moved to West Virginia. His move coincided with America's First Great Migration, the mass movement of Black southerners to northern and midwestern cities throughout the early 1900s. For example, although Anderson County's White population continued to increase from 1920 to 1930, its Black population declined by almost 15 percent as residents left in search of better jobs and political and educational opportunities denied them throughout the South. While most Black families left southern states for industrial cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, the coalfields and railroad towns in West Virginia also saw a spike in African American residents. By 1930, West Virginia's Black population would reach a high of nearly 115,000.

Curtis spent his postwar life working in West Virginia's coal mines. On December 13, 1926, he married Viola Robinson in Marion County. Viola was an African American woman born in Alabama who had two daughters from a previous marriage. By 1930, the family of four were living in a rented home in Marion County's Lincoln Magisterial District. Although African Americans were disproportionately unemployed during the Great Depression, Curtis supported his family throughout the 1930s as a coal miner. Despite the brutal economic downturn, Marion County's population doubled between 1900 and 1930 due to explosive growth of the mining industry, which kept coal production high and attracted large numbers of domestic and immigrant laborers.

Sadly, Viola died on October 7, 1941, after suffering from cervical cancer for two years. After the loss of his wife, Curtis moved to Mullens, in southern West Virginia's Wyoming County. He rented a room from Delia Early, a widowed African American woman from North Carolina who worked as a maid to support her teenage granddaughter. While in Mullens, Curtis worked for the Red Jacket Coal Company, which allowed him to support the war effort yet again with the town's mines and railroads working two or three shifts a day throughout the Second World War.

By 1950, Curtis moved back to Marion County's Lincoln Magisterial District and was a lodger in the home of Henry Jones. It is possible Curtis knew Jones through work, because Jones was a widowed African American man who made a living as a driller for the coal mines. Curtis had since moved on to a new mining role as a cutting machine man, where his job would have been to operate a machine that sawed deep slots into the coalface to facilitate the

coal's removal. As historian Joe William Trotter Jr. explains, Curtis' persistent movement throughout the state is not unique as many Black miners often “moved from one mine to another to improve their working conditions, increase their wages, and gain greater recognition of their humanity.”

Curtis remarried on November 22, 1952, and he and his wife, Queen Mann, moved to Fairmont, seat of Marion County. One month later, however, on December 31, 1952, Curtis passed away at Fairmont General Hospital due to cardiac arrest. His body was taken to the J. G. Lampkin Funeral Home, which served the Black community of Fairmont through 25 years of segregation. Lark was laid to rest five days later in Grafton National Cemetery on January 5, 1953.



Despite the obstacles, many Black troops returned from overseas proud of their conduct and service, especially those who saw combat. These battle-tested men of the 505th Engineers are in a good mood as they step back onto American soil. NARA



**SOURCES** FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

# SOURCES

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

**The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project** is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council  
 1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301  
[wvhuman@wvhumanities.org](mailto:wvhuman@wvhumanities.org)  
[www.wvhumanities.org](http://www.wvhumanities.org)  
 304.346.8500



Veterans Legacy Grant Program  
 Department of Veterans Affairs  
 Washington D.C.

