

SCOTT MARTIN SERGEANT U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR I 1888 - 1962

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An unidentified soldier of the 802nd Pioneers breaks stones for the construction of a railroad to the front. Scott Martin's railroad experience was an asset in war-torn France. NARA

Scott Martin was born on April 2, 1888, to Joe Martin and Harriet Haskins, in Rockingham County on North Carolina's border with Virginia. The loss to fire of the 1890 census, and the paucity of records on African American citizens during Reconstruction, make it difficult to determine much about Scott Martin's parents and early life. Thirty-eight percent of Rockingham County's population had been enslaved prior to the Civil War, and Ku Klux Klan activity dogged the area in the war's immediate aftermath. It is unclear whether Joe and Harriet would have experienced these circumstances firsthand.

By 1888, however, the Klan had been suppressed and Rockingham was modernizing rapidly by virtue of a growing railroad network. The Martins may have lived in or near Reidsville, which had obtained rail access earlier via the Piedmont Railroad in 1863 and was thus positioned to expand its robust tobacco industry into the 20th century. Perhaps it was these early railroad connections that eventually led Scott Martin to Grafton, West Virginia, to support himself and his family sometime after receiving a public education up to the sixth grade. Census records are inconclusive as to which family member prompted the move northward, but Scott indicates on his 1917 World War I Selective Service records that he is supporting both parents and two nephews in his Grafton home.

Grafton was a key "switching area" for freight trains of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O), which had helped establish the town as an important hub prior to the Civil War. Grafton's economy grew around this transportation behemoth. As the need for laborers grew with the railroad—itsself growing alongside the industrial-scale extraction of coal and timber from West Virginia—more men like Scott Martin found employment with the B&O. In Grafton, Martin began his first documented career as a hostler at a railroad shop. Hostlers were responsible for moving locomotives to and from maintenance repair shops, and along sidings to facilitate the efficient coordination of rail traffic. As a hostler, Scott also would have assisted locomotive engineers in preparing locomotives for longer journeys.

Despite the railroad industry being a common source of employment for African Americans in the early 20th century, railroads continued to be places of segregation until the 1960s. Black men during this era could only maintain jobs as hostlers, brakemen, laborers, mechanics, or porters, and could not hold the role of a conductor, engineer, or any type of administrative role.

Though World I had been raging on since 1914, the United States did not officially enter the war until 1917. Following America's declaration of war, many American men decided to enlist in the war efforts, but the draft was nevertheless needed to fulfill the extraordinary amount of manpower required by the war. While there was a large outpouring of war support from African Americans, the response could also be ambivalent—fighting for democracy abroad did not always appear attractive to those who did not enjoy equal rights at home. Whatever his personal feelings, Scott does not appear to have enthusiastically enlisted: his 1917 draft card requests an exemption for the four dependents in his household.

That Scott Martin was probably not planning to go to war is supported by his marriage to Pearl Williamson on April 18, 1918, ten months after filling out his draft card. They were wed in a small ceremony attended by other family

members in the home of Pearl's parents in Reidsville, North Carolina. By this time, Scott had lost two of his dependents, though in different ways: his father Joe is listed as deceased on the marriage license, and his mother Harriet as a resident of Orange, New Jersey. With the nuptials still fresh, it is unlikely that Scott chose to enlist on June 21, 1918, but rather was drafted into the Army.

In time, Scott would rise to the rank of sergeant in the 802nd Pioneer Infantry Regiment composed of African American men drawn primarily from West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Though several Black units have gained everlasting fame for their heroism in combat, such as the 369th Infantry (Harlem's Rattlers or, more popularly, the "Hellfighters"), most African American servicemen were relegated to rear echelon support roles in segregated units, such as the 802nd Pioneers. It has been estimated that only 50,000 of the 200,000 African Americans who served in World War I were in combat positions. All these segregated units were commanded by White officers. The 802nd, for instance, consisted of nearly 2,000 Black enlisted men overseen by about 50 White lieutenants, captains, majors, and colonels.

The 802nd started their journey at Camp Sherman in Ohio, a large training camp near Chillicothe that housed and trained up to 42,000 soldiers, beginning in September of 1917. In August of 1918, the regiment moved to Camp Mills on Long Island, New York, where present-day Garden City is located. The regiment trained for an additional month before shipping off to Europe, putting them there at the time of Camp Mills' peak World War I population of 31,000 troops. This was an inopportune time to be at either camp, as the global influenza pandemic raged through military and civilian populations alike. One corporal wrote from Camp Mills in October 1918 to report over 2,000 soldiers hospitalized with influenza, overwhelming the base medical staff.

This may have induced the army to ship out the 802nd as quickly as possible. Much of the unit sailed for Europe on September 1, 1918. At least part of the regiment sailed aboard the RMS *Carmania*, a converted Cunard Line passenger liner that served as a patrol ship and troop transport. Scott was part of the 802nd's Company M, however, which appears to have sailed aboard the HMAT *Anchises*, a converted Australian transport ship later sunk during World War II. Scott still held the rank of private when he climbed aboard the *Anchises* on August 31.

By the end of September, the 802nd Pioneers were steaming north from Rolampont, several hours west of Paris, to the decimated, trench-scarred fields of Verdun. There they would support the American First Army in the opening stages of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Fighting for the Americans had already begun in earnest on September 26, 1918, between the Argonne

SCOTT MARTIN



Rear area at Cheppy, France, where Martin's battalion spent time quarrying and constructing a support railroad. NARA

Forest and the Meuse River, on ground already pulverized by years of war. In this massive attack, over a million American soldiers, airmen, marines, and sailors fought alongside 135,000 French soldiers against stubborn German resistance that would last until the November 11 armistice. The American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) were tasked with some of the war's most difficult sectors over challenging terrain. They were a much fresher fighting force than their European counterparts, and American commander-in-chief General John J. Pershing was determined to prove his troops' mettle.

Fortunately for Scott Martin, those serving in the Pioneer Infantry regiments typically worked in a field with which he was well familiar: railroad construction and roads. Logistics support units with the AEF built 19 railheads to support the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, along with myriad hospitals and supply depots. The 802nd Pioneers, which operated independently rather than attached to a particular division, were split into individual battalions to better divide up the work at hand. First Battalion helped engineers build a light double-track railway from Aubreville to Varennes; Second Battalion was tasked with connecting to the First Battalion in Varennes; and Third Battalion was to furnish rocks from stone quarries to help prepare highways.

Perhaps to Scott's chagrin, Company M was part of Third Battalion, quarrying stones rather than contributing more directly to the railroad's construction. If he was unhappy, it didn't show—within a month he was elevated past private first class and corporal to the rank of sergeant. This placed him alongside seven other sergeants in the company, in charge of a platoon of men under harrowing circumstances. Though not on the front lines, the pioneers were

subjected to daily German artillery fire and aerial attacks. No doubt the construction of the railroad was of great interest to German commanders since it would bring faster deliveries of American troops, weapons, and ammunition to the front lines.

The bloody Meuse-Argonne Offensive carried through to the war's end when battered German armies called for a ceasefire. On November 18, 1918, a week after the war officially ended, the 802nd Pioneer Regiment was highly commended by the Chief Engineer of the First American Army, who enthused that their services were invaluable to the final push of victory for the Allies. Though American troops would soon begin streaming home across the Atlantic for demobilization, five of the Pioneer regiments (including the 802nd) were ordered to remain behind until the summer of 1919 to assist with clearing away and repairing catastrophic war damage in France. The 802nd finished out 1918 in La Neuville, south of Lille. In January, they moved to Dun-Sur-Meuse closer to their old haunts near Verdun. In February, the regiment crossed nearly the full width of France to Brûlon, then settled in for the next four months at the nearby town of Louplande.

Company M's war finally concluded on June 17, 1919, when they boarded the transport USS *Antigone* (ID-3007) in St. Nazaire, France. After ten long months overseas, they landed back on American soil on June 28 in Newport News, Virginia. According to the company's last muster roll in June, the entire unit was transferred on July 2, possibly to a depot brigade for discharge. Several New York newspapers noted the arrival on July 9 of "the 802d Pioneer Infantry, composed of 1,969 Southern negroes," but Company M and three others did not accompany them to the Empire State. Scott was discharged four days later on July 13, 1919.



Following his service, Pearl and Scott made their way to Reidsville, North Carolina, before settling back into Grafton. Scott resumed his work as a hostler. Pearl is listed as a schoolteacher in the 1930 census, continuing the work she had done in Reidsville. The couple resided in a house they owned at 815 Maple (sometimes listed as 815 Beech) Avenue in Grafton for four decades, industrious to the last. As late as 1950, at age 62, Scott Martin was still pulling 48 hours a week as a locomotive hostler.

Pearl passed away on November 12, 1961. After spending so much of their lives together, Scott was to follow not far behind. On April 29, 1962, Scott Martin died at the age of 74. The two are interred together at the Grafton National Cemetery.

LEFT: Unidentified engineer or pioneer unit constructs a railroad in France. NARA

BELOW: General John J. Pershing, supreme commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, reviews the 802nd Pioneers. 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.

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