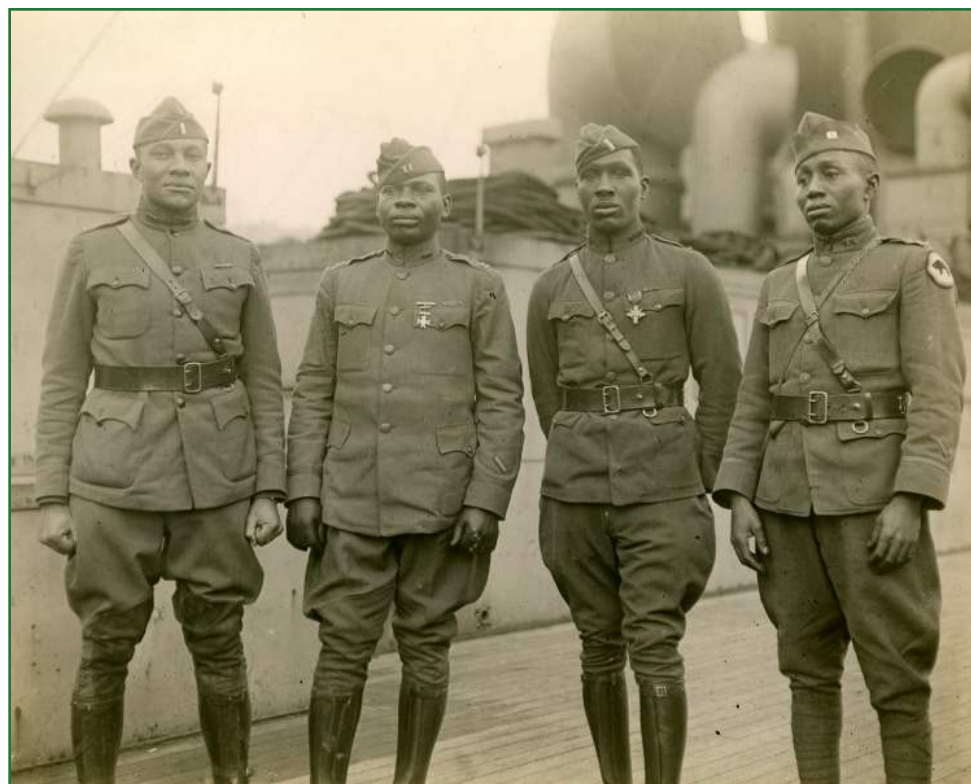


WALTER CHARLES MOCK PRIVATE U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR I 1885 - 1942

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The stories of African American soldiers who fought overseas, such as the men above, have received more attention and documentation than the tens of thousands compelled to stay behind in menial roles. *University of Massachusetts, Amherst, W.E.B. DuBois Papers*

Walter Charles Mock was born to John W. Mock and Susie Worth Mock on October 30, 1885, in Silver Lake, Tennessee. His parents hailed from Virginia and North Carolina, respectively, and it is unclear why the family came to Tennessee. At the time of Walter's birth, Silver Lake was a blossoming town. The Silver Lake Mill, built in 1808, remained nearly a century later as the community's central hub with farmers coming to grind their corn and wheat. By the turn of the century, Silver Lake had become a getaway for vacationers looking to swim in the warm springs that fed into Silver Lake itself.

Walter attended school through only the second grade. This was unfortunately common for the time, especially for Black children. Walter would have been the first or second generation of his family born following Emancipation. Post-emancipation life was difficult for Black Americans: Reconstruction ceased in 1877, removing many federal protections for Black residents in a racially hostile American South. President James A. Garfield was assassinated in 1881, removing from office the last chief executive to advocate for Black civil rights for several decades. Many Black families, especially throughout the

South, lived and worked as sharecroppers. Sharecropping contracts heavily favored the White landholders over Black tenants, making it impossible for Black families to get ahead financially. Children, like Walter, often had to stop attending school to help their parents meet the labor demands of sharecropping contracts.

On June 5, 1917, two months after the United States entered World War I, Walter filled out his draft paperwork. This was a national effort known as "Registration Day," when all men between the ages of 21 and 35 were required to register for the draft. On his forms, Walter stated that he was a coal miner for Consolidation Coal Company in Carolina, West Virginia. Consolidation Coal was an early and major mining operation in the Marion County area, producing 10 million tons of coal annually.

Walter, a Black migrant from Tennessee, was not unique in filling out Consolidation's roster of miners. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Black Americans migrated to West Virginia to work in the coalfields—many to escape the oppressive practice of sharecropping so common farther south. By 1909, Black Americans made up 26 percent of coal miners in West Virginia. Of these men, nearly 75 percent worked as coal loaders, mule handlers, or coke oven workers. Most men preferred to work as coal loaders, as they were paid for the amount of coal they mined, not merely a daily wage. The work was laborious and dangerous, but experienced coal loaders could load an average of five tons of coal per day, earning between \$2.20 and \$5.00 for doing so.

Within weeks of filling out his required papers, Walter was drafted into the armed forces. A June 21, 1918, article in Fairmont's newspaper, *The West Virginian*, listed Walter as an alternate draftee. Walter was an alternate for 24 other Black West Virginians who had been called up. The article specified that this was the second cohort of Black men to be drafted in Marion County.

That two groups of Black men had already been drafted in a predominantly White county is telling. When the Selective Service draft was put into place by President Woodrow Wilson's administration, few guidelines dictated how to select candidates. It fell to local boards to decide. These boards frequently prioritized Black draftees, allowing White men to stay at home and avoid military service. Although Black Americans made up only 9.6 percent of draft registrations, they comprised 13 percent of those selected overall. In total, 367,710 Black Americans were drafted into World War I. Thirty-four percent of all Black men who registered were ultimately selected, compared to only 24 percent of White men chosen.

Despite the disproportionate number of Black Americans being called up to serve, there were many questions surrounding Black military service at the federal level. The military was segregated, mirroring American society. Would Black servicemen be trained by White or Black leaders? Would military service finally help convey equal status to Black men in American society? Military service, many hoped, would show White Americans that they were dedicated, loyal, and equally fit as citizens. Still other Black leaders highlighted the unfairness of forcing oppressed members of society to fight for a country that actively sought to institutionalize their inferiority.

How Walter felt about the draft is unknown. Presumably, his position as an alternate solidified into that of a real draftee: his enlistment date is also designated as June 21. On June 30, 1918, Walter was assigned to the 48th Company, 12th Training Battalion, 158th Depot Brigade and was sent for training at Camp Sherman in Ohio. This unusual unit designation—companies were usually denoted by letters, not numbers—is indicative of the special function of depot brigades. During World War I, new soldiers were typically assigned to depot brigades for brief periods during their initial training, or as they returned from war service and were awaiting discharge.

Sprawling Camp Sherman was rapidly constructed to facilitate the lightning expansion of the U.S. Army from a few thousand men to over a million as quickly as possible. Within months of America's entry into the war, Camp Sherman had sprung nearly whole cloth from the plains and rolling hills near Chillicothe, Ohio. As fresh recruits poured in, Chillicothe's population ballooned from 15,000 to 60,000. Additional businesses opened in the area to accommodate the rapidly growing population. At the camp, a library was constructed for soldiers' use—and unlike most such facilities at the time, the Camp Sherman library was open to soldiers of all races. There were also 11 YMCA facilities constructed to provide food and entertainment for soldiers. Racial integration largely ended at the library doors, however: separate facilities, including a YMCA and barracks, were constructed to accommodate Black soldiers.

Many soldiers of the depot brigades were quickly assigned to more specialized units and sent to serve elsewhere. This was not to be for Walter, however, who remained at Camp Sherman as part of the 158th, fulfilling myriad labor and maintenance roles around the boot-churned base. Walter thus witnessed the camp's primary crisis of the war in 1918: the global influenza pandemic.

The pandemic would ultimately be more deadly than the war itself, taking the lives of 50 million people worldwide. Once the illness arrived in Camp Sherman, it spread quickly. Nearly 6,000 cases were noted in Camp Sherman in 1918, with 1,777 men succumbing to the illness. Death rates from the

WALTER CHARLES MOCK

Walter Mock is likely in this photograph of his company, but unfortunately individual soldiers are not identified. *Emory University Libraries*



influenza pandemic were so high at Camp Sherman that a local business, the Majestic Theater, had to be used as a temporary morgue.

Luckily, Walter was soon able to leave this hothouse of infection behind. Having served from June 21, he received his honorable discharge on September 4, 1918. Rather than return south to Marion County, West Virginia, however, he moved eastward to the Mountain State's northern panhandle.

Five months later, on February 19, 1919, Walter married Emma Fitzhugh in Mingo Junction, Ohio County, West Virginia. According to the 1920 census, Walter and Emma rented a home in Jefferson County, Ohio, where Walter worked as a laborer at a steel mill. Walter likely worked at the Mingo Junction Steel Works, which began as a small ironwork shop in 1872 and grew into a massive steel plant. At its height, the plant produced more than 1.3 million tons of steel each year. By 1934, the Mocks were living in Wheeling, West Virginia. Walter is listed as a laborer in a local directory.

It is not known how the Mocks weathered the Great Depression. Being that Walter was listed as a laborer in the 1934 directory, we can assume that he had at least some steady work throughout the period. In 1940, the Mocks were still residing in Wheeling. Walter was working as a laborer for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), making him a federal employee. The WPA was a New Deal-era program aimed at helping working-class men secure work. WPA workers constructed roads, schools, dams, bridges, hospitals, courthouses, and city halls around the nation. The WPA was a unique New Deal project as it was the only labor project that allowed for the hire of Black

Americans. Pay for WPA employees was low so that it did not compete with private sector jobs. Still, this work provided a lifeline for countless Americans throughout the Great Depression.

Several WPA construction projects were completed in Wheeling during the late 1930s on which Walter may have worked. The Crispin Center, a combined community center, swimming pool, and golf club, was constructed by WPA workers. The sandstone used to construct the building was even quarried locally. New Deal programs paid for the completion of additional courtrooms at the Wheeling Federal Building. Walter may have worked on the construction of Oglebay Park and a swimming center in Wheeling, as well as on local road repairs.

According to his April 1942 World War II draft registration, Walter was still residing in Wheeling, working as an employee at the government airport. Later that month, however, Walter checked into a Veterans Administration hospital with active and advanced tuberculosis. It is likely that medical screenings performed by the local draft board noted the advanced state of Walter's medical condition and referred him for medical treatment. He died of tuberculosis only four months later, on August 3, 1942, at age 56. Walter was interred at the Grafton National Cemetery on August 6, 1942.

RIGHT: The Camp Sherman library was evidently uncommon in its practice of allowing both Black and White soldiers to use the collections. *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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