

# ALTAUGH PRESTON WILSON

SERGEANT  
U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR I  
1895 - 1939

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A unit of “casuals” waits to board a ship. Casuals were pools of unassigned men who could be parceled out to units as needed when closer to the front. NARA

**Altaugh Preston Wilson was born on March 18, 1895,** in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father, James H. Wilson, was born just before the Civil War in Winchester, Virginia, and therefore may have been born into enslavement until the war’s outcome brought freedom. Not so for Altaugh’s mother Mary, who was born free in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in 1859.

Other details of Altaugh’s upbringing are murky from the start, with two contradictory U.S. Census records from 1900. In their rented home on Holmes Street in Pittsburgh, near the East Liberty Railway station, the Wilsons appear to have been visited four days apart by two different census enumerators in June 1900. The two enumerators, Anna Burk and John Stewart, may have unwittingly overlapped their enumeration districts in a confusing warren of streets and alleys around Frankstown Avenue and Penn Avenue—and counted the Wilsons twice. Discrepancies between what each census taker recorded considerably muddle the portrait of the family’s

relationships and illustrate the research challenges posed by inadequate government documentation of poor Black families in the Jim Crow era. It was a pattern that would dog Altaugh Wilson’s steps throughout the rest of his life.

Mary (Price or E., depending on the record) is listed as either James’ wife or housekeeper, subject to the interpretation of the census-taker. Later documents from Altaugh’s military service confirm Mary as his mother. Altaugh’s older brother William is, in one version, listed as a boarder, not a family member. James is a widower in one version, but not in the next; a teamster in the first census, a day laborer in the second. Topping off the confusion, Altaugh’s name is spelled “Alphio” by the second enumerator. What is certain is that Altaugh’s grandmother Elizabeth, born in 1824, lived with the family. And that they did indeed have a boarder in 1900, Thomas Riceton, a day laborer only a few years younger than Altaugh’s father.

During Altaugh’s childhood in the early 1900s, the United States experienced rapid industrialization and the rise of corporate monopolies in the railroad, steel, and oil industries. Historian Joe Trotter notes that Pittsburgh’s corresponding growth in the years between the Civil War and World War I, spurred largely by these very industries, attracted large numbers of Polish, Irish, and African American laborers who migrated to Pittsburgh in the late 19th century.

According to patchy census records and city directories, the Wilsons lived in the vicinity of East Liberty, an early suburb of Pittsburgh located east of downtown. After the Civil War, East Liberty became a popular neighborhood for the city’s elite, who built large mansions there and attracted wealthy businesses. Industrial concerns and the extension of the railroad into the area motivated working-class immigrants to move in as well, including laborers like Altaugh’s father.

By the time Altaugh registered with the Selective Service in 1917, he reported

his address as 6639 Kelly Street. According to fire insurance maps, this small wooden dwelling was two lots down from the J. M. Denholm Brothers slaughterhouse, the noise and smell of which would have permeated the neighborhood. Throughout the 1910s, Altaugh’s block and those around it grew steadily more industrialized, until the tiny house was hemmed in by multiple factories, automobile shops, warehouses—and the ever-pungent Denholm slaughterhouse.

Altaugh later reported that he attended school until the age of 15 and learned to read and write. In the year he finished that schooling, 1910, Pittsburgh’s African American population began to explode, tripling by the end of the decade. Historians have shown, however, that this increase came with increased discrimination from Pittsburgh’s political establishments and other immigrant groups. Integrated working-class neighborhoods of Blacks, Italians, and Poles slowly divided along ethnic lines, and Black churches and schools struggled to keep up with the combination of de facto segregation and fractured communities.

As World War I raged across Europe and events threatened to bring the United States into the conflict, Altaugh was working as a driver for H. W. Malsey, a reputable company located in Pittsburgh. He would have been keenly aware of the war’s effects on his livelihood as a driver responsible for transporting goods and materials to destinations across the city. Pittsburgh was home to many factories that produced steel, ammunition, and other essential materials for the war effort, much of which was being sold to various European nations desperately in need of them. At the same time the flow of European immigrants to the United States had constricted from over one million per year to fewer than 300,000, possibly making it easier for Pittsburgh Blacks to find work.

This state of affairs was not to last. Altaugh Wilson signed his draft card on June 5, 1917, as part of a nationally mandated registration drive (failure to sign up carried a penalty of up to one year in prison). One year later, the 22-year-old was in uniform at Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, Ohio.

Starting on June 21, 1918, Wilson was attached to the 47th Company, 158th Depot Brigade. As the third-largest training camp in the United States, Camp Sherman contained over 2,000 buildings, and housed 40,000 soldiers and 12,000 horses. At Camp Sherman—and throughout the U.S. Army—African American soldiers were typically led by White officers in segregated units. The camp provided YMCA facilities and a library open to soldiers of all races, but also provided a separate YMCA building for African American soldiers. Sherman was less segregated in this regard.



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Casuals boarding a ship to return home in 1919. NARA

On August 24, 1918, the Army transferred Altaugh to the Supply Company of the segregated 813th Pioneer Infantry Regiment at Camp Mills on Long Island, New York, as it prepared to embark for Europe. He was only with the 813th for a matter of weeks before being transferred to Overseas Casuals Company #423, a generic replacements pool from which he could be assigned almost anywhere. On October 6, Altaugh and his comrades departed from New York on the RMS *Adriatic*, one of the largest ocean liners in the world, which had been converted to carry troops in 1917. The journey across the Atlantic by convoy took roughly a week. By 1918, attacks from German submarines had reduced drastically. In any case, it may have been safer to brave the open ocean than stay in Camp Mills, where the global influenza pandemic was hospitalizing thousands of soldiers.

When Altaugh arrived in France, he most likely passed through the enormous Camp Pontanezen near the port of Brest. This was a major staging area. “During the days when it became the greatest embarkation port in France, at times there [passed] as many as forty thousand men of color,” according to Addie M. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, two Black women who provided comfort and amenities to Black servicemen in Europe via the YMCA. If Altaugh was keeping track of his erstwhile companions in the 813th Pioneers, he may have counted his blessings: they were soon digging thousands of graves for Americans slain in the war’s final offensives.

Private Wilson may not have escaped this duty altogether. It was one of the largest tasks remaining after Germany signed the Armistice on November 11, 1918. Altaugh had missed most of the war, but tens of thousands remained behind to help build the peace. His “Overseas Casuals” detachment would provide additional manpower or replacements to help other units repair roads, bridges, railroads, canals, buildings, and other infrastructure destroyed by war.

Manual labor was, after all, the most typical lot for Black troops arriving in Europe. Due to ongoing racial segregation and prevailing racist attitudes in Army leadership, it is estimated that 89 percent of Black troops served in support roles, compared to 56 percent of White troops. Pennsylvanians like Altaugh recognized the injustice. The *Harrisburg Telegraph* published an editorial on October 12, 1917, noting that “We believe this world war should do more than defeat the predatory Prussian gang. It ought to remove for all time the unreasonable prejudices and racial contentions which have in large measure retarded world-wide civilization and progress.” While in France, many African American men in the U.S. Army had to fulfill Service of Supply (SOS) jobs and were organized into labor or service battalions. SOS tasks included handling mail, taking care of mules and horses, and providing other soldiers with necessities such as ice, matches, gasoline, blankets, and ammunition. Additional SOS soldiers also worked in construction and forestry, or in quarries.

On July 5, 1919, Altaugh boarded the SS *Liberator* in Brest, France, and landed on American soil in Hoboken, New Jersey, on July 18. Having dutifully served his country, Altaugh was granted an honorable discharge from the military on July 25, 1919, following his return from France. But his personal battle was far from over.

He returned to Pittsburgh and took up employment as a brick worker and a molder’s helper in the 1920s. Racial discrimination was continuing to worsen in Pittsburgh. In the “Red Summer” of 1919 racial violence was committed against Black communities en masse. Prejudicial circumstances may have impacted Altaugh’s ability to secure work and housing. According to historians Joe Trotter and Jared Day:

**White workers [in Pittsburgh] gradually bridged their ethnic and nationality differences and waged a unified struggle for their rights, but the Sons of Vulcan and the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers unions restricted membership to whites only. Seasoned, skilled black men could not obtain union cards and young black workers could not gain access to apprenticeship and training programs. According to one white steel unionist, compelling whites to work with black men “was itself cause sufficient to drive . . . [white workers] into open rebellion.”**

This atmosphere of increasing racial hostility, in which vagrancy laws and other statutes permitted African Americans to be arrested for even minor incidents, makes it difficult to ascertain whether Altaugh’s troubled postwar life was as criminal as it appears. In 1927, he was convicted for “entering [a] traincar with intent to commit [a] felony.” What felony was intended is not stated, but according to the ledger it was his second conviction. He appears to have done hard farm labor in prison until 1930.

In 1931, he was arrested again, along with two other men, for being a “suspicious person” in relation to the shooting of an East Liberty confectioner over a card game. It is not clear whether he received a sentence. The last straw probably came in 1938, when he was sent to prison for vagrancy. Throughout the 1930s, it had probably been nearly impossible to obtain a job, between the Great Depression and his criminal record. Altaugh applied for veterans’ benefits in 1935 after Congress passed a law releasing \$2 billion for that purpose, but it is unclear whether he ever received any assistance. At the time he listed the old Kelly Street address, in the shadow of the slaughterhouse, even though both his father and mother were deceased. If he inherited the tiny house upon their deaths, it remains a mystery how he was convicted of vagrancy three years later.

Altaugh Wilson was hospitalized on September 27, 1939, and passed away on October 7, at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Pittsburgh. He had succumbed to generalized military tuberculosis, a serious form of the disease. Tuberculosis spread widely in both veteran and civilian populations in the postwar years. Black veterans often had difficulty accessing medical care for the condition, which prompted the Tuskegee Institute to donate land in Alabama to establish a Veterans Hospital to care for Black veterans afflicted with tuberculosis and other conditions. But it was too late for Altaugh.

On his 1935 benefits application, Altaugh listed a previously unmentioned sister, Myrtle Baker, living near the old East Liberty neighborhood on Orphan Street. Since Altaugh was unmarried, childless, and parentless, perhaps Myrtle had a hand in arranging his burial in Grafton National Cemetery on October 12, 1939. There was no national cemetery near Pittsburgh at the time, and Grafton was the closest to home Altaugh Wilson could be interred. He rests there to this day among many other veterans of the Great War.



**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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