

FOREST DOPSON

1895 –1956, WORLD WAR I

U.S. ARMY, PRIVATE

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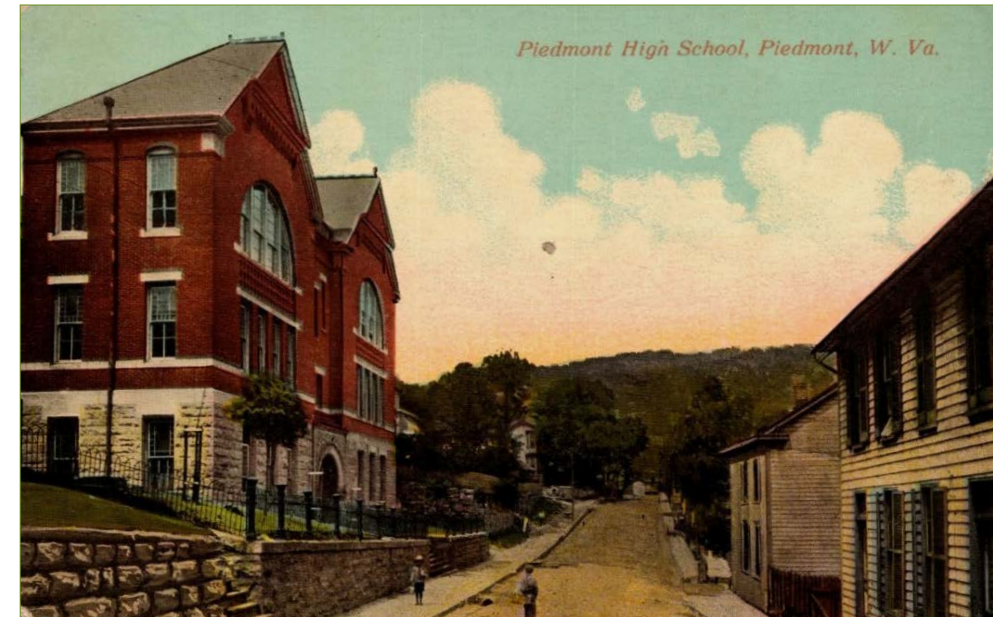
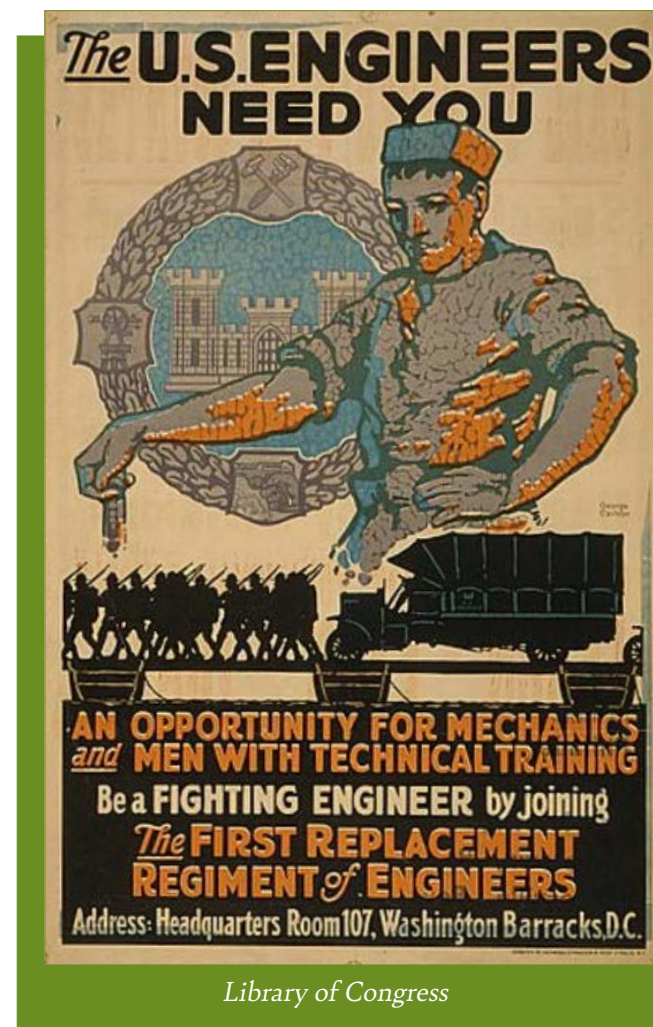
Forest Dopson was most likely born on

January 24, 1895, in Covington, Virginia, but multiple recorded birthdates make it difficult to know for certain. His parents, Richard and Mary Dopson (née Lemon), were both born before the Civil War, and had been married about ten years when Forest entered their lives. By the time Forest was five years old in 1900, the Dopson family included ten children (several were from his father Richard’s first marriage).

Richard “Dick” Dopson worked as a teamster delivering goods by horse-drawn wagon. Mary raised the children and served four boarders inside their home. The rent from these boarders may have provided the Dopsons with a certain degree of economic freedom, since the three oldest male Dopson children were listed as “at school” in the 1900 U.S. Census. Lower income families, especially large ones like the Dopsons, often needed the eldest children to drop out of school and earn money. The Dopsons, on the other hand, were able to sustain many of their children’s secondary educations.

Still, racial segregation limited educational opportunities in Covington. Available public funds tended to favor White over Black institutions. When Forest began school, Covington had only a single five-room brick building, Jefferson School, for its Black community, even though Black residents comprised about a quarter of the city’s population.

The family patriarch Richard died in 1914. This meant major changes for the family, and Forest eventually moved away in search of better



employment. Two of his older brothers, Percy and Ira, had already married and left home. Because the Dopson’s home was mortgaged, Richard’s death may have made it impossible to keep the family together. By the time he signed a draft card in June 1917, Forest had relocated to Piedmont, West Virginia, though he had probably established residence there in the preceding months or years.

Some 150 miles of mountainous terrain separated Covington and Piedmont, but the towns were linked by a rail line established by the West Virginia Pulp & Paper Company. Perhaps following in his father’s teamster footsteps, Forest found work as a private chauffeur for Dr. Zadock Troxel Kalbaugh. Forest settled into a rented domicile just a few doors down from his employer.

Dr. Kalbaugh was a prominent figure in the local community. He was one of the only medical doctors in Piedmont, but also served on the Board of Directors for the Brady Coal Corporation. The company controlled much of the coal production around Piedmont, and acquired more mines while Kalbaugh was on its board. Kalbaugh also possessed a measure of military experience, having volunteered in 1898 for the Spanish-American War. He served with the state’s National Guard units, the 1st and 2nd West Virginia Infantry, which were quartered in Georgia and Pennsylvania during

the war and never saw action overseas. A doctor’s services were still very much required during the regiments’ time in camp, however, since illness was rampant.

Forest Dopson’s employment with Kalbaugh was interrupted by the approach of another war—a much larger and deadlier one. Europe had been consumed by the flames of World War I since 1914, a conflict that instigated mass destruction and death on a scale hitherto unseen in human history. The United States had maintained its official neutrality but was eventually pulled into support for the Allies. Congress declared war on the Central Powers—primarily Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey—on April 6, 1917.

America’s military was woefully unprepared to join a modern war overseas. Even with measures begun in 1916 to build up more armed strength, the nation’s 1917 declaration of war was issued when only 127,000 men were actively serving in the U.S. Army. Across the country, draft offices opened and began registering young men to build up the military. Like millions of men across the country, Forest Dopson signed his draft card on June 5, 1917, a national deadline to register.

Both the French and British, America’s new allies, specifically asked that the U.S. commit large



Black Army bakers at work in their segregated section of the base at Camp Lee, Virginia, October 1918. *National Archives*

numbers of engineering units to the conflict. One of World War I's most novel aspects was the scale at which the adversaries destroyed infrastructure. New artillery, bombs, explosives, and entrenching tactics tore up roads, railroads, towns, and miles of countryside, making it difficult to launch attacks or even move troops and equipment. Additionally, the influx of hundreds of thousands of American troops required new bases, barracks, and transportation routes to move these men to where the fighting was taking place.

To conduct this kind of work, the U.S. military eventually placed 240,000 men in engineering and construction units, including 40,000 Black soldiers—and such was the case for Forest Dopson. On October 27, 1917, the draft board selected Forest's registration number and inducted him into the armed forces.

Army life was not likely to be pleasant for Forest. Racial segregation permeated the military and limited Black men to certain branches and jobs. At the time, the Marine Corps did not accept Black recruits at all. The Army allocated most of its Black troops to construction or logistical units, reserving combat roles for White men in the false belief that Black soldiers lacked the courage or intelligence to fight on the front lines despite ample proof to the contrary. Forest reported to the Army induction center in nearby Keyser, West Virginia, from which the Army placed him in Company B, 505th Engineer Service Battalion.

The 505th Engineers were predominantly comprised of Black men from West Virginia, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The unit assembled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, throughout October 1917 and departed for Camp Lee, Virginia, on October 30, a mere three days after Forest joined

the outfit. Forest and his new comrades arrived at Camp Lee in Petersburg, Virginia, on November 1. The Army had completed the camp's facilities two months earlier to accommodate the rapid influx of draftees. Military officials named the cantonment after Virginia native General Robert E. Lee, a slaveowner and Confederate leader who had fought to preserve the institution of slavery into which Forest Dopson's parents were born. The Army even sited Camp Lee on part of the historic Petersburg battlefield, where Black troops had fought in the notorious 1864 Battle of the Crater. Presciently, the Battle of Petersburg had also been a long, grueling siege whose trenches are now considered a harbinger of the very style of warfare so common during World War I.

The camp provided military leaders with good conditions to train their new recruits, but in keeping with the legacy of its Confederate namesake, Camp Lee was racially segregated. Most White recruits learned combat drills while many Black troops constructed roads or railways.

Not all government officials were pleased with racial segregation. Secretary of War Newton Baker

condemned racial discrimination at Camp Lee in December 1917. But Baker ultimately concluded his remarks by stating the military would not try to settle "the so-called race question" as it prepared for war. Forest and his comrades would not be elevated from their rear echelon roles.

Young Dopson's training with the 505th did not last long. On the afternoon of November 8, a week after arriving in camp, Forest reported to his superiors that he was not feeling well. He transferred to the camp hospital, where he remained for two days. Perhaps believing his condition had improved, camp doctors discharged him from the hospital and sent him back to the barracks with the designation "Sick in Quarters." The prognosis was premature: as of November 13, Forest's condition had not improved and he was transferred back to the hospital. The Army reassigned him to Company Y, since Forest had missed so much training with Company B.

Less than a month later, Company B climbed aboard railcars and departed for Hoboken, New Jersey, where the transport ship *President Lincoln* awaited to take them to Europe. Forest Dopson was



Due to his illness at Camp Lee, Forest Dopson was never able to experience the camaraderie his unit developed overseas, as illustrated by this photograph of soldiers from the 505th Engineers having fun together as they return to the United States from Europe.

National Archives

not among them. Forest remained in Camp Lee and transferred out of the 505th Engineers to the 31st Company, 8th Battalion, 155th Depot Brigade. It is difficult to know when Forest recovered from his illness, but he assumed some duties with his new outfit and commanding officer, Captain J.E. Doyle, who remarked: “Character excellent. Service honest and faithful.”

The Depot Brigades were the Army’s solution for unprecedented numbers of men entering and exiting service. These units coordinated the arrival of recruits, issued uniforms, assessed physical abilities, gave recruits their occupational classifications, assigned them to units, and maintained their records. By 1918, the 155th was processing so many inductees at Camp Lee that they temporarily ran out of uniforms and had the recruits retain their civilian garb during the opening stages of training. Forest’s ability to read, write, and drive automobiles all probably helped him transition more easily to a unit of this nature.

Unfortunately, however, Forest continued to struggle with medical issues stemming from his November illness. On March 28, 1918, Camp Lee’s hospital surgeon deemed Private Dopson physically unfit for duty and granted him a certificate of disability with medical discharge. Forest had served a day over five months, and appears to have spent all of it inside Camp Lee.

Following his discharge, Forest returned to Piedmont, West Virginia. He settled back into working for Dr. Kalbaugh as an in-resident servant and may have continued sending money to support his mother until she passed away in 1919. Forest continued in the employ of Dr. Kalbaugh until he married a local widow, Alpha “Ethel” Yancey (née McDonald), on August 16, 1921, in Piedmont.

The couple did not remain in Piedmont indefinitely. By the time of the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, Forest and Ethel had moved farther west to Fairmont in Marion County. The Depression afflicted West Virginia with unemployment

rates as high as 80 percent in some areas, but Ethel and Forest supported themselves amidst the economic turmoil. Ethel picked up work as a private housemaid and Forest found a job as an auto mechanic. The couple remained in Fairmont throughout the Great Depression and into the 1940s as the world again became embroiled in armed conflict.

On December 7, 1941, the United States entered World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Similar to the previous World War, the mobilization efforts called upon men to register with the Selective Service. Forest Dopson, at the age of 55, dutifully made the journey to Morgantown, West Virginia, to enroll for the draft.

By this time, Forest was no longer able to serve. The draft board noted that he was lame in both legs, and missing the forefinger on his right hand. Unemployed at the time of his registration, it is unclear how Forest supported himself and his wife through the war. It is possible that Social Security payments, then a fairly new innovation brought about by the Roosevelt administration in 1935, made up for Forest’s unemployment in his old age.

In 1947, doctors discovered Ethel had uterine cancer. Available treatments of the day were very limited and on May 14, 1948, after 27 years of marriage, Ethel passed away. For unclear reasons, she is buried with her first husband, Daniel Yancey, in Keyser, West Virginia. Forest remained in the house he had shared with Ethel in Fairmont, finally succumbing to bronchopneumonia on April 29, 1956. He was buried in the Grafton National Cemetery three days later.



PLACE OF INTERMENT:
Grafton National Cemetery
SECTION B
SITE 1714



Sentry on duty at Camp Lee, where Forest Dopson spent much of his enlistment.
National Archives

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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, among many others.

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For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress’s *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers’ Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a “living bibliography” of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project’s webpage under the “Programs” tab at www.wvhumanities.org.

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