

LOYALTY WITHIN RACISM

The SEGREGATED SIXTEENTH BATTALION of the MINNESOTA HOME GUARD During World War I

Peter J. DeCarlo

WHEN PRESIDENT Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany on April 2, 1917, he famously asserted, “the world must be made safe for democracy,” and claimed that the United States was “one of the champions of the rights of mankind.” To many African Americans, Wilson’s words revealed the hypocrisy at the heart of America. The US government wished to promote democracy abroad while denying equal rights to 12 million citizens based on the color of their skin.

Across the country, black Americans reached various conclusions about whether to support the war. For many, the European war was a distant affair that only warranted

indifference. Some black leaders were opposed to war overseas when African Americans had a war to fight at home: civil rights. Others saw black participation in the war effort as a path toward racial progress and equality. As the demand for 100 percent loyalty to the United States swept the country and the Selective Service Act instituted the draft for all men ages 21 to 30, support for the war among African Americans grew. While much of the patriotism and hope was genuine, some of it was pragmatic.¹ In Minnesota, African Americans faced the same dilemma. Should they blindly support a government they saw as duplicitous? Or might they be able to prove their

loyalty while framing their demands for democracy and equality, thereby turning the war into an opportunity for racial progress in Minnesota?

A unique wartime organization that illuminates the experiences of some African American Minnesotans during World War I is the Sixteenth Battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard. The Sixteenth was the only Home Guard unit that recruited African Americans and marked the first time the state military allowed the recruitment of black people. Black soldiers were citizens but their rights were denied every day. An African American in uniform was a potent

Soldiers of the Sixteenth Battalion, 1918.



symbol of America's democratic hypocrisy. The men of the Sixteenth Battalion entered the contradictory space of serving on the Minnesota home front while facing pervasive discrimination. The story of the segregated unit reveals a complex and conflicted Twin Cities African American community during a time of great trial.

FIVE DAYS AFTER the United States entered World War I the two leading black newspapermen of the Twin Cities, Charles Sumner Smith and John Q. Adams, declared the loyalty of black Minnesotans—though not without reservation, and not without disagreement between them. Smith, editor of the *Twin City Star*, declared,

The Negro cannot be expected to rally to the country's call today as he did to Lincoln and McKinley; but he is ever ready. . . . Should the American people grant him equal rights as other Americans, he will then forgive their [sic] wrongs he has suffered. As it is, he is calm and deliberate. He will enter this war for his second emancipation.

Smith believed the best military response was a "military corps of Negroes . . . under Negro officers." He accepted segregation in the military as reality and felt blacks could prove themselves within its racist framework.²

Adams, editor of the *Appeal*, struck a more radical tone, initially agreeing with Smith, "Now that the war is really here, colored patriots are ready and anxious to become defenders of their country." He feared that segregation would be accommodated by some blacks whom he called "the foe within." To Adams it was time to



Charles Sumner Smith, ca. 1917. Smith was captain of Company D, founding member of the Twin Cities Protective League and Minneapolis NAACP, and editor of the *Twin City Star*. Image is from the *Appeal*, Aug. 25, 1917.

"cut out the color line in the army. WE ARE ALL AMERICANS."³

The color line in the army (segregated units) Adams referred to had been firmly established during the Civil War and perpetuated thereafter. In 1881, as Minnesota's independent militia companies began transitioning into the state National Guard, blacks attempted to claim a place within it. An all-black militia company formed in St. Paul. It was endorsed by Mayor Edmund Rice, from whom they took their name: the Rice Guards. However, the unit never appeared on any official roster of state troops and was short lived. It is unknown why the state appears not to

have accepted the unit for service, but racism is a likely supposition.⁴

When the Spanish-American War began, another attempt was made to form a black military company, this time in Minneapolis, but it made less progress than the Rice Guards and never coalesced.⁵ By the advent of World War I, the US military was a supreme example of institutionalized racism, and state militaries had followed suit. While those who agreed with John Q. Adams that segregation in the military needed to end, not accommodating to it meant giving up the opportunity to serve in the military. Most blacks felt that the military was a prime proving ground for racial

PETER J. DeCARLO is a historian and the author of *Fort Snelling at Bdote* (Minnesota Historical Society Press). He holds a master's degree in history and works at the Minnesota Historical Society as MNopedia's digital content developer.

Most blacks felt that the military was a PRIME PROVING GROUND for racial progress.

progress. Better to serve and protest obliquely than not serve at all.

When Congress declared war, America's black leaders petitioned the war department to allow black officers to be recruited. When it became clear the war department would only allow blacks to train segregated from other officers, debate within the African American community ensued. A groundswell of support from black universities led most black leaders to endorse the government's plan. The military opened a single segregated officer training facility at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, in July 1917. The officer training corps was composed of black veterans, noncommissioned officers from the segregated regular army units, and college educated or professional men. They reflected a concept advocated by W. E. B. Du Bois: the Talented Tenth—the idea that one in ten black men would become educated leaders and bring about social change. Among the officer candidates were John Bundrant and eight other men from Minnesota.⁶

Initially, Bundrant had tried to form a segregated company that would volunteer for federal service. Bundrant and Charles Sumner Smith, both Spanish-American War veterans, had obtained permission from the state adjutant general, Walter F. Rhinow, to raise “a colored unit for the world war.” Bundrant then organized recruitment efforts and volunteers began filling the ranks.⁷

On the national level military officials debated whether to allow African Americans to serve as volunteers, or whether to even include

them in the draft. Then, on May 18, 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act instituting the draft for all US men between the ages of 21 and 30, regardless of race. Black Twin Citians still hoped that Bundrant's volunteer company would be accepted for service. “The Military honor of the Negro citizens” depended on it.⁸ Amid the changes in federal enlistment policies, however, Bundrant abandoned the volunteer company and it dissolved. He and others formed other plans to join the military.

On June 5, 1917, all eligible men registered for the draft. After filling out their draft cards, black men were, in the words of the *Appeal*, “subjected to an infamous insult.” To identify them as African American, local draft boards throughout the nation tore off the lower left corner of the form. John Q. Adams immediately lashed out against the practice, arguing that no US soldier should go abroad to fight until the “undemocratic conditions” at home were “eliminated.”⁹

More than 370,000 black men were drafted nationwide, 511 of them Minnesotans. The vast majority faced racism and terrible conditions in pioneer (engineering) regiments that built roads, bridges, and fortifications overseas and in labor units that moved supplies, unloaded ships, and performed many other tasks. Only 42,000 were combat troops, serving in the Ninety-second Division and Ninety-third Provisional Division. With the draft instituted, the military ardor of the Twin Cities black population fell in line with the national

effort. Newspapers closely followed the progress of men who were training to be officers. Of particular note was Dr. John Roy French, a black dentist from St. Paul whose application to the US Medical and Dental Corps was rejected based on his skin color. With the help of Fourth District congressman Carl Chester Van Dyke, French eventually qualified for the Medical and Dental Corps, becoming the first black man in the country to do so.¹⁰

As the nation mobilized for war, the Minnesota Legislature created the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety on April 16, 1917. The commission was charged with protecting life and property and ensuring that Minnesota's “military, civil, and industrial resources” were “efficiently applied” toward the defense of the state and the country during the war. The seven-man commission, headed by Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist, had vast power “to do all things non-inconsistent with the constitution or laws of the state of Minnesota or of the United States.”¹¹ In short, the commission enforced loyalty to the state and the nation by cracking down on those deemed disloyal—part of a national trend as the federal government increased surveillance of American citizens.

One of the Commission of Public Safety's first acts was the creation of the Minnesota Home Guard, established on April 28, 1917. This volunteer organization replaced the state's National Guard, which had entered federal service. Over the course of the war, the Home Guard eventually consisted of 23 battalions with more than

7,000 men. While the Home Guard provided disaster relief and security for the state, it also became the military arm of the Commission of Public Safety, enforcing its policies.¹²

NEWSPAPERS OF THE TIME do not reflect an immediate desire among African Americans to join the Home Guard. Perhaps the Home Guard made it clear, whether directly or indirectly, that African Americans were not welcome in its ranks. Like most citizens, blacks in the Twin Cities appear to have mostly obeyed the acts of the Commission of Public Safety, though they endured negative effects. Agitating for civil rights or speaking out against the war became more dangerous because of the commission. It also forced saloons to close by 10 PM and did not allow alcohol to be served to women. These policies caused many of the black working class, most of them waiters and porters, to lose their jobs.¹³

Black elites encouraged loyalty, and some helped enforce it. William T. Francis, considered by many to be the most prominent black man in Minnesota, was appointed a representative of the Commission of Public Safety. He was assigned to observe the draft board in St. Paul's Eighth Ward, which included the majority of the old Rondo district where many young black men lived. He was to report any

irregularities. In Minneapolis, prominent attorney William Morris was appointed to the Hennepin County Public Safety Association, making him "responsible for the recent regulations of the liquor traffic" and for enforcing "stringent laws for public safety."¹⁴

The first public mention of forming a segregated Home Guard unit did not occur until mid-October 1917, nearly six months after the organization was created. Charles Sumner Smith proposed the idea at a farewell reception in Minneapolis hosted by black elites as a sendoff for drafted black men. Although Smith's proposal "brought a hearty response," nothing came of it.¹⁵ Six months later, a segregated Home Guard unit gained traction in St. Paul. In late March or early April 1918, Clarence W. Wigington and others petitioned Governor Burnquist and Adjutant General Rhinow to allow the formation of a segregated unit of the Home Guard. Wigington worked for the city of St. Paul as a municipal architect and was a "real force in the city" according to the *Appeal*. His employment by the city, or Governor Burnquist's presidency of the St. Paul chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), may have helped pave the way for Wigington to broach the idea with Burnquist. The governor's approval to recruit the Sixteenth Battalion marked the first time people of color were enlisted in



Captain Clarence Wigington of Company A, 1918. Wigington, the first African American municipal architect in the nation, received the nickname "Cap" for his service in the Sixteenth Battalion.

the state's military forces. Burnquist's acquiescence, however, was more likely calculated than altruistic in light of his 1918 reelection campaign on the Republican ticket. The Sixteenth Battalion could help placate African American voters while not offending whites with integration. Virtually all black leaders in Minneapolis and St. Paul were Republicans,



Minnesota Home Guard service insignia pins, ca. 1917. Officer insignia, left, enlisted man insignia, right.

and several of them became officers of the Sixteenth.¹⁶

The unit received almost complete support from the African American community, but its inception was not without critics. Charles Sumner Smith saw it as a political ploy to garner the votes of “the ‘cullud peepul.’” He also noted that, “while the wave of loyalty was at its height Negroes were not wanted,” and now “many are reluctant to join any organization after such contemptible treatment by our state officers.” Reluctantly, Smith concluded that blacks would still act “like men” and join the unit.¹⁷ The only black leader to oppose the unit openly was John Q. Adams; perhaps he felt chagrined when his son joined the battalion.

By April 6, 1918, Wigington had recruited 60 men, and on April 11 he held a formal enlistment meeting in the old second state capitol building in downtown St. Paul. At the meeting, Companies A and B of the Sixteenth Battalion were mustered into service. Later that month, African Americans in Minneapolis held a similar meeting in the courtroom at city hall and began recruitment for Companies C and D. By the end of April the St. Paul companies had come close to their recruitment goals of 100 men each. Companies C and D in Minneapolis enjoyed an initial surge of recruitment but took longer to fill their ranks. Eventually, 400 men volunteered and the Sixteenth Battalion was officially formed. Over the life of the unit, 500 men served.¹⁸

The demographics of those who served in the battalion represented a sampling of the Twin Cities black population during World War I. By birthplace, the men of the battalion were almost evenly split between North and South. The vast majority of St. Paul volunteers lived in the Rondo neighborhood; a smaller group lived near Oakland Cemetery. In Minneap-



Ad for an event hosted by Company A of the Sixteenth Battalion, Minnesota Home Guard. Image is from the Appeal, May 25, 1918.

olis, members lived throughout the city, but in fairly concentrated communities. Many resided in what are now the North Loop and Near North areas of the city. A fair number lived downtown. Another concentration clustered around what later became the I-35W corridor, in the Powderhorn and Whittier-Lyndale neighborhoods. A few made their homes in Longfellow. A small number of men resided in white neighborhoods, but in both cities the black population was concentrated.

The average age of the volunteers was 33.6 years. Volunteers were supposed to be beyond draft age to enlist in the Home Guard; however, men

agreed to leave the unit if drafted, and the draft-age rule of 21 to 30 was frequently broken. The oldest guard member was 59, while some as young as 17 enlisted with the permission of a guardian. Just over 50 percent of the men worked in the service industry, with more than 28 percent of this group employed as porters or waiters. Another 26 percent worked as laborers. Just over 9 percent worked as merchants, tradesmen, clerks, or civil servants. The rest, fewer than 5 percent, were professionals, managers, or business owners.¹⁹

The men of the battalion demanded that their officers also

be African American, and the state government did not resist. The men elected their own officers, who were then commissioned by Burnquist. Almost all the officers were of the professional class. Most were also Freemasons, and several were Spanish-American War veterans. The most important qualification was that the officers of the battalion be “experienced race men” who fought for the rights of African Americans. The battalion commander was Major Jose Sherwood, a clerk for the post office and a national leader of black Freemasons. He had earned a reputation as a “race man” for fighting against the St. Paul showing of the racist film *The Birth of a Nation*. When the war began, Sherwood attended the segregated officer training school at Des Moines intending to enter the National Army, but he was discharged for eye problems, returned home, and was elected commander of the Sixteenth. Wington became captain of Company A. Orrington C. Hall commanded Company B. Hall was a clerk in the county auditor’s office and a church leader involved in Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) work. The captaincy of Company C went to recent University of Minnesota Law School graduate Gale P. Hilyer, the son of the first black graduate of the university. Upon graduation, Hilyer joined a white attorney’s law firm. Charles Sumner Smith led Company D. As an outspoken community leader, newspaper editor, and Spanish-American War veteran, Smith was an obvious choice. Heading the Medical Corps was Captain Valdo Turner; he was part of the old guard of black leaders and had an established medical practice. Finally, in command of the band was Lieutenant William H. Howard, a veteran who had served at Fort Snelling with the segregated Twenty-fifth Infantry in the 1880s, music teacher, and owner of a music studio.²⁰



Major Jose H. Sherwood, 1918. Sherwood commanded the Sixteenth Battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard.



Orrington C. Hall, ca. 1920. Hall commanded Company B of the Sixteenth Battalion, Minnesota Home Guard. He was also a founding member of the St. Paul NAACP and worked for the YMCA during World War I.



Lieutenant William H. Howard, ca.1919. Howard was the leader of the Sixteenth Battalion Band.

THE MEN OF THE SIXTEENTH Battalion volunteered for a number of reasons. Overall, their participation demonstrated black men's determination "to protect [their] country as well as fight for it abroad." Within the black community, it was a chance for race leadership to participate in the first black military organization of the state, to wear the uniform of the US Army, and to show patriotism. For blacks, who had reason to not support the war, displays of citizenship and loyalty were, ironically, perhaps more important than for most whites. Some African Amer-

ican leaders began equating loyalty to America with loyalty to the black race. The *Appeal* declared, "This is the time when one must be 100 per cent American." The paper went on to say, "This is also the day and time for 100 per cent Race Loyalty." So-called race slackers would not be tolerated.²¹

In this frenzied environment, blacks had to be even more worried about their well-being. As the battalion was taking shape, a "gang of masked men" lured John L. McHie, a black repairman living in Minneapolis, from his home. They charged McHie with making "disloyal

remarks" and took him to the city outskirts. There they beat him, possibly threatened him with a rope, and left him stranded. McHie stated that "race prejudice" caused the assault. Later he backpedaled and said the beating "grew out of a real estate transaction" (which more than likely also would have been racially motivated). In that era, being black and viewed as disloyal could endanger a person's life. The fact that McHie was a veteran of the famed Tenth Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers was not enough to prove he was a loyal American. Shortly after the incident, McHie enlisted in Company C of the Sixteenth Battalion and served in the color guard.²² McHie's enlistment is an example of how participation in the battalion could prove one's loyalty and resilience as a African American in Jim Crow America.

The Sixteenth Battalion spent May 1918 preparing for Memorial Day. The St. Paul companies began drilling weekly at the city armory, while the Minneapolis companies did likewise, operating out of city hall. On Memorial Day the companies marched in their respective cities. The *Twin City Star* covered the Minneapolis parade in detail. The black companies marched with the rest of the Minneapolis Home Guard units. Though they had not yet been issued uniforms, the guardsmen wore white gloves and carried flags from black Masonic lodges. At the time, each company had about 50 men. "All along the line of march there was special applause for the 'Colored Boys' and complimentary remarks encouraged the men," the *Star* reported. Most importantly, the *Star* argued, the companies proved black men could be soldiers and officers. The mere presence of black men in the Home Guard conveyed "a strong protest against many injustices suffered by the Negroes."²³

In that era, being black and viewed as disloyal could ENDANGER A PERSON'S LIFE.

After the Memorial Day parade, the Sixteenth Battalion appears to have received 600 uniforms from the adjutant general. All the uniforms may not have been delivered or distributed to members of the battalion as the Minneapolis companies were still raising money for uniforms as late as August 1918. On June 5, the battalion started a tradition of giving military balls and receptions. On June 14, Companies C and D marched in a Flag Day parade and held a military ball afterward. This ball, which marked the first performance of the battalion band, was a grand success. Afterward, Company A formed a baseball team that played in the Rondo neighborhood.²⁴

Throughout July 1918, the battalion perfected its drill and continued to host military balls. Lieutenant Howard's band grew to more than 40 musicians and became the focal point of many community gatherings. On August 1, the Twin Cities African American community held its traditional Emancipation Celebration at Arcadia Dance Hall in Minneapolis. As part of the festivities, the battalion hosted a grand ball and gave a military demonstration. The event included the showing of a race picture (a film with a black cast intended for a black audience) entitled *Trooper of Company K*, which recounted the participation of the black Buffalo Soldiers in the 1916 Battle of Carrizal between the US and Mexican armies. Nearly 1,000 people attended the celebration.²⁵

Two days after the Emancipation Celebration, the second draft

of black men left for training camp and service in the US Army, and the *Twin City Star* highlighted the occasion with a front-page headline. The African American community gave its draftees a royal sendoff. It began at 5 PM in front of the Minneapolis courthouse, where Mary White Ovington, vice president of the national NAACP, spoke. A procession including the Minneapolis companies of the Sixteenth, the battalion band, African American women of the Red Cross, and local citizens escorted the draftees to Great Northern Station. The Motor Corps then transported the battalion band to St. Paul to take part in a similar sendoff for St. Paul draftees at Rice Park and Union Depot. The last person to speak at the St. Paul event was Governor Burnquist, "who paid a glowing tribute to the loyalty of the colored people." John Q. Adams called it the "grandest public demonstration ever accorded to colored people in St. Paul."²⁶

Though some whites attended these sendoff proceedings, the event was marred by racial violence and prejudice. While black draftee John Sayles was on his way to a banquet in his honor, he was "brutally beaten" without provocation by a white police officer. After being called a "black son of a bitch" and assaulted by the police, Sayles was held at the Minneapolis South Side police station, where he received no medical attention until Charles Sumner Smith and others arrived. Four days later Sayles left to fight for his country.²⁷

Throughout August and September 1918 the battalion continued

its usual activities, punctuated with some changes in command and friction between some officers. Orrington C. Hall, captain of St. Paul's Company B, left to serve overseas and was replaced by Thaddeus W. Stepp. Throughout the battalion's existence, the command in the St. Paul companies was harmonious. The same could not be said for the companies in Minneapolis, where a faction became dissatisfied with those in charge and discipline began to fail. Among the complaints were the military inexperience of many of the officers and the fact that several of the commanders were political appointees. The desire of some to "climb over the corpses of their fellows to secure official prominence" created discord. The main instigators of the friction appear to have been George W. Holbert,



George W. Holbert ca. 1911. Image is from the Appeal, Oct. 28, 1911.

a second lieutenant of Company C, and Robert L. Robinson, first lieutenant and battalion adjutant. At the time, battalion commander Major Sherwood was away on Masonic business and some soldiers may have attempted to replace him. This activity was cast as counterproductive to the war effort, and therefore criminal. The Commission of Public Safety removed Holbert and Robinson for violating the commission's orders. In addition and perhaps unrelated, Smith was assigned as a staff officer and his chief rival, William Morris, became captain of Company D.²⁸

On Columbus Day the battalion marched in the Liberty Parade. After playing numerous events, Lieutenant Howard's band had perfected performances of several patriotic songs. They were declared "best of all the bands" and received "continuous applause."²⁹ On October 12, 1918, the worst natural disaster in Minnesota history, a vast fire in north central Minnesota, killed more than 450 people, and the Home Guard assumed management of the aftermath. Captain Smith, who had been serving as publicity and intelligence officer for the Sixteenth Battalion, was appointed to Adjutant General Rhinow's Home Guard staff for one week as a special aide and intelligence officer in the disaster zone. Smith served within the Emergency Bureau, helping with information gathering, supplies, transportation, and record keeping. Perhaps as a jibe toward others in the Sixteenth, Smith claimed that his ability won him the appointment, not politics. While this may have been true, evidence also suggests that William T. Francis and George L. Hoage, first lieutenant in the Sixteenth and personal messenger of Governor Burnquist, helped Smith get the appointment. Serving alongside white officers in the fire zone, Smith found no "color or racial



George L. Hoage, 1924. Hoage was a state capitol messenger and became secretary to Governor Joseph Burnquist. He served as a lieutenant and supply officer in the Headquarters Company of the Sixteenth Battalion.

conditions a barrier" and felt he was treated based on his merit. A week later, Smith was relieved by Company C captain Gale P. Hilyer. While these two Sixteenth Battalion officers fulfilled disaster duties in what was perhaps the most important role the Home Guard ever performed, the Sixteenth as a whole was never called to active duty.³⁰

Mid-October also brought a ban on public gatherings because of the Spanish influenza. This seems to have brought a halt to meetings of the Sixteenth Battalion. November was dominated by political elections, the continuance of the ban on large gatherings due to the influenza outbreak, and the end of World War I on November 11. That date saw a "great world Peace Celebration" in St. Paul. One account of African American participation in the celebration reflected their confounded situation locally and nationally. That morning a black man was lynched in Sheffield, Alabama, and the news made black Twin Citians' "hearts bleed" and their

"minds wonder." As a result, few African Americans took part in the celebration that day, but three African American individuals did attract a good deal of attention. Mrs. Clara B. Hardy, Mrs. E. S. Barnett, and Mr. J. W. Walton marched with a banner that read, "A Negro was lynched this morning but we are still loyal." Two captains of the Sixteenth Battalion attempted to dispense with the banner but failed. The three banner bearers proceeded on with a flag and tambourine. In an editorial in the *Appeal* J. W. Walton declared that the banner bearers had more courage than the black Home Guard captains.³¹

The battalion resumed activity when it marched in the Thanksgiving Day parade, which drew a vast crowd deemed the "grandest ever in St. Paul." The companies continued to hold military balls, but enthusiasm for the



Unidentified African American woman wearing a military uniform, ca. 1918. Based on the collar insignia and provenance of the photograph, this is likely a Minnesota Home Guard uniform.

battalion seems to have waned, notably in Company D. In December, another rift in command occurred when Company D captain William Morris brought charges against Smith for spending the company's money improperly. Smith denied the charges, but was relieved of his duties pending an investigation. Smith claimed Morris's motivation was purely political, and that under his poor leadership Company D had "dwindled to a squad." As the new year began, the shining light for the battalion was the band, which was so successful it considered charging for its services.³²

IN EARLY 1919 THE Commission of Public Safety began to repeal some of its acts, and many Home Guard units disbanded. A few officers in the Sixteenth, however, envisioned transitioning the battalion into the National Guard. Once again, George L. Hoage exerted his influence on Burnquist and Rhinow. The two leaders hoped to retain the Motor Corps, as well as the extended military power the war had conferred upon them. The creation of a segregated unit in the Minnesota National Guard rode this wave of militarism. As the 1919 legislative session got underway, the idea of a segregated unit in the state's National Guard reignited debate in the African American community: should blacks work within segregation, or oppose it in every way? Most black leaders—including officers Smith, Sherwood, Howard, and Morris—supported a segregated unit. John Q. Adams, however, opposed the legislative bill vigorously, arguing that no state law should impose a color line and calling black supporters of the bill "short sighted."³³

On January 28, 1919, HF 280, authored by 11 Nonpartisan League representatives, was read in the house

and referred to the Committee on Military Affairs. The text of the original draft of the bill is not extant—the committee struck out and replaced all but the enacting clause. On March 4, the new version of the bill was passed by a vote of 72 to 48 and sent to the senate. Senator Charles N. Orr of St. Paul had introduced a companion bill that was postponed when the house bill arrived in the senate. On the last day of the session, senators customarily suspended the rules in order to pass bills that were rarely looked at in detail. In this relaxed climate, Senator Orr slid HF 280 into the mix.

The bill—carefully worded to enact a Jim Crow law without actually mentioning race—was passed on April 23, 1919, by a vote 42 to 9. Accounts stated that some senators hadn't realized what they had voted on.

From the beginning, the National Guard had opposed the measure to form a segregated National Guard unit, citing a lack of armory space. Several legislators tried to undo the bill but their efforts were too late. The law allowed for the creation of a "separate battalion of infantry," but did not require it. Though it did not mention race, the law stated the new

Ad for concert put on by the Sixteenth Battalion Band at Union Hall in St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood. Image is from the Appeal, Oct. 25, 1919.

unit's members would come from the Sixteenth Battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard, which was code for black. The creation of a segregated National Guard unit was nothing new; black National Guard units had existed in other states, some dating back to the 1880s.³⁴

The Sixteenth was officially redesignated as the First Infantry Battalion of Minnesota Militia. Much of the credit for creating a "favorable sentiment" toward the inception of the segregated battalion was given to Lieutenant Howard and his band. Members of the old Sixteenth and returning black veterans were needed to fill the ranks of the new unit.³⁵ National Guard records for this period are sketchy, leaving the exact history of the First Battalion unknown. The last mention of the existence of the battalion comes from a roster of state units from March 21, 1921. From the roster it is apparent that the battalion did not have a full

complement of officers and men. Whatever the cause, it seems the First Battalion did not recruit enough men and lost cohesion.³⁶

The last active remnant of the former Sixteenth Battalion was its band. As late as September 1921, First Battalion musicians were performing in the Twin Cities. Eventually some of the members formed the Jazz Band Orchestra and continued performing in their uniforms. The band became famous regionally, entertaining the Twin Cities African American community, along with some whites, and traveling the Upper Midwest.³⁷

WHILE THE BLACK population of Minnesota was small during World War I, between seven and nine thousand, the experience of black Minnesotans reflected that of black people across the nation.³⁸ In Minnesota, as elsewhere, blacks were

second-class citizens economically and faced segregation in housing. They faced racism in Twin Cities society—racism that could threaten their lives. During World War I, African Americans faced the hypocritical racism of their democratic nation most poignantly in the army. That brand of racism occurred in Minnesota and was perpetuated by the state military. World War I-era US history cannot be told without centralizing race, and the Sixteenth Battalion was one way in which black Minnesotans responded to the currents of World War I. The Twin Cities African American community was complex, conflicted, classist, and competitive. Within the Sixteenth Battalion the intersection of loyalty to race, state, and nation played out. Perhaps the most American and truly democratic figures of the war are the average African Americans who remained loyal to their country while hoping for change. ▣

Notes

1. Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 3; Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), xx.

2. *Twin City Star*, April 7, 1917, 4.

3. "Fund to Aid Americanism," *Appeal* (St. Paul), April 7, 1917, 2; "Failure to Fight Costly," *Appeal*, April 7, 1917, 2.

4. After the Civil War, the US government created four segregated army units: the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry, and the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry. Nicknamed the "Buffalo Soldiers," they served in the American West, Cuba, the Philippines, and the Mexican border. "An Act Relating to the Organization and to Promote the Efficiency of the Uniformed Militia of the State of Minnesota," Minnesota Statutes 1881 Supplement, Chapter XII, Militia, https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=12&year=1881&keyword_type=all&keyword_sg=statute&keyword=militia; "Tribute to Hon. Edmond Rice," *Appeal*, July 20, 1889; "St. Paul" and "The Procession," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Sept. 27, 1881; "The Rice Guards," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Sept. 28, 1881;

Adjutant General National Guard Inspection Rolls and Reports, A2/Ov5 Drawer 1, Manuscript Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; P2945: Minnesota National Guard Association, Association Records, "Annual Report of Militia, [1882];" Adjutant General National Guard Inspection Rolls and Reports, 109.K.12.12.F "Exhibit A," "1st Regiment N.G. of M. Col. W. B. Bend," n.d. but likely from the Encampment at Winona, May 12–19, 1884.

5. "Attention Volunteers!!!," *Appeal*, June 4, 1898, 3; "Colored Volunteers," *Saint Paul Globe*, May 25, 1898, 3; "To the Young Men of St. Paul," *Appeal*, April 30, 1898, 3; Earl Spangler, *The Negro in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: T.S. Denison, 1961), 88; Paul Nelson, *Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 60–62, 86–87.

6. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 39–42; Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial*, 54–61; "Qualified for Training Camp," *Appeal*, June 9, 1917, 3.

7. "The call for volunteers by Captain Bundrant," *Twin City Star*, April 7, 1917, 4; "Attention All!," *Appeal*, April 7, 1917, 4; Thos. S. Schall to Mr. J. E. Nelson, May 6, 1935, World War I Bonus Files, File #486699, Box 370, State Archives Record, Adjutant General, Minnesota Historical

Society, St. Paul; "A Negro Military Unit," *Twin City Star*, April 14, 1917, 2.

8. "Patriotic Meeting," *Twin City Star*, April 28, 1917, 2; "Volunteers to Organize," *Twin City Star*, May 5, 1917, 2; Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial*, 52–54; "Bundrant's Volunteers," *Twin City Star*, May 26, 1917, 4; "Bundrant's Volunteers," *Twin City Star*, June 2, 1917, 4.

9. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 53; "An Insult to Patriots," *Appeal*, June 9, 1917, 2; "Negroes Specially Identified By Government Registration," *Twin City Star*, June 9, 1917, 4.

10. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 105–144; "Congressman C. C. Van Dyke Succeeds in Breaking Down the Color Line for Dentists in the US Army," *Appeal*, July 14, 1917, 3; "Dr. French in Dental Corps," *Twin City Star*, August 8, 1917, 1.

11. "Minnesota Commission of Public Safety," in *General Statutes of Minnesota: Supplement 1917*, compiled by Francis B. Tiffany (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1918), 16; Matt Reicher, "Minnesota Commission of Public Safety," MNopedia, June 23, 2014.

12. Peter DeCarlo, "Minnesota Home Guard," MNopedia, Jan. 20, 2015.

13. "Hotel Men Lose Jobs," *Twin City Star*,

June 9, 1917, 3; "Walters Out of Work," *Twin City Star*, June 16, 1917, 2.

14. "Morris Receives Appointment," *Twin City Star*, June 23, 1917, 2.

15. "Farewell Reception to Drafted Men by Local Elks," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 20, 1917, 5.

16. "Commissioner Hyland Knows All Good Men Are Equal and Proves It by His Actions," *Appeal*, March 16, 1918, 3; David Vassar Taylor, *Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 53–56.

17. "The Negro Home Guard," *Twin City Star*, April 13, 1918, 4.

18. "Home Guard Notice," *Appeal*, April 6, 1918, 3; "Negroes to Organize a Home Guard Unit," *Twin City Star*, April 20, 1918, 5; "Home Guard Notice," *Appeal*, April 20, 1918, 3; Home Guard Records, 1917–1919, State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

19. Statistics and demographic information regarding the Sixteenth Battalion came from two Minnesota State Archives collections, one containing enlistment records of the Home Guard and the other index cards for each man who served; this information, augmented with minor genealogical research, was combined to create a roster of the battalion.

20. "Jose Sherwood, Grand Master of Masons in Minnesota," *Appeal*, Sept. 24, 1911; "Mr. Jose Sherwood of St. Paul," *Twin City Star*, May 19, 1917, 4; "The Birth of a Nation," *Appeal*, Oct. 23, 1915, 3; Tim Brady, "Almost Perfect Equality," *Minnesota* Part 1 (Sept.–Oct. 2002); Nelson, *Fredrick L. McGhee*, 187; "Governor Burnquist Appoints Experienced Race Men Officers for the Sixteenth Battalion," *Appeal*, June 22, 1918, 4.

21. "Atty. Francis Addresses Social Service Club," *Twin City Star*, May 11, 1918, 1; "No Time for Race Slackers," *Appeal*, June 15, 1918, 4.

22. "Negro Taken from Home and Beaten by Mob," *Twin City Star*, April 13, 1918, 5; "A Correction," *Twin City Star*, April 20, 1918, 5; "Negro Home Guards Receive an Ovation on Memorial Day," *Twin City Star*, June 1, 1918, 5.

23. "Home Guard Band Meeting," *Twin City Star*, June 1, 1918, 1; "Company 'D' Drill," *Twin City Star*, May 18, 1918, 5; "Home Guard Notice," *Appeal*, April 20, 1918, 3; "Negro Home Guards Receive an Ovation on Memorial Day," *Twin City Star*, June 1, 1918, 5; "Commissions Negro Home Guard," *Twin City Star*, June 15, 1918, 5.

24. "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" *Appeal*, May 25, 1918, 3; "Public Notice," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 31, 1918, 5; "Home Guards to Uniform," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 31, 1918, 5; "Home Guards Reception," *Twin City Star*, June 8, 1918, 5; "Flag Day Reception and Dance," *Appeal*, June 1, 1918, 1; "Saint Paul," *Appeal*, June 8, 1918, 4; "Battalion Parade and Ball a Big Success," *Twin City Star*, June 22, 1918, 7.

25. "Emancipation Celebration," *Appeal*, Aug. 3, 1918, 3; "Emancipation Celebration Is a Big and Inspiring Event," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 3, 1918, 1.

26. "The Drafted Men Leave Saturday, Aug. 3," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 3, 1918, 1; "Second Draft

Leaves for Camp Dodge," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 10, 1918, 5; "Our Draftees Are Given a Splendid Sendoff on Last Saturday," *Appeal*, Aug. 10, 1918, 1. For more information on the Motor Corps see, Peter DeCarlo, "Minnesota Motor Corps," *MNopedia*, June 30, 2015.

27. "Drafted Negro Brutally Beaten by Policeman," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 3, 1918, 1.

28. "For Y.M.C.A. Overseas Service," *Twin City Star*, July 13, 1918, 5; "Secretary O. C. Hall," *Appeal*, Sept. 21, 1918, 3; "Home Guard Friction," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 17, 1918, 4; "Official Changes in Negro Home Guard," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 24, 1918, 5; "Evidently there has been such a pressure brought to bear. . .," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 31, 1918, 4; "Major Sherwood to Visit Camp Dodge," *Twin City Star*, Aug. 10, 1918, 5; "Delegates Geo. W. Holbert. . .," *Twin City Star*, Sept. 7, 1918, 5; "Selfishness Is Disloyalty. Call for Liberty Meeting," *Twin City Star*, Sept. 14, 1918, 4.

29. "Successful Band Concert," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 5, 1918, 5; "Home Guards to Parade," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 12, 1918, 5; "Liberty Day Observed," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 19, 1918, 5; Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1974), 71–74, 121–22, 171.

30. Paul Nelson, "Cloquet, Duluth, and Moose Lake Fires, 1918," *MNopedia*, June 8, 2015; "Negro Captain Serves on Staff of Adjutant-General During Fire Trouble," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 19, 1918, 5; "16th Battalion in Reserve," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 19, 1918, 5; "Gale P. Hilyer served in. . .," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 26, 1918, 5; "Negro Assistant to the Adjutant General," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 19, 1918, 5.

31. "Ban on Public Gatherings," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 19, 1918, 5; "It was very much regretted. . .," *Appeal*, Oct. 19, 1918, 4; "The Flu Ban Raised," *Appeal*, Nov. 16, 1918, 3; "Patriotism Supreme," *Appeal*, Nov. 16, 1918, 3; "Didn't Know Captain Smith," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 23, 1918, 6.


32. "The Great Peace-Thanksgiving Parade. . .," *Appeal*, Nov. 30, 1918, 3; "Revive the Home Guards," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 23, 1918, 6; "Relieved from Duties," *Twin City Star*, Jan. 25, 1919, 3; "A Business Proposition," *Twin City Star*, Dec. 14, 1918, 2.

33. "Governor of Minnesota," *Twin City Star*, May 18, 1918, 5; "Revive the Home Guards," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 23, 1918, 6; "Plan Negro Guard Units," *Twin City Star*, Dec. 14, 1918, 2; "A Bad Precedent," *Appeal*, Feb. 1, 1919, 3; "A Bad Bill," *Appeal*, Feb. 15, 1919, 3.

34. C. J. Buell, *The Minnesota Legislature of 1919* (St. Paul: C. J. Buell, 1919?), 80–81; Minnesota 41st Legislature, "An Act Relating to the organization and equipment of an additional battalion of infantry for the Minnesota National Guard," April 25, 1919, in *Session Laws of the State of Minnesota Passed During the Forty-First Session of the State Legislature at the Session Commencing January 7, 1919*, 628, Julius A. Schmahl, ed. (Minneapolis: Syndicate Printing Co., 1919); Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I*

EYES RIGHT!

Com'y D 16th Bt'n



MINN. HOME GUARDS

will give a

GRAND MILITARY BALL

AT

ARCADIA HALL

710 N. Dwyer Court, Saint. Minneapolis

MONDAY EVE. OCT. 14, '18

You are invited, come, bring your friends with you and see Company D in action. Music by the Home Guard Orchestra, the latest, best and most inspiring. You can't afford to miss it.

GENERAL COMMITTEE

PRIVATES: Dunlop, Harris, Hines, Sellers, Thompson, Woodard, Turner, Young. SERGEANTS: Stewart, Robinson, Simmons, McCullough, Rhodes, Newton, Melto. OFFICERS: P. H. Southall, A. W. Collier, Wm. R. Morris. CORPORALS: Turner, Saxe, Burdell, Bryant, McDev, Southall. Approved by Major Joe H. Shegwood.

Ad for a military ball hosted by Company D of the Sixteenth Battalion at Arcadia Hall in Minneapolis. Image is from the *Appeal*, Oct. 12, 1918.

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 315–16; Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers*, 70–71; <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/?year=1919&type=0&doctype=Chapter&id=472>; "Negro Battalion Bill Passes," *Minneapolis National Advocate*, May 3, 1919, 1; *Journal of the House of the Forty-First Session of the Legislature of the State of Minnesota* (St. Paul: McGill-Warner Co., State Printers, 1919), 196–197, 224, 355–356, 573, 676; *Journal of the Senate of the Forty-First Session of the Legislature of the State of Minnesota*, (St. Paul: McGill-Warner Co., State Printers, 1919), 297, 567–568, 1063, 1732–1733.

35. "The 16th Battalion Minnesota Home Guards. . .," *Minneapolis National Advocate*, Aug. 23, 1919, 1.

36. Edward Karrow Papers, Minnesota Historical Society Manuscript Collection, St. Paul, A/.K18.

37. "32nd Annual Rally of St. Peter's A.M.E. Church," *Minneapolis National Advocate*, April 17, 1920, 1; "One of the Leading Musicians of the Northwest," *Minneapolis National Advocate*, Aug. 7, 1920, 1; "A Public Reception to Rt. Rev. L. J. Coppin, D.D.," *Minneapolis National Advocate*, Aug. 7, 1920, 1; "Famous Band Entertains," *St. Paul/Minneapolis Twin City Guardian*, July 26, 1919, 1; "The First Battalion Musical Organization. . .," *Minneapolis Messenger*, Sept. 10, 1921, 2.

38. June Drenning Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 81. The African American population in Minnesota was 7,084 in 1910 and 8,809 in 1920.

Photos on p. 208 and 211 (top) appeared in *Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone* by David Vassar Taylor with Paul Clifford Larson (MNHS Press, 2001), courtesy Linda Garrett. All other photos are from MNHS collections.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).