

**TEACHING WITH ONLINE PRIMARY SOURCES:  
DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

**“I STILL HAVE NO PEACE,”  
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WORLD WAR I VETERAN’S LETTER  
TO PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE, OCTOBER 16, 1923**

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Nearly five years after the end of World War I, African American veteran Timothy Percy Patterson wrote to President Calvin Coolidge stating, “I served Eighteen Months in the World’s war. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of Nov. 1918, on the Battlefield in France I heard much discussion about we being at peace. I beg to inform that I still have no peace.” For Patterson, the Versailles Peace Treaty did not resolve the racial conflicts in the United States or stem the violence directed at African Americans. Patterson’s letter continued that in 1923 he still found himself in a battle for “Constitutional rights and beg you assist me in getting them.”<sup>1</sup>

In his April 2, 1917, address to Congress, President Woodrow Wilson had asked that body to declare war on Germany. He prominently cited German use of unrestricted submarine warfare against the United States and Germany’s autocratic government as justifications for the proposed declaration. Said Wilson, “The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty.”<sup>2</sup> Through the Selective Service Act of May 1917, millions of American men, including Patterson, were drafted into the armed forces of the United States. Those troops proved critical in the Allies’ successful repelling of the German advance and ultimately procured a cease-fire from Berlin on November 11, 1918.

Patterson was one of nearly 400,000 African American men who served in the U.S. military during World War I. Approximately 200,000 of them were sent to Europe. While most were assigned to service units—and so spent their time unloading ships and transporting supplies—the 92<sup>nd</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> Divisions in particular saw active duty at the front. Impressively, 171 members of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Division), also known as the Harlem Hellfighters, received the French Croix de

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<sup>1</sup>Timothy Percy Patterson to President Coolidge, October 16, 1923; File 180337-1-2-2; Straight Numerical Files; Records of the Department of Justice; National Archives Record Group 60. This letter is available through the National Archives website at <http://archives.gov/research/arc>. In the search box, type the identifying ARC number 6207372. It is also available through the National Archives website DocsTeach at <http://docsteach.org/>.

<sup>2</sup>President Wilson’s Declaration of War Message to Congress, April 2, 1917; Records of the United States Senate; Record Group 46, National Archives, Washington, DC.

Guerre.<sup>3</sup> This medal was awarded by the French government to soldiers who displayed great bravery in battle. These troops had done their part to return the world to peace and provide President Wilson an opportunity to secure a world in which democracy might flourish.

These soldiers had entered the military from a civilian society that over the course of several decades had limited their civil rights. Restrictions on voting rights increased as the twentieth century progressed. Some states instituted poll taxes that disproportionately excluded and discriminated against poor blacks. Other states instituted “understanding tests” in which prospective voters were required to “correctly” interpret a section of the state or U.S. Constitution. Those tests further reduced the numbers of African Americans who were able to vote. The overall result was a dramatic decrease in black voters by the dawn of the twentieth century.

Numerous states also segregated African Americans into separate and unequal public facilities. In 1896, the Supreme Court had ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that a Louisiana law requiring separate racially designated train cars for black and white riders was constitutional. By the outbreak of World War I so-called “Jim Crow” laws segregated the races in nearly every aspect of southern life, including restaurants, theaters, parks, and hospitals.<sup>4</sup>

Further, after fighting the German army in Europe, African-American veterans found themselves confronting the racial violence of lynching at home and a resurgent Ku Klux Klan after 1915. Between 1882 and 1968, 3,445 African Americans were reported lynched in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The 1890s, a particularly violent decade, witnessed an average of 187 lynchings each year, according to one estimate.<sup>6</sup> This was the culture in which Timothy Patterson and other African Americans found themselves after World War I. His letter makes clear that he had hoped to return to a more just America.

It took more than forty years after Patterson wrote his protest letter for the federal government to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The passage of these laws was hastened by non-violent demonstrations against the forces supporting racial segregation and black disenfranchisement during the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet, letters like that of Timothy Patterson’s remind us that this struggle

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<sup>3</sup>For a photograph of African American veterans who received the Croix de Guerre go to the National Archives website at <http://archives.gov/research/arc>. In the search box, type the identifying ARC number 533492.

<sup>4</sup>Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 437-439.

<sup>5</sup>“Lynching Statistics by Year,” in *Lynching in America: Statistics, Information, Images* at <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchstats.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation*, 439.

has a long history that pre-dates the rise of the “modern” civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

### Additional National Archives Documents

- Photograph of some of the [African American] men of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry (15<sup>th</sup> New York) who won the Croix de Guerre for gallantry in action, 1919. This photograph is available through the National Archives’ website at <http://archives.gov/research/arc>. In the search box, type the identifying ARC Identifier 533492.
- Petition from the citizens of New Jersey praying for Congress to make the act of lynching a crime against the United States, February 21, 1900. This letter is available at <http://archives.gov/research/arc>. In the search box, type the identifying ARC Identifier 306656.

### Additional On-Line Resources

- Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohhtml/exhibit/aopart7.html>
- New York Public Library: <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html>

### Teaching Activities

- Ask students to write brief definitions for the word “peace.” Their definitions should address the meaning this term has in their life, in their country’s life, and internationally. Then invite them to share their definitions. Write—or have one of your students write—the definitions on the board. What similarities do they see? What differences?  
Alternatively, direct your students to create a collage (using clippings from old magazines, their own drawings, etc.) that illustrates their understanding of the word peace.
- Describe for your students the political and economic roadblocks placed in front of African Americans after the Civil War (e.g., poll taxes, “Jim Crow” legislation, and job discrimination). Lead a class discussion on how this might have affected Timothy Percy Patterson. For example, how might Mr. Patterson’s lack of “peace” have been affected by “Jim Crow” and disenfranchisement?
- Provide your students a copy of Mr. Patterson’s letter and ask them to read it carefully. Then, divide students into small teams of three to four. Inform them that they are to play the roles of advisors to President Coolidge. The President has asked them to help him write a response to Timothy Percy

Patterson's letter. Direct them to discuss what their recommendations to the President would be. Gather the class together and ask each team to report the results of their discussion.

Finally, ask your students to write a response letter for the President's approval.

- Ask your students to conduct independent research on the topic of voter requirements in their state. What is the process for registering to vote, and what might disqualify an individual from voting? Then direct them to write a brief essay relating their research results along with any recommendations they might have for changes in the voter registration process.
- Ask the students to locate an instance of denial of voting or other civil rights somewhere in the world today using the Internet or internationally distributed newspapers. Have them print out or cut out what they found and pin those materials to a world map. Lead a discussion of the similarities or differences between these current-day examples compared to the experience of Timothy Percy Patterson.
- Direct your students to the DocsTeach activity titled "Integration of the U.S. Armed Forces" located at <http://docsteach.org/activities/372>. Inform them that in this activity they will analyze photographs and documents related to the participation of African Americans—such as Timothy Percy Patterson—in the U.S. Armed Forces and of the racial integration of the military.

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