

# “Most Anxious to Serve their King and Country”: Black Canadians’ Fight to Enlist in WWI and Emerging Race Consciousness in Ontario, 1914-1919

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*Sir Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia and Defence, officially welcomed Blacks to join Canada’s war effort. However, when these Canadians tried to enlist in the “Great War” at various recruiting stations, they were rejected by local Commanding Officers based on racial grounds. Black Canadians then complained to Ottawa but were told that recruitment operated through a decentralized structure, which meant that Headquarters could not dictate the selection of soldiers at a local level. Denied this fundamental privilege of citizenship, Black Canadians responded using a variety of political activist methods and strategies to articulate their demands for full inclusion in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces. Focusing on Black Canadians in Ontario, this article sheds light on how wartime activism stimulated race consciousness and engendered pragmatic militancy approaches to confront anti-Black racism in Canada.*

*Invités officiellement par le ministre de la Défense et de la Milice, Sir Sam Hughes, à participer à l’effort de guerre du Canada, les Noirs ont tenté de s’enrôler pour la « Grande guerre » dans divers centres de recrutement. Au moment où ils ont cherché à le faire, ces Canadiens ont cependant été rejetés par les commandants locaux pour des raisons de race. Les Noirs canadiens se sont alors plaints à Ottawa, mais ils se sont fait dire que le recrutement s’effectuait de façon décentralisée, en d’autres mots, que le quartier général ne pouvait pas dicter la sélection des soldats à l’échelon local. Comme ce privilège fondamental de la citoyenneté leur était refusé, les Noirs canadiens ont réagi en faisant appel à diverses méthodes et stratégies de militantisme politique pour exposer leurs demandes d’inclusion complète dans le Corps expéditionnaire canadien. Axé sur les Noirs canadiens en Ontario, le présent article jette de la lumière sur la manière dont l’activisme en temps de guerre a stimulé la conscience de race et engendré des techniques pragmatiques de militantisme pour lutter contre le racisme à l’égard des Noirs au Canada.*

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AS THE TWENTIETH century progressed, Black Canadians found it increasingly difficult to ignore the stifling effects of racism in their beloved country.<sup>1</sup> The hardships they faced when trying to enlist in World War I marked a decisive turning point for Black Canadian activism in Ontario. These wartime experiences forced Black Canadians to confront the limitations of blackness in Canada. Namely, what it meant to belong to a historically racialized group that was considered by the Canadian state and society as being “half free and half slave”—“mid way betwixt slaves and men.”<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Canadian anti-Black sentiment was made painfully apparent, exposing an undeniably vast divide between the idea of racial freedom in theory and the absence of racial equality in reality. Entitled by a grassroots level of autonomy, Commanding Officers in charge of recruiting for their regiments prevented Black Canadian volunteers, solely on racial grounds, from enlisting to defend the British Empire. They refused to treat them like Anglo-Canadians who, not being a part of a “visible minority,” were encouraged to demonstrate their patriotism.<sup>3</sup> As Black Canadians in Ontario were denied this fundamental privilege of citizenship, they pragmatically responded using a variety of political activist methods and strategies to articulate their demands for full inclusion in Canadian society.

This article deepens our understanding of Canadian history in several ways. It expands on the scholarship of Calvin W. Ruck, who pays particular attention to Black Canadians in Nova Scotia. It joins the work of James W. St. G. Walker, who examines policies regarding the enlistment of visible minorities and how

- 1 With respect to terminology, I recognize the use of African Canadian, Afro-Canadian, and black Canadian in scholarship. However, in my work I refer to people of African descent in Canada as Black Canadians. I do so while joining David Sealy’s call for scholars to attend to the “diversity, plurivocality and heterogeneity of Black Canadian life....” My choice to use Black Canadians is inspired by Sealy’s insights on the coded agency of naming and how this is a part of a larger conversation on blackness and belonging in Canada. He asserts that the “implication of this construction of Canadian identity for Black identity is revealing: it’s impossible to be both Black and Canadian at the same time, since Canada is imagined either as a place without Black people, or where the few Blacks there are well-behaved, even apolitical. .... The very calling of oneself as Black ... are reappropriations of a term of ultimate degradation to empower African diasporic peoples.” See David Sealy, “‘Canadianizing’ Blackness: Resisting the Political” in Rinaldo Walcott, ed., *Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2000), pp. 91, 98, 101, 104. In regards to my capitalization of “Black,” I agree with Kimberlé Crenshaw who uses “an upper-case ‘B’ to reflect my view that Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other ‘minorities,’ constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun.” See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law,” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 101, no. 7 (May 1988), p. 1332. See footnote 2; I also do not capitalize “White” as this does not refer to “a specific cultural group.” See Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6 (1991), p. 1244. See footnote 2; Catherine A. MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982), p. 516. MacKinnon contends that “Black” should not be construed as “merely a color of skin pigmentation, but as a heritage, an experience, a cultural and personal identity, the meaning of which becomes specifically stigmatic and/or glorious and/or ordinary under specific social conditions.”
- 2 *Dawn of Tomorrow* [London], July 19, 1924; *Provincial Freeman* [Toronto], June 10, 1854.
- 3 James W. St. G. Walker, “Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 70, no. 1 (March 1989). Walker shows that South Asian, Japanese, Chinese, and Aboriginal Canadians all faced various forms of racism in their attempts to participate in the CEF. See also Timothy C. Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

these Canadians struggled to attain equal opportunities. Moreover, it adds social contours to John G. Armstrong's "report" on the "formation and subsequent service" of Blacks in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces (CEF).<sup>4</sup> I add to this body of literature by considering how an international crisis shaped Black Canadian activism, exposed home-grown racial fault-lines, and raised Black Canadians' political and racial consciousness. Black Canadians who fought in the country's first and only Black battalion are now being integrated into Canada's Great War narrative, as exemplified by a recent commemorative stamp honouring the advent of the No. 2 Construction Battalion.<sup>5</sup> Here, I address how the development of a distinct nation-state identity and a demonstration of "militia" men's innately robust masculinity was an organic racial project of white superiority in Canada.<sup>6</sup> This racial project entailed the exclusion and then the marginalization of Black Canadian men in a quintessentially Canadian way.<sup>7</sup> Black Canadians in Ontario responded to these expressions of anti-Black racism in ways that encouraged burgeoning postwar social activism in the province.

A wide variety of military documents located in the Library and Archives of Canada (LAC) allow a rare glimpse into how anti-Black racism was expressed through both state and society apparatuses. The *Canadian Observer* is a key and hitherto underutilized source that lends historically rich insights

- 4 Calvin W. Ruck, *The Black Battalion, 1919-1920: Canada's Best Kept Military Secret* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Ltd., 1987); Walker, "Race and Recruitment," p. 3; John G. Armstrong, "The Unwelcome Sacrifice: A Black Unit in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1917-19" in N. F. Dreisziger, ed., *Ethnic Armies: Polyethnic Armed Forces from the Time of the Habsburgs to the Age of the Superpowers* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), p. 179.
- 5 Danielle Pittman, "Moving Mountains: The No. 2 Construction Battalion and African Canadian Experience During the First World War" (Honours thesis, Mount Saint Vincent University, April 2012), p. 6. The author claims that "the members of the No. 2 CB are the forgotten soldiers of the First World War. They have been overshadowed by the service of European Canadians in combatant units. Due to its obscurity, little exists with regard to the No. 2 CB's service and, thus, the service of most African Canadian men."; Boulou Ebanda de B'beri, "The Politics of Knowledge: The Promised Land Project and Black Canadian History as a Model of Historical 'Manufacturation'?" in Boulou Ebanda de B'beri et al., eds., *The Promised Land: History and Historiography of the Black Experience in Chatham-Kent's Settlements and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), pp. 18, 37. Building on de B'beri's methodological insights, this paper urges scholars to recognize how Black Canadian wartime experiences are much more than just "sideline" or "parallel" events to Canadian history. Moving these narratives "from the margins to the centre" of conversations concerning Canada and the First World War encourages a greater appreciation for how hierarchies of civic and social belonging premised on race and racism are part and parcel of Canada's history; <http://pridenews.ca/2016/02/04/stamp-honours-black-canadian-unit-in-first-world-war/>.
- 6 Mike O'Brien, "Manhood and the Militia Myth: Masculinity and Militarism in Ontario, 1902-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 42 (Fall 1998), pp. 115-141; John Brannen, "Remembering Canada's Black Battalion," *The News* [New Glasgow], July 7, 2013. Public history efforts to insert Black Canadian soldiers into Canada's "militiamen" narrative of the "Great War" continue even now. At a ceremony honouring the contributions of these Black Canadians, Lieutenant Colonel Chip Madic addressed attendees by highlighting an innate cultural makeup of Canadian militiamen irrespective of race. He argues, "Canada has always bred a hardy militiaman; one whom [sic] was equally at home propelling a boat or chopping his way through a virgin forest, and these were the type of men who stepped forward to volunteer for service as part of the No. 2. Construction Battalion. Not only did they have to prove that they were fit to serve, but they did so under the pall of racism."; David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 7.
- 7 Barrington Walker, *Race on Trial: Black Defendants in Ontario's Criminal Courts, 1858-1958* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 22, 46; Daniel Coleman, *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 169-171.

to my analysis. The newspaper publicly disseminated critical Black Canadian responses intentionally produced for consumption by an interracial audience. The unexplored records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Toronto branch, in addition to the earliest records of Toronto's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) branch, reveal the embryonic stages of emerging race consciousness. Black Canadians in Ontario connected to these transnational Black Diaspora activism networks to improve the conditions they faced in Canadian society.

Concurring with historian Adriane Lentz-Smith's contention that the "Great War" was a "transformative moment" in Black American race politics, I focus on Black Canadians and examine how their wartime experiences entailed a unique disillusionment—the reckoning of anti-Black racism in British North America.<sup>8</sup> Blackness has historically occupied a liminal place in Canadian nationhood: evoked as simultaneously inside Canada's national identity (as per Anglo-Canadian British civility in racial tolerance) and outside the parameters of its social belonging (as per the social and economic marginalization of Blacks).<sup>9</sup> Using the Canadian military as a litmus test for an overarching societal *mentalité* of anti-Black racism, I argue that the enlistment battle incited the rise of Black Canadian activism and race consciousness in Ontario. Situating Black agency at the forefront of this conflict, this article analyzes how the enlistment battle led to the rise of race consciousness ushering in a new era of Black Canadian social activism and nascent protest politics in Ontario.

Even though Blacks were turned away when they tried to enlist voluntarily in the CEF, they did not back down. In fact, much like the Black American approach to later activism, Black Canadians saw the enlistment battle as an opportunity to ensure their recognition as equal citizens.<sup>10</sup> Resilient demands for inclusion came from all angles: from church pulpits to impassioned letters. Black Canadians did not capitulate to Canada's racial state.<sup>11</sup> Their rejection from the CEF sparked a flame of indignation. In resistance to this racialized exclusion,

8 Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 5.

9 Barrington Walker, "The Tale of Ida Jane and George: Murder, Miscegenation, and Bastardy in 1893 Raleigh, Ontario," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2000), p. 213; Angela Fuiller, "Racial Grief and Melancholic Agency" in Sue Campbell *et al.*, eds., *Agency and Embodiment* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2009), p. 50. Here, the author insists that "[f]or the dominant culture ... white identity is secured through the simultaneous exclusion and consumption of racialized others. This is, while socially sanctioned practices such as racial profiling and segregation ensure that minorities and nonwhite immigrants never quite belong to the nation, the nation depends on possessing and exploiting these 'others' to support its social and economic hierarchies, as well as its fantasies of itself as a multicultural, democratic state."

10 Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 16. In paralleled but contextually differing experiences to those of Black Canadians, by 1917 many Black Americans viewed wartime participation as an opportunity to "challenge white supremacy and make democracy a reality" (p. 27). The author argues that "declarations of black loyalty rested on more than mere pragmatism. Black spokespersons tapped into a post-Civil war political tradition that linked patriotism with nationhood and civic belonging. In doing so, they hoped to reconcile the paradoxical nature of American nationalism with a racially inclusive vision of democracy."

11 Goldberg, *The Racial State*, pp. 29, 117.

they wrote to local MPs and high-ranking government officials, held public mass meetings, ran debates, and organized patriotic and fund-raising concerts. Through the *Canadian Observer*—a nationally distributed Black-focused newspaper edited by Joseph R. B. Whitney, who published it out of Toronto, Ontario—Black Canadians challenged the government to protect Blacks from discrimination based on race, colour, or creed.<sup>12</sup> In essence, it was a fight for the liberal principles of the Union Jack.<sup>13</sup> Enlistment was a key battle on Canadian soil that was fought to determine the relationship among race, state, nation, imperial and social belonging in Canada. These wartime experiences engendered affective and effective local, continental, and diaspora activism networks in Ontario.

As a self-governing dominion, Canada was automatically involved when Britain declared war against Germany and its allies in 1914. Most Canadian men were eager to join the war effort. When Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia and Defence, asked for volunteers, he was inundated with enthusiastic replies.<sup>14</sup> The soldiers of the CEF's First Contingent were overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon with respect to their places of birth. Out of these 30,617 men, 18,495 were born in Britain, 9,159 were born in Canada, and 652 men were born in other British colonies. Anglo-American born soldiers made up 756 members of the Contingent while men from Russia, Bulgaria, France, Belgium, Holland, and Denmark, for example, were listed as having been born in "foreign countries." The postwar military survey duly noted that 1,032 men chose to withhold their names.<sup>15</sup> Black Canadian men also yearned for the adventure of war and felt a sense of patriotism like fellow Canadians. They too "ached for honour, sacrifice, and an opportunity to prove [their] manhood" but soon discovered that their enthusiasm was not appreciated or welcomed.<sup>16</sup>

Even though Black Canadians adamantly demanded their right to fight in the war, their ambitions for racial equality were thwarted. While the battle lines in Europe had been drawn, the racial lines in Canada were less pronounced but becoming clearly demarcated in the labour market, for example, where covert socio-economic racisms protected the racial privileges of Anglo-Canadians.<sup>17</sup>

12 For Canadian "Promised Land" narratives, see Karolyn Smardz Frost, *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Sharon A. Roger Hepburn, "Following the North Star: Canada as a Haven for Nineteenth-Century American Blacks," *Michigan Historical Review*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1999), pp. 91-126, and *Crossing the Border: A Free Black Community in Canada* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

13 David Killingley, "'A Good West Indian, A Good African, and, In Short, A Good Britisher': Black and British in a Colour-Conscious Empire, 1760-1950," *Journal of Commonwealth History*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2008), p. 370.

14 Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, eds., *Canada: A National History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 303. The wheels of war were set into full motion when a young Serbian nationalist assassinated the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand—heir to the Austrian throne—and his wife on June 28, 1914. The major powers in Europe rallied around their alliances and, when Germany planned to attack neutral Belgium en route to France, Britain joined the Allied Forces and declared war against it.

15 Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting in the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), pp. 28-29.

16 Tim Cook, "'He was Determined to Go': Underage Soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 41, no. 81 (2008), p. 46.

17 Craig Heron, "Boys Will Be Boys: Working Class Masculinities in the Age of Mass Production," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 69, no. 1 (Spring 2006), p. 19.

Informal colour lines were palpable to many Black Canadians marginalized to menial jobs regardless of their skill sets and levels of education.<sup>18</sup> Blacks were often barred from public places such as restaurants, swimming pools, skating rinks, theatres, hotels, and pubs.<sup>19</sup> Yet it was taboo for both Black and Anglo-Canadians to discuss anti-Black racisms since such sentiments were contrary to Underground Railroad (UGR) heritage. The country's identity was built upon a proud reputation of British civility upholding Black freedom compared to the USA's long and tumultuous legacy of Black slavery.<sup>20</sup> In Canada, race had no formal place as evidenced by the lack of *de jure* codified racial distinctions.<sup>21</sup> Even though there were no formal segregation laws in Canada, the scholarship of Constance Backhouse makes it abundantly clear that practices of racial segregation were quite effective in Canadian society.<sup>22</sup> The enlistment battle brought to light the stubborn racist beliefs underpinning what it meant to be a *bona fide* Canadian citizen living in a "White Man's Country" and permitted to fight in a "White Man's War."<sup>23</sup>

Extrapolating the social sentiment expressed through military records demonstrates that the mere idea of interracial social intimacy with Black Canadians brought out deep-seeded racial anxieties among many Anglo-Canadians. Most were not accustomed to working or socially engaging with Blacks on terms of equality in everyday life.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, they spurned the very idea of fighting alongside Black Canadian men on the battlefields of Europe. While Hughes hoped to create an interracial Canadian militia, his ideas were not only unrealistic but also based on a naively utopian vision. Regardless of the righteous cause at hand, the amicable interracial harmony he envisioned for the Canadian military was simply incompatible with normative social practices. The prospect of mixing and mingling with Black Canadians unleashed an unspoken anti-Black racism that reared its ugly head with tenacious ferocity.

- 18 Nora Faires, "Going Across the River: Black Canadians and Detroit Before the Great Migration," *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2006), p. 122; Agnes Calliste, "Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1987), p. 6; Dionne Brand, "'We Weren't Allowed to Go into Factory Work until Hitler Started the War': The 1920s to the 1940s" in Peggy Bristow et al., eds., *"We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up": Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 174.
- 19 James W. St. G. Walker, "Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience" (Canadian Historical Association booklet, 1985), p. 16.
- 20 Goldberg, *The Racial State*, p. 134.
- 21 Barrington Walker, "Finding Jim Crow in Canada, 1789-1967" in Janet Miron, ed., *A History of Human Rights in Canada: Essential Issues* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 2009), p. 81, and "Introduction: From a Property Right to Citizenship Rights—The African Canadian Legal Odyssey" in Barrington Walker, ed., *The African Canadian Legal Odyssey: Historical Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 2012), pp. 1, 28.
- 22 Constance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 1999).
- 23 John Schultz, "'White Man's Country': Canada and the West Indian Immigrant, 1900-1965," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1982), pp. 53-64; Walker, "Race and Recruitment," p. 5.
- 24 Julia Roberts, *In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), pp. 113-117; Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), pp. 61-81.

The enlistment battle underscores the divide between the realm of rhetoric and the realm of social practice. In reality, many Anglo-Canadians were more concerned with maintaining race as a prime marker of belonging than they were with honouring patriotism and a sense of duty. In essence, they were willing to give their lives overseas to defend the Union Jack—a flag that in theory represented racial equality—while they fought at home to maintain their racial superiority. For these Canadians, fighting alongside Blacks meant that they would have to see and treat these men as their equals. To do so would be tantamount to forfeiting their racial privilege. Even though by the end of the war more than 600,000 of the combatants mobilized were Canadian, more than 60,000 had died, and nearly 170,000 were wounded, giving up their racial privilege was one sacrifice that most Anglo-Canadian men were not willing to make.

### **An Official Policy of Unofficial Anti-Black Racism**

The battle to enlist brought to light the fact that Blacks were being discriminated against solely on racial grounds. Anti-Black racism was not only happening in the military but also in general society. Clear expressions of racism were a stimulus for Black Canadians to begin to think earnestly about how to articulate and approach the ostracism they faced in Canadian society. There was no single consensus on the best strategy to fight racial scorn. The enlistment struggle forced them to think of different ways to find redress in hopes of securing the elusive rights and responsibilities of citizenship they were seeking.

As a direct result, the *Canadian Observer* was born. Published from December 12, 1914 to June 14, 1919, it was a Black Canadian “war-baby” created specifically in response to Black men being barred from joining the CEF.<sup>25</sup> Whitney founded the *Observer* on behalf of Blacks dissatisfied with racially biased injustices that denied them the full benefits of their rights and responsibilities as British subjects and loyal Canadians. He wanted to start a “Revolution of Thought by Our People” (Figure 1). If they honestly assessed their situation, he believed Black Canadians would agree that, “as a race, we are not, in Canada making the progress we should be making.” In the summer of 1915, Whitney posed ten questions to figure out why Blacks were “not a factor in the national life of this country”:

1. Why are we not making the progress we should?
2. Is it lack of brain power?
3. Is it for lack of initiative?
4. Is it for lack of confidence in one another?
5. Is it from dislike of labor?
6. Is it from prejudice on the part of our white fellow country-men?
7. Is the prejudice greater than it was 60 years ago? If so, why?
8. What are we to do to start our people on the real road to achievement?
9. Will organization along co-operative club lines do?
10. If a movement is needed, what name should it be under?

25 Multicultural History Society of Ontario [hereafter MHSO], Black Collection, 934, *Canadian Observer* [Microfilm], 1914-1919, “Fourth Anniversary Our Greatest Celebration,” December 21, 1918.

**WE WANT A REVOLUTION OF  
THOUGHT BY OUR PEOPLE**

**Read the Question, May They Stimulate Your Thinking Faculties,  
Let Us Hear From You.**

I think you will agree that, as a race, we are not, in Canada making the progress we should be making. Population considered, we are not a factor in the national life of this country. What is the reason?

1. Why are we not making the progress we should?
2. Is it for lack of brain power?
3. Is it for lack of initiative?
4. Is it for lack of confidence in one another?
5. Is it from dislike of labor?
6. Is it from prejudice on the part of our white fellow countrymen?
7. Is the prejudice greater than it was 60 years ago, if so, why?
8. What are we to do to start our people on the real road to achievement?
9. Will organization along co-operative club lines do?
10. If a movement is needed, what name should it be under?

**THINK IT OVER AND WRITE "THE CANADIAN OBSERVER"**

**NOTE, OUTLINING YOUR VIEWS ON THIS QUESTION.** We will publish as many as we can, and will honestly endeavor, with the aid of a BOARD OF SELECTORS, to print those which contain the germ of a solution.

Do not hesitate because of an impression that one week will end the inquiry. We purpose keeping this investigation open until something workable has been arrived at.

J. R. B. Whitney, Editor.

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**ANSWER 12.**

To Editor, Observer:

TORONTO, Oct. 21.—I have been an interested reader of your valued paper since its inception, and feel that with the loyal and substantial backing it ought to receive from every member of our race, that it should prove a boon and power for good to its many readers.

I am surprised so few have up to the present, had the moral courage to answer the questions put forward in your open letter, which every right thinking man, would do well to consider and endeavor to the best of his ability, to answer.

Let us consider the first question:—

Why are we not making the progress we should? Is it lack of brain power? Certainly not. Has not our race produced some of the most brilliant men and women of our time? Is it lack of initiative and confidence in one another? To a very appreciable extent it is. Why should we not all endeavor to pull together? Is there not strength in unity? Dislike of labor? No, I don't think people can point the finger at us and say we are an idle race. Decidedly not. I believe the majority are most industrious. Of course, there are exceptions, but very few.

I still believe there is a degree of prejudice existing, but I think we are outliving it. There still rankles in men's minds, recollections of sixty years ago. But are we not equal to morally and intellectually solve all prejudice? Most certainly we are.

The answer to the eighth and ninth questions, I firmly believe to be the solution to the whole. Get together.

Continued on Page 4.

**Figure 1:** "We Want a Revolution of Thought by Our People." *Canadian Observer*, October 23, 1915. Source: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Black Collection, 934 [Microfilm]*. Reproduced from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

By the end of October 1915, Whitney had received his twelfth response to these thought-provoking questions.<sup>26</sup> The questions themselves give a unique glimpse into this era of race politics in Canada. They speak to the specific conditions, conversations, and ideas circulating with respect to the historical and contemporary status of Black Canadians. It was clear that Anglo-Canadians treated Black Canadians much differently in 1915 than they had in the UGR days of 1855. This change was having a negative impact on Black Canadians. Now they were being prevented from performing their rightful patriotic duties.

26 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, "We Want a Revolution of Thought by Our People," October 23, 1915.



Minister of Militia & Defence  
Ottawa

Nov. 6, 1914

Dear Sir:

The colored people of Canada want to know why they are not allowed to enlist in the Canadian militia. I am informed that several who have applied for enlistment in the Canadian expeditionary forces have been refused for no other apparent reason than their color, as they were physically and mentally fit.

Thanking you in advance for any information that you can & will give me in regards to this matter I remain  
yours Respectfully,  
Arthur Alexander,  
North Buxton, Ont.

**Figure 2:** Letter from Arthur Alexander to Sam Hughes. November 6, 1914.

Source: Library and Archives of Canada, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21. Reproduced courtesy of Spencer Alexander.

One of the earliest military records of Black activism in the enlistment battle comes from Arthur H. Alexander, a Black Canadian in North Buxton, Ontario. Alexander was a proud descendant of the Elgin Settlement—a community comprised of formerly enslaved Black American emigrants who had come to Canada West (present day Ontario) during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> On November 6, 1914, this esteemed schoolteacher and community leader wrote to the Minister of Militia and Defence on behalf of “the colored people of Canada” who wanted to know “why they were not allowed to enlist in the Canadian Militia” (Figure 2). He noted that they were turned away from recruiting offices for “no other apparent reason than their color, as they were physically and mentally fit.”<sup>28</sup> After closing his letter with his respect for “King & Country,” Alexander must have felt sorely dejected when a fortnight later a brief reply from a military secretary explained, “under instructions already issued, the selection of Officers and men . . . is entirely in the hands of Commanding Officers, and their selections or rejections are not

<sup>27</sup> Arlie C. Robbins, *Legacy to Buxton* (North Buxton: A. C. Robbins, 1983).

<sup>28</sup> Library and Archives of Canada [hereafter LAC], Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, Arthur H. Alexander to Sam Hughes, November 6, 1914.

interfered with from Headquarters.”<sup>29</sup> This response did not specifically address Alexander’s concerns about anti-Black racism but instead implied that Ottawa was powerless to stop Black Canadians from being rejected at local recruiting stations. Although authorities in Ottawa implored officers to end their capricious enlistment practices, they were unable to enforce an “official mind” within a decentralized military system that was “characterized by a high degree of local control and initiative.”<sup>30</sup>

The response revealed that it was a permissible matter of selection left to the prerogative of local Canadian military officers “who don’t see the same as the General and are using their power in not enlisting the colored man.”<sup>31</sup> While the Canadian military’s anti-Black racism conventions certainly did not adhere to British “fair play,” they were apparently fair game since Ottawa had virtually no mechanisms in place to control the centrifugal forces on the ground that enabled Commanding Officers to exercise autonomy in the enlistment process.<sup>32</sup>

### Avoiding a Bad Social Experiment?

Anglo-Canadian Commanding Officers used a number of reasons to justify their refusal of Black Canadians—some vague and some quite specific. An intra-government correspondent wondered, “Would Canadian negroes make good fighting men?” Without substantiating his conclusion, he answered his own question with a curt “I do not think so.”<sup>33</sup> One Commanding Officer justified his refusal of Black Canadians because he had been “fortunate to have secured a very fine class of recruits, and I did not think it was fair to these men that they should have to mingle with negroes.”<sup>34</sup> Some rejections were qualified with much more interesting details. On November 29, 1915, the Adjutant-General of the Canadian Militia wrote to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to find out why he had received “a great many complaints ... from coloured men in regard to their treatment” since “the Honourable Minister has given instructions that the coloured men are permitted to enlist in any battalion.”<sup>35</sup> Commanding Officer W. H. Allen’s response on December 14, 1915, clearly illustrated that the Minister’s wishes were incongruent with the racial sentiments of many Anglo-Canadians on a local level.

Responding to the Adjutant-General, Allen recalled that as soon as it was known that Black Canadians were allowed to enlist, “several white men who had been about to sign on, refused to do so if coloured men were to be admitted into

29 *Ibid.*, Lieutenant Colonel Military Secretary to Arthur H. Alexander, November 20, 1914.

30 Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1963); Paul Maroney, “‘The Great Adventure’: The Context and Ideology of Recruiting in Ontario, 1914-17,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 77, no. 1 (1996), pp. 70-72.

31 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Recruiting and the Colored Man,” April 15, 1916.

32 John Darwin, “Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion,” *English Historical Review*, vol. 112, no. 447 (June 1997), p. 624. In a decentralized system, the impact of centrifugal forces on a local level often successfully challenged the “official mind” mandates of high government authorities, which meant that “ministers and officials were rarely free to impose their departmental view even when they had one.”

33 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, Major General W. Gwatkin to Loring C. Christie, September 30, 1915.

34 *Ibid.*, G. W. Fowler to 6<sup>th</sup> Division Headquarters, November 25, 1915.

35 *Ibid.*, W. E. Hodgins to 6<sup>th</sup> Division Headquarters, November 29, 1915.

the Regiment.” He did, however, think, “Coloured men should do their share in the Empire’s Defence” and even admitted that “some of them would make good soldiers.” Nonetheless, forced to make the choice, he would “prefer white men, and if the enlistment of coloured men is going to prevent better men from signing on, it seems to me that the best thing to do would be to keep them separated.” Moreover, he would be “[I]oath to risk the experiment of taking negroes when plenty of white men were available. Neither my men nor myself, would care to sleep alongside them, or to eat with them, especially in warm weather. A white man’s appetite is a peculiar thing.”<sup>36</sup> Allen’s remarks relay a fragile sense of racial tolerance that was quintessentially Canadian. They express a strong belief in Canada’s imperial belonging and thus its responsibility to the British Empire. However, these remarks also show that, potential fighting abilities aside, most Anglo-Canadians did not consider Black Canadians suitable comrades because of the high level of interracial socialization their presence in the military would entail. Highlighting some of the social activities that would necessitate intimate interracial contact, Allen alluded to the offensive bodily smell of Black essence and how he and others found the idea of such cross-racial contamination repulsive.<sup>37</sup>

Major-General Willoughby Gwatkin—a British officer who served as Canada’s Chief of the General Staff (CGS)—supported his Commanding Officers’ refusal of Black Canadians from the CEF based on a number of highly racialized grounds that he outlined in a memorandum. Like others involved in Canada’s war effort, Gwatkin was immersed in transnational race politics that perpetuated the epistemic violence of Social Darwinist theories.<sup>38</sup> He utilized pejorative race knowledge to sanction his stance on why it was best to accede to anti-Black racism in CEF recruiting. Gwatkin argued that the “civilized negro is vain and imitative” and surmised that those in Canada trying to enlist were not doing so based on “a high sense of duty.” He believed that “in the trenches he is not likely to make a good fighter.”<sup>39</sup> Even if this were not the case, he knew “the average white

36 *Ibid.*, W. H. Allen to Hodgkins, December 14, 1915. For a compelling exploration on sites of intimacy between soldiers in the First World War, see Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

37 Walker, *Race on Trial*, p. 111; Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), p. 11; Nancy Stepan, “Race, Gender, Science and Citizenship,” *Gender and History*, vol. 10, no. 1 (April 1998), pp. 26-52; Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

38 Armstrong, “The Unwelcome Sacrifice,” p. 179. The author notes that Gwatkin was a “highly educated and intelligent man.” See also George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 54. Mitchell argues that Social Darwinism “complimented gendered notions of conquest implicit in imperialism as it provided a rationale for subjugating people of color. By ranking ‘types’ on a hierarchical scale according to fitness, character, and culture, social Darwinism promoted notions that each race had its own domain or place. Notions about race were varied, imprecise, overlapping, and even antonymous, yet darker races were less fit for civilization because they were less manly; they were less manly because they were not white.” See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 31. The author points out: “One clearly available example of ideological epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other.”

39 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, MEMORANDUM

man will not associate with him on terms of equality. Not a single commanding officer in the Military District No. 2 is willing to accept a coloured platoon as part of his battalion.” With a turnabout concern for the feelings of Black Canadians, he noted, “[I]t would be humiliating to the coloured men themselves to serve in a battalion where they were not wanted.” Instead, Gwatkin suggested allowing Blacks to form a labour battalion so that they could participate in the Canadian war effort but in a demoted non-combatant way that would not affront the delicate racial and gendered sensibilities of Anglo-Canadian soldiers.<sup>40</sup> These confidential inter-departmental military records are rare in their honest exposure of how many Anglo-Canadians felt about working and socializing with Black Canadians. They make clear the societal climate of racial hostility, as expressed by the Canadian state, with which Blacks were forced to contend.

### Penning Perturbed Discontent

On October 4, 1915, T. J. Stewart—MP and Commissioner of Hamilton, Ontario—was contacted by one of his Black Canadian constituents regarding enlistment. As an elected public figure, Stewart was accountable to an electorate, and he knew that his included a sizeable number of Black Canadians—many of whom had a longstanding presence in the city since the 1800s.<sup>41</sup> One member of this community, George Morton, telephoned this MP and “complained” that his letter to Sir Sam Hughes—regarding the fact that Black Canadians in Hamilton were being barred from enlisting—had gone unanswered for about a month. Morton asked Stewart to intercede on his behalf by writing a letter “in reference to this matter.” Stewart recognized that he could not afford to rebuff this request since to do so “would make considerable trouble for myself.”<sup>42</sup> Writing to Sir Sam Hughes, Stewart asked him to reply to Morton as a “personal favour” and not necessarily because he was appalled by the injustice of the matter at hand.<sup>43</sup> Stewart enclosed Morton’s eloquent letter addressed to Hughes on September 7, 1915. In this letter, Morton informed the Minister of Militia that Black Canadians in Hamilton had been refused enlistment “solely on the ground of color or complexional distinction; this being the reason given on the rejection or refusal card issued by the recruiting officer.” He was supported by “a number of leading white citizens” who, perhaps like Stewart, “most emphatically repudiate the idea as being beneath the dignity of the Government to make racial or color distinction in an issue of this kind.” However, Morton was not so easily assuaged by “this kindly expressed opinion” since the “cold and unexplained fact” still remained that “the proffered service of our people have [*sic*] been refused.”

According to Morton, Black Canadians in Hamilton were “much perturbed” since they were well aware that they should not be denied the rights and

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on the enlistment of negroes in Canadian Expeditionary Force, April 13, 1916.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Adrienne Shadd, *The Journey from Tollgate to Parkway: African Canadians in Hamilton* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2010).

42 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, T.J. Stewart, Esq. MP to Sam Hughes, October 4, 1915.

43 *Ibid.*

responsibilities of citizenship in “this so-called Land of the free and the Home of the brave” where “there should be no color lines drawn or discrimination made.” Even though Morton quoted what would later be the official American national anthem, he staunchly upheld his British imperial belonging when he claimed, “As humble, but loyal subjects of the King, trying to work out their own destiny, they think they should be permitted in common with other peoples to perform their part, and do their share in this great conflict.” Evoking the “North Star” myth perpetuated by the UGR discourse of Canadian/American race politics, Morton declared that Black Canadians felt a sense of gratitude toward Canada as they “remember that this country was the only asylum and place for refuge in the dark days of American slavery, and that here, on this consecrated soil, dedicated to equality, justice and freedom, under the all-embracing and protecting folds of the Union Jack, that none dared to molest or to make them afraid.”<sup>44</sup> While Black Canadians were “most anxious to serve their King and Country in this critical crisis in its history,” if they were rejected because of the “hue of their skin,” then this racial slight would “prevent them from further offering their services in the hour of their country’s great need, only to suffer the humiliation of being refused solely on color lines.”<sup>45</sup> Replying to Stewart’s inquiry on behalf of Morton, Acting Adjutant General, Brigadier General W. E. Hodgins let the MP know that his letter had been “handed to me for consideration.” He confirmed, “There are no regulations or restrictions, which prohibit or discriminate against the enlistment of any coloured men who possess the necessary qualifications.” However, Hodgins made sure to close his letter by telling Stewart that “the final approval of any man, regardless of colour or other distinction, must of course rest with the officer commanding the particular unit which the man in question is desirous of joining.”<sup>46</sup> This humiliating rejection illustrated that Black Canadians were not

44 Walker, “Racial Discrimination in Canada,” p. 6.; LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, George Morton to Sam Hughes, September 7, 1915; George Elliot Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 28; Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta Smith Tucker, eds., *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016); Paul Finkelman, “The Anderson Case and Rights in Canada and England” in Louis A. Knafla and Susan W.S. Binnie, eds., *Law, Society and the State: Essays in Modern Legal History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 37-72; Alexander Murray, “The Extradition of Fugitive Slaves from Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 43, no. 4 (1962), pp. 289-314; Melissa N. Shaw, “Dawn of Tomorrow, ‘A Noble Tradition to be Maintained’ in the Historical Memory of Canada” in Paul E. Lovejoy and Vanessa S. Oliveira, eds., *Slavery, Memory, Citizenship* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2016), p. 175. In this chapter I discuss how historical memory was a strategically pragmatic tool to argue that “Black liberty was intricately connected to Canada’s national identity.” The UGR narrative of Black emancipation from the bonds of American slavery depicted Canada as a “commendable ‘Promised Land’.” This was a historically significant “symbol of Canada’s loyal commitment to its legacy of ‘British Justice’ and ‘fair play’.” Fighting against anti-Black racism in the twentieth century, Black Canadians evoked this narrative to let Anglo-Canadians know that they expected Canada to live-up to its abolitionist antecedents by protecting the racial freedom their descendants ostensibly found north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. This served as a contemporary reminder that, juxtaposed to the United States, Canada was supposed to be “the North American pillar of Britishness” and the home of morally superior Anglo-civility.

45 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, George Morton to Sam Hughes, September 7, 1915.

46 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, Acting Adjutant General W. E. Hodgins to T. L. Stewart, Esq. MP, October, 16, 1915.

living in a country committed to British “fair play” regardless of race, colour, or creed. They were not allowed to enjoy the privileges of their rightful British imperial inheritance. On the same day as George Morton telephoned T. J. Stewart for help, protest was being penned by a Black Canadian in Saint John.<sup>47</sup>

Responses to racist recruiting practices came not only from Black Canadians in Ontario, but also from Black Canadians in the Maritimes, thereby demonstrating that this type of anti-Black racism and corresponding responses to it were not regionally isolated events. On October 4, 1915, John T. Richards of Saint John, New Brunswick, addressed his letter to the Duke of Connaught, Governor General of Canada, using a more militant tone than Morton, called “attention to the fact that Colored men of good repute have been denied the chance of enlistment in the Forces for overseas service etc, on the grounds of Color.” Underlining the word “Color” to highlight the issue of anti-Black racism at the heart of this matter, Richards, a marine shipping agent, assured Connaught that all these rejected men were “British subjects, born in Canada”—thus imperially and nationally entitled to the rights and responsibilities enjoyed by all Canadians. According to Richards, it was “certainly highly insulting to the Colored people here, and galling as well, to not be allowed to serve their King simply because they [*sic*] faces are dark.” Beyond the justified protest, the letter denotes a sense of strategic thinking among Black Canadians. Situating Canada within its imperial network, Richards pointed out that “England and some of her Allies has [*sic*] many colored soldiers defending the several flags and I venture to say that they try at least to do their little bit.” As if to forewarn these authorities about the next steps Black Canadians were contemplating, he told the Governor General that “some of my colored friends have been suggesting that we ought to protest to the Allies and elsewhere.” However, Richards presented himself as a level-headed and responsible interracial

47 Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), p. 23. In the early stages of organizing the NAACP, W. E. B. Du Bois spoke to the importance of unifying Black Americans from varying regions in the country by linking them to a “common vision of political and social struggle.” He explained that it was imperative to “bring together people who have never seen each other, but simply have racial discrimination as a point of contact.” Drawing from Du Bois’ understanding of disparate Black Americans connected through their common experiences of anti-Black racism, I have referenced the experiences of Black Canadians in New Brunswick in an article about Black Canadians in Ontario to demonstrate that anti-Black racism pervaded the country during this era, and this specific “event” incited Blacks across the country to respond. The social climate of racialized injustice that enabled the common rejection of Blacks from the CEF connected Black Canadians living in ostensibly disparate parts of the country. I put these Black Canadian responses from different provinces into discourse with each other seeing the ideas in them as linked and connected intertextually. See Natalie Z. Davis, “Anthropology and History in the 1980s: The Possibilities of the Past,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1981), p. 269. Davis compellingly argues that historians can garner a better appreciation of the past by putting analogous materials and texts into conversation with each other, examining “informal or small-scale interactions which can express important linkages and conflicts.” See also John E. Toews, “Intellectual History After the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 92, no. 4 (October 1987), pp. 885-886. Exploring the impact of the linguistic turn on intellectual history, Toews considers the ways that “texts are ... containers of ideas or facts that can be extracted from them and then set into relation with other similarly minded ideas or facts. ... Both text and context are complex relations of ‘signifying practices.’ The connections between them must thus be construed as ‘intertextual.’ The context never ‘explains’ the text in the sense of providing the essence of its appearance or the cause of its effect or the reality of its representation.”

broker. As a dutiful Canadian and loyal British subject, he believed in the wisdom of appealing through mechanisms already in place. His advice, therefore, was to refrain from bringing this matter before external powers and “to await [*sic*] a while longer” for corrective measures by Canadian authorities rather than potentially damaging Canada’s international reputation.<sup>48</sup> The inactivity of the government towards corrective steps wore such faithful considerations thin.

When, almost two months later, Richards was seemingly unappeased by the Governor General’s response, he followed up by directing his concerns to Sir Sam Hughes. This time, in addition to imperial belonging, he framed his protest in terms of masculinity and conventional gendered expectations.<sup>49</sup> Richards expressed his frustration over the fact that poor Black Canadian men, “some with families ... threw up their jobs to enlist and fight for their Empire and King” only to have their earnest efforts and long travels met with rejection, racial insults, and shame. Since “nothing has been done for those people by the Military here,” he let Hughes know that the “Colored people are talking of appealing to the Embassies at Washington whose Countries are using Colored men to be allowed to enter the Foreign Services.” Once again, he had “consulted against this,” but now this intrepid leader had more prescriptive advice. He told Hughes that he wished the Minister would “have this matter cleared up at your earliest moment of leisure.” Furthermore, he boldly suggested that this could be easily done if Hughes just “issue[d] a general order that Colored where fit shall not be discriminated against by the Military Recruiting Officers in Canada [underlined].” Before signing-off “Yours for a square deal for each and for all,” Richards made sure to mention that he was against the formation of a separate Black battalion since he was “directly opposed to segregation.”<sup>50</sup> This powerful protest was made on behalf of Black Canadians who were growing weary from the “shameful and insulting” anti-Black racism in the CEF. They could not understand why able-bodied men who were “British subs [*sic*], and loyal to King and Empire” quite “willing to defend the flag with their lives,” were prevented from doing so because they were Black.<sup>51</sup> Black Canadians tried different strategies and approaches to get their desired results and did not exclude leveraging restrictive hierarchies of social and civic belonging in protest to racial discrimination.

48 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, John T. Richards to The Governor General of Canada [Duke of Connaught], October 4, 1915.

49 Simon James Theobald, “A False Sense of Equality: The Black Canadian Experience of the Second World War,” (M.A. thesis, University of Ottawa, 2008), p. 13. The author notes that a “consistent wage was also crucial for many soldiers and their families, especially as the period from 1913 to 1915 saw the country deal with a severe economic downturn.”; Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family and Unemployment in Ontario’s Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); p. 78. Campbell points out that, during the 1930s, activism trying to prompt the government into action would often evoke “the status of the male breadwinner and his ability ... to meet the material needs of his family.”

50 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, John T. Richards to Sam Hughes, November 20, 1915; Sam Hughes to John T. Richards, November 25, 1915. Hughes replied to Richards five days later to let him know that he had given clear instructions to the effect that “colored men” could enlist in any battalion and was going to get back to Richards as soon as he had received a report investigating the matter.

51 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, John T. Richards to Lieutenant Colonel Military Secretary, November 20, 1915.

A letter from R. L. Hamilton, a Black Canadian also from Saint John, accentuates pernicious social expressions of anti-Black racism and the way British imperial belonging and elitism could be employed as methods to fight it. Writing to the Governor General of Canada on December 29, 1915, Hamilton wanted to explain the unjust “condition of the Negro” in Saint John. Here, he claimed, it had been “five to six years that the Negro hasn’t been allowed any public privileges such as Restaurants, Ice Cream Parlors [*sic*] and now even the dirtiest of the 5 [cent] theatres is drawing a line.” These Jim Crow practices were longstanding in the United States, supported by the judicial system and mob law. Black Canadians also faced segregation, social ostracism, economic deprivation, and political marginality.<sup>52</sup> However, since Canada was deemed a raceless country with no anti-Black racisms imbedded in the law, blatantly broadcasting socially palpable racism was considered impolite and thoroughly unBritish.<sup>53</sup> Anglo-Canadians preferred subtler and, ostensibly, more civilized ways to express their anti-Black racism.

Convinced that the best recourse was to appeal to this representative of the British Empire “from a Theological and Moral Standpoint,” Hamilton sincerely asked that the Governor General use his authority to “try and save us from constant humiliation.”<sup>54</sup> Petitioning the empire that had made Canada a key destination on the UGR, Hamilton expected contemporary British imperial authorities to maintain this Canadian legacy of protecting Black freedom. Many Black Canadians assumed that high-ranking government authorities were oblivious to the everyday racial barriers they faced in twentieth-century Canadian society.<sup>55</sup> They beseeched these imperial agents and state officials to use their political sway to “right the wrong” of racial injustice.<sup>56</sup> However, this imperial identity approach was not the only method of activism.

Scholarship has shown that, in utilizing the politics of respectability, Blacks believed that they merited recognition of their rights by virtue of their elite standing.<sup>57</sup> Respectability was denoted by behavioural demonstrations of refined character—industrious attitudes of self-control exemplifying thrift, sobriety, and the ability to distinguish correct versus rough behaviour.<sup>58</sup> By noting the elitist

52 Walker, “Finding Jim Crow,” p. 82.

53 Backhouse, *Colour-Coded*, p. 14. The author notes: “The ideology of racelessness, a hallmark of the Canadian historical tradition, is very much in keeping with our national mythology that Canada is not a racist country, or at least is much less so than our southern neighbour, the United States.”

54 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, R. L. Hamilton to The Governor General of Canada [Duke of Connaught], December 29, 1915.

55 Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 1 (1995), p. 8.

56 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, John T. Richards to Sam Hughes, November 20, 1915; Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 13. Examining Britain during the interwar years, the author notes that, in response to racist policies, “Black seamen continued to call on the state as a protector, demanding ‘British justice.’”

57 Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 45, 161-162, 259.

58 Judith Fingard, “Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 20, no. 2 (May 1992), p. 172; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,



way Hamilton snubbed his nose at “the dirtiest of the 5 [cent] theatres,” we can tell that he considered himself to be an upstanding Black Canadian citizen. He saw his class standing as his entitlement to be treated fairly irrespective of his race. He expected to enjoy the right to frequent public recreation and leisure social places like Anglo-Canadians of a similar class. When he was denied this right because of his racial identity, his sense of elitism was offended. Such activism premised claims of citizenship on a concept of respectability that had held clout in the nineteenth century, but was steadily losing cultural currency in the twentieth. While Hamilton had the financial means to take the Jim Crow theatre to court, he was not optimistic about the outcome since he recognized that “the Negro gets no justice in the courts here.” He evoked respectability when he cited a brawling incident as unfairly resulting in the military’s wholesale dismissal of Black Canadian volunteers who did not subscribe to such uncouth behaviour as the two quarrelling men. Hamilton relayed a recent slight where “20 coloured men enlisted for service [but] they were eventually thrown down (because) two men got drunk and wanted to fight.” He thought it was unfair that one “Negro makes a disturbance and all the rest has [*sic*] got to suffer.” Even though the 20 rejected Black Canadian men were still in Saint John hoping that recruitment officials would change their minds and let them back in, Hamilton knew that the “Militia Authorities will not have them.” He expressed the inter-regional connectivity and awareness of Black Canadian experiences when he asked if “Upper Canadian regiments has [*sic*] Negroes why not Saint John’s Battalions.”<sup>59</sup> Overall, his method of elitist activism was steadily falling out of vogue and thus not effective.

Anglo-Canadian military officials refused to distinguish elite Black Canadians and instead lumped all Blacks together, irrespective of class standing.<sup>60</sup> According to historian Judith Fingard, in the Victorian era, mixed race communities within the British empire assigned social belonging based on “those who were respectable and those who were not” instead of on race.<sup>61</sup> Hamilton hoped he was operating in such an imperial world when he insisted, “Surely there are some of us who know how to behave like Gentleman.” He wondered why it was so easy for local military authorities to “discriminate as to color,” yet so difficult for them to “do the same amongst color.”<sup>62</sup> Hamilton was mistaken about the contemporary currency of his British imperial belonging and “respectability” in a milieu that had embraced Social Darwinism and eugenics. He, and Black Canadians like him, soon realized that their racial identity was not negated by claims of elitism and respectability.<sup>63</sup>

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1993), p. 187. In studying the early twentieth-century Black American Baptist women’s movement, the author notes that adhering to notions of respectability was employed as a tool activism. This enabled these activists to challenge “demeaning racist structures and images” and was a way to reprimand what they perceived to be the “negative practices and attitudes” of Black Americans.

59 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, R. L. Hamilton to The Governor General of Canada [Duke of Connaught], December 29, 1915.

60 Touré F. Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity: The Urban League the Politics of Racial Uplift, 1910-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p. 29.

61 Fingard, “Race and Respectability,” p. 170.

62 LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1206, file 297-1-21, R. L. Hamilton to The Governor General of Canada [Duke of Connaught], December 29, 1915.

63 Fuiller, “Racial Grief,” p. 51. Exploring the racial melancholy of “the nonwhite other,” the author notes

As the editor of the only Black Canadian newspaper circulated across Canada at this time, J. R. B. Whitney had a unique platform to launch Black Canadian activism in Toronto through the *Canadian Observer*. On April 15, 1916, an editorial entitled “Recruiting and the Colored Man” asked all Canadians “what right have we to rebuke Germany if we are going to let what we are fighting against exist here under our own flag?” Hoping to explain Black Canadians’ eagerness to fight in the war to his Anglo-Canadian readers, Whitney published Rev. R. A. Ball’s article to the *Observer*. Here, the esteemed Black Canadian BME pastor clarified that they were going to “contend for our rights” to enlist “not because we love fighting ... but as Canadian citizens striving in this trying time for justice and freedom and the need of crushing Prussian militarism.” This article evaluated the role of the state in protecting the rights of Black freedom. He asked his readers if it was fair that the “Government of Canada permit an officer to wear the King’s uniform and stand in the way of healthy, physically strong men who wish to do their duty to Canada, Great Britain and the allied forces.”<sup>64</sup> These cries for justice seemed to fall on deaf Anglo-Canadian ears.

These early records show that Black Canadians evoked conventional gendered expectations of masculinity and a man’s familial duty, British imperial belonging, respectability, and elitism as well as a sense of justice to lay claims to their right to join Canada’s war effort. These were devices of activism strategically employed to entreat various state authorities to repudiate anti-Black racism. As the war progressed and the battle for Black Canadians to enlist raged on, these traditional methods of activism proved to be ineffective ways to secure racial equality in Canada. However, even when these appeals were ignored, Black Canadians did not wallow in their frustration and disillusionment. In fact, these roadblocks stimulated important conversations about race politics in Canada. The Canadian state could not enforce the rights of equal opportunity for Blacks, who felt as though they should be recognized as equally valuable members of the body politic. To many Black Canadians, enlistment was the event that emphatically demonstrated the shallow nature of their imperial rights in Canadian society. Contrary to usual expressions of subtle and somewhat polite anti-Black racism in Canada, the rejection of Blacks from the Canadian military was glaring. Told that their services were not welcomed because Canada did not want a “chequer-board

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that it functioned “as the internalization of this vulnerability to racial violence and, simultaneously, and identification with the (albeit unattainable) racial ideal of whiteness.” Black Canadians like Hamilton were “identifying with whiteness or the ideals ... as a kind of psychic ‘holding on’ to the fantasy of inviolability.... for racial minorities, identifying with whiteness may preserve some sense of safety or fitting in.”; Melissa N. Shaw, “The Darker Side of Imperial Belonging: The *League of Coloured Peoples’* Social Activism in 1930s Britain,” unpublished manuscript, p. 20. I argue that in this “pervasive alienation of the self from the bodily,’ blackness was sanctioned as a racial pathology that could neither be completely avoided or removed. The Black colonial’s faith in imperial identity rested in its promise to see past restrictive racial definitions. Imperial belonging offered one’s good ‘character’ as the contingency needed to breakaway from blackness and the colonizer’s racially superior gaze. .... As a consequence of epistemic racial violence, Black colonials could only avoid a wholly depraved racial identity through the benevolence bestowed on them through the British civilizing process of racial uplift. Claiming an authentic imperial identity could ostensibly elevate the Black ‘Self’ from the wretched nature of their race and enable them to become equal imperial partners with their white British ‘Other’.”

64 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Recruiting and the Colored Man,” April 15, 1916.

army,” Black Canadians seriously began to question the liminal parameters of their citizenship.<sup>65</sup>

### **Sowing the Seeds: Wartime Activism**

With a war waging in Europe and Anglo-Canadians being encouraged to show their manhood and loyalty by donning the “King’s uniform,” Black Canadians barred from doing the same could no longer tolerate racial injustice.<sup>66</sup> During the Good Government Club’s weekly meeting, the topic of patriotism led to a “very lively argument.” These Black Canadians in Windsor, Ontario declared, “We, as a leading factor among our race, do not feel that we can afford to allow the oppression which truly does exist.” However, they still debated exactly what they should do about this oppression. Since Black Canadians had “not been called to the colors,” they were prevented from showing themselves to be “staunch Canadians” in ways that were made readily available to others. Eager to participate in the war effort in some way, this club planned on holding a fundraising gala to financially support the war by contributing to the national patriotic fund.

Successfully raising over \$700 for this fund, this group’s activism served a two-fold purpose.<sup>67</sup> First, it explicitly challenged their complete exclusion from participating in the war effort since the government would gladly accept the money they raised. Second, it implicitly contested dominant assumptions of Black racial depravity since it showed that Black Canadians were able to organize and generate positive outcomes with a clear goal in mind. The club believed that “altho [*sic*] we have not been called to the colors we should manifest our interest by doing what we can to uphold the fair name of our dear beloved nation.” These Black Canadians in Windsor were well aware that the gala was a form of social activism that would emphatically make sure that “other races see that we as a supposedly inferior race can come together and do great things in time of dire necessity.” Many Black Canadians still felt that the onus was on them to push beyond racism and “further interest the Anglo-Saxon race in our plea for recognition.” The club reminded despondent Black Canadians that, contrary to their socio-economic marginalization, Blacks were also “entitled to our portion of the good things.”<sup>68</sup> “Grand affairs” arranged by Black organizations like Toronto’s British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church’s patriotic concert, were social performances of subtle protest and resistance. Here, Black Canadians proudly sang “Rule Britannia” and recited “Love of Country” and “A Good Country for All.” These events gave them an opportunity to insert Blacks into a national script from which they had been excluded from because of their race. They wanted to play a part in the war effort and took every means available to assert their belonging and defend their rights as citizens and subjects (Figure 3).<sup>69</sup>

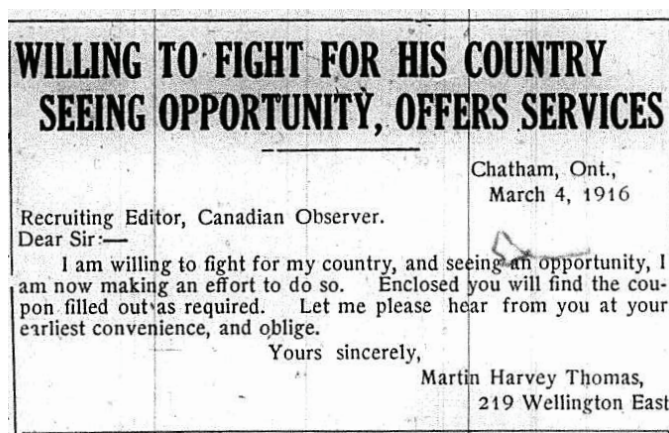
65 Ruck, *The Black Battalion*, p. 7.

66 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Recruiting and the Colored Man,” April 15, 1916.

67 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), p. 319.

68 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Patriotic Spirit at Meeting of Good Govt. Club,” October 30, 1915.

69 Archives of Ontario, MHSO Fonds: Black, F 1405, box MU9850, “Grand Patriotic Concert [Programme], July 1, 1918, British M.E. Church, 94 Chestnut St.”; MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Patriotic Concert by



**Figure 3:** “Willing to Fight for His Country Seeing Opportunity, Offers Services.” *Canadian Observer*, March 11, 1916.

Source: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Black Collection*, 934 [Microfilm]. Reproduced from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

The *Observer* reported on a debate in Toronto among Black Canadian men and women on how they should deal with the exclusion of Black Canadians from the CEF. The debate itself exposed the hypocrisy of Canada’s UGR haven narrative in the twentieth century. Miss Chrissie Bush was a contentious debater who argued that Black Canadians “should wait for an invitation to fight.” She was apprehensive of them pushing their way into the military and believed that this move would be to their detriment if Black men were spitefully placed in the most dangerous positions. “[T]oo many colored men would be killed off to suit the needs of the [white] race,” Bush explained. Her debating peers accused her of “seeking self-protection by preserving the lives of the colored men.” Perhaps trying to deflect this accusation, Bush “proclaimed herself property of another race.” Conversely, another debater, Mrs. Banks, believed that it was imperative that Black Canadians join the fight as a principled matter of “justice and religion.” Mr. Addison chimed in with nostalgia and reflected on how differently Blacks were being treated compared to Ontario’s abolitionist days of old. Addison relayed how his fugitive slave mother had escaped American slavery through the UGR. He considered contemporary anti-Black racism through the eyes of a descendant of a freedom-seeker who had longed “to reach Canada for the protection of the Union Jack.”<sup>70</sup> Miss Rudd advised that Blacks should “sit down and trust in the Lord.” Her comments were summarily dismissed for making “no point in particular.” Mr. Cromwell, with the most pragmatic reasoning of the lot, emphasized the potential longstanding negative impact on the race as a collective group in Canada if Black Canadians did not insist on being allowed to enlist in the military.

Good Government Club,” November 6, 1915.

<sup>70</sup> R. J. M. Blackett, *Making Freedom: The Underground Railroad and the Politics of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), p. 21; Donald George Simpson, *Under the North Star: Black Communities in Upper Canada before Confederation* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2005).

After Mrs. McDowell pointed out that Black Canadians had to come to terms with the level of rampant “race antipathy” they faced since they were “only tolerated” in Canadian society, Mr. Cromwell’s response reflected a heightened sense of race consciousness and shared racial destiny. He posed a time-sensitive question to the debaters: if “the colored man was only tolerated ... now what would be his position after the war if he stands idle during the crisis?” His rhetorical question encouraged those weighing the pros and cons of enlistment to abandon their utopian ideas, racial bias, and reminiscences about a Canada of yesteryear and its unfulfilled promise of racial freedom. Black Canadians, he asserted, needed to take stock of the current situation and think clearly about what was at stake. Applying sheer logic to an emotionally charged topic, Cromwell mentioned that “there was a general opinion that a colored man will not die for a principle.” Unless Black Canadians proactively fought for their responsibilities as citizens, they would be portrayed as unpatriotic cowards in the postwar era. If anti-Black racism in Canada worsened over time, they would lack a legitimate platform to launch claims for uncompromised rights as loyal subjects who had showed solidarity with fellow Canadians in a time of crisis.<sup>71</sup>

**Conceding to Canadian Jim Crow**

<b>CALL FOR RECRUITING</b>	
<b>ARE YOU DOING YOUR BIT?</b>	
The nation is sadly in need of all able-bodied men, and that means you (if medically fit). Why should you not do your part and do it now?	
The Dept. of Militia and Defence says that the first thing necessary is to obtain the names of 50 volunteers to form the first platoon. These will then be forwarded to Ottawa and steps taken to authorize a complete company.	taining the feeling of our people, we print below a slip which can be filled in, signed and mailed to the recruiting editor. Any man fit for military service between the ages of 18 and 45 may fill out this slip. We trust that many names will be submitted before our next issue and that the support received will warrant the confidence of the militia department.
The Canadian Observer will do all in its power to further this cause, and as a preliminary method of ascer-	
----- CUT OUT AND SEND TO EDITOR -----	
Recruiting Editor of The Canadian Observer, 154 Jones Ave., Toronto, Ont.	
I am in favor of forming a platoon composed of members of our race, and authorize you to use my name as a volunteer for service in such a platoon.	
Name in full .....	
Address .....	
Married or single .....	Age .....
City or town .....	Date .....

**Figure 4:** Call for Recruiting.” *Canadian Observer*, February 12, 1916. Source: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Black Collection*, 934 [Microfilm]. Reproduced from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

71 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Colored Soldiers Being Debarred Aroused Lyceum,” November 20, 1915; Walker, “Race and Recruitment,” p. 5.

Many Black Canadians in Ontario were deeply concerned and conflicted over the terms and conditions of their wartime inclusion. By November 1915, a separate "Colored Platoon" was being formed with the *Canadian Observer* at the helm in Ontario, doing "all in its power to further this cause" and to encourage Black Canadian men to enlist (Figure 4).<sup>72</sup> Being allowed to join the war effort only through a separate racially distinctive platoon was not what Black Canadians wanted, and they did not uniformly support this initiative.<sup>73</sup> Given their limited options, however, they did not have much choice. During a "patriotic lecture" in Windsor at the local African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church on February 5, 1916, Reverend Newsome used his pulpit to show his Black Canadian congregation why "we, as a race, should rally to the support of the Union Jack" (Figure 5). His strongest point was the fact that "there is no strength in a person's patriotism who says he can't help protect his flag because he has some personal grievance against it." Even though he admitted that Blacks were not "receiving our rights," he made a sound assessment when he stated that "it will go hard with us if we can't stand up and say, 'I did my bit for the empire'." The *Observer* was a medium through which Black Canadians could express why many were hesitant to have a separate Black platoon as opposed to having Black Canadian soldiers dispersed throughout the CEF. Whitney explained, "Some object to the colored platoon as being an encouragement to race prejudice and an incentive to drawing the color line. Others fear that a colored company would be put in the most dangerous position, consequently exposed to greatest peril."<sup>74</sup> The level of distrust and fear for the immediate and long-term implications of segregation demonstrates that Black Canadians felt as though their very lives were deemed less valuable by military authorities, prospective comrades, and fellow citizens. Furthermore, it illustrates that Black Canadians were aware that more was at stake than just the promise of adventure fighting in an overseas war. As historian James St. G. Walker has pointed out, these men and women were fighting for Black men to go abroad as CEF soldiers so that all Blacks would be appreciated and treated as *bona fide* Canadians at home.<sup>75</sup>

Whitney still encouraged Black Canadians to enlist, even in a demoted non-fighting construction battalion. He maintained, "When the war is over we can boast that we offered ourselves but were turned down."<sup>76</sup> However, he could not pretend that these concessions and the overall treatment of Black Canadians in their fight to enlist had not marred their faith in British justice and "fair play."<sup>77</sup> Many were at a loss not knowing how they could honestly reconcile blatant anti-

72 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, "Call for Recruiting," November 20, 1915.

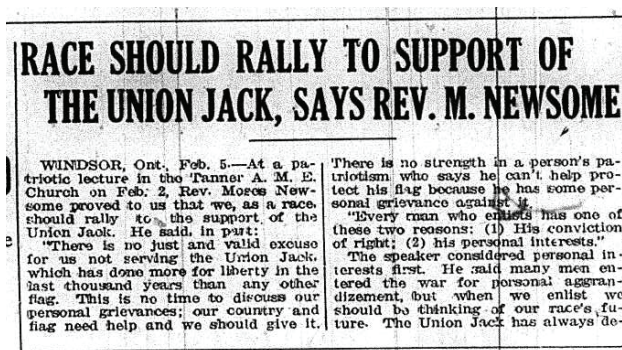
73 Armstrong, "The Unwelcome Sacrifice," p. 186. The author notes that some Black Canadians refused to join the No. 2 because they considered this racial segregation unacceptable; Theobald, "A False Sense of Equality," p. 12.

74 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, "Why Ministers Hesitate to Urge Race Recruiting," April 15, 1915.

75 Walker, "Race and Recruitment," p. 5. The author argues that, in addition to seeking adventure and feeling patriotic, visible minorities persisted in their efforts to enlist in the CEF because they were "moved ... by a consciousness that a contribution to the war effort could help to overcome the disadvantages faced by their communities."

76 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, "Why Ministers Hesitate to Urge Race Recruiting," April 15, 1916.

77 Fingard, "Race and Respectability," p. 169.



**Figure 5:** “Race Should Rally to Support of the Union Jack, Says Rev. M. Newsome” *Canadian Observer*, February 12, 1916.

Source: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Black Collection*, 934 [Microfilm]. Reproduced from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

Black racism with the ideals of racial tolerance Canada proudly boasted. In April of 1916, Whitney penned an editorial that exposed the disillusioning disappointment felt by Black Canadians. He asked his Anglo-Canadian readers:

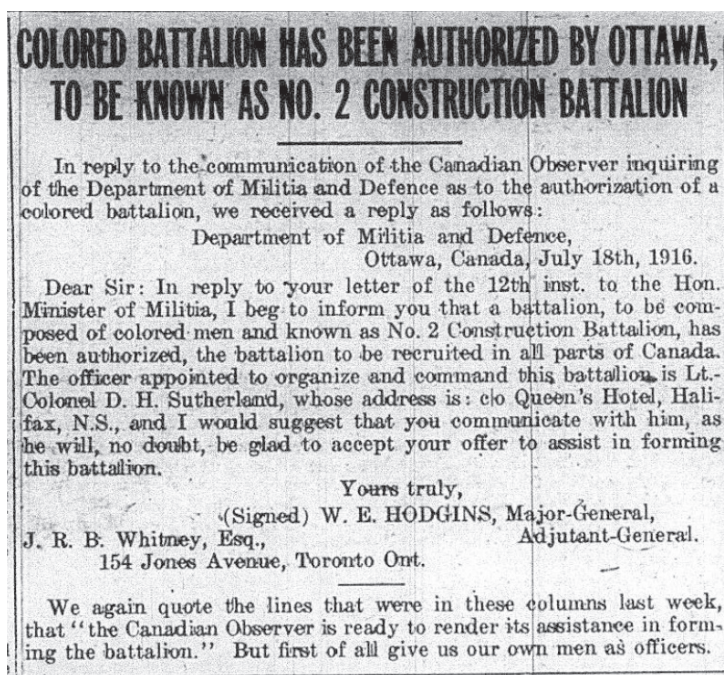
Is it British fair play to refuse them from the ranks of the army? Should they beg to sacrifice their lives and leave their homes and loved ones for the country? ... If conscription should prevail in Canada would the government draft these men into service? If so, it would be worse than heathenism. Give them British fair play when the country is calling for volunteers.... May the government give fair play, free of race prejudice. ... [T]he government should deal justly to all of its citizens alike, or they should not be termed citizen's rights.<sup>78</sup>

Whitney implored his newspaper's interracial audience to earnestly reflect on Canada's imperial commitment to the concept of British “fair play” insofar as it promoted equal opportunities free from racial discrimination. Almost foreshadowing the future, he explained how insulting it would be for the CEF to force Blacks into the military after years of their lobbying to voluntarily join had been rebuffed. Moreover, he cast reasonable doubt on whether or not Blacks were truly citizens who shared in the rights and responsibilities enjoyed by fellow Canadians. Their treatment by the state clearly demonstrated that, for Black Canadians, these rights were arbitrary at best and illusionary at worst.

While these demands for racial equality in the Canadian military were loud and clear, they were not directly addressed. The racially segregated No. 2 Construction Battalion, CEF, was officially authorized on July 5, 1916 (Figure 6) amidst a recruiting crisis that came right on the heels of Prime Minister Robert Borden's promise to send 500,000 volunteers overseas for service.<sup>79</sup> More than 1,000 Blacks were allowed to enlist, but only 598 went overseas as the non-combatant No. 2

<sup>78</sup> MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “The Colored Man and Militia,” April 29, 1916.

<sup>79</sup> David Campbell, “The First 100,000 Came Easily: Recruiting the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the First World War,” *Revue internationale d'histoire militaire*, no. 86 (2006), p. 71.



**Figure 6:** "Colored Battalion Has Been Authorized by Ottawa, To Be Known as No. 2 Construction Battalion." *Canadian Observer*, July 22, 1916.

Source: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Black Collection*, 934 [Microfilm]. Reproduced from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

Construction Battalion tasked with deck labour, forestry work, providing lumber for the front lines, constructing railways and temporary shelters for soldiers, and general labour.<sup>80</sup> About a year later, Black Canadians were ironically forced into the CEF through conscription with the *Military Service Act* of August 29, 1917 (Figure 7). According to a research project that is currently underway, an additional 600 Black Canadian soldiers were "dispersed in various units outside of the No. 2."<sup>81</sup> Black Canadians were deemed unfit for combat because of dominant racial stereotypes that assumed that they, as a racial group, were lazy and lacked initiative and were thus only suitable for unskilled duties. Moreover, this pejorative

80 Armstrong, "The Unwelcome Sacrifice," p. 116. The author quotes Recruiting Officer Captain A. J. Gayfer, who complained that "due to the rough manner in which they have been previously turned down, the recruiting of coloured men [has been] very difficult especially as they are perhaps supersensitive." See also pp. 178, 186. About half of the No. 2 Construction Battalion were Black Canadians from Nova Scotia, "171 men born in the United States ... and sixty-six" from the "British West Indies" among Blacks from across the Canada (LAC, Records of the Department of National Defence, RG 24, vol. 1833, file 8-34A, "Labour Battalions"); Theobald, "A False Sense of Equality," p. 12. According to the author, the No. 2 "accepted recruits from across the country, but the majority came from Nova Scotia and Ontario. These two provinces accounted for 86.5 percent of enlistments, with Nova Scotia at 60.1 percent and Ontario at 26.4 percent. Unlike the CEF, which was over 50 percent British-born even at the end of the war, 56.8 percent of those who enlisted in the No.2 CB were Canadian and 28 percent were American-born."

81 Walker, "Race and Recruitment," p. 21. See footnote 66.



race knowledge also surmised that Blacks were dependant and childlike, which made them innately incapable of maintaining the high level of discipline required for being a soldier fighting on the front lines.<sup>82</sup> Just as they experienced in civilian life, Black Canadians were racially designated to perform manual labour. Major Bristol, secretary to the Canadian Overseas Militia Minister at the British War Office in London, England, wrote to Borden encouraging him to proceed with the racially segregated No. 2 Construction Battalion. In his response, marked “personal,” Bristol claimed that this was advisable since “these niggers do well in a Forestry Corps and other labour units.”<sup>83</sup> Black Canadians faced racism at the level of state policy and social interaction. Before the war, many Black Canadians viewed intra-racial community networks and organizations as unwise associations that could reify one’s racial identity connected to damning stereotypes. As a result of their activism for the right to enlist, Black Canadians in Ontario began to open up to the possibility that intra-racial associations were the best means to challenge racial injustices and support each other in ways that the Canadian government clearly did not.<sup>84</sup>



**Figure 7:** Contingent of the No. 2 Construction Battalion. November 1916.

Source: Museum of Windsor, P6110. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum of Windsor.

It is no coincidence that about three months after conscription began, hypocritically, to badger Blacks into the CEF that the first of four Canadian NAACP branches arose in Toronto. This group was formed during the summer of 1917 once a “great interest” had been “aroused” among “energetic race-loving men and women” in the city.<sup>85</sup> Acting secretary Miss Clara Deas wrote to this American anti-racism

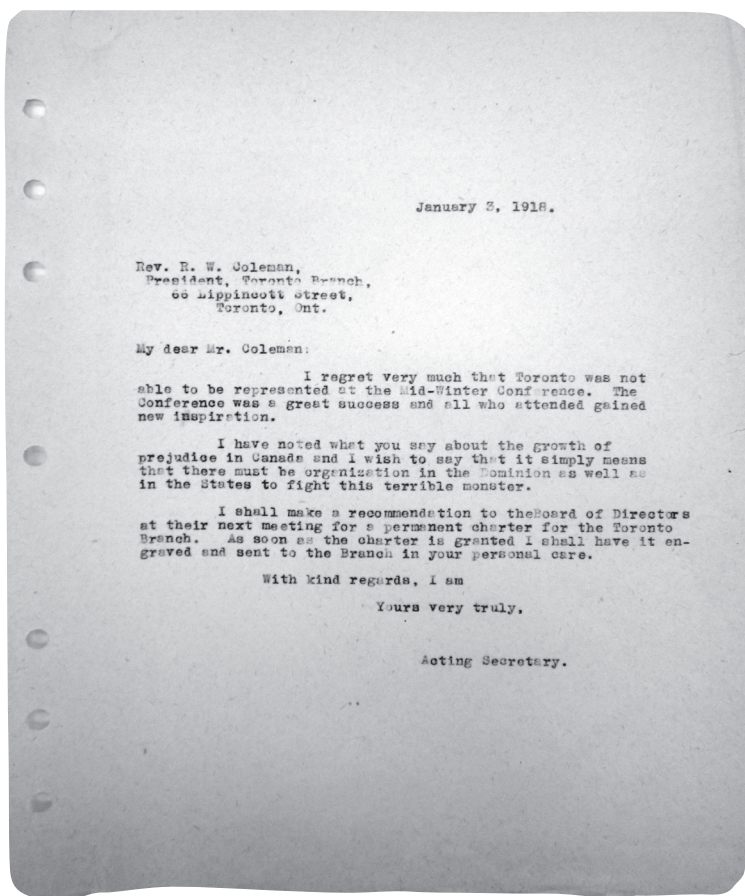
<sup>82</sup> Walker, *Race on Trial*, pp. 12, 31, 49, 52. The author analyses the history of such stereotypes in Canada and how they were engaged in Ontario’s criminal courts. See also Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, p. 2, who states that many Black Americans were also “consigned to labor duties for the duration of their time in the army.”

<sup>83</sup> Walker, “Race and Recruitment,” p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*, p. 107.

<sup>85</sup> Library of Congress [hereafter LC], National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [hereafter NAACP] Branch Files (Foreign), Box I:G221, Folder 13, Toronto, Canada, Clara Deas to James Weldon Johnson, October 2, 1917; Clara Deas to Roy Nash, July 24, 1917.

organization's New York headquarters asking what next steps would be needed to create a branch in Canada.<sup>86</sup> Exasperated by the enlistment battle and then insulted by conscription, Black Canadians in Toronto responded to these racial slights by aligning with this influential Black American organization. They recognized that "the need of such an able and effectual organization in our midst has been clearly evidenced."<sup>87</sup> Intra-continental race activism was a strategy to confront the "growth of prejudice in Canada." Responding to R. W. Coleman, president of its Toronto branch, the acting secretary of the NAACP believed that "there must be an organization in the Dominion as well as the States to fight this terrible monster" (Figure 8).<sup>88</sup> Coleman was further inspired by the "signs of an awakening of



**Figure 8:** Letter from NAACP Acting Secretary to R. W. Coleman, President Toronto Branch. January 3, 1918.

Source: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Branch Files (Foreign)*, Box I:G221, Folder 13, Toronto, Canada. Reproduced courtesy of the NAACP.

86 *Ibid.*, Clara Deas to James Weldon Johnson, October 2, 1917.

87 *Ibid.*, Clara Deas to Roy Nash, July 24, 1917.

88 *Ibid.*, Acting Secretary to Rev. R. W. Coleman, January 3, 1918.

race pride throughout the whole Dominion.”<sup>89</sup> This group of Black Canadians in Toronto became an official NAACP branch in November 1917.<sup>90</sup> Alongside pragmatic intra-continental linkages for race activism, British imperial belonging was also a significant aspect of these wartime Black Canadian experiences. When Black Britons visited Ontario, the need for race consciousness was illustrated through imperial dialectics.

### **Black Britons in the Canadian Periphery/Black Canadians in the British Metropole**

Evidence of Anglo-Canadian anti-Black racism highlighted the complicated relationship among racial identity, imperial belonging, and social place in Canadian society. In August of 1918, a volunteer crew of 13 men from England arrived in Fort William, a small city in northern Ontario, to man a newly built ship and take it overseas. To their dismay, within a few hours of their arrival at the local YMCA where they had made arrangements, 11 members of the crew were asked to leave because they were Black. The current residents could not tolerate sharing living quarters with Black Britons from the West and “East India Islands.” One ousted crew member depicted Canada’s racial violence as worse than German hostilities. He told Port Arthur’s *Daily News-Chronicle*:

In England I have been treated fairly at the YMCA and other places. ... We came here to man this ship when the white man did not volunteer. Germany, I know, has carried out a severe plan of warfare, but honestly, Mr. Reporter, our treatment in Fort William compares with it. I have been in Germany, previous to the outbreak of the war, and there, despite my color, was treated with respect and as a gentleman. ... We are doing our bit as British subjects. Since that time I personally scarcely leave my room ... feeling that I am not wanted to mix with the public here.<sup>91</sup>

Once upon a time, Canada West was a beacon of hope for Black Americans searching for racial freedom in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1918, Canadian social sentiment had fallen far from its prior UGR pedestal. This crew member’s honest appraisal of anti-Black racism in Fort William exposed the impact of racial violence at a local social level. In that same issue an editorial entitled “Treatment Accorded Men in Service of the Empire” chastised “the opinion of some white

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, R. W. Coleman to James Weldon Johnson, December 25, 1917; MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Farewell to the N.A.A.C.P.,” November 23, 1918. After a “petty grievance of a few” led to the demise of the NAACP’s Toronto branch, it disbanded on November 16, 1918.; The Toronto NAACP’s president, R. W. Coleman, was a controversial Reverend of Toronto’s First Baptist Church who remained politically active in the city. See McMaster University Baptist Archives, Toronto, Ont., First [Baptist] Church Minutes, 1905-1919/1919-1937, Monthly Business Meetings Records, July 27, 1920, p. 24 and May 31, 1921, p. 41; MHSO, Black Collection, Universal African Improvement Association [hereafter UAIA] of Toronto records, Minutes of the Universal Negro Improvement Association Toronto Branch, February 19, 1920). A majority vote of 29 members elected him secretary of the Universal Negro Improvement Association’s Toronto branch.

<sup>90</sup> LC, NAACP Branch Files (Foreign), Box I:G221, Folder 13, Toronto, Canada, Acting Secretary to Clara Deas, November 20, 1917.

<sup>91</sup> LAC, Records of the Prime Minister’s Office, RG 13, vol. 229, file 2463-2483 1918, *Daily News-Chronicle*, Port Arthur, Ontario, August 19, 1918.

men” in Ontario who felt that being Black “degrades the man so endowed to an extent as to unfit him to be in the same room or the same building [as] the superior white.” The men were well supported by their ship captain, who claimed that this type of racial segregation was unique to Ontario. “I can truthfully say,” he insisted, “that this is the first town that ever questioned the rights of a colored British subject.” Although his remarks demonstrated his limited familiarity with wartime racisms, they undermined Canada’s international reputation of being a historically racially inclusive country.<sup>92</sup>

Trying to explain away this embarrassing incident to Ottawa’s Minister of Justice, Allen Thomson, director of this YMCA, claimed that his hand had been forced in the matter. He insisted that all of the other residents of the dormitory, along with its matron, had threatened to leave if these “coloured men” were allowed to stay. Thomson reassuringly noted that, other than sleeping over, “the Association was free to the men, and many of the crew and sailors enjoyed its privileges.” From his perspective, nothing could have been done to curb this aversion to intimate interracial socialization and induce an amicable outcome since “we found it impossible to mix black with white in our dormitories.”<sup>93</sup> The Colored Political and Protective Association (CPPA) of Montreal responded to this Jim Crow treatment by writing to Prime Minister Robert Borden on September 12, 1918. Taking a stand for the “protection of our colored citizens,” Corresponding Secretary Arthur J. Thomas, MD, told Borden that the organization considered this “glaring and defiant discrimination an insult to every one of us.” To the CPPA, the Port Arthur incident was just “one of the many discriminations meted out to our men when they volunteer to do their ‘bit’ for Britain, whose loyal sons we are.” They believed that an essential component in the war’s successful “fight for Democracy” was ensuring harmony between the various races. The CPPA logically argued that, since “colored men are good enough to die bravely on the battlefield in ‘No Man’s Land’ for the Empire’s Cause, that they should be given equal treatment under the British flag.”<sup>94</sup> This incident in northern Ontario shows how the war produced occasions that illuminated anti-Black racism in Canadian society.<sup>95</sup> Black Britons, subjects or not, were racially undesirable members of Canadian society. Even though Anglo-Canadians could tolerate their presence, they were not willing to embrace them as though they were fellow British subjects.

When the war drew to a close, war-related interracial tensions and local ramifications did not subside. In fact, these challenges reached a boiling point across the Atlantic in June 1919 with the seaport race riots in England.<sup>96</sup> Even

92 Philippa Levine, “Battle Colors: Race, Sex, and Colonial Soldierly in World War I,” *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Winter), pp. 110, 118; Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, pp. 15-29.

93 LAC, Records of the Prime Minister’s Office, RG 13, vol. 229, file 2463-2483 1918, Allan Thomson to the Minister of Justice, October 22, 1918.

94 *Ibid.*, Arthur J. Thomas on behalf of the Colored Political and Protective Association of Montreal to R. L. Borden [Prime Minister of Canada], September 12, 1918.

95 Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, “The Politics of Intimacy in an Age of Empire” in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 2-4.

96 These race riots were grounded within the social turmoil following the war. Crowds of white English men and women invaded racially mixed neighbourhoods in Liverpool, Bristol, Newport, Cardiff, and Barry,

though Black Britons and their families were the aggrieved parties in the riots, some Canadians did not see it that way. During the House of Commons debates on June 20, 1919, a very cryptic exchange between the Honourable Jacques Bureau of Three Rivers and Sir A. Edward Kemp (Minister of Overseas Forces) inadvertently exposed the taboo nature of anti-Black racism in Canada. This exchange also illustrated the extent to which the state regarded Blacks as undesirable citizens. Following a discussion about the repatriation of Canadian soldiers, Bureau asked Kemp if there were any Black Canadians among the “negroes rioting in England.” If there were, he wanted to know what was being done to “return them to their own country, and what disposition would be made of them as being undesirables?”

Kemp tried to evade the question altogether by pointing out that, if there were any Blacks in the CEF, they would be “scattered through out the forces—one or two here and two or three elsewhere—and they would be treated exactly the same as other Canadian citizens.”<sup>97</sup> He was deliberately trying to prevent the military’s anti-Black racism from tarnishing Canada’s image. The minister was well aware that he was not telling the whole truth but was mindful that the debates were being recorded for public consumption.<sup>98</sup> Kemp knew that, while the Union Jack would not accept anti-Black prejudice, the Canadian military was a different story.

In spite of his earnest attempt to sidestep the issue, Kemp’s political manoeuvring did not distract Bureau. Unsatisfied by the evasive answer, Bureau still wanted to know whether or not Black Canadian soldiers were involved in England’s seaport race riots and reiterated: “My question is, have any steps been taken to ascertain if there are any Canadians among them? If so, how many are there and how is the Government going to dispose of them in view of their being undesirable?” He was aware that such riotous soldiers could have very well been *bona fide* Canadians. Nevertheless, he wanted to know if the government was going to seize the opportunity to rid the country of these racially unsuitable citizens. With the question put so plainly, Kemp finally admitted that nothing had been done since it was not “supposed” that any Black Canadian had been involved in the riots.<sup>99</sup> This exchange between the two officials reflects the lengths the government went to deny the sheer injustices of state-sanctioned racial segregation. Moreover, the questions posed by Bureau demonstrate that Blacks were not wanted, even if they were citizens of the country with longstanding historical roots.<sup>100</sup> From his perspective, blackness was antithetical to true belonging in Canada. The race riots in England would have been the perfect opportunity to purge this racial element

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damaging homes and terrorizing occupants. In one horrific incident, a Black Naval fireman drowned while a crowd of his pursuers encouragingly chanted racial insults. See Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Black 1919: Riots, Racism and Resistance in Imperial Britain* (Liverpool: University Press, 2009).

97 House of Commons, *Debates*, June 20, 1919.

98 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, p. 316. Kemp had been previously contacted and corrected by J. R. B. Whitney for telling Parliament that he was not aware of attempts to organize a unit of Black Canadian soldiers.

99 House of Commons, *Debates*, June 20, 1919.

100 Sealy, “‘Canadianizing’ Blackness,” pp. 91, 100-101. The author provides some key insights into how scholars may begin to “Canadianize” blackness while situating it within transatlantic ideas of Black modernity. Resisting the temptation to depict Black Canadian history as “either a repetition of Black American life, Black African life or Black Caribbean life,” Sealy recognizes that these continental and imperial border-crossings are integral features of Black Canadian identities.

from the country. Bureau was suggesting that, if Black Canadian soldiers had participated in the riots, then the government had a valid excuse to “dispose” of them like unwanted rubbish on the grounds of dishonourable military conduct overseas. Although Black Canadians were not involved in the seaport race riots, they were most definitely involved in a race riot that occurred in Kinmel Park—Canada’s demobilization camp in England.

Soon after the Armistice of November 11, 1918, in the early months of 1919, a confidential report reached Ottawa briefly describing a “disturbance” in the Canadian demobilization camp that had taken place on January 7. According to the report, the disturbance began when a Black Canadian Sergeant Major of the No. 2 Construction Battalion placed a “white man under arrest and put him in charge of a colored escort.”<sup>101</sup> Although the report does not identify the specific charge levied against the Anglo-Canadian man in question, he was arrested for “insolent” behaviour.<sup>102</sup> Private Shepard of the No. 2 recalled that while the group marched on a “[b]ath parade under the direction of Sergeant [Edward] Sealy,” a “White Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO)” made racist comments, “ignored orders from Sealy and interfered with the line of the march.”<sup>103</sup> When he was arrested and locked-up, some of his comrades attempted to remove him from the guardhouse. A riot broke out, and a number of soldiers ended up in the hospital.<sup>104</sup> It was most likely a bitter point of contention that any Anglo-Canadian man would be subject to the authority of a Black Canadian—Sergeant Major or not.<sup>105</sup>

The military report chronicled that “the 275 O.R. of the Second Canadian Construction Co. here, all colored” engaged in a “General Melee” where “razors were used by the colored troops.” It called attention to the fact that “[f]ive white men had their faces cut, and several men were hit with rocks.” Omitting the fact that the men hit by rocks were the Blacks, the report noted that these Black men’s huts had been severely damaged and “the majority of the kits in the hut were rifled.” A subsequent inventory check of their kits and clothing revealed that Anglo-Canadian soldiers had destroyed 450 items belonging to the Black Canadian battalion that had to be replaced.<sup>106</sup> Although only two Black soldiers were directly involved in the arrest of the unnamed Anglo-Canadian soldier, all 275 members of the No. 2 were implicated in the incident report. It strongly implied that these Black men had used excessive violence against the white

101 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 1709, D-3-13, vol. 6, Maj. G. V. Collier to OC Canadian Troops, January 10, 1919.

102 Desmond Morton, “‘Kicking and Complaining’: Demobilization Riots in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, 1918-19,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 61, no. 3 (1980), p. 343. In footnote 37 the author states, “Eyewitness accounts of the riot were furnished by Frank Hessie and James Vittie who assumed that this was the ‘Kinmel Riot.’” See also Ruck, *Black Battalion*, p. 47. During his interview with Ruck, Private Elms of the No. 2 Construction Battalion claimed that the riot broke out after “a white soldier made a racial remark.”

103 Ruck, *Black Battalion*, p. 56; Theobald, “A False Sense of Equality,” p. 21.

104 Ruck, *Black Battalion*, p. 56.

105 Nickolas Gardner, “Disaffection and Disobedience in the Aftermath of the First World War: The Canadian Attack on the Epsom Police Station, June 1919” in Craig Mantle, ed., *The Apathetic and the Defiant: Case Studies of Canadian Mutiny and Disobedience 1812-1919* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008), pp. 439-463. In a turbulent demobilization period, soldiers became confrontational against authorities in order to secure the release of their imprisoned mates.

106 LAC, RG 9, III, vol. 1709, D-3-13, vol. 6, Maj. G. V. Collier to OC Canadian Troops, January 10, 1919.

soldiers. It failed to mention the number of Anglo-Canadian soldiers involved and which group started the fight. Historian Desmond Morton, however, shows that the No. 2 had been forced to take the defensive. They were strategically ambushed when they were at their most vulnerable state: “attacked ... as they paraded for baths.”<sup>107</sup> It is safe to presume that the razors these Black men used to cut the faces of “five white” men were likely on hand because they had intended to use them for shaving, not violence. As these Black men once again tried to parade to their baths in a dignified manner, most likely scantily clothed, their razors would be the only tools they had readily available to fend off their surprise attackers.

It is important to draw attention to the discrepancies between the reported account of the incident and the eyewitness accounts that support Morton’s analysis. The report omitted extremely salient details, which indicates that it was written with a specific agenda in mind. The military official’s report of the “disturbance” at Kimmel Park protected the esteem of Anglo-Canadians. It strategically left out crucial contextual aspects like the sequence of events and how many Anglo-Canadian soldiers were involved. Omitting such details, it produced an account of the event that protected Anglo-Canadian soldiers from reprimand. As a demonstration of racial privilege and solidarity with his fellow Anglo-Canadians, the writer depicted the men of the Black Canadian battalion as the deviants when they were in fact the target of unprovoked bodily violence. Any reader of this report would not likely empathize with Black Canadians, but, quite to the contrary, would most likely conclude that they had audaciously transgressed “proper” racial boundaries. The report suggested that Blacks had somehow crossed the line when they placed a white man under the watchful eye and control of a Black man—thereby reversing racial roles. From this vantage point, the report suggested that these Blacks had apparently forgotten their lowly place in the racial order of things.<sup>108</sup> Anglo-Canadian soldiers were therefore justifiably vexed by such an impertinent usurpation of their racial superiority.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, the report painted a skewed view of Black Canadian men, suggesting that they engaged in barbaric behaviour by attacking other soldiers with razors. In effect, it tried to use this incident as supporting evidence to suggest that Black Canadian men, supposedly racially predisposed to savage violence, were not fit to be in the company of civilized Anglo-Canadian men.<sup>110</sup> By leaving out crucial details as to who initiated the disturbance, failing to explain how it unfolded, and focusing solely on the bodily harm suffered by Anglo-Canadian men, the writer reporting the incident was able to spin the narrative in a way that completely placed the blame on the men of the No. 2. Using these Black Canadian men as scapegoats, the report conversely portrayed the assailants as victims and the aggrieved party as the assailants.

<sup>107</sup> Morton, “Kicking and Complaining,” p. 343; Walker, “Race and Recruitment,” p. 24.

<sup>108</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, p. 59.

<sup>109</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, “‘Social Equality,’ Miscegenation, Labor, and Power” in Numan V. Bartley, ed., *The Evolution of Southern Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 53.

<sup>110</sup> Walker, *Race on Trial*, p. 91.

**“I Say OUR RACE”: Post-War Race Consciousness**

Intra-racial cooperation, race consciousness, and social activism were key elements of Black Canadian responses to racism during the World War I era. The efforts of Black Canadians during the war laid the groundwork for the race consciousness that was vital to postwar Black politics in Ontario. An example can be found in the opinions of Ada Kelly, a public schoolteacher from Windsor. While Kelly firmly embraced the ideas of intra-racial cooperation, race consciousness, and social activism at the end of the war, this stance had not always been the case. Back in 1915, she had responded to the *Observer's* questions in “We Want a Revolution of Thought” and admitted, “Prejudice today is greater than it was sixty years ago.” At that point, she had dismissively suggested that Canadian anti-Black racism was not very harmful since it was expressed “only along social lines.” According to Kelly, Black Canadians were living “in an age ... where the best man wins ... If we are efficient enough to make the necessary progress, no man’s prejudice will be strong enough to keep us down. We will be bound to be recognized.”<sup>111</sup> The subsequent wartime events with respect to Black Canadians altered her understanding of racial uplift and shattered her illusions of a Canadian meritocracy irrespective of race.

By December 1918, Kelly’s convictions about relying on “fair play” in Canadian society to improve the conditions faced by Blacks in Ontario had significantly changed. After observing how hard Black Canadians contended for their right to enlist, she revised her opinions and came to the conclusion that anti-Black racism was a formidable pernicious force that demanded reckoning since it refused to appreciate the earnest and sincere efforts of Black Canadians.<sup>112</sup> During a social event celebrating the fourth anniversary of the *Observer*, she took to the podium calling for proactive race consciousness:

Mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters of our race: take heart, push on and achieve. I say OUR RACE because the other race need not that command surrounded as they are with every advantage there is nothing to stop them from pushing on and achieving. ... So I say to our Afro-Canadians ... We do not know the depths of the hidden powers within us. ... We as a race of people cannot and must not be satisfied just to exist.<sup>113</sup>

As the war drew to a close, Black Canadians in Ontario, like Kelly, were beginning to realize that it was detrimental to continue to assume that all Anglo-Canadians

111 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “We Want a Revolution of Thought by Our People,” November 6, 1915.

112 *The Evening Record* [Windsor], “Drawing of ‘Color Line’ at Theatre Causes Trouble: Riot Narrowly Averted Between Management and Colored Soldiers,” February 7, 1917. “...members of the No. 2 construction battalion, were refused admission to the main floor, because the manager drew the color line. Several kiltie soldiers were in the audience and sided with the colored boys. Some trouble was averted by a quick decision on the part of Capt. Gayfer ... he gave authority to have the men file out of the theatre. .... They were gratified with the display of discipline on the part of the men, who were told that if they had any grievance it would be adjusted without using forcible measures. Sergt. Alcorn, of the military police was forced to draw his bayonet to keep some unruly persons in check. .... the officers of No. 2 construction battalion warned him that an apology was expected and the rule relaxed about barring colored soldiers from the main floor.”

113 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Fourth Anniversary Our Greatest Celebration,” December 21, 1918.



adhered to an enlightened sense of fairness. Canada was not a meritocracy “bound” to recognize the virtues of Black Canadians. Canadians were not obligated to ensure that Blacks enjoyed all the rights and responsibilities of unmitigated Canadian citizenship under a British flag that did not discriminate based on race, colour, or creed.

As Whitney looked ahead and anxiously thought about what the future held for Black Canadians, he used his newspaper to ask Anglo-Canadian readers what kind of conditions Black men would find when they came back from Europe. Would they still be confined to menial jobs regardless of their level of training and education?<sup>114</sup> In an editorial entitled “What-When Our Boys Come Home?” he asked if their sacrifices would be for naught, leaving them “compelled to continue at the same drudging work they had before leaving their homes in [*sic*] behalf of their country, or will they be given equal opportunities with other returned men?”<sup>115</sup> This evidence strongly suggests that, much like Black Americans who critically reflected on postwar perpetuations of anti-Black racism, Black Canadians had learned lessons during wartime that produced a rude awakening.<sup>116</sup>

By the dawn of 1919, Black activism all over the world was stimulated by powerful Pan-African movements like the UNIA—a transnational Black activism organization. Inspired by the UNIA’s president Marcus Garvey as he urged unprecedented race pride, Black Canadians became more aware of race politics on a global scale. Black Canadians in Ontario started to appreciate how their experiences of racial injustice were connected to the plight of Blacks throughout the diaspora.<sup>117</sup> During Toronto’s First Baptist (Black) church’s annual Christmas festival, the programme included an address by Mr. Martin. Originally from London, Ontario, Martin had moved to America 17 years prior and was now the secretary for the YMCA in North Carolina. Visiting his sister over the holidays, he took the opportunity to bring the “Race problem close to home.” He showed the “crowded house” how the “problems of the South are our problems and our problems are their problems as such a way of thinking we would be in unity.”<sup>118</sup> Reverend F. O. Stewart, the young Black pastor of the BME church in Niagara Falls, Ontario, echoed Martin’s sentiments for unity—but not with respect to geopolitics. Stewart beseeched Black Canadians to stop using “petty” intra-racial privileges such as being light-skinned or even trying to pass as “white” to secure individual advancement.<sup>119</sup> Weary of these local intra-racial tensions, Stewart

114 Judith Fingard, “From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and their Families in Halifax, c. 1870-1916,” *Acadiensis*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1995), p. 52.

115 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “What-When Our Boys Come Home?” December 7, 1918.

116 See Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, chap. 4, “At War in the Terrestrial Heaven.”

117 Clarke, *Odysseys Home*, p. 39.

118 MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Locals,” January 4, 1919.

119 Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property” in Kimberlé Crenshaw *et. al.*, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New York Press, 1995), p. 277; Fingard, “Race and Respectability,” p. 179; Carla Marano, “‘We All Used to Meet at the Hall’: Assessing the Significance of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Toronto, 1900-1950,” *Journal of the CHA*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2014), p. 153; Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, p. 229; Jared G. Toney, “Locating Diaspora: Afro-Caribbean Narratives of Migration and Settlement in Toronto, 1914-1929,” *Urban History Review*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2010), pp. 75-87.

deemed such elitist tendencies effectively bankrupt and counter-productive to the progress of Black Canadians in Ontario as a whole. Instead, he encouraged all Blacks to nurture a greater sense of racial pride and intra-racial unity. In his letter published by the *Observer* entitled “Race Pride is One of Our Greatest Needs as a Race of People,” he declared:

It is high time for us ... to begin to realize that we are an established Race of people, and if we are to be a power in the world, we must present to the great masses of the world this one great fact, that we are what we are. ... Race pride for this reconstruction period is a time when all selfish and petty trifles must be cast to the winds and our Race become united as one. ... [T]his new era which has dawned upon us is the greatest in the history of our existence, and the one great question is, What are we going to do about it? I would suggest to talk less and do more. Organize the forces and begin action.<sup>120</sup>

Stewart optimistically hoped for renewed Black Canadian activism on the cusp of a new decade.

The year 1919 was full of possibilities to many Black Canadians who anticipated it as the dawning of a new era in race politics—a time when Black Canadians would stop hoping that racism would go away by appealing to British benevolence and take matters into their own hands. Hoping to inspire Black activism initiatives, in March Whitney heralded the “Get Together Movement,” whereby the “unity among our people in Canada is going to manifest itself in a stronger form than ever known heretofore.” He foresaw the introduction of a new era of pragmatic militancy and believed that “this great movement will be brought about before the close of 1919.”<sup>121</sup> During the spring, a group of nine Black Canadian men in Toronto founded the Coloured Literary Association (CLA). During their second meeting on May 4, 1919, the CLA added three more members and held a lively debate on the subject: “the Negro and the New Reconstruction.” Every member was invited to speak for about five minutes.

Donald Moore appreciated the racial awakenings brought on by the war.<sup>122</sup> His address spoke to the fact that the war had given Blacks a new perspective: a way to see “the world from several view points.” He claimed that it was “now time ... for us to do great things, to observe the part finance plays in the social and political status of a people.” Mr. Watkins, remarking on a personal level, said that the “War of 1914 woke him up to better things.” He “spoke of the oppression of Blacks by Whites” and was convinced that “we should stop and think of the present situation.” After commenting on “Japan’s demand for Race equality,” he wondered, “Why can’t we accomplish something for [the] commercial, financial and educational development of our masses at large?”<sup>123</sup> These Black Canadians

<sup>120</sup> MHSO, *Canadian Observer*, “Correspondence: Race Pride is One of Our Greatest Needs as a Race of People,” February 1, 1919.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, “The Strength in Organization,” March 22, 1919.

<sup>122</sup> Don Moore, *Don Moore: An Autobiography* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1985), pp. 108-120.

<sup>123</sup> MHSO, Black Collection, UAIA of Toronto records, Minutes of the Coloured Literary Association, May 4, 1919.

in Ontario now had a heightened awareness of race politics on an international level and considered the anti-Black racism they faced in Canada as part of a larger system of racial inequality. Nonetheless, the specific conditions of Black Canadians on a national level was clearly at the forefront of these men's minds when, at a meeting a few weeks later, they debated whether or not "the entry of the Negro into the farming industry in Canada [will] be beneficial to the Negro at large?"<sup>124</sup>

Whitney's push for race activism was beginning to come into fruition. Unbeknownst to the founding members of the CLA, the association would soon become the Toronto branch of the UNIA.<sup>125</sup> These CLA meeting minutes speak to the UNIA in Toronto's organic Canadian antecedents.<sup>126</sup> Two months after the CLA was organized, an NAACP branch in Windsor was created in July 1919, and another was formed in Montreal in the early 1920s.<sup>127</sup> On the cusp of a new decade, Black Canadians in Ontario began to shape their shared racial destiny in what many saw as the "New Reconstruction" period.<sup>128</sup>

The war taught Black Canadians that they did not share the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in kind with other Canadians. In fact, "fair play" in Canada's celebrated "Promised Land" was a hollow shell of protection.<sup>129</sup> If Black Canadians were going to improve their socio-economic standing, they would have to come together and strategize the best methods to make the promise of racial freedom in Canada a reality (Figure 9).<sup>130</sup> The war was a portal into a

124 *Ibid.*, May 25, 1919; Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, p. 139.

125 MHSO, Black Collection, UAIA of Toronto records, Minutes of the Universal Negro Improvement Association Toronto Branch, December 1, 1919; Carla Marano, "'Rising Strongly and Rapidly': The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 2 (2010), p. 234; Joan Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton* (Cape Breton: Centre for Cape Breton Studies, Cape Breton University, 2007), p. 36; Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919–1939* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

126 Clarke, *Odysseys Home*, pp. 39, 49; Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, pp. 261–262. Williams' work corresponds to my contention that postwar race consciousness and activism developed in organic and gradual ways. He shows that Black Americans, like Harry Haywood, had learned "valuable lessons in the army about the meaning of democracy, citizenship, manhood, and freedom." Much like the Black Canadian men of the CLA who met to debate and discuss various subjects related to race and racialization on a local, national, continental, and global scale, Haywood also joined a "study group." Here, he conversed and bonded with other Black men as they "read about and discussed various dimensions of the 'race problem.'" After they disbanded, Haywood continued this period of "intellectual self-discovery" and years later joined the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB)—an organization that fused "revolutionary Marxism, black nationalism, and diasporic race consciousness." Haywood participated in the ABB for six months before leaving it to join the Communist Party.

127 LC, NAACP Branch Files (Foreign), Box I:G221, Folder 10, Windsor, Ontario, Canada, Field Secretary to William H. Venable, May 27, 1919; Folder 11, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, Robert A. Valentine to Walter F. White, September 13, 1919. The Colored Political and Protective Association questioned whether or not they should become a branch of the NAACP (Field Secretary to Robert Valentine, January 27, 1920). The Montreal branch of the NAACP was approved in January 1920.

128 Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, p. 9.

129 Nina Reid-Maroney, "History, Historiography, and the Promised Land Project" in Boulou Ebanda de B'beri et al., eds., *The Promised Land: History and Historiography of the Black Experience in Chatham-Kent's Settlements and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 65.

130 As the war drew to a close, Mrs. H.F. Logan and Rev. H.F. Logan of the BME (left of centre) spearheaded the "Colours Fund" and, assisted by the *Canadian Observer*, collected money to procure a plaque to commemorate the patriotic sacrifices and loyal contributions of Black



**Figure 9:** Unveiling Ceremony for No. 2 Construction Battalion Memorial Plaque at Queen's Park.  
*Source:* City of Toronto Archives, *Fonds 2, series 411, Item 86.* Reproduced from the City of Toronto Archives.

new era of twentieth-century Black Canadian agency that was centred on a race consciousness mobilized through social activism and protest politics. As loyal subjects of the British Empire and dutiful Canadian citizens in an era of intense racial tension, Black Canadians joined other Blacks across the diaspora by doing less “asking for” and more “demanding of” their rights.<sup>131</sup>

### Conclusion: A Pivotal Point Along a Difficult Road

The No. 2 Construction Battalion was officially disbanded on September 15, 1920. Given their tumultuous wartime battle against racism, Black Canadians in Ontario and beyond would not soon forget how their rights and responsibilities were denied to them in both subtle and overt ways. This racism is how Black Canadians experienced the “Great War”—a point in Canadian history often described as a definitive event in the development of a unique national identity.<sup>132</sup>

Black Canadian men met relentless racial barriers when they initially attempted to sign up for service in the Canadian military. Consequently, conscription made it impossible for Black Canadians to deny the oppressive nature of anti-Black racism in Canadian society. There were no physical or mental health factors that initially

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Canadians to the First World War. On 5 July 1920, a memorial tablet honouring the “heroes of the No. 2 Construction Battalion” was unveiled at Queen’s Park Legislature. This photograph captures a group of mostly Black Canadians who posed on the front steps with Ontario Premier Ernest Charles Drury and Sir Henry Pellatt. Attendees included returned soldiers, their families, and clergy members representing Ontario’s three predominately Black religious groups: The British Methodist Episcopal (BME), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and the First Baptist Churches. The plaque remained in Queen’s Park for many years. See *Akili: The Journal of African-Canadian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (November 1993), p. 16; Owen Thomas, “Cultural Tourism, Commemorative Plaques, and African-Canadian Historiography: Challenging Historical Marginality,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 29, no. 58 (1996), p. 432.

131 Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, p. 166; For Black Canadian activism in the 1920s into the 1940s, see Carla Marano, “‘Rising Strongly and Rapidly’: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 2 (2010), pp. 233–259, and “‘We All Used to Meet at the Hall’; Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*; Agnes Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Split Labour Market,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1987), pp. 1–20; James W. St. G. Walker, “Race,” *Rights, and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), pp. 122–181; Backhouse, *Colour-Coded*, pp. 173–225; John C. Weaver, “Black Man, White Justice: The Extradition of Matthew Bullock, An African-American Residing in Ontario, 1922,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, vol. 34, no. 4 (1996), pp. 627–660; Donna Hill, ed., *A Black Man’s Toronto 1914–1980: The Reminiscences of Harry Gairey* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981); Sheldon Taylor, “Darkening the Complexion of Canadian Society: Black Activism, Policy-making and Black Immigration from the Caribbean to Canada, 1940–1960s” (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1994); Stanley Grizzle, *My Name is Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1998); Moore, *Don Moore: An Autobiography*; Constance Backhouse, “‘I Was Unable to Identify with Topsy’: Carrie M. Best’s Struggle Against Racial Segregation in Nova Scotia, 1942,” *Atlantis*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 16–26; Carmela Patrias and Ruth A. Frager, “‘This is Our Country, These are Our Rights’: Minorities and the Origins of Ontario’s Human Rights Campaign,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 82, no. 1 (March 2001), pp. 1–35; Ross Lambertson, *Repression and Resistance: Canadian Human Rights Activists, 1930–1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

132 Sean Flynn Foyn, “The Underside of Glory: AfriCanadian Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1917,” (M.A. thesis, University of Ottawa, 2000), p. 110, Cedric Jennings, *Canada in the First World War and the Road to Vimy Ridge* (Ottawa: Communications Division, Veterans Affairs Canada, 1992); Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986); Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997). See Chapter 1 discussing Canada’s nationally self-serving romanticized re-imaginings of the “Great War.”

made Blacks unfit to fight—there was no logical reason why they were rejected, segregated, and then later forced into the CEF. The prevalence of racism in social practice denied them their rights as British subjects and Canadian citizens.<sup>133</sup> This fact convinced many Black Canadians in Ontario that their racial identity and the corresponding stereotypical assumptions about their race were not the crux of the problem. Rather, the problem rested on how invested Anglo-Canadians were in defining *their* racial identity privileges by their ability to exclude Black Canadians through anti-Black racisms.<sup>134</sup> Upon the conclusion of the war, many Black Canadians in Ontario came to terms with the reality of race politics in Canada. They had helped to win the war, but in their efforts to do so they lost vital home-front battles. Many felt as though they had conceded to Jim Crow in the military.

Black Canadians may have been anxious to serve their King and country, but the feeling was not reciprocated. The war gave them a clearer understanding of Canada as a particular type of racialized state. Unlike brazen anti-Black racisms in the USA, Canadian expressions were veiled, often polite, albeit sinister articulations of historically rooted racial hierarchies. Yet, as a meaningful by-product of these affronting experiences, Black Canadians were inspired to nurture a deeper race consciousness, and their social activism in Ontario gained needed momentum. As a result of this symbiotic relationship between anti-Black racism and Black activism on the cusp of a new decade, many Black Canadians in Ontario began to rally together to do something about racial discrimination they faced by standing up for themselves and demanding that they be treated fairly. In doing so, they were embarking on what was arguably one of the most arduous and unrelenting battles of the twentieth century.

133 Ruck, *The Black Battalion*, p. 27.

134 Goldberg, *The Racial State*, p. 79. The author avers that historicist racial states (like Canada) are “ambiguous, ambivalent, indeed, hypocritical.” Unlike the naturalist racial states (like the USA) where “the battle lines could be more directly drawn,” historicist racial states employed “politeness, coded significance (the very implications of ‘progress’ tending to hide assumptions about inferiority), and tolerance as veils for continued invocation of racial power.”