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The Men in Green: African Americans and the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942

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The Men in Green:
African Americans and the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

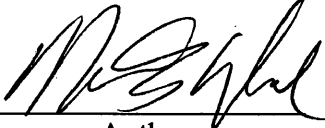
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2002

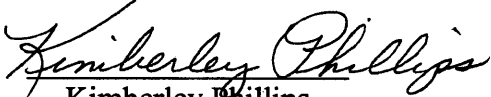
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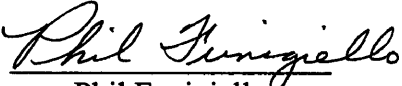
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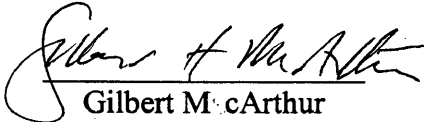

Gilbert M. cArthur

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of African Americans in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps at Yorktown, Virginia. The CCC was a New Deal work program that employed young men and World War I veterans to work in reforestation and conservation projects throughout the country. Over 2.5 million men served in the CCC, and roughly 250,000 of those men were African American. Black enrollees in the program faced widespread discrimination and segregation. This study argues that the CCC became most segregated at the local level. However, the most powerful critique of segregation within the program also developed locally. Whites insistence on segregation allowed blacks to turn that very insistence against them. Black leaders in the Tidewater area campaigned for the appointment of black educators in the Yorktown camps on the notion that “separate but equal” insured the employment of black teachers in all-black schools. Meanwhile, enrollees, lacking access to prominent government officials, acted on a daily basis to circumvent the rigid discipline and work schedules practiced by the white camp commanders. They also responded to the hostility of the local white population by openly protesting in a narrowly averted race riot, and by finding acceptance in local black neighborhoods.

**THE MEN IN GREEN: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE CIVILIAN
CONSERVATION CORPS, 1933-1942**

INTRODUCTION

Between 1933 and 1942, over 2.5 million men participated in the largest conservation project in American history. They planted over one billion trees, built 5,000 miles of roads, and constructed virtually the entire infrastructure for the nation's national parks. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) became the most popular program in President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal alphabet soup. Even today, ceremonies are held across the country to honor the efforts of the CCC, and the few remaining veterans of the program hold annual meetings to discuss their fond memories.¹

Lost in the cacophony of memorials and anniversary celebrations is the way in which the history of the CCC offers a window into New Deal era social relations. Of those 2.5 million men that served in the CCC, 250,000 were African American. Though promised "equal participation and opportunity," black men that enrolled in the CCC often found something far different. Black enrollment numbers were capped at an artificially low level, black camps were strictly segregated, and black men were not allowed to serve in most supervisory positions.

New Deal historians have largely ignored black participation in the CCC. The epic tomes of New Deal history briefly mention the program as a whole, but never reflect on African American involvement. Most of the available works on the CCC fall into the category of celebratory history. The handful of academic works on the CCC dedicate no more than a chapter to black participation in the program, and then analyze it only from the national level, relying on CCC documents alone to analyze a multifaceted subject.

¹ Stan Cohen, The Tree Army: A Pictorial History of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942 (Missoula, Missouri: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1980), 23.

Olen Cole's research on African American CCC camps in California focused only on national black organizations and ignored local forces. He has argued that the segregationist policy of the CCC was a direct product of Army doctrine and prevailing government practice. While partially true, this argument has not adequately addressed the impact of local events in the formation of national CCC policy.²

My evidence illustrates that Roosevelt's laudable efforts to place men in the field as quickly as possible led to the increased participation of local and state authorities. The participation of local government officials often led to widespread discrimination against African American applicants, which was compounded by the official policy of segregation adopted by the CCC. However, that policy of segregation was not created in a vacuum.

The genesis of the CCC's segregation policy can be found in the hostility of some local white communities to the placement of black camps in their neighborhoods. Acceptance of all-black camps in Yorktown rested solely on the practice of segregation and the preservation of skilled CCC supervisory positions for white workers. Many white communities were willing to accept black camps only with the assurance that no black enrollees would be allowed to serve in supervisory positions. For communities such as Yorktown, black men in leadership positions of virtually any kind proved

² James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956); Cohen, The Tree Army; Olen Cole, The African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999); Charles Harper, The Administration of the Civilian Conservation Corps (Clarksburg, West Virginia: Clarksburg Publishers, 1939); Leslie Lacy, The Soil Soldiers: The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Great Depression (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1976); William Leuchtenberg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1963); Perry Merrill, Roosevelt's Forest Army: A History of the Civilian Conservation Corps (Montpelier, Vermont: Perry H. Merrill Publishing, 1981); John Salmond, The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study (Durham: Duke University Press,

anathema. CCC Director Robert Fechner acknowledged this reality when establishing national CCC policy.

Local black leaders in the Yorktown community professed an alternative narrative. Hughes Robinson argued that African American enrollees deserved to be considered for any leadership position in the CCC despite the outcries of the local white community. He developed an education program, with the help of the president of Hampton Institute, to prepare the men for life outside of the camps. Despite their rigorous work schedules, the enrollees actively participated and helped shape the contents of the program. When Robinson's educational framework became a standard for all black camps, he worked with other organizations to secure the appointment of black educators in black CCC camps by working with a Democratic Party in search of black votes and turning whites insistence on segregation against them

The efforts of local leaders were enhanced by the individual actions of the enrollees themselves. Enrollees did not have access to prominent officials so they instead turned to a long history of resistance to arbitrary authority, exclusion, and intrusion into their private lives. The Army-like rigidity of camp life and the pervasive racism of the local community led to periods of widespread dissatisfaction. Enrollees expressed their displeasure by refusing to work and deserting the camps. The men also attempted to overcome the limitations placed on the exercise of their leisure. In one extreme example, enrollees encircled the local jail to defend six men they believed falsely accused of injuring a local white child. The men ultimately found a myriad of means to mitigate the racial policies of the CCC and the local community.

1967); Arthur Schlesinger, The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

Facing exclusion from the environs of Yorktown proper, black enrollees spent their weekends visiting local black communities. In Uniontown, Newport News, and other surrounding black neighborhoods, enrollees found the freedom and acceptance denied them by camp officials and local white citizens. Despite their regional and age differences, the men turned segregation into congregation.

The history of African American involvement in the CCC is incomplete without an analysis of events at the local level. A macro view of events ignores the actions of individuals and instills a false sense of complete authority to government officials. The policy of segregation adopted by the CCC had its roots in local opposition. Likewise, black criticism of that policy can only be analyzed from the bottom up.

Chapter one of the thesis analyzes the development of the CCC program and its links to segregation. Chapter two is a history of educational efforts in the Yorktown camps that outlines the efforts of local black elites to develop classes for enrollees and the role that black enrollees played in the selection of courses. The chapter also examines the efforts of black leaders to gain employment opportunities for black educators in the CCC and the ways in which the educational program changed under the direction of the CCC. The third and final chapter provides an in-depth look at the efforts of the enrolled men to shape the nature of their work and their leisure.

My analysis utilizes a wide range of hitherto unexamined primary sources to paint a portrait of the CCC at the local level. Prior CCC historians have relied solely on the massive CCC document collection in the National Archives. The records contain voluminous reports from the camp commanders on camp activities, but they contain little information on the interaction between enrollees and local authorities. This analysis

augments CCC sources with material from the records collections of Colonial National Historical Park, Hampton Institute, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Virginia State Library.

CHAPTER I

A SUM OF ITS PARTS: THE CREATION OF THE CCC

Segregation in the Civilian Conservation Corps was a direct product of the organization's rapid assembly, its reliance on state and local government agencies, and the complicity of CCC officials. Black enrollees faced discrimination in the selection process and segregation inside of the camps. In Yorktown, white residents refused to accept four black CCC camps unless the program insured skilled positions would be available only to whites and that the camps would adopt the practice of segregation. The national leadership of the CCC determined that local and state support was vital to the success of the CCC, and refused to sacrifice that support to challenge any prevailing social practices. The United States Army, a bastion of segregation in its own right, worked in tandem with local officials to insure that the CCC would not become a social experiment in integration. The Director of the CCC capitalized on segregation as the centerpiece of a strategy to garner local support for African American CCC camps in Yorktown and national support for CCC policy. As a result, the CCC became most segregated at the local level.¹

¹ Information on discrimination in the selection process can be found in John A. Salmond, The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967). The best secondary resource available on the Army's relationship with the CCC is Charles W. Johnson, "The Army, The Negro and the Civilian Conservation Corps," Military Affairs 3 (October 1972): 82-88. However, my argument stresses the role of local white communities in the formulation of CCC policy. The aforementioned authors largely disregard local reaction to the camps because they rely solely on the CCC document collection in the National Archives. This study attempts to meld that material with state and local records ignored by prior CCC historians.

Franklin Roosevelt was elected in 1932 on the promise of a New Deal—a program to alleviate the nation’s gripping economic crisis. One of his first decisions as President was the implementation of a national reforestation program, loosely based on a similar program he initiated while governor of New York. It combined two of Roosevelt’s major objectives as President: the development of land and water resources and the economic relief of unemployed men. On the morning of March 14, 1933, he discussed the basic framework of the program with his advisor, and close friend, Raymond Moley. After explaining the program, Roosevelt exclaimed, “I think I’ll go ahead with this, the way I did on beer”—ten days later the bill became law. More than any other New Deal agency, the CCC bore Roosevelt’s personal mark.²

The details of the proposed bill were openly debated among Roosevelt’s cabinet members. On March 15, Roosevelt presented the members with his plan to employ 500,000 men in a national reforestation program by the beginning of June. After reading the bill, the secretaries of Agriculture, Labor, War, and the Interior argued that the CCC should be “strictly limited to works which are not available as projects for public works . . . and it is highly desirable that they should be specifically confined to forestry and soil erosion projects in the Bill.” By limiting the program, the secretaries hoped to counteract the inevitable criticism of labor organizations and skittish southern Congressmen.³

² James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1956); William E. Leuchtenberg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1963); Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958).

³ Salmond, The Civilian Conservation Corps, 10; Harold Ickes, The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes: The First Thousand Days (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 7.

In his “Relief of Unemployment” address to Congress, Roosevelt formally proposed “to create a Civilian Conservation Corps” to be involved in “simple work,” not interfering with “normal employment,” and following the suggestion of his advisors, confining itself to “forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control and similar projects.” In addition to the obvious material gain offered each participant, Roosevelt believed the program’s greatest contribution would be “the moral and spiritual value of such work.” The overwhelming majority of unemployed Americans, he claimed, “would infinitely prefer to work,” and the CCC would serve to “eliminate to some extent at least the threat that enforced idleness brings to spiritual and moral stability.”⁴

Wanting to act as quickly as possible, Roosevelt planned to utilize the existing machinery of the War, Labor, and Interior departments. The creation of an entirely separate government entity was too time consuming, and virtually impossible given the limited size of the federal bureaucracy in 1933. Initial funding came from unappropriated public works funds rather than separate government expenditures. Following the President’s message, identical bills for “The Relief of Unemployment Through the Performance of Useful Public Work and for Other Purposes” were introduced in the House and Senate chambers, and were quickly referred to a joint congressional committee.⁵

With the noted exception of the *New York Times*, the mainstream press largely ignored the measure, but it drew strong dissent from organized labor. Led by William Green of the American Federation of Labor, labor organizations strongly abhorred the

⁴ Congress, House, President’s Message to Congress on Relief of Unemployment, 73rd Congress, 1st sess., Congressional Record, v. 77, pt. 1, 650.

involvement of the Army in the CCC program, as well as the proposed \$1 per day wage scale. Green feared that the plan would lead to the “regimentation of labor,” and claimed that the bill trumpeted “grave apprehensions in the hearts and minds of labor.” Green, criticizing the involvement of the Army, proclaimed before a congressional committee, “This is military control itself . . . It smacks as I see it, of fascism, of Hitlerism, of a form of sovietism.” A.F. Whitney, president of the Brotherhood of Trainmen, similarly complained that the proposed pay scale “would place Government’s endorsement upon poverty at a bare subsistence level.”⁶

In her testimony before the committee, Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins attempted to dispel the rumors being spread by the legislation’s vocal opponents. She stressed the need for programs directed at young, unmarried men, commonly left out of state and local welfare programs. Many of these young men, according to Perkins, had been forced “to a standard of living and type of behavior which they as good, sound Americans could not endorse.” When asked about the \$1 per day wage upon private industry, she dismissed labor critics, stating, “I think that ordinary self protection would lead industrialists to recognize the need of paying a wage which will produce more purchasing power.”⁷

Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur appeared before the committee and attempted to fully explain the role of the military in the project. The Army would be responsible for establishing and commanding each of the camps, and would provide food, shelter, and clothing for each enrollee. Roosevelt relied on the Army largely

⁵ Ibid, 701.

⁶ New York Times, 22 March 1933, 2; Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, Unemployment Relief: Joint Hearings on S. 598, 73rd Cong., 1st sess., 23 March 1933, 8.

⁷ Unemployment Relief, 22, 25-26.

out of necessity—no other government agency was capable of mobilizing a significant number of men in such a short amount of time. In fact, Roosevelt’s call for an initial deployment of 500,000 men was the largest mobilization in the United States since World War I. Despite the obvious need for military involvement, members of Congress worried that the enrollees would undergo military training. MacArthur assured the members that there would be “No military training whatsoever.”⁸

The final bill, approved by the joint committee and delivered on the House and Senate floors, varied greatly from the original proposal. Direct references to the War Department and the \$1 per day wage were struck from the document; in their place, the bill authorized the President to “under such rules and regulations as he may prescribe and by using such existing departments or agencies as he may designate, to provide for employing citizens of the United States who are unemployed, in the construction, maintenance and carrying out of works of a public nature in connection with the forestation of lands belonging to the United States.” The language was significantly vague in order to allow Roosevelt the flexibility to develop the program as he wished within a broad set of guidelines. Several members amended the bill, adding minor points, but one amendment, written by the sole black member of the House, Oscar DePriest, a Democrat from Illinois, proved to have far reaching consequences. The amendment, initially an afterthought, provided that “no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or creed.” The struggle to

⁸ Ibid, 42.

uphold the integrity of that statement proved to be a contentious issue for the duration of the program.⁹

After receiving congressional approval, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 6101 officially creating the CCC. The order established a fund for the program which drew from unobligated public works funds, and government departments were required to furnish the program with supplies and materials. Robert Fechner, vice president of the American Federation of Labor and a leading figure in the International Association of Machinists, was appointed as the director of the program. His ties to organized labor proved useful in dampening their vocal objections to the program. Roosevelt also appointed an oversight Advisory Council to the Director composed of representatives from the War, Agriculture, Labor, and Interior departments. Each individual agency was responsible for a particular aspect of the program, while Fechner and the CCC office coordinated the activities of the four agencies. According to Roosevelt, the Army and “the forestry people” in the Agriculture and Interior departments “would really run the show;” Labor would “select the men and make the rules;” and Fechner would “go along and give everybody satisfaction and confidence.”¹⁰

Facing a June 5 deadline, government officials wasted no time in cementing the initial structure of the program. The Department of Labor had the task of selecting and enrolling eligible candidates for the program. Understaffed and

⁹ Public Act No. 5, a copy can be found in “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, Executive Correspondence, The Executive Papers of George C. Peery. The executive correspondence of Governor Peery will hereafter be referred to as GCP. Nancy J. Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 81-84, contains a brief biography of DePriest.

overwhelmed by the number of applicant, the agency could not enroll so many men, so quickly. They decided instead to rely on state and local relief agencies to enroll the men. The state and local agencies would then report directly to the Department of Labor. Practically overnight, Department of Labor officials prepared detailed instruction booklets for each relief official and released information to the press about the upcoming enrollment. Thus, the decentralized nature of the selection process was a direct product of the hurried attempt to place men in the field by the summer.¹¹

In Virginia, the selection of enrollees came under the auspices of the Virginia Emergency Relief Agency (later renamed the State Department of Welfare). CCC Director Robert Fechner set quotas for each state, which were based roughly on the total number of men on state relief rolls in relation to the total nation-wide. The director of the CCC selection program for the Department of Labor, W. Frank Persons, then passed the totals to the state director of welfare relief, who divided the totals among various counties and towns. Each county appointed a local official, usually someone already acting as a state relief agent in the area, to recruit and enroll eligible men in the program. Based on their own judgment of the applicant's ability to perform the job, local officials, not state or federal, had the authority to select or deny individual applicants. In the words of Arthur James, the Virginia Commissioner of Public Welfare, "the selection, therefore, becomes a matter of social work,

¹⁰ Executive Order 6101, copy in "Federal CCC" file, Box 16, GCP; Salmond, New Deal Case Study, 27-28, Schlesinger, Age of Roosevelt, 335-339.

¹¹ Frances Perkins to George Peery, 15 April 1933, "Federal CCC" file, Box 16, GCP. For a more complete discussion of black enrollment in the CCC consult John A. Salmond, "The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Negro," Journal of American History 52 (June 1965): 73-88.

judgment, and conscience, over which no one except the communities has any real control.”¹²

Despite their relative autonomy, selecting agents had to follow basic guidelines from the Department of Labor. For example, the program was initially limited to “young men between the ages of 18 and 25,” who were “citizens of the United States, unmarried and unemployed who wish to volunteer for the work, and who wish to allot a substantial portion of their \$30 monthly cash allowance to their dependants.” The men were also expected to be physically fit, and able to serve for at least one six-month enrollment period. In addition, the Department of Labor insisted that “no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or creed.” Some selecting agents, however, did everything within their power to resist the Department of Labor’s non-discrimination clause.¹³

The selection of black enrollees proved to be a troubling issue from the very beginning of the CCC. Immediately after the initial selection process began, reports from the South suggested that local selection agents were excluding blacks from enrollment. In Georgia, selection agents refused to enroll a single black applicant for almost a year. Several prominent black citizens complained to the Department of Labor and the CCC. Director Fechner responded that there was little he could do to rectify the problem. Meanwhile, W. Frank Persons decided to take a more active approach by threatening to withhold the state’s entire CCC allotment for the

¹² William A. Smith to W. Frank Persons, 3 August 1936, “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, GCP; Selection Bulletin No. 1, “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, GCP; Newport News Daily Press, 28 April 1933.

¹³ Selection Bulletin No. 2, “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, GCP.

upcoming enrollment period. Facing an elimination of their enrollment, Georgia officials relented, accepting a token number of black applicants into the program.¹⁴

During Virginia's first enrollment period, a local selecting agent in Portsmouth, an area containing a substantial black population, refused to accept any black applicants into the program. J. Thomas Newsome, the black editor of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, wrote a scathing editorial decrying the low rates of black enrollment in Portsmouth and other cities in Virginia. Arthur James responded to Newsome, in a letter later published in the newspaper, that he had contacted each local relief agency in the state and instructed them that blacks were indeed eligible for enrollment. Eventually, Newsome's protest led to the full enrollment of black men in the Portsmouth area.¹⁵

Overall, Virginia proved more willing to enroll black men in the CCC than most other southern states. According to a survey conducted by the state, black men composed approximately 15% of the total Virginia CCC enrollment for 1935, and it appears this percentage stayed relatively constant throughout the life of the program. This percentage fell short of the actual 26.8% of the total Virginia population in 1930 that was black, and the even larger percentage of blacks on state relief rolls. However, the state more than met the 10% black enrollment rate mandated by Director Fechner, and surpassed the 5% to 10% black enrollment average in southern

¹⁴ Salmond, *New Deal Case Study*, 83-85, 94. The first black enrollees from Georgia constituted less than 1% of the state's total enrollees.

¹⁵ *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 8 July 1933, 2.

states with much larger African American populations such as Mississippi and Georgia.¹⁶

The CCC was not the only New Deal program beset by discrimination. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), the New Deal program that would eventually become one of the largest employers of African Americans in the country, experienced similar enrollment problems. During the initial phases of the program, local selecting agents refused to hire African Americans. Black enrollees were also allowed very limited access to supervisory positions. The National Recovery Administration was widely criticized by black organizations for codifying large wage discrepancies between white and black workers in the South. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, a program that paid farmers to withdraw cotton land from production, relied on county committees to administer the law at the local level. The committees excluded blacks from participation, which allowed white landowners to institute policies that drove black landowners into the ranks of sharecroppers and forced growing numbers of sharecroppers off the land entirely.¹⁷

An exception to the pattern of discrimination in New Deal programs was the Public Works Administration (PWA). Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes utilized his complete control of the PWA to “offer blacks a square deal.” When the PWA

¹⁶ Unfortunately, no state enrollment sheets exist before 1935. The percentage of African American involvement in the program was calculated using October, 1935 enrollment data from Arthur T. James to George Peery, 5 October 1933, “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, GCP; and the calculations presented in Joseph Carvalho III, “Race, Relief and Politics: The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942, Masters thesis, College of William and Mary, 1977, 66. State population figures came from United States Census Bureau, 19th Census of the United States, v. 2, “Characteristics of the Population” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 134.

¹⁷ Earl Lewis et al, To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 409-433.

began to build public housing units, Ickes instituted specific percentage contract requirements. The PWA contracts required contractors to insure that the number of blacks hired and their percentage of the project payroll was equal to the proportion of African Americans in the 1930 occupational census. Historian Nancy Weiss argues that “agencies [like the PWA] that were run with heavy centralized control made it easier to protect the interest of blacks; where local control was powerful, there was always a battle.”¹⁸

The exclusion of African American enrollees, initiated by local selection officials, was greatly exacerbated by the official policies of the CCC. Problems at the national level began first and foremost with the camp site selection process. Sites were selected based on the labor needs of the Interior and Agriculture departments. Fechner assessed those needs, and after consulting with leading Army officials, selected the final location of each CCC camp. What became vital for African Americans was the selection of camp sites for black camps. In discussing the matter, Fechner wrote, “Whether we like it or not, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that there are communities and States that do not want and will not accept a Negro Civilian Conservation Corps camp.” Fechner further declared that he was unwilling “to compel any community to accept a Negro company. . . against its will.” As a result, many areas throughout the country did not have enough black camps to house African American enrollees, thus placing a significant limit on black enrollment.¹⁹

¹⁸ Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 50-52. It is interesting that Weiss makes no more than a passing reference to this argument. I intend to explore this idea more fully in my upcoming dissertation.

¹⁹ Robert Fechner to Robert J. Bulkley, 4 June 1936, “CCC Negro Selection” file, Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Robert Fechner to Thomas L. Griffith, 21 September 1935, “CCC Negro Selection” file,

The CCC's support for segregation was not the sole responsibility of Robert Fechner. The policies of the CCC ran congruent with, and were unabashedly supported by, officials in the War Department. In the words of a dissenting NAACP official, "the War Department policy is segregation top to bottom in everything it handles." In his study of the Army's role in the CCC, historian Charles Johnson came to a similar conclusion, arguing "this was clearly discrimination based on race." The War Department's policy on segregation was an unwritten code that placed strict limits on the positions available to black recruits. African American soldiers were overwhelmingly relegated to so-called menial jobs such as food preparation and ditch digging. During World War I black soldiers expressed their anger at the military's rigid caste system, and that same criticism would take on a new life as black enrollees in the CCC entered camps operated by the War Department staffed by Army officers steeped in the culture of military segregation.²⁰

Following the suggestion of Colonel Major, the Army's representative to the CCC Advisory Council, Fechner decided in 1935 to place black enrollment on a "replacement only" basis, effectively placing a cap on the development of new black camps. As a result, black enrollees--who normally stayed in the program longer than their white counterparts—found fewer and fewer opportunities to participate in the program.²¹

Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD. It is interesting to note that Roosevelt, as assistant secretary of the Navy during World War I, supported the racial segregation of the armed forces.

²⁰ Charles W. Johnson, "The Army, The Negro and the Civilian Conservation Corps," *Military Affairs* 3 (October 1972): 82-88. It is interesting to note that Roosevelt, as assistant secretary of the Navy during World War I, supported the racial segregation of the armed forces. Lewis et al, *To Make Our World Anew*, 412.

²¹ *Ibid*, 83.

Fechner supported the Army's decision to appoint only white officers and supervisory personnel in black camps because Fechner knew that the Army was vital to the success of the CCC, and he did not want to challenge them. The Army tried to support their segregationist stance by presenting Fechner with a series of studies—conducted by the Army during World War I to blunt the criticism of black newspaper editors critical of the military's policy—that black men performed more efficiently under white supervision.²²

Fechner's support for white supervisors in black camps, however, must not be viewed as a mere capitulation to the War Department. In his correspondence with community and state leaders, Fechner realized almost immediately that the promise of strict segregation proved useful in gaining local support for black camps. Local communities in Virginia proved willing to accept black camps if they conformed to southern labor and social practices. Any camp that outwardly appeared to thwart the southern divisions of labor and white male hegemony, as witnessed in Yorktown, Virginia, faced a vehement backlash from the surrounding community.

On April 9, 1933, two all-black camps were established at Colonial National Monument in Yorktown, Virginia. The two camps, comprised of Virginia and Maryland recruits, housed over 400 enrollees in a series of buildings hastily constructed from prefabricated lumber supplies. On October 13, 1933, two new black companies, containing 400 men from New York City and the surrounding area, were moved from Wawayanda, New York to the grounds at Yorktown, erecting two camps adjacent to the existing site. Yorktown had been chosen as a CCC site because of its noted historical importance, the insistence of the park's zealous supervisor, and

²² Ibid, 82.

because the land was owned by the federal government, offering the CCC more leverage in the event that local citizens opposed the establishment of the camps. According to local newspaper reports, the Yorktown community embraced the camps, in the hope that the historical restoration of the Revolutionary battlefield, along with Rockefeller's vast colonial reconstruction project several miles up the road in Williamsburg, would bolster the area's tourism industry and boost local revenue. However, local support proved to be tenuous at best.²³

In October 1935, a rumor began to circulate within the community that the white supervisors in the Yorktown camps were about to be replaced by blacks from the surrounding area. Since the inception of the CCC, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes had been arguing for equal access to supervisory positions in the program. A noted integrationist and former chairman of the NACCP in Chicago, Ickes hoped to use his authority as head of the Department of Interior to change the policy of segregation within CCC camps located on National Park Service property. In a letter to Fechner, Ickes requested that the CCC director help "arrange for the appointment of colored Superintendents and Foremen in some of the camps that are manned by colored enrollees." Upon receiving the note, Fechner quickly penned a response, arguing instead that "from all the information available, I seriously doubt if

²³ Camp NM-1 Inspection Report, 10 March 1934, "Virginia NM-1" file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Camp NM-2 Inspection Report, 10 March 1934, "Virginia NM-2" file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Camp NM-3 Inspection Report, 10 March 1934, "Virginia NM-3" file, Box 135, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Camp NM-4 Inspection Report, 10 March 1934, "Virginia NM-4" file, Box 135, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Newport News Daily Press, 14 May 1933, 1; Newport News Daily Press, 18 May 1933, 6; Newport News Daily Press, 20 June 1933, 3; Newport News Daily Press, 3 December 1933, 4-5.

the appointment of negro [sic] supervisory personnel could be successfully undertaken,” and any such action might prove to be a “definite menace to the success that we have achieved.”²⁴

Ickes, however, disagreed, and responded with a strongly worded defense of integration:

I have your letter of September 24 in which you express doubt as to the advisability of appointing Negro supervisory personnel in Negro CCC camps. For my part, I am quite certain that Negroes can function in supervisory capacities just as efficiently as can white men and I do not think that they should be discriminated against merely on account of their color. I can see no menace to the program that you are so efficiently carrying out in giving just and proper recognition to members of the Negro race.²⁵

Meanwhile, throughout this exchange, Ickes corresponded with Roosevelt, encouraging him to become personally involved in the matter. On September 27, the President responded by sending a hastily prepared, hand-written message to Fechner’s office, in which Roosevelt asked the director to place black foremen “in the Park Service CCC camps, where the boys are colored.” Upon receiving the note,

²⁴ Harold Ickes to Robert Fechner, 20 September 1935, “CCC Negro Foremen” file, Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Robert Fechner to Harold Ickes, 24 September 1935, “CCC Negro Foremen” file, Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD. For a broader analysis of Harold Ickes’s views on racial discrimination see Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 51-53, 158-159; Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 112-114; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 67-69.

Fechner did nothing. He refused to act on the request until the President could be properly warned about the possible backlash from local politicians and residents.²⁶

Two weeks later, Ickes became frustrated with the CCC director's inaction and demanded an explanation. Fechner finally scheduled a meeting with Roosevelt and explained that any such change in policy would lead to considerable displeasure in CCC camp communities throughout the country—not just in the South. The minutes of the meeting are unavailable, but it appears that, according to a brief summary prepared by Fechner, the two struck an agreement to promote only fifteen black enrollees to non-technical foremen positions in black CCC camps located on National Park Service properties. The plan was about to be placed into action when the information somehow leaked to congressional representatives and local politicians in Yorktown, Virginia.²⁷

The source of the leak remains unclear, but it appears that the person carefully selected the recipients of his or her information. The most significant recipient was

²⁵ Harold Ickes to Robert Fechner, 26 September 1935, "CCC Negro Foremen" file, Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

²⁶ Franklin Roosevelt to Robert Fechner, 27 September 1935, "CCC Negro Foremen" file, Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Robert Fechner to Harold Ickes, 26 September 1935, "CCC Negro Foremen" file, Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

²⁷ Robert Fechner to Harry Byrd, 21 October 1935, "CCC Negro Foremen" file, Box 700, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD. My discussion of Roosevelt's intervention is a significant divergence from the existing scholarship on the CCC. Salmond, *New Deal Case Study*, and Olen Cole, *The African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999) both argue that Roosevelt adamantly backed the demands of the War Department; my evidence suggests that Roosevelt, at least for a time, was convinced by Ickes to experiment by placing a small number of black supervisors in black CCC camps. My upcoming dissertation will show that Ickes's efforts were finally rewarded in 1937 when Roosevelt approved the appointment of an all-black supervisory staff to a Gettysburg,

Harry F. Byrd, a Democratic senator from Virginia. By 1935, Byrd and several of his southern counterparts in the Senate were beginning to express their frustration with Roosevelt's New Deal programs. A year later, they would formally coalesce into a solidly anti-New Deal voting block that drastically circumscribed Roosevelt's ability to pass social legislation through Congress.²⁸ News of any change in the CCC's segregation policy, particularly within a Virginia camp, would have certainly raised the ire of Senator Byrd.

In a letter to Senator Byrd and the Governor of Virginia George Perry, S.A. Curtis, president of the First National Bank of Yorktown and an active community leader, claimed that an order "has been issued to replace all white foremen," which would have a dire effect on civil disobedience; because, as Curtis argued "the population in the immediate vicinity of these camps is about 75 percent Negro." Believing that it was "hard enough now to maintain order with the limited police protection obtainable in rural sections, Curtis felt that "turning these 800 additional Negroes loose without white supervision" would be "a very serious menace to the lives and properties of every citizen of the lower peninsula." In a direct political threat, he stated, "Of late years the voters in Warwick, York, and James City counties, which are affected, have shown strong Republican leanings in national elections, and it is my opinion that if this order is not changed all three counties will refuse to support Democratic nominees."²⁹

Pennsylvania CCC camp. My evidence suggests that Ickes personally chose the Gettysburg camp site to prove a point to southern congressman that had thwarted his earlier efforts.

²⁸ For an excellent account of Virginia politics during the New Deal consult Ronald Heinemann, Harry Byrd of Virginia (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

²⁹ S.A. Curtis to Harry F. Byrd, 24 October 1935, "Federal CCC" file, Box 16, GCP. It should be noted that Curtis's population statistics are tremendously inflated, even when

Another prominent Yorktown citizen, A.J. Renforth, seconded Curtis's plea, warning that with "only one county police officer and one sheriff to keep order" the situation could possibly become a "great menace." For Renforth, the white foremen were a powerful control element, and if trouble were someday to arise, the foremen could be used as "peace officers." Renforth then reiterated Curtis's political threat by claiming that the removal of white foremen would be "a very dangerous thing" and "certainly not a vote getter for the Democratic Party."³⁰

State officials and Yorktown residents were also cognizant that the appointment of black supervisors would jeopardize the well-paid leadership positions held solely by white men. In addition, to the camp commanders, the National Park Service received funds to hire 24 local men with experience in road and building construction. These men, commonly referred to as local experienced men or LEM's, supervised the park's various work sites and the activities of the enrollees in the field. All of the LEM's at Yorktown lived in the area around the park. Many had owned their own contracting firms, but business virtually ceased during the Depression. The CCC offered them consistent employment at reasonable wages. The appointment of black supervisors would have led to the dismissal of the park's white LEM's. The loss of white jobs and the perceived federal acquiescence in breaching southern labor practices further fueled the concern of local citizens.

Upon receiving the news in his office, Congressman Schuyler Otis Bland, who represented Yorktown in Congress, contacted the offices of several southern

counting the 800 black men in the camps, African-Americans composed only 43% of the population in York County. United States Census Bureau, 19th Census of the United States, 190-191.

³⁰ A.J. Renforth to Harry F. Byrd, 24 October 1935, "Federal CCC" file, Box 16, GCP.

senators, all of whom were outraged—many filing their protests with the President. Senator Byrd personally telegraphed the President about the matter, and then wrote to Governor Peery claiming, “I feel certain now that this matter will be adjusted satisfactorily.” Upon returning to Washington from his presidential retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia, Roosevelt assured the Virginia delegation that the white foremen would not be replaced.³¹

The flurry of letters generated by Yorktown citizens illustrates the dependence of local white citizens on the perception of white control of black labor. When overseen by white supervisors, black men could be “held in check.” The introduction of black foremen seriously challenged the social status quo and directly threatened coveted skilled labor positions available only to local whites. With white authority in place, the camp was a model town institution. But if the perception of white control of black labor were compromised, the camp would become a powerful symbol of federal acquiescence in challenging Jim Crow. S.A. Curtis said as much, declaring “This is not a protest against present conditions. If the white men are left in charge, I think everything will continue to the satisfaction of our people.”³² Thus, the black CCC camps in Yorktown were widely accepted by the local white community, but that acceptance lay solely on the continued enforcement of segregation and the preservation of skilled positions for white workers in the park.

Historians have traditionally attributed the CCC’s segregationist policy to decisions made by leaders of the organization at the national level. Although this is

³¹ L.R. O’Hara to George Peery, 24 October 1935, “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, GCP; Harry F. Byrd to George Peery, 4 November 1935, “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, GCP.

certainly true, those decisions were dictated by events at the state and local level. White residents feared that blacks supervisors would replace white workers in the most highly paid positions available in the CCC. The NAACP, black newspaper editors, and one prominent figure in the Administration attempted to craft an alternative approach that would have included placing African Americans in supervisory positions in black camps. Although Fechner was forced to respond to their pleas, he believed that appointing black supervisors would unsettle local communities and jeopardize the future of black camps throughout the CCC. In this context, Fechner's directive against the appointment of black leaders was merely a formal endorsement of a decision already made by the white citizens of Yorktown.

³² S.A. Curtis to Harry F. Byrd, 24 October 1935, "Federal CCC" file, Box 16, GCP.

CHAPTER II

BLACK TEACHERS IN BLACK SCHOOLS: A PROGRAM OF EDUCATION IN THE CCC

Much as historians have underestimated the power of local communities in shaping CCC policy, their examinations of black responses to that policy have focused overwhelmingly on national black organizations such as the NAACP. Lost in their narratives is an understanding of the powerful critique of CCC policy that took place at the local level. The strongest arguments against discrimination in the CCC, like the most vehement arguments supporting it, originated locally. In Yorktown, two local black elites—one a university president and the other a life insurance salesman—built an educational program which became a model for the entire CCC and argued successfully for the appointment of black educators to CCC camps. Their pleas coincided with the separate but equal legal strategy of the NAACP and a newly interested Democratic Party in search for black votes. The enrolled men at Yorktown, despite their long hours of difficult work, enthusiastically embraced the camps' educational programs and helped determine the types of classes offered within the camps. The efforts of local black elites and the Yorktown enrollees prove convincingly that African Americans in Yorktown played an active role in manipulating the CCC's policy of segregation.¹

¹ John A. Salmond, "The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Negro," Journal of American History 52 (June 1965): 75-88; George P. Rawick, "The New Deal and Youth: The CCC, NYA, and the American Youth Congress," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957. The best example of an overemphasis on national black organizations is Olen Cole, The African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999). Cole offers a thorough analysis of NAACP's efforts in California, but

Education played an important role in the Yorktown camps from their inception. Shortly after the camps began operation, camp commanders invited rangers from the National Park Service to deliver weekly lectures on topics related to the park. Thus, enrollees were treated to talks on topics ranging from the history of the Virginia Tidewater region to the employment of newly developed erosion control techniques. Enrollees also watched National Park Service informational films with such mundane titles as “Life History of the Mosquito,” “Preparing for a Garden,” and “The Story of Bakelite Resnoid.” All enrollees were required to attend the lectures and films. The sessions served an educational function, but enrollees found them “boring.” National Park Service officials discussed creating a more formal education program, but the idea floundered when no one within the park surfaced to direct the activities.²

The development of a formal education program in the Yorktown camps was a direct result of the efforts of a black Yorktown resident and the enthusiastic support of the enrollees. Hughes A. Robinson, an insurance salesman for Prudential Life Insurance, moved to the Yorktown area from Bordentown, New Jersey, where he had

he never ties their efforts back to local communities around the camps or the enrollees themselves. Cole’s work leads one to believe that the only African Americans protesting CCC policy were members of the NAACP. My approach to local efforts draws upon Charles Payne’s research on the Mississippi civil rights struggles in the 1950’s. Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Payne argues that the civil rights struggle in Mississippi can only be understood when analyzed at the ground level. National organizations entering Mississippi in the 1960’s built on a legacy of local resistance. That context served to bolster or circumscribe any activity that took place in Mississippi. I believe that a complete history of African American involvement in the CCC must utilize the same approach. In the CCC, local black elites and individual enrollees reinforced and gave birth to a national critique of the agency’s policy toward African Americans.

led an urban education program for African American youth financed by a philanthropic local bank owner. During the banking crisis of 1932, the bank was forced to close, and the educational program lost its funding. When he visited the CCC camps at Yorktown, Robinson believed he could emulate his earlier education promotion efforts, by establishing a program at the camps.³

Camp commanders were initially reluctant to allow a black educator into their ranks. They feared that Robinson's presence would be viewed by the local population as one step on a slippery slope leading to black supervisors. Ultimately, their decision to support Robinson's program was based on prevailing educational practice in Virginia.

The Yorktown CCC camp commanders did not have to look very far to realize that black students in Virginia attended segregated, all-black schools that were usually taught by black teachers. In 1938, of the 583,556 children enrolled in the state's public school system, 154,330 or 26.5 percent were African American. The total value of white school property in the state totaled \$57 million, black school property was valued at only \$7 million. The state expended \$26.23 per student to educate white children and only \$16.04 for black children. Funding discrepancies were most readily apparent when comparing teacher salaries. In 1938, the average yearly salary for a white teacher in the state was \$864, whereas black teachers commanded only \$558. Black students additionally suffered from substandard educational facilities. Of the 1,695 school buildings open to black students, 1,616

² Superintendent Monthly Report, June 1933, Records of the Colonial National Historical Park, 7; Ye Olde York Times, 20 March 1936, 2.

³ Lloyd H. Lewis to George Zook, 25 December 1933, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, Arthur Howe Papers, Hampton University, Hampton, VA (AHP).

were one-room, wooden buildings and 1,019 of those consisted of only one teacher. 64 of the 100 counties in Virginia had no high schools for black students to attend, as such, few black students attended school beyond the age of 14. What little funds were available to black schools in Virginia often came from philanthropic white businessmen such as John F. Slater and Julius Rosenwald or through fundraising efforts organized by local black citizens. The prevailing racial segregation in Virginia's public schools led camp commanders to believe that Robinson would not pose a threat to local acceptance.⁴

Robinson's program began much like public school efforts throughout the state. He taught a weekly course on basic grammar in a dilapidated park building that served as a one-room schoolhouse. Robinson, lacking any CCC funds for educational materials and working without any payment for his activities, used textbooks from his own collection. Reports published by the CCC's central information office suggest that roughly one in ten black CCC enrollees from Virginia were unable to read upon entering the camps, and less than twenty percent had completed the seventh grade or higher.⁵ One of Robinson's first students, Charlie Irvine, a World War I veteran from Newark, New Jersey, penned a thank you letter to Robinson in which he wrote, "I came to the CCC in January. I could not read or write. Thank you for teaching me.

⁴ Lloyd H. Lewis to George Zook, 25 December 1933, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; Works Projects Administration of Virginia, The Negro in Virginia (Winston Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair Inc., 1994), 299-302.

⁵ Edgar G. Brown, "The Civilian Conservation Corps and Colored Youth," "Negro Relations" file, Box 1, General Correspondence, Records of the Division of Planning and Public Relations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Signed, Charlie Irvine.” It was the first time Charlie Irvine had ever signed his own name.⁶

The enrolled men embraced Robinson’s classes immediately despite their exhausting work activities. The average enrollee’s day began with a call to reveille at 6:00 A.M. The men then had thirty minutes to wash and dress before breakfast. After breakfast, the men spent another 50 minutes “making their beds, cleaning their bunks, and mopping the floors.” Commanders inspected each bunk and rated its cleanliness. At 8:00, the men fell into formation in the common area outside of the bunks, and checked in with their assistant leaders—skilled enrollees that helped the all-white technical foreman coordinate work activities. The leaders then reported to their camp commanders and listed any absent enrollees. After check-in, the men were “given the order ‘left face’ and marched out to the service road where trucks were waiting to take them to work.”⁷

Most of the CCC work activities in the park were physically exhausting. To give one example, Roy Jones, nicknamed Pinhead by his fellow enrollees, was a member of the camp’s 25-man tree transplantation crew. Colonial National Park employees identified trees throughout the park to be moved to the area around the scenic highway under construction between Yorktown and Jamestown. They placed a flag in front of each tree and traced a line surrounding the tree to mark the outer limits of the tree’s root bulb. Two enrollees were then assigned to each tree to begin digging a circle around the roots. After they finished digging out all of the dirt

⁶ Camp NM-4 Inspection Report, 24 May 1939, “Virginia NM-4” file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁷ Camp NM-1 Narrative Report, 15 May 1934, “NM-2” file, Box 74, Records of the Land and Recreational Planning Division, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, MD.

around the bulb, two more enrollees called “shapers” cut the remaining roots and covered the root bulb with burlap. After the shapers finished their work, another group of enrollees known as “the bull gang” went into the hole and pulled the trees over to place a wooden platform under them. The technical foreman selected the members of the bull gang “principally for the strength of their backs.” Jones was a member of the Camp NM-2 bull gang. These men often lifted dogwood trees over 20 feet in height that “could weigh over 1500 pounds.” After the wooden platform was secured under the tree, another group of four enrollees placed two wooden or steel planks that led to the bed of a large truck. The wooden platform underneath the tree was then attached to a steel wench, which slowly pulled the tree up the planks and onto the bed of a service truck. As each set of enrollees completed their tasks, they immediately repeated the entire process for any surrounding marked trees.⁸

The enrollees’ work schedule included little time for breaks. They originally returned to camp at 12:00 for lunch, but the commanders believed that “too much time [was] lost transporting them back to camp.” The commanders then outfitted a “chow truck” that delivered hot meals to the enrollees in the field. The commanders reported “an hour for lunch was tried and proved unsatisfactory as the men just played around, got lost in the woods, and were completely out of any notion of working after an hours rest.” The commanders refined the lunch break by reducing the duration of the break to thirty minutes and announcing the end of the break with a loud whistle. Thus, enrollees working in the field received only one thirty-minute break in their entire workday.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

The men returned to their camps at approximately 4:00 each evening. They spent the next hour showering and preparing their bunks for evening inspection. At 5:00, the men formed lines in front of the camps' flagpoles and participated in a flag retreat ceremony. The men then fell out of formation and gathered in the mess hall for dinner. At 6:00, their official duties were complete and they had the choice to relax in the recreation hall with their friends or spend an hour in Robinson's classes. Although Jones and his fellow enrollees were often exhausted from their work, over 60% of the enrollees participated in Robinson's evening classes.¹⁰

After the first month of classes, enrollees urged Robinson to expand his educational offerings. They wanted more vocational courses that would help them secure employment after leaving the CCC. Some of the enrollees expressed their frustration that the work they performed at the park had little practical application outside of the CCC. One enrollee complained directly to his camp commander that "there [was] no future in dragging brush." Robinson did not have the financial or physical resources to offer vocational classes on his own. With the full support of the Yorktown camp commanders, Robinson contacted officials at Hampton Institute, an all-black college located roughly thirty minutes from the camp, to ask for additional supplies and expertise. Arthur Howe, the president of Hampton Institute, admired Robinson's zeal and directed a member of his staff to "help Mr. Robinson organize courses in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the trades."¹¹

¹⁰ Camp NM-2 Investigation Reports, 10 March 1934, "Virginia NM-2" file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

¹¹ Arthur Howe to George Zook, 11 December 1933, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

Hampton Institute's participation in the educational programs of the Yorktown camps radically changed the type of classes available to enrollees. Although Hampton was in the process of changing its image from a vocational school to a nationally known black college offering a diverse curriculum, the campus still housed a wide array of facilities featuring equipment designed for trade instruction. Hampton's carpentry, woodworking, automobile repair, and welding classrooms were the some of the best in the nation. Arthur Howe made his facilities and instructors available to the enrollees at Yorktown. The camp commanders paid for buses that transported the men to class, and Hampton provided free instruction.¹²

Robinson, drawing upon his physical education training at Springfield College, also introduced a recreational program. Working on the weekends, Robinson and the enrollees built a baseball field and a basketball court. Each camp fielded a team to compete in the often heated inter-camp athletic rivalries. These backyard battles helped build camp allegiances, not unlike those generated by modern-day college athletic programs. As the men cheered and competed for their respective camps, they formed a group identity that added immeasurably to camp morale—a fact not lost on the camp commanders.¹³

Word of the educational activities at Yorktown reached Robert Fechner's office in November of 1933. After meeting with his advisory staff, including officials from the Department of Education, the Department of Interior, and the Army,

¹² Francis Peabody, *Education for Life: The Story of Hampton Institute* (New York: Ayer Co. Publishing, 1991), 45-69; Camp NM-2 Investigation Reports, 10 March 1934, "Virginia NM-2" file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Fechner developed basic guidelines for a CCC program of education. The primary goal of the program would be “returning to the normal work-a-day world, upon completion of the emergency relief project, citizens better equipped mentally and morally for their duties as such and with a better knowledge of the government under which they live.” Officials hoped that CCC enrollees would be able to leave their camps and find gainful employment utilizing the skills they had garnered in CCC programs.¹⁴

Like the rest of the CCC, the educational program was a hastily constructed institution. The program was first and foremost under the auspices of the War Department. Because of their prominent role in the camps, camp commanders were given oversight control at the local level. On the national level, the War Department appointed one educational coordinator for each Army corps area. These men developed implementation procedures and served as liaisons between local commanders in the field and the War Department bureaucracy. The Office of Education, working with the Department of Interior, was charged with “the selection and appointment of camp educational advisors,” along with the development of “instruction outlines, teaching procedures, and types of teaching materials for use in the camps.” Thus, the Office of Education selected the men and outlined a

¹³ Lloyd H. Lewis to George Zook, 25 December 1933, “CCC 1934” file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP. While a student at Springfield College, Robinson enrolled in several classes taught by Professor John Naismith—the inventor of basketball.

¹⁴ Ye Olde York Times, 30 March 1935, 5; Yorktown Sentinel and Review, 15 May 1935, 4; United States Department of the Interior Office of Education, A Handbook for the Educational Advisers in the Civilian Conservation Corps (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1934), 1.

curriculum, while the War Department assumed a supervisory role of the program in each individual camp.¹⁵

The first allocation of educational advisors was set to take place in December 1934. Based on Robinson's success at Yorktown, the commanders of the Yorktown camps lobbied aggressively on his behalf. The commander of Camp NM-4, in a letter to George Zook, the commissioner of CCC education, wrote "On the basis of previous results obtained by Mr. Robinson in our educational work, you may rest assured that his appointment [as an educational advisor] will meet with the approval of all concerned. He has given his services and time freely, day and night, and we shall be very appreciative of your kind consideration in making this appointment." The commanding officers of camps NM-1 and NM-2 echoed his comments, claiming that Robinson "deserves recognition," and that "no position in this new educational program will be too much for his ability." The commanders of the Yorktown camps respected Robinson's efforts on behalf of the enrollees, and hoped that his appointment might ease the implementation of the new education program.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the praise of Yorktown's camp commanders ran counter to the strict racial policies of the War Department. When the first group of educational advisers was announced, not a single African American appeared on the list. Arthur Howe expressed his outrage at this poor result. He had hoped that the CCC's educational program would offer employment opportunities for several of his recent

¹⁵ United States Department of the Interior Office of Education, A Handbook, 2. The best review of the administrative structure of the CCC's education program is Charles Price Harper, The Administration of the Civilian Conservation Corps (Clarksburg, WV: Clarksburg Publishing Company, 1939).

¹⁶ Lloyd H. Lewis to George Zook, 25 December 1933, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

graduates. Demanding an explanation, he penned an angry letter to the Commissioner of Education. Commissioner Zook's prompt reply confirmed what Howe and Robinson had assumed, "after consulting the Corps Area Commanders of the Army, we were advised. . . . that it would be best to appoint only white Camp Educational Advisors."¹⁷ Clark Foreman, a friend of Arthur Howe and Harold Ickes's personal assistant on racial matters, discovered that Zook was actually in favor of the appointment of black education advisors, but that his appeals were shunned by the Army and the director of the CCC, Robert Fechner. It looked as though the CCC would once again deny blacks equal access to leadership positions within the organization.¹⁸

Robinson and Howe, working with various state and local civil rights organizations, attempted to illustrate the absurdity of the CCC's decision to exclude African Americans from the program's educational positions. Howe insisted, "where a dual education system prevails, justice demands the appointment of qualified Negroes as educational advisors in Negro CCC camps." Robinson made a similar argument, positing, "colored men understand the colored enrollees better than anyone else." Both men attempted to recast the argument that Robinson had used so effectively to garner initial support for his educational program at Yorktown. If officials from the CCC or the War Department accepted the fundamental

¹⁷ George Zook to Arthur Howe, 10 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

¹⁸ Clark Foreman to Arthur Howe, 8 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

underpinnings of segregation, then it made perfect sense to appoint black education advisors in all-black camps.¹⁹

The “separate but equal” argument espoused by Howe and Robinson mirrored the NAACP’s court strategy at the time. In 1934, Charles Houston, the Dean of Howard University Law School, and his promising student Thurgood Marshall began carefully selecting cases that involved racial inequality at graduate schools throughout the South. According to historian Richard Kluger, the NAACP legal team decided “not to attack the constitutionality of segregation itself, but to challenge its legality as it was practiced by showing that nothing remotely approaching equal educational opportunities was offered blacks in segregating states.” There was certainly no pretense of separate but equal in southern graduate schools, because no facilities existed for black professional education in any of the southern states. The NAACP’s first success came in a case involving the University of Maryland Law School. Donald Murray, a black Amherst graduate, was denied admission to the school based solely on race. Marshall argued before the Maryland Court of Appeals that the state’s provision for out-of-state tuition grants did not constitute equality of treatment under the law. The court agreed and instructed the state to establish a separate law school for blacks in the state or admit Murray into the existing school. In the fall of 1936,

¹⁹ Arthur Howe to George Zook, 4 March 1934, “CCC 1934” file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; Hughes Robinson to Walter White, 24 March 1934, Records of the NAACP: Peonage, Labor and the New Deal, 1913-1939 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), frame 191. The best brief evaluation of racial segregation in the South is still C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

Murray became the first black law student at Maryland's previously all-white law school.²⁰

The segregation appeals of Howard and Robinson also garnered overwhelming support from the Virginia Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). Although little has been written about the CIC, it played an important early role in the facilitation of racial dialogue among white liberals and black elites in the Upper South.²¹ Composed primarily of prominent white businessmen from Norfolk and Richmond, the Virginia CIC viewed the CCC educational advisor campaign as tailor-made for its own advocacy program. The director of the Virginia CIC, L.R. Reynolds, corresponded frequently with Arthur Howe on the matter and offered the full assistance of his organization. Borrowing the segregation arguments of both Howe and Robinson, Reynolds penned a letter to the Office of Education asking that "Negro leadership be given consideration in making assignments to Negro camps." Rather than addressing his argument directly, Clarence Marsh, an official in the Office of Education, replied that no black education advisors had been appointed in the state because none had applied. This problem was remedied when Robinson, with the help of Howe and several prominent black leaders, distributed information packets describing the CCC educational appointments to over 100 hundred African-

²⁰ Richard Kluger, Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality (New York: Random House, 1977), 21-36; Harvard Sitkoff, A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 186-187.

²¹ Despite the paucity of scholarly monographs on the history of the CIC, the organization receives a bit of attention in the work of Patricia Sullivan and Nancy Weiss; Patricia Sullivan, Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 32-35; Nancy Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of F.D.R. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 68-69.

Americans deemed qualified for the positions. The Office of Education responded with a wall of silence.²²

No person had more reason to be furious with the CCC's decision than Hughes Robinson. He had labored since October to build an educational and recreational program that became a model for the CCC's own education plan, but was then told he was not qualified for the job based on his skin color. He responded by writing a description of the CCC's decision to Walter White at the NAACP, and to every major black newspaper in the United States.²³ His letter engaged White, because the question of black educational advisors fit well within the NAACP's new legal strategy and its efforts to engage the federal government.

In 1934, Roosevelt's campaign managers urged the Democratic Party to make overtures to black voters. Most African Americans were disfranchised in the South and blacks composed only a small minority of the electorate in the North. However, the Bureau of the Census estimated that 400,000 blacks left the South from 1930 to 1940. The black population in eight states—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania—increased by 291,600. These eight states represented 202 of the 212 electoral votes needed to win the presidency. Although the black voting population was still relatively small, the Democratic Party now regarded it as important.²⁴

²² L.R. Reynolds to Clarence Marsh, 5 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; L.R. Reynolds to Arthur Howe, 6 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; Hughes Robinson to Walter White, 8 March 1934, Records of the NAACP, frames 184-185.

²³ Hughes Robinson to Walter White, 12 March 1934, Records of the NAACP, frame 186.

²⁴ United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 46-47.

Both parties actively sought the black vote in the year preceding the 1936 election. For the first time, both parties advertised in black newspapers. Democrats initiated a number of firsts at their 1936 national convention; they seated ten black delegates, twenty-two black reporters were allowed to take seats in the regular press box, and the party scheduled a press conference for the black media. The Democratic Party, unlike the Republicans, attempted to aggressively send a message of openness to African Americans. The NAACP and other black elites responded with a massive letter-writing campaign to the President and the black press, outlining the discrimination in the CCC and other New Deal programs.²⁵

The powerful appeals of Howe and Robinson, the public denunciations of the CCC in the black press, and the Democratic Party's new initiative to gain black voters, led the Administration to reconsider opening educational appointments to African Americans in all-black CCC camps. George Zook quietly contacted the presidents of several historically black higher institutions, including Howe, to gain assistance in locating qualified black applicants. Howe contacted several close associates and asked them to list five qualified applicants. After receiving their responses, he sent the information to Zook, who then selected several of the candidates for placement in the CCC. For Howe, the CCC's change of direction offered him a prominent role in the allocation of CCC educational advisor positions and a voice in the educational programs of all-black CCC camps throughout the Tidewater region. Hampton Institute's participation segued with the school's new

²⁵Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 136-157, 180-209.

emphasis on educational training programs. It also led to a considerable boost in prestige for Hampton and a vital infusion of federal relief funds.²⁶

In a sad turn of events, Robinson's application for employment was turned down by the Office of Education. His vocal denunciations of prominent officials at the Office of Education and the War Department certainly sealed his fate. Robinson, in a letter to Thomas G. Bennett, educational director for the Third Corps area, commented that "he was well aware of the reason why my application was not approved. . . . I realize that I may have done something that was not pleasing to Dr. Marsh [the Army's leading advisor to the CCC education program]." Despite his appeals, the CCC refused to offer Robinson employment during the first enrollment period for black education advisors. He watched as a young educator from Pennsylvania assumed control of his program in Yorktown.²⁷

Incapable of removing himself from the issue of black involvement in New Deal programs, Robinson attempted to establish what he called "a Bureau of Information and Clearing House." He felt that "colored men take much for granted" and fail to "make applications for certain government positions." The proposed Bureau of Information would publish job openings in national, state, and local governments, enabling "thousands of men and women to find employment in places that were once closed to them in our national life." Possibly drawing on his own experience with the CCC, he proposed that the organization not "arouse the emotions

²⁶ Arthur Howe to Richard Bowling, 21 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; George Zook to Arthur Howe, 27 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; L.F. Palmer to Arthur Howe, 23 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; M.E. Davis to Arthur Howe, 26 March 1934, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

of the people.” Rather than publicly demanding more government job opportunities, the Bureau of Information would simply inform African Americans about the numerous positions that came available, whether they were open to blacks or not. Robinson hoped that this growing awareness would increase the participation of African Americans in government and blunt the “No blacks applied” argument often expressed by government officials when explaining why blacks were excluded from various positions. Robinson gained the support of *Norfolk Journal and Guide* editor P.B. Young, but failed to move the organization past the initial planning stage.²⁸

In the summer of 1935, Robinson made one final plea to the Office of Education. In order to gain support for his application, Robinson wrote a desperate letter to his former companion Arthur Howe. He fondly recalled “the success we had in getting President Roosevelt to appoint 100 black advisors.” Expressing his frustration, Robinson stated, “It falls on the shoulders of one to fight, and on others to reap the benefits acquired.” He wanted one final favor from Howe; a “kind letter to Dr. Thomas G. Bennett, Educational Advisor for the Third Corps Area” asking him “to appoint me as supervisor for colored camps in Virginia.”²⁹ Howe, who was now an important consultant to the CCC’s black education program, refused to risk angering the administrators at the Office of Education by lauding the accomplishments of Hughes Robinson. Howe contacted Bennett as Robinson

²⁷ Hughes Robinson to Thomas Bennett, 1 August 1934, “CCC 1935” file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

²⁸ Hughes Robinson to Walter White, 10 August 1934, Records of the NAACP, frames 197-199.

²⁹ Hughes Robinson to Arthur Howe, 26 July 1935, “CCC 1935” file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

requested; but in the letter, he claimed that he had only met Robinson “one or two times” and that he knew “very little about his career or abilities.”³⁰

In Robinson’s absence, the Yorktown camps and Hampton Institute became an epicenter for the CCC’s black education program. On August 7, 1935, the Third Corps area of the CCC (comprising Virginia, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania) held a two-week training session for newly appointed black education advisors on the campus of Hampton Institute. In his opening address, Robert Fechner insisted that the intent of the conference was “the development of the advisor and the stimulation of interest which will be carried back to each camp and show itself in the betterment of each camp education program.”³¹

The content presented during the conference’s twelve sessions laid the groundwork for the essential components of the CCC’s program. The first two sessions featured talks entitled “Educational Activities in the CCC” and “Camp Educational Problems,” which focused on literacy and civic awareness. The overwhelming majority of the training sessions, however, dealt with vocational issues. Programs such as “The Individual and the World of Work,” left no doubts about the intended end result of the CCC’s program—“to direct the individual enrollee toward a job consistent with his ability.” The new advisors were encouraged

³⁰ Arthur Howe to Thomas Bennett, 5 August 1935, “CCC 1935” file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP; Arthur Howe to George Zook, 11 December 1933, “CCC 1934” file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

³¹ The minutes from the Hampton education conference are contained in a bulletin entitled “The Adviser,” a copy of which is located in Thomas Bennett to Arthur Howe, 16 August 1935, “CCC 1935” file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP. Fechner’s comments can be found on page 4.

to hold mock job interviews and develop basic job training programs, all in an effort to move the men off of public relief rolls.³²

In Yorktown, each of the four camps received its own educational advisor. Each advisor developed classes, provided classroom instruction, coordinated activities with local schools and universities, oversaw the camp's recreation program, and served as a liaison between enrollees and the camp commanders. The advisors were helped in their activities by an assistant educational advisor also appointed by the Office of Education. The duties undertaken by the CCC educational advisors were virtually identical to those earlier assumed by Robinson. However, the involvement and oversight of the CCC fundamentally changed the education program at Yorktown in two ways: it provided more money for classes at Hampton and charged the advisors with helping the enrollees "find gainful employment following their service in the CCC."³³

The infusion of capital to support the CCC's educational efforts led to an even larger role for Hampton in the Yorktown CCC camps. The school dispatched students from its education program twice a week to offer high-school level grammar, history, and mathematics courses. The number of vocational offerings expanded to include woodworking, table waiting, food preparation, and bricklaying. The advisors urged the men to participate in the classes, but they were not required to attend. An official enrollee handbook stated "the idea behind the program is not that of

³² W.A. Avery to Arthur Howe, 21 August 1935, "CCC 1935" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

³³ Charles Price Harper, The Administration of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 20-42; Arthur Howe to George Zook, 11 December 1933, "CCC 1934" file, Box 1, CCC Records, AHP.

cramming education down the throats of enrollees . . . it is that of giving the boys who come into camp something of value.”

The list of vocational courses available in Yorktown illustrated the types of positions that were open to African Americans during the 1930's. They were also the courses most requested in surveys conducted among the Yorktown enrollees. These so-called “Negro jobs” may have carried a negative racial stigma, but as historian Nancy Weiss argues, blacks’ “last hired, first fired” status made practically any steady job in New Deal America desirable. In fact, unemployed whites were now filling many jobs traditionally held by African Americans.³⁴

Although no historian has conducted an appraisal of the long-term benefits of the CCC's vocational program, evidence from Yorktown suggests that at least two groups of students received employment as a direct result of their training in the CCC. Many of the students that enrolled in the Yorktown CCC's food preparation and table waiting classes were offered full-time employment in the recently opened taverns and hotels of Colonial Williamsburg. Several enrollees in the camps' woodworking classes became so skilled in their craft that the Colonial park staff asked them to create reproductions of colonial furniture. The park staff hailed their reproductions and the enrollees eventually began making furniture for historical national parks in Boston and Philadelphia. Several of the men later left the CCC to become skilled laborers for North Carolina furniture manufacturers.³⁵

³⁴ Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln.

³⁵ Newport News Daily Press, 11 February 1937, 3; Charles M. Hunter, “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Williamsburg,” unpublished report, Williamsburg Area Historical Society, Williamsburg, VA. In a recent survey of park artifacts, the National Park Service identified Yorktown CCC furniture pieces in virtually every colonial national park in the Northeast.

In addition to providing feedback on vocational offerings, the Yorktown enrollees suggested changes in the camps' high-school level courses. The introduction of an African American history class illustrates the ways in which enrollees encouraged their advisors to offer classes tailored to their interests. One particularly popular class since the inception of the camps' educational program was "Civics and American History," a course taught by Colonial Superintendent Floyd Flickinger. His lectures focused largely on the events of the American Revolution and the founding of the United States. When the educational advisors conducted a survey of enrollees in 1937, they found that the men also wanted a class "that talked about Negro history." The educational advisors responded by working with Hampton Institute faculty to develop an African American history class. The class was well received, creating such a large demand that classes were held in the camps' recreation halls because they were the largest spaces available to the advisors.³⁶

On Saturdays, the educational advisors provided career counseling to individual enrollees. The advisors maintained a network of relationships with local employers, employment agencies, and state relief officials. They met with enrollees to "ascertain their interests" and then "encouraged them to apply for any available positions." If an enrollee needed to leave the camp for a job interview, the advisors worked with the camp commanders to attain leave passes. Camp commanders also consulted with the advisors to provide honorable discharges so that enrollees could leave the camps after finding gainful employment elsewhere. The CCC supported the job placement services of the educational advisors because they wanted to move the

³⁶ Camp NM-4 Inspection Report, 24 May 1939, "Virginia NM-4" file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

men off of public relief rolls and into the job market if possible. Unfortunately, few jobs were available until the late thirties when Tidewater area defense contractors such as Newport News Shipbuilding began increasing their capacity.

The development of the CCC's educational program is a case study in the ways in which local black elites and individual enrollees challenged the CCC's policy of discrimination. The work undertaken by Hughes Robinson and Arthur Howe at Yorktown provided the genesis for the CCC's entire education program. Their frustration upon learning that the CCC would not hire black teachers was echoed by state and national leaders, forming a powerful chorus of dissent. Robinson, Howe, and national black organizations capitalized on white insistence on segregation and a newly amenable federal government to garner support for the employment of black educators in all-black CCC camps—the only supervisory position ever available to African Americans in the CCC. The enrollees responded by actively participating in the classes and offering directions for course content.

CHAPTER III

A DAY IN THE LIFE

African American enrollees in the CCC, unlike Robinson and Howe, did not have access to prominent CCC officials and Roosevelt cabinet members to air their grievances. They instead turned to a long tradition of black resistance to arbitrary authority and social exclusion. The enrollees at Yorktown acted on a daily basis to circumvent the CCC's racial stratification and strict regimentation. These acts of resistance, or what James C. Scott terms "infrapolitics," served notice to the camps' commanding officers that the enrolled men would not submit willingly to traditional structures of Army authority. Using techniques as widely divergent as work stoppages and public protest, the enrolled men at Yorktown attempted to shape their own work and their leisure with varying degrees of success. In their relations with communities outside of the camps, black enrollees found acceptance in nearby black neighborhoods, and publicly voiced their frustration with the white residents of Yorktown in a narrowly averted race riot.¹

¹ James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). The best works on black resistance to arbitrary authority include Tera Hunter, To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War (New York: Harvard University Press, 1998); Robin D.G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Robin D.G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: Free Press, 1996); Leon Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Kimberley Phillips, AlabamaNorth: African American Migrants, Community, and Working Class Activism in Cleveland, 1912-1945 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Joe William Trotter, Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

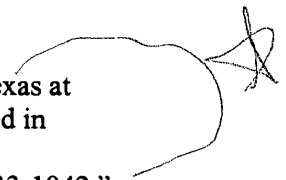


The United States Army had the largest role of any government agency in the administration of the CCC. They were forced to place a large number of men in the field in a very short period of time. In fact, within a year, the CCC was triple the size of the nation's standing Army.² The hurried attempt to place men in the field led the Army to adopt military policy as the central basis for CCC camp administration. The commanding officers in the CCC were all junior officers rotated through reserve lists in the United States Army. The Army chose the company-unit size of 202 men as the ideal number of men that could be sustained in the field. CCC camp structures were little more than pre-fabricated buildings developed by the Army for quick assembly on military bases. Everything within the camps looked and felt like an Army base. The physical structure of the camp was matched by the Army's development of an authority structure.³

The Army's book manual of regulations for CCC camp commanders—called “the Bible” by many camp commanders—describes in great detail how the CCC camps were administered. The text urged each commander to “model his camp on the finest camps in the American military.” Enrollees were not to participate in military training, but the regulations stated that “a military system of authority was crucial” to the development of a successful camp. The handbook given to CCC enrollees upon entering the program trumpeted in bold letters, “Without discipline, there could be no CCC.” Thus, CCC commanding officers developed a system of

² This figure comes from the ongoing research of Jim Steely at the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently working on a large-scale study of CCC men that later served in World War II.

³ Charles Johnson, “The Army, the Negro and the Civilian Conservation Corps: 1933-1942,” *Journal of Negro History* 52 (June 1965), 75-88.



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authority, including rules and regulations, which closely matched those in operation at other military installations.⁴

For enrollees, their indoctrination into a military way of life began almost immediately after their acceptance into the CCC. Luther Wandall, a 21 year-old black enrollee from New York City, joined the CCC after carefully considering its links to the Army. His brother, a World War I veteran, advised him emphatically, “I wouldn’t be in anything connected with the Army.” Wandall decided to ignore his brother’ concerns, and enrolled in the CCC at his local Home Relief Bureau. Three days later, he reported to Pier I, North River in New York City to complete his registration. Upon arrival, he signed another set of forms and was then ushered into a “a large warehouse” where Wandall waited over four hours to take an oath to the CCC, after which he and a large group of men “marched,” under the instruction of an Army officer, to the U.S. Army headquarters on Whitehall Street. The men underwent thorough physical examinations, just like those given to recruits in the regular Army. Wandall was then placed into a group of 35 men and loaded onto a bus. Army meal rations containing “beans, pickles, bread, coffee, and butter” were distributed as the men were informed that their bus was headed to a conditioning camp at Fort Dix, New Jersey.⁵

Wandall arrived at Fort Dix for what the Army called “conditioning training.” It was here, in these conditioning camps, that enrollees received their first indoctrination into Army discipline and structure. As Wandall stepped out of the bus,

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⁴ United States Army, Civilian Conservation Corps Camp Commanders Manual and Regulations (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1934), 2-3; Civilian Conservation Corps, Your CCC: A Handbook for Enrollees (Washington, D.C.: Happy Days Publishing Company, 1936), 22.

an officer stood shouting, "You will double-time as you leave this bus, remove your hat when you hit the door, and when you are asked questions, answer 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir.'" And it was here that Wandall first encountered the CCC's policy of segregation. Wandall and his fellow black enrollees were told to "fall out in the rear." They waited in line over two hours until every white enrollee had been registered and taken to their tents. Wandall was led to the black area of the camp and discovered that the tents were "the worst in Camp Dix—old, patched without floors and electric light." According to Wandall, the "separation of the colored from the whites was completely and rigidly maintained at this camp." Fort Dix was not alone in its practice of segregation. The Army instructed every conditioning camp throughout the country to separate black and white enrollees within the camps in preparation for their service in the CCC.

Wandall spent nine days in the camp marching, drilling, and generally becoming acquainted with a regular work schedule.⁶ Breakfast was served at 6:15 A.M., men were to report to their work sites by 7:00, lunch was served at 12:00, work ended at 3:30, dinner was served at 5:00, and the evening was often consumed by lectures on discipline and personal hygiene. On the day before his departure, Wandall received his official CCC uniform. The pile of clothing included two sets of green work fatigues, a pant and shirt outfit with tie for formal occasions, and a pair of Army issue boots. The uniform served several purposes. It clearly marked the men

⁵ Luther Wandall, "A Negro in the CCC," *Crisis* 42 (August 1935), 244.

⁶ The duration of stay within the conditioning camps varied depending on the CCC's need for replacements. Some men stayed in the camps up to two weeks, while others were shipped to their campsites in three days.

as members of the CCC and it provided a uniform dress that matched the doctrine of obedience and uniformity required by the Army.⁷

When enrollees departed their conditioning camps, officials placed them in groups of varying size and then transported them via bus or train to CCC camps throughout the country. Enrollees rarely discovered where they would be placed until they were in route to their destination. Wandall joined one of the four CCC camps at Yorktown, Virginia. His camp was composed entirely of young black men, between the ages of 18 and 25, from the New York City area. Another camp was composed of World War I veterans from the New York City area. Yorktown's remaining two camps contained men from Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C.; all of the men went through conditioning training at Fort Monroe in Hampton, Virginia.⁸

After arriving at their camps in Yorktown, the men found a rigid top-down command structure. The commanding officer was the ultimate source of authority. The commanders followed a set of basic rules first introduced in the conditioning camps. The men were expected to keep a clean living area; report to mess and work in a timely fashion; work to the best of their physical ability; stay away from alcohol and drugs; and observe all state and local laws. Rule infractions were handled in several different ways following traditional Army practice. Minor infractions could result in the loss of a weekend furlough or a fine against future wages, whereas major infractions often resulted in a dishonorable discharge. Camp commanders, however, were limited in their response to misdeeds when compared to Army commanders. CCC camp commanders did not have their own judicial system like the Army. Minor

⁷ Wandall, 244.

⁸ Wandall, 253.

infractions were punishable by a fine against future wages up to \$3 or assignment to kitchen duty. Enrollees found in violation of local and state laws had to be handed over to local police authorities.⁹

The men's violations of the rules formed a part of everyday life in the Yorktown camps. Most disciplinary actions in camp were taken against men that refused to work. The enrollees at Yorktown worked on a wide array of projects including road construction, landscaping, archaeology, and historical military embankment reconstruction around the city of Yorktown. The work was often difficult, requiring long hours in hot, humid Tidewater, Virginia summers and winter temperatures that often fell below freezing. Not all of the men found the work dreadful. Luther Wandall commented, "The work varies, but is always healthy, outdoor labor. As the saying goes, it's a great life, if only you don't weaken." However, not everyone had the same positive attitude toward the rugged labor.¹⁰

Rigorous toil at the work site, followed by the military-like regimentation of life within the camps, led many of the enrollees to conclude that their entry into the program was a serious mistake. The records of the Yorktown camps contain voluminous annual reports on individual desertions. The act of desertion became so common that enrollees developed their own term for desertion—"going over the hill." For example, one afternoon a Yorktown CCC camp received 15 new men from the conditioning camp at Fort Monroe. Their camp commander held a short meeting in which each enrollee was given his work assignment for the following month. Four of the men, after hearing that they would be relocating trees along a scenic highway,

⁹ United States Army, Civilian Conservation Corps Camp Commanders Manual and Regulations (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1934), 42.

refused to go to work the following morning. When their commanding officer found them in their barracks, the men demanded to be sent home, but their officer refused. After he left, the four men gathered their belongings and fled the camp on foot.¹¹ Another enrollee from the same camp boldly informed his work site foreman that he “didn’t intend to do a lick of work in the CCC.” The foreman reported the man to his commanding officer and recommended that he be dismissed from the CCC.

During the life of the Yorktown camps, five to ten percent of new enrollees deserted the camps within their first month of service. CCC camp commanders and officials abhorred the practice, but they could do little to stop it. CCC deserters, unlike Army soldiers, did not face criminal prosecution for their actions.¹² Instead, camp commanders issued a handbook that encouraged dispirited enrollees to “take their troubles to the camp commander. He will help you.” The handbook also warned potential deserters, “such a habit may grow on [you]. Whenever you find a job that’s hard, you are going to quit. No one can desert without feeling that he ‘couldn’t take it.’” Camp commanders also reacted to the desertions by periodically moving men to different job sites to alleviate boredom and overexertion. Desertion and the threat of desertion offered enrollees a critical tool in their efforts to mitigate against unwanted forms of authority.

¹⁰ Wandall, 254.

¹¹ Camp NM-1 Narrative Report, 17 April 1935, “NM-1” file, Box 74, Records of the Land and Recreational Planning Division, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, MD.

¹² Camp NM-1 Narrative Report, 17 April 1935, “NM-1” file, Box 74, Records of the Land and Recreational Planning Division, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, MD; For an analysis of similar events in an all-white camp consult Reed Engle, Everything was Wonderful: A Pictorial History of the Civilian Conservation Corps in Shenandoah National Park (Luray, VA: Shenandoah Natural History Association, 1999).

The Yorktown enrollees also found more subtle ways to express their discontent with work assignments. Many of the enrollees lodged complaints with their assistant leaders—a carefully selected group of black enrollees that possessed technical skills relevant to a particular job site. These men worked with the National Park Service’s technical foremen, all of whom were white, to supervise the enrollees in their daily tasks. While on the job, the enrollees effectively used their assistant leaders as information couriers in their labor relations with the park’s technical staff. The assistant leaders were known to convince the technical staff to end work early on hot summer days and to avoid hazardous working conditions in the forest.¹³

The assistant leaders were equally important to the technical staff for many of the very same reasons. The technical foremen needed the assistant leaders to help them coordinate difficult construction projects such as landscaping along the park’s scenic roadway and the reconstruction of Revolutionary and Civil War earthworks. One camp commander attested to their importance in a report to the Department of the Interior in which he referred to the men as “the backbone of the camp.” When several of the assistant leaders in Camp NM-1 were forced to leave the CCC at the end of their two years of service, their commander wrote to the Third Corps area director, “I believe it would be a fitting reward for their loyalty, to allow them to re-enlist, and it would most certainly help us to do our work more efficiently, thereby keeping public criticism to a minimum.” Despite his appeal, the CCC refused to allow an exception to the program’s two-year service limit.¹⁴

¹³ Camp NM-1 Narrative Report, 11 October 1935, “NM-1” file, Box 74, Records of the Land and Recreational Planning Division, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, MD.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The CCC's limited term of service proved to be a wedge in the development of close relationships among the enrolled men. Each man enrolled for one enlistment period, which lasted six months. At the end of that term, the enrollee could go home or re-enlist in the program. Some of the men chose to leave immediately, others stayed until they were able to arrange for a job elsewhere. No matter what he desired, no enrollee was allowed to enlist for a period exceeding two years. Thus, every March and September, the camp experienced fluctuations in enrollment as men came to the end of their six-month enlistment periods. In periods of high turnover, the population of the camp could drop from 200 to 110 overnight. One commander complained to his Corps Area commander, that at the end of each enlistment period "there follows a period of about a month where there is a struggle to keep the work projects moving with the man power remaining. Then almost without warning we have about 100 recruits dropped upon us." The continual movement of personnel led to a biyearly turnover that made it difficult to create lasting relationships in the camps.¹⁵

The Yorktown enrollees at Yorktown also varied greatly in age and background. Two of the camps, designated NM-1 and NM-2, contained junior enrollees—single men between the ages of 18 and 25—from Virginia and Maryland. Meanwhile, Camp NM-3 housed junior enrollees from "the tenements and alleys of Harlem." One camp observer commented that the mix of men from very different backgrounds led to "factions and dissention."¹⁶ To further complicate the mix, Camp

¹⁵ Camp NM-4 Narrative Report, 14 May 1934, "NM-4" file, Box 75, Records of the Land and Recreational Planning Division, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, MD.

¹⁶ Camp NM-1 Investigation Report, 19 May 1933, "Virginia NM-1" file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD;

NM-4 contained World War I veterans from New York and New Jersey. In order to circumvent another invasion of the Bonus Army—a group of World War I veterans that marched on Washington to demand the early payment of their war bonuses, these men were given a special exemption to join the CCC by President Roosevelt. Unlike the young men in the other three Yorktown camps, most of the men in Camp NM-4 were forty to fifty years of age. The age difference between the men in NM-4 and the other three camps led to spatial divisions within the camps' public areas. For example, the older men generally kept to themselves in the mess hall and were unable to “take part in the more active sports” offered in camp.¹⁷

In fact athletic events were unique in their tendency to foster close bonds among the participants while, at the same time, spurn divisions between the four camps. Each year, the commanders organized basketball and baseball tournaments, pitting the four camps against one another. Members from each camp competed for their respective teams, and enthusiastically cheered on the members of their camp. These team allegiances solidified the men's identity as a group and placed them in an adversarial relationship with the members from other camps. Despite such tendencies, the opposite effect occurred when all-star teams, containing men from all

Camp NM-2 Investigation Reports, 10 March 1934, “Virginia NM-2” file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Camp NM-3 Narrative Report, 5 October 1935, “NM-3” file, Box 75, Records of the Land and Recreational Planning Division, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, MD.
¹⁷ E.W. Jordan to George Peery, 20 June 1934, “Federal CCC” file, Box 16, Executive Correspondence, The Executive Papers of George C. Peery, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA; Camp NM-4 Investigation Report, 16 February 1938, “NM-4” file, Box 135, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

four camps, competed against black servicemen from Fort Monroe and Langley Airfield. In this case, the men joined together to support their athletes.¹⁸

Yet despite the barriers placed in their way, the men in Yorktown formed alliances and friendships that helped ease the daily toil of their work assignments. Enrollees with vastly different backgrounds and experiences were drawn together by the close quarters of camp life and the limitations placed on their leisure by the white residents of Yorktown. In the fight to exercise their leisure, black enrollees were challenged by a hostile white community and the official policies of the CCC.

The CCC enrollee handbook clearly stated the CCC's leave and furlough policy: "from the time you enroll in the CCC until you are discharged, your time belongs to the government—24 hours a day." Weekend and evening furloughs were granted with the permission of the camp commander. The men spent many Saturday mornings cleaning their bunks and working on camp facilities. Sunday was generally a day for leisure outside of the camps, but even that was not guaranteed if the camp commander decided that enrollees were needed for work within the camps. The camp commanders quickly discovered that the power of granting furloughs proved useful in encouraging the men to follow orders. Leave passes could be revoked if enrollees violated camp rules and they could be given as rewards for hard work and good behavior.

When enrollees were denied permission to leave the camps, many decided to leave anyway. The monthly reports filed by Yorktown camp commanders are replete

¹⁸ Yorktown Sentinel and Review, 20 March 1935, 4; Yorktown Sentinel and Review, 15 May 1935, 4; Ye Olde York Times, 20 March 1936, 2.

with notations of enrollees that went absent without leave (AWOL). Most enrollees listed as AWOL returned to the camp within one day or merely reported several hours late. The rates of men reported AWOL rose dramatically following Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. During the holidays, the enrollees were often given multi-day passes to visit friends and family. Following Easter weekend in 1936, camp commanders at Yorktown noted, “roughly 20 men went home for Easter and enjoyed their stay too well. As a result, they will be smoking stumps this weekend. Quite an expensive Easter Monday for them.”¹⁹ In the Army, AWOL soldiers could be court-martialed for their actions. In the CCC, commanders could only levy fines or discharges. The fines charged to each enrollee were usually minimal for a first offense, because camp commanders feared that a more harsh punishment would encourage the enrollee to desert.²⁰

Enrollees that successfully garnered leave passes faced strict limitations on their movements in Yorktown. Many white residents were willing to accept the segregated black camps as long as the men stayed within their confines on the far western edge of the park, over one mile from the center of town. The local community adopted an outwardly austere acceptance of the camps, but they never accepted the right of enrollees to spend their leisure time in Yorktown proper. The attitudes of the local white community became abundantly clear following a brutal storm that hit Yorktown only two months after the camps were first established.²¹

¹⁹ Ye Olde York Times, 25 April 1936, 3. During construction of the Colonial parkway, enrollees fell or transplanted thousands of trees. The stumps and root bulbs left behind by the cut trees were pulled from the ground and then burned, thus the term “smoking stumps.”

²⁰ Your CCC, 34-35.

²¹ Stephen Early to Robert Fechner, 28 August 1933, “York County, Virginia file, Box 604, General Correspondence of the Director, Record group 35, National Archives, College Park,

On August 23, 1933, a violent hurricane angled toward the east coast of the United States and slammed into the harbor at Yorktown. The 100-mile per hour winds fueled an eight-foot surge of water that engulfed the entire Yorktown waterfront. The record-breaking storm caused massive flood and wind damage from South Carolina to Boston, Massachusetts and was directly responsible for 18 deaths. The community of Yorktown was littered with debris from fallen trees and homes that were damaged or destroyed. Along the waterfront, over fifty ships lay on the shore, tossed from their moorings in the harbor and every building suffered severe water damage.²²

The next morning, York County Commonwealth Attorney Paul B. Crockett sent an urgent telegram to Robert Fechner pleading for the immediate assistance of the CCC. Fechner agreed, and sent Yorktown's four camp commanders a memo explaining, "It seems to me that in a disaster of this character, we are justified in rendering whatever aid we can and I therefore authorize you to use [CCC] men in responding to appeals for help in this locality."²³ The commanders quickly assembled a crew of 100 enrollees to assist in the local cleanup effort. One group of men carried off heavy logs and other debris from the waterfront, while another

MD; Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1933, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 11-12.

²² Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1933, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 10-11.

²³ Paul W. Crockett to Robert Fechner 25 August 1933, "York County, Virginia" file, Box 604, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

cleared away debris from Water Street, the town's main thoroughfare, so that the road could be reopened to traffic.²⁴

Fechner outlined the cleanup efforts underway in Yorktown for President Roosevelt. Stephen Early, the President's assistant secretary, responded, "[Roosevelt] thinks this would make a good story and should be given to the newspapers at once." Town authorities, however, did not share Roosevelt's enthusiasm. In fact, following the CCC's heroic first day, Crockett demanded a meeting with park superintendent Floyd Flickinger and the four CCC camp commanders. He believed that the enrollees should have been under more "close supervision," and that several members of the camps had been found "looting." Flickinger and the commanders denied the charges, but gave their consent to Crockett's plan for proper supervision. The commonwealth attorney proposed that "the Monument rangers be sworn in as sheriff deputies, and that their main function would be to guard the men moving debris." The men were treated as prisoners, kept under armed guard as they attempted to help the citizens of Yorktown recover from the storm. Following the incident, Flickinger and the camp commanders agreed to limit the enrollee's access to Yorktown's waterfront business district.²⁵

Only five months after the hurricane, the enrollees directly challenged the limitations placed on their leisure and addressed the real and perceived racism of the local white community. The men grew increasingly weary of Yorktown's community

²⁴ Robert Fechner to Duncan K. Major et al, 25 August 1933, "York County, Virginia file, Box 604, General Correspondence of the Director, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

²⁵ Stephen Early to Robert Fechner, 28 August 1933, "York County, Virginia file, Box 604, General Correspondence of the Director, Record group 35, National Archives, College Park,

policing efforts. The animosity between both parties erupted in a narrowly averted race riot that illustrates the ways in which fear, anger, and rumor intersected to create a potentially violent situation.

On January 20, 1934, nine year-old Alfred Moore was playing with his younger sister in the backyard of his stepfather's farm, located just outside of the park boundaries. In the midst of slaughtering a pig, Alfred's stepfather, H.C. Ferguson, asked the boy and his sister to go into the woods adjacent to his property and locate a rope that he had left there. Several minutes later, Ferguson heard a shrill scream coming from the woods. He and his wife ran into the woods and discovered Alfred lying in a shallow hole with blood streaming from his forehead. They quickly loaded the children into a truck and rushed the injured boy to the hospital. After Alfred was taken away by one of the doctors, Ferguson asked the little girl what had happened while they were in the woods. She replied that Alfred had been beaten on the head by "a large black man." Ferguson contacted the local sheriff and formed his own informal posse to aid in the investigation.²⁶

The authorities immediately focused their attention on the four CCC camps at Yorktown. In a community that had always been apprehensive about the introduction of 800 African Americans, the Alfred Moore attack appeared to be a realization of their greatest fears. In addition, a violent set of rumors had been circulating throughout the Tidewater region that merely added fuel for the flame. One of the most widely circulated rumors was that local blacks were purchasing ice picks to

MD; Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1933, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 11-12.

attack white citizens. Blacks were said to be collecting massive arsenals with which they would kill white men and steal white women. These rumors were invariably false, but they created a culture of fear, which provided the social context for any violent act deemed racial in nature.²⁷

In his landmark study of the 1917 East St. Louis race riot, sociologist Elliot Rudwick wrote, “during periods of tension and crisis, when people are jittery and willing to believe almost anything, rumors [are] manufactured, rapidly circulated, and of course accepted uncritically by many citizens.” In East St. Louis, whites grew angry as local factories hired black workers to thwart the power of all-white unions. Democratic politicians fed on this anger by suggesting that the Republican Party was actively recruiting southern blacks to move into the area to tilt the outcome of the next election. When news spread that a black man had killed a white man during a robbery, an angry white mob took to the streets eventually killing at least 39 African Americans.²⁸

In Yorktown some local white citizens responded to their own fears and false rumor by organizing gangs of white men that rode past the camps uttering obscenities and violent threats. Local police officials stormed into the CCC camps’ sleeping quarters with dogs barking and flashlights waving, hoping to find evidence linking

²⁶ Superintendent’s Monthly Report, January 1934, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 18-20; Newport News Daily Press, 21 January 1934, 1; Newport News Daily Press, 22 January 1934, 1; Norfolk Journal and Guide, 27 January 1934, 1.

²⁷ Howard Odum, Race and Rumors of Race: The American South in the Early Forties (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 96-105. Odum, writing in 1943, wisely states “if thousands of people who actually believed and passed on fantastic rumors just as they would actual happenings could sense the almost treasonable implications, it might go a long way toward checking the epidemic of so many emotional reactions.”

²⁸ Elliott Rudwick, Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917 (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1966), 1-28, 222.

one of the men to the beating. The four camp commanders, fearing for the safety of their men, ordered everyone to remain in camp until further notice.²⁹

The situation in Yorktown became even more complex the following day. That morning, six CCC enrollees left their camp without permission and broke into the park's storage area on Wormley Pond. They grabbed one of the boats and several fishing rods and spent the balance of the morning attempting to catch fish. A park ranger noticed them out on the water and arrested the six men for stealing National Park Service property. The men were taken to their camp commander who then turned them over to the local authorities to be charged for theft. As the men were taken away, rumors began to spread among the enrollees that the men had actually been chosen as scapegoats for the Alfred Moore attack. Furthermore, several of the enrollees feared that the angry white mob that had driven past the camp the night before would lynch the six men as they sat in the local jail.³⁰

The rumors were all completely false, but one must not discredit the types of emotions these comments must have generated among the black enrollees. The *New York Times* recorded 24 lynchings in 1933. Only one month before the Alfred Moore attack, "the most popular newspaper in camp," the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, had published an article chronicling the violent lynching of an African-American man in Alabama.³¹ In her analysis of the role played by rumor in the development of race riots, folklorist Patricia Turner notes that riots are most likely to occur in situations

²⁹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1934, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 19; *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 27 January 1934, 1.

³⁰ Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1934, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 19; *Newport News Daily Press*, 22 January 1934, 3;

³¹ *New York Times*, 3 December 1933, section VIII, 2; *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, 17 December 1933, 1.

where blacks feel that one persecuted individual or group of people symbolizes, on a personal, identifiable level, “African-Americans’ frustrations with the state of affairs.”³² For the 800 enrollees at Yorktown, the men imprisoned in the local jail became a physical reminder of the racial animosity present in the local community. Out of their fears and anxieties, the enrollees took to the street in protest.

The men formed a large phalanx as they made the mile-long march from their camps to the local jail. When they finally arrived, the men encircled the jail and demanded the immediate release of the six men held inside. The local sheriff called the park and the nearby Naval Mine Depot asking for immediate backup. When Marines from the naval base and officials from the park finally arrived on the scene, they brokered a deal whereby the six men would be turned over to their camp commander for disciplinary action. The protestors outside of the building were assured that no action would be taken against them. With the help of the Marines, the area was cleared and the enrolled men returned to their camps.³³

The following day, several local officials requested that the camps be removed. Floyd Flickinger, who feared losing his irreplaceable labor source, downplayed the incident in local newspapers and in his meetings with York County officials. He worked with community leaders to conduct a town hall meeting on preventing similar outbreaks in the future. It appears that his exhaustive campaigning worked. In fact, no mention of the Yorktown riot was ever made to the CCC’s administrative officials; six months after the riot, Camp NM-2 was recognized as the

³² Patricia Turner, I Heard it Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 45-56.

³³ Superintendent’s Monthly Report, January 1934, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 19-20; Norfolk Journal and Guide, 27 January 1934, 1.

best all-black camp in the country and the second best camp in the Third Corps area—black or white. The events of the past several months were conveniently swept under the carpet.³⁴ For the men that participated in the protest, their actions had, at least for a moment, allowed them to express a vocal opposition to the discriminatory attitudes of the local white citizens on public ground ordinarily denied to them.

Problems with the local police surfaced again only one month after the riot. Harry Ford, an enrollee in Camp NM-3, was charged by his camp commander with “attempting to set fire to CCC property.” Following CCC practice, he was transported to the local jail for prosecution by local authorities. Ford claimed that he had been smoking beside a fellow enrollee’s bed when a lit cigarette dropped from his mouth and onto a newspaper on his bunkmate’s bed. According to Ford, the newspaper ignited and the fire then spread to the bedding. Ford’s version of the events was confirmed by at least two other enrollees, but the commanders refused to believe him. Ford stood trial for arson in the York County Court and was sentenced to “one year on the chain gang.” Ford responded to the sentence by writing to the CCC asking for a formal inquiry. The notes from that investigation no longer exist, but CCC officials convinced the court to reduce Ford’s sentence to three months. The conviction of Ford and the severity of his sentence further confirmed for enrollees the animosity of the local white community.³⁵

³⁴ Superintendent’s Monthly Report, January 1934, Records of Colonial National Historical Park, Yorktown, VA, 20-21; Camp NM-2 Narrative Report, 25 October 1934, “NM-2” file, Box 74, Records of the Land and Recreational Planning Division, Record Group 79, National Archives, College Park, MD.

³⁵ Documents pertaining to the Ford case can be found in Camp NM-3 Investigation Report, 10 March 1934, “Virginia NM-1” file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

In surrounding black communities, CCC enrollees found the acceptance and excitement denied them by the white citizens of Yorktown. Borrowing the terms of historian Earl Lewis, the Yorktown enrollees “turned segregation into congregation.” Weekends were periods of leisure for the Yorktown enrollees. It was on the weekends that they tried to escape the endless toil of the CCC camps. The enrollees entered places like Uniontown and Newport News to articulate what historian Robin Kelley calls “the grievances and dreams of an exploited class.” Trips to neighboring black communities became a valuable release from the atmosphere in camp.³⁶

The most popular weekend gathering spot was Uniontown, an all-black community located only several minutes north of the camps. Founded by newly freed blacks following the Civil War, Uniontown was a small enclave of residences and black-owned businesses. The enrolled men came into the town to buy drinks at local bars and pursue relationships with local women. Tales of Uniontown shenanigans became legendary. One story recounted in the camp newspaper described the despair of one enrollee who squandered 18 months of earnings to entice the woman of his dreams—to no avail. Although the commanders felt that Uniontown was “a hotbed of ill-rest and contention,” the enrollees enjoyed their weekly visits because the

³⁶ Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 91-92; Kelly, *Race Rebels*, 44. My research into the leisure activities of the black working class is also informed by Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

members of the community readily accepted and embraced them, unlike the citizens of Yorktown.³⁷

The camp commanders also organized weekend trips to nearby cities. On one excursion, a large group of men watched John Barrymore in “Raffles” at Richmond’s most popular black theater—the Hippodrome. But one enrollee found the atmosphere outside of the theater even more interesting than what was taking place inside.

“There were girls galore on Second Street,” he fondly recalled, “it looked like ‘Sweethearts on Parade.’ Love failures were the source of fun all the way back to camp.”³⁸

In Norfolk, enrollees spent their weekend nights on Church Street, an area that enrollees jokingly nicknamed “Negro heaven.” Church Street featured a two-block section that local blacks remembered as a little oasis in the desert or “our street.” The area offered a variety of black-owned businesses including drug stores, cafes, barbershops, pool halls, social clubs, beauty parlors, and taxi stands. Black residents of Norfolk in the 1930’s fondly recall that nighttime on Church Street “was showtime.” People were “togged down to perfection,” wearing “flaming pocket handkerchiefs” and vivid neckties. Bystanders lined the streets “joking, jiving,

³⁷ Yorktown Sentinel and Review, 11 March 1935, 4; Yorktown Sentinel and Review, 10 September 1935, 3; Ye Olde York Times, 20 March 1936, 1. The above titles refer to newspapers created by the men enrolled in the CCC’s journalism classes. Copies of the remaining CCC newspapers are housed in the Library of Congress. My brief history of Uniontown draws upon my numerous conversations with park historian Jane Sundberg. Kelley Deetz, a student at William and Mary, recently completed a senior honors thesis on the community. Many of these black communities, including Uniontown, now exist only in the minds of those who once lived there. As the naval installations around Yorktown grew in size, many African Americans were displaced to make way for the construction. A similar process took place in nearby Williamsburg where large African American communities were forced to move in order to make way for the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg and a CIA training center at Camp Peery.

³⁸ Yorktown Sentinel and Review, 11 March 1935, 1.

arguing, but always smiling.” One group could be discussing Joe Louis’s chances in his next fight, another a recent run of bad numbers, another the causes of the depression, and another the “respective merits of girls at a recent dance.” One former resident stated, “there was an intangible comfort to that banter. It was escape for many, escape from the daylong toil in the white man’s world. The faces, the laughter were music to the Negro’s soul, the rhythm of the crowd a solace.”³⁹

In places like Norfolk, enrollees were able to escape the rigid structure of camp life and partake in an active, vibrant black working class culture. The environs of Church Street were the antithesis of life in the CCC camps. Amid the hustle and bustle of a Saturday night in Norfolk, the racial animosity of Yorktown was temporarily lost in a fog of acceptance and excitement.

The efforts of Yorktown enrollees to shape their own experience in the CCC extended to their religious practice. The men that chose to remain in their quarters on Sundays were not happy with the religious services offered by the camp commanders. Initially, the Army decided to supply the camps with white military chaplains. In Yorktown, the Army appointed one chaplain to cover all four camps. But shortly after his appointment, the camp commanders expressed concern over the extraordinarily low rate of attendance at the camps’ church services.⁴⁰ After speaking

³⁹ Remembrances of Church Street in the 1930’s can be found in Works Projects Administration, The Negro in Virginia (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair Publishing, 1994), 369-388.

⁴⁰ Camp NM-1 Investigation Report, 10 March 1934, “Virginia NM-1” file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Camp NM-3 Investigation Report, 10 March 1934, “Virginia NM-3” file, Box 135, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD; Camp NM-3 Investigation Report, 20 December 1934, “Virginia NM-3” file, Box 135, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

to their assistant leaders and several of the enrolled men, they discovered that the men resented the appointment of a white chaplain and preferred the services of a local black minister. Many of the men in fact left the camp on Sunday mornings to attend services in Newport News and other surrounding communities. In places of worship such as Shiloh Baptist Church in Uniontown, the enrolled men found religious services featuring a more expressive and musical atmosphere than the rather staid services conducted in the camps. Furthermore, their attendance at local churches served to strengthen the ties between the enrollees and the local black community.⁴¹

In June of 1935, shortly after the CCC reversed its policy on black education advisors, the program opened the position of camp chaplain to black applicants. Yorktown was one of the first camp sites in the country to receive a black chaplain. The camps' first black chaplain, along with his successors, introduced a radically different service style more in line with those conducted at local black churches. They also initiated a program to provide monthly visits from prominent local clergy. Although many of the men still chose to attend local churches, the attendance at camp services more than doubled following the CCC's introduction of black chaplains.⁴²

The enrolled men of Yorktown continued to resist the regimentation of their program for the duration of the CCC. The enrollees successfully created pockets of

⁴¹ Camp NM-1 Investigation Report, 19 May 1933, "Virginia NM-1" file, Box 134, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD. A similar debate was underway at Hampton Institute as students began to protest the style of religious ceremonies performed in the campus worship hall.

⁴² Camp NM-4 Investigation Report, 16 February 1938, "NM-4" file, Box 135, Records of the Division of Investigations, Record Group 35, National Archives, College Park, MD.

power that allowed them to have a voice in the day-to-day operation of the Yorktown CCC camps. They also counteracted the animosity of the local white population by finding refuge and acceptance in surrounding black communities. Their critiques of CCC policy and local hostility reinforced and inspired local and national efforts to end discrimination and segregation in the CCC.

CONCLUSION

Approximately 3000 men served in the CCC camps in Yorktown. The remnants of their handiwork can be witnessed throughout the Tidewater region. Revolutionary War earthworks, originally built by slaves, were restored to their original condition. The nation's first large-scale archaeology project, performed largely by CCC labor, discovered artifacts related to the arrival of the first slaves into the colony at Jamestown. Tourists walking the grounds at Yorktown today are likely unaware of the CCC's history at Yorktown. Unfortunately, historians have been unaware of their actions as well.

The four CCC camps at Yorktown illustrate that the CCC was most segregated at the local level. State selection agents placed limitations on black enrollment and many white communities refused to accept African American CCC camps. In Yorktown the support of white residents rested solely on the enforcement of segregation within the camps and within the community. Black enrollees were not allowed to serve in a supervisory capacity, because local citizens believed that the employment of black supervisors would jeopardize the positions held by white foremen. CCC officials co-opted the segregationist arguments of local communities under the guise of buttressing local acceptance of black camps.

Whites' insistence on segregation within the CCC allowed blacks to turn that very insistence against them. Hughes Robinson, with the assistance of Arthur Howe, introduced an educational program in the Yorktown camps that served as a model for the entire CCC. Black enrollees embraced the program, despite their long and arduous labor, and worked with Robinson and their subsequent instructors to promote courses that

provided marketable job skills. When the CCC introduced its own educational program, black teachers were not eligible for the positions. Using a “separate but equal” argument much like the NAACP’s legal strategy at the time, black leaders encouraged a Roosevelt administration in search of black votes to allow African Americans to serve as educational advisors in black camps.

Within the camps, enrollees abhorred the rigid Army discipline and authority practiced by camp commanders and the limits placed on their leisure by the white residents of Yorktown. The black men in the camps did not have Robinson or Howe’s access to prominent officials, so they turned to a long tradition of black resistance to unwanted authority and exclusion. Inside of the camps, enrollees placed limits on their authoritarian commanders by deserting or lodging complaints with their black assistant leaders. Outside of the camps, enrollees took to the streets to protest the perceived mistreatment of six fellow enrollees by local authorities and the limitations placed on their leisure by Yorktown residents. Incensed by the discrimination in Yorktown proper, enrollees found excitement and acceptance in local black communities.

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