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“The Crowning Insult”: Federal Segregation and the Gold Star Mother and Widow Pilgrimages of the Early 1930s

Rebecca Jo Plant and Frances M. Clarke

James Weldon Johnson was hard at work on his book *Black Manhattan* in the summer of 1930, having taken leave from his position as executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). One morning, after reading a newspaper article that filled him with disgust, he “threw aside” his manuscript to write a satirical poem. The offending news concerned the gold star mother and widow pilgrimages, a federal government program that would send nearly 6,700 women to Europe to visit the graves of their sons and husbands who had perished in World War I. Johnson read that “Negro gold-star mothers would not be allowed to sail on the same ship with the white gold-star mothers” but would instead travel separately on “a second-class vessel.” The poem he penned in protest of that treatment, “Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day,” never directly refers to the women, however; instead, it dramatizes the plight of the betrayed and effaced black male soldier. In the poem’s fantastical climax, set in the nation’s capital at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, members of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Ku Klux Klan, and veterans’ groups recoil in horror when the soldier is revealed to be black: “Through it, at last, his towering form loomed / big and bigger— / ‘Great God Almighty! Look!’ they cried / ‘he is a nigger!’”¹

Today largely forgotten, the government’s discriminatory treatment of the black gold star mothers and wives ranked high among the concerns that preoccupied black journal-

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¹ On the history of the gold star mother and widow pilgrimages, see John W. Graham, *The Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s: Overseas Grave Visitations by Mothers and Widows of Fallen U.S. World War I Soldiers* (Jefferson, 2005); Lisa M. Budreau, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919–1933* (New York, 2009), 185–241; G. Kurt Piehler, “The War Dead and the Gold Star: American Commemoration of the First World War,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, 1994), 168–85; Lotte Larsen Meyer, “Mourning in a Distant Land: Gold Star Pilgrimages to American Military Cemeteries in Europe, 1930–33,” *Markers*, 20 (2003), 31–75; and Rebecca Jo Plant, “The Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages: Patriotic Maternalists and Their Critics in Interwar America,” in *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare, and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Marian van der Klein et al. (Oxford, 2012), 121–47. For studies that focus on the African American pilgrims but that do not detail how the controversy surrounding the pilgrimages played out in

ists and activists in 1930. For many African Americans, it was “the crowning insult”—a particularly unforgivable breach to add to the litany of grievances that had accumulated under the Hoover administration. Supported by the *Chicago Defender* and other leading black newspapers, the NAACP launched a campaign to pressure the government to reverse its decision to segregate the women; when that failed, it contacted all eligible black women and urged them to boycott the program. Approximately twenty-five women canceled their reservations and never made the pilgrimage. In the end, however, 279 mothers and widows joined one of six all-black groups that traveled during the spring and summer of 1930 through 1933. Like the white pilgrims, these women spent two weeks in Europe, shepherded through itineraries that included not only visits to the American cemeteries but also sightseeing and shopping expeditions, luncheons at elegant restaurants, and entertainment by famous African American expatriates. Upon returning to the United States, many disputed the negative coverage of the pilgrimages in the black press and urged other eligible women to participate.²

This article provides the first in-depth analysis of the all-black gold star mother and widow pilgrimages and the protests they inspired. The story is rife with paradox: even as the government segregated the black pilgrims, it recognized their civic contributions as war mothers and widows in an unprecedented and lavish manner. This jarring contradiction stemmed from competing notions of citizenship and American identity embedded in the program. Drawing on the ideal of martial citizenship, which linked the rights of citizenship to military service, the government presented each individual pilgrimage as a survivor’s benefit, granted in recognition of the pilgrim’s indirect contributions to the war effort. Collectively, however, the pilgrimages were also a series of very public commemorative acts centered on the iconic image of the all-American war mother. This patriotic iconography derived its power, in part, from its ability to communicate a vision of the United States as a homogenous, white nation. Integrated pilgrimages not only threatened to alienate whites—particularly white southerners—but also to compromise the program’s effectiveness as a nationalist gesture. In the end, the logic of martial citizenship prevailed only to a limited extent; it seems that no one publicly argued that the African American mothers and widows should be denied this unique government benefit. By manifesting the tension between visions of the nation communicated by officially sanctioned commemorations and monuments and the more inclusive message about national belonging signaled by the distribution of

black communities, see Richard A. Serrano, “Poignant Protest,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, Sept. 15, 2002, <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/sep/15/magazine/tm-moms37>; Elizabeth D. Schafer, “Black Gold Star Mothers,” in *Organizing Black America: An Encyclopedia of African American Associations*, ed. Nina Mjagkij (New York, 2001), 104–6; Constance Potter, “World War I Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages, Part I,” *Prologue*, 31 (Summer 1999), 140–45; and Constance Potter, “World War I Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages, Part II,” *ibid.*, 31 (Fall 1999), 210–15. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; New York, 1990), 293; James Weldon Johnson, *Saint Peter Relates an Incident: Selected Poems* (New York, 1935), ix, esp. 13–22.

² “The Crowning Insult,” *Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1930, p. A2. The government identified each of the pilgrimages groups by a letter. The first African American group, Party L, departed in July 1930 and included fifty-four women, followed in August 1930 by Party Q, with forty women. In May 1931 thirty-eight women sailed in Party E, and in July of that year thirty-four women made the pilgrimage in Party K. Thirty-seven pilgrims traveled in Party C in June 1932, while a final group of pilgrims, also labeled Party C, made the journey in July 1933. Of the 305 women who made a reservation at some point during the four-year program, a total of 26 (or 8.5%) canceled and never rescheduled, but some of these cancellations may have been due to the poor health of the traveler. Information on reservations and subsequent cancellations is from a database we created to compare different documents for each of the six pilgrimages: passenger lists, letters and RSVP cards from individual gold star mothers, and ship manifests. From this we were able to cull lists of those women who canceled and those who rescheduled and eventually made the trip.

military benefits, the program illuminates both the narrow possibilities and severe limitations of African American citizenship at the time.³

The pilgrimage episode also warrants scrutiny because it provides insight into the rapidly shifting terrain of black politics in the 1920s and early 1930s. In the wake of World War I, anger over the nation's abysmal treatment of black soldiers and veterans contributed to the rise of a masculinist ethos that tended to conflate the pursuit of racial justice with efforts to assert the rights of black manhood. This same period witnessed a decline in the influence of the black clubwomen's movement and the politics of racial uplift it had long espoused. These trends are clearly evident in the mobilization surrounding the pilgrimages. Due in large part to their ties to the Republican party, leading black clubwomen remained surprisingly removed from the protests, despite the fact that the victims of the government's policy were all women. Instead, well-educated and cosmopolitan newspapermen and NAACP activists outside the South assumed the role of organizing and representing the gold star mothers and widows. Committed to an integrationist agenda, these men pressured the women to boycott the pilgrimages, arguing that no self-respecting mother or widow would make a mockery of her loved one's ideals and sacrifices by acceding to segregation. At its core, their defense of the would-be pilgrims was a defense of the women's martyred husbands and sons; by denouncing the government's policy, they denounced what that policy implied about the futility of black soldiers' contributions and sacrifices. Indeed, references to fallen soldiers figured so prominently in the controversy that, as in Johnson's poem, their spectral presence at times overshadowed the women who survived them.⁴

³ A report on the constitutionality of the proposed legislation pointed to two types of precedents for the pilgrimage program: those establishing the government's power to "grant relief to soldiers and their dependents" and those recognizing the government's power to enact legislation that would "further patriotic sentiment." "Memorandum upon Constitutionality of Use of Federal Funds for Gold Star Mothers' Pilgrimages," in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Military Affairs, *To Authorize Mothers and Unmarried Widows of Deceased World War Veterans Buried in Europe to Visit the Graves: Hearing before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Military Affairs, United States Senate, Seventieth Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 5494, S. 2681, S. 5332, Bills to Enable the Mothers and Unmarried Widows of the Deceased Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines of the American Forces Interred in the Cemeteries of Europe to Make a Pilgrimage to These Cemeteries. Part 2, February 12, 1929, 70 Cong., 2 sess., Feb. 12, 1929, pp. 11–15.* Lucy Salyer has illuminated the concept of martial citizenship by showing how Asian veterans who served in the U.S. military during World War I successfully challenged their ineligibility for citizenship by employing "the strong link forged between military service and citizenship." Lucy E. Salyer, "Baptism by Fire: Race, Military Service, and U.S. Citizenship Policy, 1918–1935," *Journal of American History*, 91 (Dec. 2004), 847–76, esp. 848.

⁴ On how the figure of the valiant black soldier served "to galvanize a broader commitment to citizenship rights and resistance to racism," see Chad L. Williams, "Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial Militancy," *Journal of African American History*, 92 (Summer 2007), 347–70, esp. 349; and Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill, 2010). On how, after the war, African Americans produced historical and visual records that celebrated black soldiers' achievements and exposed the suffering and injustices they had faced, see Jennifer D. Keene, "The Memory of the Great War in the African American Community," in *Unknown Soldiers: The American Expeditionary Forces in Memory and Remembrance*, ed. Mark A. Snell (Kent, 2008), 60–79. On the construction of black manhood and its significance for interwar politics, see Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*; Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York, 2004); Matthew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 100–153; and Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 193–232. Deborah Gray White asserts that the "permanent decline" of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in the 1920s ended the notion that "the progress of African Americans was marked by the progress of black women." Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York, 1999), esp. 112–13. On black clubwomen and the shift away from the politics of respectability in the interwar period, see Erin Chapman, *Prove It on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (New York, 2012); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, 2001); and Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington, 2006). On leading black clubwomen's ties to the Republican party, see Lisa G. Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877–1932* (Chapel Hill, 2009); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "In Politics to Stay: Black Women Leaders and Party Politics in the 1920s," in *Women, Politics, and Change*, ed. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin (New York, 1992), 199–220.

That the U.S. War Department's order appeared in line with the increasing—and increasingly undisguised—nationalization of Jim Crow practices also contributed to the intensity of the activists' response. Commentators repeatedly emphasized that the *federal* government had issued the order to segregate the pilgrims, and that a *Republican* president failed to countermand it. Untrustworthy allies to be sure, these entities had nonetheless offered a modicum of hope to African Americans who wanted both equal rights and a sense of national belonging. Yet in the 1920s and 1930s African Americans witnessed a constriction of the already-narrow spaces they had managed to carve out for themselves in the U.S. military, the civil service, and the Republican party. If a Republican president was willing to condone the segregation of war mothers and widows, of all people—and do so in a federal program designed to draw international attention—surely there was no stopping Jim Crow's inexorable spread.⁵

Most importantly, this little-known and compelling story allows us to glimpse the myriad ways a group of so-called ordinary black women responded to an extraordinary circumstance that forced them to weigh powerful appeals to racial solidarity against deeply felt personal commitments and desires. Because the pilgrimage program created an anomalous situation in which both leading African American men and War Department officials depended on the decisions of poor black women to attain their objectives, it generated an archive that allows access to the voices of actors whose thoughts and feelings rarely appear in historical records. Many of the women strongly objected to segregation, but those who sailed declined to act as self-denying race mothers or widows. Instead, they signaled their independence from black leaders by laying claim to an unusual survivors' benefit and the opportunity for international travel it afforded. Employing a discourse of respectability typically associated with the black elite, they defended their participation by emphasizing the fine accommodations and courteous treatment they enjoyed throughout the pilgrimages, despite segregation.

The Hoover administration, hoping to appease disgruntled black voters and avert international censure, went to surprising lengths to ensure that the women returned home satisfied. It did so in part by enlisting the services of Col. Benjamin Davis, then the highest-ranking officer in the U.S. Army, along with African American civil servants and other black personnel. The presence and actions of these individuals, who shouldered much of the responsibility for the pilgrimages' day-to-day operations, make it difficult to speak of "the government's" stance toward black gold star mothers and widows. By segregating the

⁵ Practices of racial segregation increased in the North during the 1920s, especially in cities that had experienced a large influx of black migrants. In addition, a sharp rise in segregated schools and housing occurred, and numerous shops, restaurants, and theaters adopted a whites only policy. Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008), esp. 6. In the 1880s and 1890s, as southern states imposed Jim Crow laws, the federal government had "moved in the opposite direction, at least as regards its own employees." Between 1883 and 1913, the number of black civil service employees grew from about 600 to 12000—a total that included several hundred white-collar workers. Judson MacLaury, *To Advance Their Opportunities: Federal Policies toward African American Workers from World War I to the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (Knoxville, 2008), esp. 5. Beginning in 1913, the Wilson administration segregated government offices and began requiring civil service applicants to submit photographs as it sought to purge African Americans from all but menial federal jobs. Subsequent Republican administrations did little to reverse these developments. Eric S. Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson's America* (Chapel Hill, 2013), 177. See also Nicholas Patler, *Jim Crow and the Wilson Administration: Protesting Federal Segregation in the Early Twentieth Century* (Boulder, 2004); and Desmond King, *Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the U.S. Federal Government* (New York, 1995). On African Americans' marginalization in the U.S. Army, see Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York, 1989); and Edward M. Coffman, *The Regulars: The American Army, 1898–1941* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

women, the War Department powerfully reasserted white supremacy. Yet by assigning African Americans much of the responsibility for the pilgrimages' day-to-day operations, the department inadvertently created an arena in which these officials could respectfully honor women of their race while drawing international attention to African Americans' wartime sacrifices and continued oppression.⁶

These complexities and contradictions were not, however, what most African Americans would remember about the pilgrimages. "Remember our Gold Star Mothers" became an effective rallying cry for Democratic politicians seeking to draw African Americans away from the Republican party. The segregation of the pilgrims was by no means the main cause of this shift; the Democrats managed to attract black voters, despite the party's dismal track record on race, because the New Deal delivered a modicum of economic relief and because key figures in the Roosevelt administration vocally supported civil rights. If Democrats succeeded in pulling black voters toward them, though, Republicans also effectively pushed them away with a series of widely reported actions (and nonactions) that thoroughly disgusted African Americans and set the stage for their defection. Of these, the decision to segregate the gold star mothers was widely perceived as the lowest of blows. Quick to capitalize on what one black Republican judged the "worst boner" contributing to Herbert Hoover's "ever increasing unpopularity" among African Americans, Democratic politicians and operatives began claiming that the bereaved women had not only been segregated but had also been forced to cross the Atlantic on cattle ships. This incendiary rumor, which soon acquired the hard sheen of fact, eclipsed the voices of the pilgrims even as it conveyed larger truths about the gendered forms of humiliation that black women and men endured under the shadow of Jim Crow.⁷

Race, Gender, and Martial Citizenship during and after World War I

The controversy over the gold star pilgrimages was a conflict about both rights and representation—a conflict that in many ways reprised debates that had played out during World War I. It spoke to what the black pilgrims were owed as bereaved women who relinquished their sons and husbands, presumably for the greater good of the nation. And it spoke to how black women should figure in patriotic and national iconography. Similar questions had been hotly contested during the war: Should black men be called upon to serve as soldiers? If so, in what capacities? Should black women be expected or allowed

⁶ Margot Canaday's argument that the state does not simply implement policy but is itself a site of contestation helps make sense of the role played by black pilgrimage officials. Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2009).

⁷ On "Remember our Gold Star Mothers" as an effective rallying cry, see "From Boston to Atlanta," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Nov. 29, 1930, p. 6. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, xiv. Harvard Sitkoff argues that African Americans' perceptions of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration as supportive of civil rights played a central role in shifting black loyalties, but Nancy J. Weiss contends that economic self-interest was the determinative factor. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York, 1978); Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, 1983). The realignment was sudden and dramatic; Herbert Hoover won roughly two-thirds of the black votes in 1932, yet over 70% of African Americans voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 41, 95. On the Republicans' growing unpopularity with African American voters, see also Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill, 1985); and Simon Topping, *Lincoln's Lost Legacy: The Republican Party and the African American Vote, 1928–1952* (Gainesville, 2008). Tom Cauty to George Akerson, May 30, 1930, box 165: Gold Star Mothers 1930–32, Subject File: Presidential Period 1929–33, Herbert Hoover Papers (Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa).

to assume the same wartime roles as white wives and mothers? And how—if indeed at all—should African Americans be recognized and compensated for their contributions?

The answers to these questions hinged on the extent to which the ideal of martial citizenship, with its promise of rewards for the soldier and his family, could be marshaled to challenge racial and gender ideologies and exclusions. During the war, most military officers had insisted that black men should not—indeed, *could* not—serve as combat soldiers. In contrast, most (though by no means all) race leaders pushed hard to secure black men’s “right” to shoulder the same duties as their white counterparts, in hopes that they would then finally reap the rewards of full citizenship. In July 1918, W. E. B. Du Bois famously urged African Americans to “forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens.” In the end, however, the approximately two hundred thousand African Americans who served overseas did not fight alongside white soldiers. Although some distinguished themselves in combat, including the men of the much-decorated U.S. 369th Infantry Regiment, which fought under French command, the vast majority of black soldiers (almost 90 percent) were assigned to segregated stevedore and labor units where they faced appalling conditions and treatment. Indeed, it was mainly black troops who performed the “gruesome, repulsive, and unhealthful” job of exhuming and reintering bodies in the cemeteries now deemed pilgrimage sites.⁸

Black commentators frequently portrayed the segregation of the gold star mothers and widows as part of a much longer history in which African American soldiers and veterans had consistently faced ill-treatment, disrespect, or worse. Incensed by the government’s “spiteful plan,” Roy Wilkins of the *Kansas City Call* demanded, “Who can forget . . . the 369th Buffaloes—strutting up famous Fifth Avenue, citations streaming from its snapping colors?” Frank A. Young of the *Chicago Defender* recalled not only the feats of the fighting units but also the labor of “the boys who worked like Trojans” in service companies and battalions. Critics of the segregated pilgrimages also pointed to the ill-treatment and marginalization of African American men in the modern military. They particularly protested the reassignments of the legendary U.S. 9th Cavalry and 10th Cavalry Regiments—two of the four original all-black units formed after the Civil War—and complained that soldiers in these units were being forced to perform service work. To many observers, it appeared that the U.S. Army was well on its way to purging African Americans from its ranks entirely: by 1930 black troops numbered a mere 2,974—just 2.5 percent of the total force.⁹

⁸ On military officers’ insistence that black men could not be effective combat soldiers, see James Mennell, “African-Americans and the Selective Service Act of 1917,” *Journal of Negro History*, 84 (Summer 1999), 275–87. On African Americans’ competing views of World War I, see William Jordan, “‘The Damnable Dilemma’: African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I,” *Journal of American History*, 81 (March 1995), 1562–83. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Close Ranks,” *Crisis*, 16 (July 1918), 111. The U.S. 369th Infantry Regiment endured more continuous combat and sustained greater losses than any other U.S. regiment during the war; the French government awarded it a regimental Croix de Guerre. On the 369th Infantry Regiment, see Jeffrey T. Sammons and John H. Morrow Jr., *Harlem’s Rattlers and the Great War: The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality* (Lawrence, 2014). Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*; Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 107–24; Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (New York, 2005); Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore, 2001), 82–104; Jennifer D. Keene, “A Comparative Study of White and Black American Soldiers during the First World War,” *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 103 (no. 1, 2002), 71–90. On black troops tasked with exhuming and reintering bodies, see Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, *Two Colored Women with the American Expeditionary Forces* (Brooklyn, 1920), 28–29.

⁹ Roy Wilkins, “Talking It Over,” *Kansas City Call*, March 28, 1930, p. 8. The February 17, 1919, parade, which made an enormous impression on witnesses, has been portrayed as the symbolic beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. See David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1997), 3–24. E.[rank] A. Y.[oung], “The Gold Star Turns to Be One of Brass,” *Chicago Defender*, July 19, 1930, p. 13. “9th Cavalry Is a Labor Outfit, Says Ex-Soldier,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 24, 1931, p. 21. On black troop numbers in 1930, see Coffman, *Regulars*, 294.

Yet while commentators readily connected the segregation of the gold star mothers to black soldiers' past and present status, they rarely if ever mentioned a parallel set of controversies that bore on black women's social and symbolic place within the polity. For instance, they did not recall how the Armed Forces Nurses Corps had refused to accept black women during the war, nor did they revisit the bitter struggles surrounding black war wives' access to federally dispensed allotments during the war, which southern whites had vehemently opposed because they afforded such women greater economic autonomy and bargaining power. Likewise, no one seems to have connected the issue to the notorious "work or fight" ordinances enacted by southern states during the war to force black men and women to perform menial labor—a matter of major concern to the NAACP during the war. Finally, commentators did not connect the pilgrims' segregation to a controversy that had erupted in 1924, when the United Daughters of the Confederacy attempted to erect a monument on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to the faithful "mammy" of the antebellum South, who selflessly showered love on her white charges. (Heated protest from black clubwomen and the NAACP helped stymie the plan.) In other words, although black women had consistently demanded recognition as wives and mothers, resisting whites' attempts to reduce them to domestic employees, such struggles did not influence and were not referenced in published commentary on the pilgrimages.¹⁰

The nearly decades-long campaign to establish a pilgrimage program played out amid these conflicts over African Americans' place within national iconography and over their claims to equal status as American soldiers and veterans, war wives and mothers. National war mothers associations headed the lobbying effort for the government-funded pilgrimages, drawing support from veterans' organizations, including the powerful American Legion. First organized on a local level, war mothers eventually coalesced into two main national associations: the American War Mothers and the American Gold Star Mothers. The former, open to any mother with a son who had served in the war, included a small number of African American and Native American members. The latter, comprising women whose sons had perished in the war, admitted white women only. Both associations perpetuated the long-enduring ideal of the republican mother, whose willingness to surrender her soldier-son constituted the ultimate display of civic virtue. Though ostensibly nonpartisan, they advocated military preparedness and consistently aligned with the forces of antiradicalism.¹¹

Yet the identity of "war mother" could also carry different political implications depending on who claimed its mantle. When black women presented themselves as American war

¹⁰ On the refusal of the Armed Forces Nurses Corps to accept black women, see Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*; and Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890–1950* (Bloomington, 1989). On black war wives' access to federally dispensed allotments during the war, see K. Walter Hickel, "War, Region, and Social Welfare: Federal Aid to Servicemen's Dependents in the South, 1917–1921," *Journal of American History*, 87 (March 2001), 1362–91. Gerald Shenk, "Work or Fight!": *Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War One* (New York, 2005); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 219–40; and Tera W. Hunter, "'The Women are Asking for BREAD, Why Give Them Stone?': Women, Work, and Protests in Atlanta and Norfolk during World War I," in *Labor in the Modern South*, ed. Glenn T. Eskew (Athens, Ga., 2001), 62–82. Michele Paige McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Joan Marie Johnson, "'Ye Gave Them a Stone': African American Women's Clubs, the Frederick Douglass Home, and the Black Mammy Monument," *Journal of Women's History*, 17 (Spring 2005), 62–86.

¹¹ On membership and restrictions of the American Gold Star Mothers (AGSM), see Piehler, "War Dead and the Gold Star," 176–77. On the origins of the ideology of republican motherhood, see Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1976), 187–205; and Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980). For an analysis of patriotic motherhood during World War I, see Susan Zeiger, "She Didn't Raise Her Boy

mothers, they asserted a civic identity (American citizen) and a gendered status (respectable lady) from which they had historically been excluded. On rare occasions, this allowed them to challenge or defy Jim Crow conventions. For instance, when the Illinois resident Laura Leake, one of only two black women to attend the 1931 National War Mothers conference, arrived at the convention hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, the taxi driver and bellhop served her deferentially. “Of course I know they weren’t so pleased at rendering me this service,” she told the *Chicago Defender*, “but I was pleased to know that they HAD to recognize me as a war mother.” Cognizant of how conceptions of martial citizenship could sometimes be leveraged to challenge discrimination, many race leaders urged eligible women to join war mothers’ associations or to form their own groups, just as they encouraged black veterans to be active in the American Legion. Likewise, most black newspapers welcomed the pilgrimage program as “a magnanimous gesture on the part of the government.” The first ship, the *Chicago Defender* declared, should carry “a large number of dark women.”¹²

Initially no one seemed to note that the law had been worded so as to grant the secretary of war the latitude to impose segregation. The War Department quietly signaled its intent to segregate the women in a bureaucratic document published in January 1930; a single sentence made clear that, whereas all other pilgrims would be grouped as citizens residing in particular states, African American women would be grouped as members of a separate race. Mothers and widows whose sons and husbands had been identified as “colored,” “black,” or “African” on their draft cards were also thus designated, while all the other women became “white” by default. The latter group included at least one woman who listed a home address in Puerto Rico, as well as an elderly Winnebago Indian who spoke no English. Virtually every white group also included at least a few resident aliens, not to mention naturalized immigrants. (In 1930 alone, the government arranged for translators in Finnish, French, Italian, Hebrew, German, Russian, Polish, Greek, Spanish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Slovak.) In fact, the African American parties were, ironically, the only ones comprising almost entirely English-speaking, native-born U.S. citizens—a distinction not lost on the women themselves. Speaking to the Jamaican American journalist Joel Augustus Rogers, women in the first black party asserted that they were “the most truly American group,” since all the preceding parties had included foreigners who “respond to the impulses of their own lands rather than to America.”¹³

to Be a Slacker: Motherhood, Conscription, and the Culture of the First World War,” *Feminist Studies*, 22 (Spring 1996), 6–39. On the political leanings of war mothers’ organizations, see Piehler, “War Dead and the Gold Star.” Studies of the post–World War I rise of women’s conservatism include Kirsten Marie DeLegard, *Battling Miss Bolshevik: The Origins of Female Conservatism in the United States* (Philadelphia, 2012); Christine Kimberly Erickson, “So Much for Men’: Conservative Women and National Defense in the 1920s and 1930s,” *American Studies*, 45 (Spring 2004), 85–102; Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 128–52; and Kim E. Nielson, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism and the First Red Scare* (Columbus, 2001).

¹² “A Scrap Book for Women in Public Life,” *Chicago Defender*, May 23, 1931, p. 6. Emphasis in original. On the urging of eligible women to join the American War Mothers, see Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “So It Seems,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 1, 1930, p. 6. “A Trip for War Mothers,” *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1929, p. 2.

¹³ “All pilgrimages shall be made in accordance with such regulation as the secretary of war may from time to time prescribe as to the time, route, itineraries, composition of groups, accommodations, transportation, arrangements, management, and other matters pertaining to such pilgrimages.” *Military Laws of the United States* (Washington, 1930), 748. “Invitations to mothers and widows of the Negro race shall be extended for such time as will permit the organization of separate groups of such mothers and widows.” U.S. War Department, *Pilgrimage Regulations* (Washington, 1930), 4. On the governmental provision of translators, see “Languages Spoken by War Mothers and Widows,” April 17, 1930, memo, Languages folder, box 9, American Pilgrimage Gold Star Mothers and Widows, New York, 1930–33, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774–1962: General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives, College Park, Md.); and “Foreign Languages Spoken by War Mothers and Widows,” May 7, 1930, memo, *ibid.* J. A. Rogers, “Gold Star War Mothers Talk for the Afro,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug. 9, 1930, pp. 1, 17.

Such sentiments notwithstanding, the pilgrims' segregation made clear that race had trumped formal citizenship status. Precedent offered little reason to expect that the pilgrimages would be conducted in any other manner; after all, the women's sons and husbands had served in segregated units. Yet many commentators appeared genuinely stunned that the federal government would stoop so low as to apply Jim Crow laws to gold star mothers. After all, the mothers and widows had been invited to partake in the pilgrimages as guests of a presumably grateful nation: the program was supposed to honor participants, not insult them. Moreover, unlike black soldiers, the mostly poor and often-aged women did not evoke intense fear among white Americans who hoped to preserve the racial order. Because of their relative powerlessness, the weight of their loss, and the unique character of the federally funded program, segregation in this instance struck many commentators, both black and white, as particularly unconscionable. The resulting outrage would spur a serious but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to pressure the War Department and President Hoover to reverse the policy.¹⁴

Protesting the Segregated Pilgrimages

When civil rights leaders and journalists caught wind of the government's intent to segregate the pilgrims in February 1930, they moved quickly to oppose the plan. Over the next six months black newspapers ran hundreds of articles on the pilgrimage program, and countless individuals wrote letters, signed petitions, and, in at least one instance, gathered to demonstrate against the government's policy. But such factors as gender, class, region, and political affiliation influenced how African Americans viewed the issue and how they prioritized it. The pilgrimage episode thus clarifies lines of difference among African Americans in the years immediately prior to the New Deal era. At the same time, it shows how gendered and emotionally charged notions of honor, loyalty, virtue, and respectability served as a common language across the political spectrum, employed to justify or promote widely divergent positions.¹⁵

Although communists also protested the pilgrims' segregation, the voices that dominated were those of men from northern or midwestern regions who were associated with the NAACP and leading black newspapers. Well educated, well traveled, and relatively affluent, if not outright wealthy, their ranks included NAACP secretary Walter White; the newspaper editors Robert S. Abbott, Robert L. Vann, and Roy Wilkins; Illinois representative Oscar DePriest (then the sole African American serving in the U.S. Congress); and the successful Pennsylvania businessman John Mott Drew. Some of these men had ties to the Republican party. Nearly all had been skeptical, if not hostile, toward Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which in the 1920s attracted large numbers of working-class and poor rural blacks with its message of Pan-Africanism, self-determination, and racial separatism. Unlike Garveyites—or black communists, for that matter—these men believed that the most promising path

¹⁴ On the relative powerlessness of gold star mothers, see, for example, "Black and Gold Stars," *Nation*, July 23, 1930, p. 85.

¹⁵ "Last Boat for Relatives of War Dead: War Department Plans J.-C. for War Mothers," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb. 22, 1930, p. A3. In addition to the *Chicago Defender*, most other influential black newspapers, including the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Kansas City Call*, and the *Los Angeles California Eagle*, also supported the boycott. The *Baltimore Afro-American*, along with smaller papers such as the *Wyandotte (KS) Echo*, argued that the women should participate even as they condemned segregation.

for African Americans, politically speaking, was to insist on their status as U.S. citizens.¹⁶

The protests and boycotts they organized do not fit neatly into the “long civil rights movement” paradigm that locates the origins of the modern civil rights movement in the 1930s, with the forging of a new coalition of “laborites, civil rights activists, progressive New Dealers, and black and white radicals.” Unfolding just prior to this flourishing of cross-racial alliances and class-inflected politics, the campaign against segregated pilgrimages was instead emblematic of an older tradition in which comparatively well-situated African Americans targeted the federal government for redress, demanding that it enforce the Reconstruction-era amendments that promised blacks equal rights and protections. These activists focused on discrimination and segregation in the civil service and the military, the appointment of racial reactionaries to high office, and the ways African Americans were or were not visually represented by the state in everything from national monuments to official White House photographs. Unlike more radical attempts to forge transnational ties across the African diaspora, such efforts were nation-based initiatives that aimed to garner publicity and exert pressure on (and ultimately sway) those in power.¹⁷

In the case of the pilgrimages, the first order of business was to compel the government to own up to its plan. This proved no easy task. In March 1930 the director of the pilgrimage program, Gen. J. L. DeWitt, tried to skirt the matter when questioned by the NAACP. “The composition of groups,” he wrote, had been “determined after the most careful consideration of the interests of the pilgrims themselves. No discrimination whatever will be made as between the various groups.” For his part, President Hoover refused to address the matter, referring all questioners to the War Department. Not until mid-April, just weeks before the first group of white pilgrims sailed, did the War Department explicitly state: “Groups of Colored mothers and widows will be formed.” The sentence’s passive voice and lack of an agent spoke volumes.¹⁸

The *Chicago Defender* responded by running a front-page article with an oversized headline: “Gold Star Black Mothers: STAY OUT OF FRANCE If Forced to Sail on Jim

¹⁶ John Mott Drew coordinated his efforts with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which reported that he had “rendered yeoman’s service in the effort to prevent the segregation of the Negro Gold Star Mothers.” National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Twenty-First Annual Report, 1930* (New York, 1931), 23, 52–53. On Drew, see Lindy Constance Wardell, *Darby Borough* (Mount Pleasant, 2004), 60; and “John Mott Drew Dies, 93, Founder of Transit Line,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 13, 1976, p. 12. While the influence of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) waned following Marcus Garvey’s deportation in 1927, the fundamental tenets of Garveyism continued to have enormous cachet among poor and working-class African Americans. Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The United Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920–1927* (Chapel Hill, 2007). The UNIA newspaper, *Negro World*, ran only a few articles on the pilgrimages. It also disputed other black newspapers’ characterization of France as a nation free of racial discrimination. For instance, on the day that Party E, the third contingent of black pilgrims, arrived in Paris, the paper carried an article asserting that the French would not patronize black-owned businesses. See “Negro War Mothers Welcomed in Paris,” *Negro World*, June 20, 1931, p. 1; and Capt. Isaiah Alleyne, “Captain Alleyne Reports That Negro Business Has Poor Chance in France,” *ibid.*, June 20, 1931, p. 3.

¹⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, 91 (March 2005), 1233–63, esp. 1245.

¹⁸ J. L. DeWitt to Royal S. Copeland, March 29, 1930, Subject File Jamaica, New York, Branch, April–May 1930, group 1, series B The Northeast, part 12 Selected Branch Files 1913–1939, *Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (microfilm, 1,292 reels, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1982–1999), reel 3. J. L. DeWitt would go on to play a leading role in the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Hoover “refused all public comment, ignored the vehement black protest, and argued feebly in private that Congress had given the War Department ‘sole authority’ so he could not intervene in any way.” Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites*, 235–36. “War Department to Ignore Plea of U.S. Citizens,” *Chicago Defender*, April 19, 1930, p. 1.

Crow Ships!" At the same time, the NAACP and John Mott Drew began contacting all black women who intended to participate, informing them of the government's plan and imploring them to boycott the pilgrimages unless the War Department reversed its plan. By late May fifty-five women had signed a letter drafted by NAACP officials in which they pledged to refuse the trip rather than submit to segregation. "Twelve years after the Armistice, the high principles of 1918 seem to have been forgotten," it read. "We who gave and who are colored are insulted by the implication that we are not fit persons to travel with other bereaved ones." The issue preoccupied African American journalists and civil rights leaders throughout the spring and summer and emerged as a "chief topic" of discussion at the NAACP annual convention in early July.¹⁹

The boycott's advocates insisted that the women had a personal and political duty to refuse to bow to segregation. In advancing their argument, they invoked the ideal of the "race mother," who melded womanly selflessness with racial militancy, expressing both through her fierce devotion to her husband, children, and community. This maternal ideal resonated with the long-standing model of the stoic republican mother but with a crucial twist: because of the U.S. government's treachery, the race mother owed her loyalty not to the state or the nation but to her son and her people. The woman who refused the government's demeaning terms affirmed her loved one's right to be properly honored as an American hero, whereas she who accepted the terms evinced a shameful failure of both political and maternal courage. As the *Chicago Defender* urged, "Mothers, don't shame those boys further by going to visit their graves on Jim Crow ships!"²⁰

At the same time, male activists and commentators interpreted the government's act as an affront to black manhood in general. By segregating the women, the government failed to properly honor them as particularly deserving citizens, but it also refused to acknowledge their respectability as women—an act that demanded redress by black men. "It is about the most caddish, ungentlemanly and unchivalrous thing any men could do to women," wrote a *Baltimore Afro-American* reader who urged a forceful response. "For if men won't strike back at insults to their women, they soon will have nothing else to strike back for or to strike with." Matthew W. Bullock, who had worked closely with black troops as a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) secretary during the war, concurred. "I am sure you will agree with me when I say that we would be less than men if we allowed this insult to pass unchallenged," he wrote to the *Chicago Defender*. Thus, by refusing to place themselves in the hands of a racist state, outside of black male protection, the mothers and widows who boycotted the program not only respected the memory of their sons and husbands but also upheld the dignity of black manhood writ large.²¹

Leading clubwomen's lack of engagement in the protests contributed to the strongly masculinist framing of the campaign. Many clubwomen, to be sure, viewed the issue as a pressing one. In March 1930 the National Association of Clubwomen (NACW) publication,

¹⁹ "Gold Star Black Mothers: STAY OUT OF FRANCE If Forced to Sail on Jim Crow Ships!," *Chicago Defender*, April 19, 1930, p. 1. Drew urged the mothers and widows to send letters of protest to the government and forward copies to him. Some of these are reprinted in "'Gold Star Mothers' Bitterly Attack Uncle Sam's Segregation," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 22, 1931, p. 15. "Capital Rebuffs Gold Star Negroes," *New York Times*, May 30, 1930, p. 12; and "Gold Star Mothers Balk at Jim Crow Move," *Chicago Defender*, June 7, 1930, p. 2. For the NAACP-drafted letter, see National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Twenty-first Annual Report, 1930*, esp. 23–26. "Can't Now Halt Rise of Negro, NAACP Hears," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 5, 1930, p. 1.

²⁰ For an enlightening analysis of the discourse of "race motherhood," see Chapman, *Prove It on Me*, 53–77. "Gold Star Black Mothers: STAY OUT OF FRANCE If Forced to Sail on Jim Crow Ships!," 1.

²¹ "More than Shame," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 19, 1930, p. 6. Matthew W. Bullock, "Our Gold Star Mothers," *Chicago Defender*, March 29, 1930, p. 14.

National Notes, carried an editorial by a member who urged, "Not a mother of you should go. You have sacrificed your sons. You can sacrifice the trip!" That same month, a Michigan clubwoman inquired as to whether the association was "doing anything" to oppose the government's policy and reported that her local group was "anxious" to assist, "and how!" But these sentiments among the rank and file did not translate into significant activity on the part of the national organization. At its annual meeting in July (which happened to take place during the week that the first black pilgrims sailed for Europe), the NACW did respond to an urgent telegram from NAACP secretary Walter White by issuing a statement condemning segregation and praising those women who boycotted the pilgrimage. Yet there is little evidence that the NACW or any other women's organization played a significant role in generating popular pressure to compel the government to reverse its decision. The clubwoman Addie W. Hunton, a well-known NAACP field secretary who had worked with the YMCA during the war to provide services to black troops in France, even volunteered to accompany the pilgrims overseas. Though her offer was rebuffed, another prominent clubwoman, the physician Sara Winfred Brown, traveled with the first party as a hostess.²²

Most clubwomen were wives and mothers, and they may well have felt a gender-based sympathy for the gold star mothers and widows who were prepared to endure segregation to visit their loved ones' graves. Even so, their leaders' apparent reluctance to become involved seems largely attributable to their ties to the Republican party. In the 1920s many leading clubwomen had aligned themselves with the Republican party not only because of its historical associations with the antislavery movement but also, as the historian Lisa Materson has shown, because of its stance on moral and cultural issues such as Prohibition. For a select group of black women, these alliances translated into new leadership opportunities and public recognition. For instance, in 1929 President Hoover tapped Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune to serve on a commission for the construction of a memorial building to commemorate the "Negro's contribution to the achievements of America." Likewise, in 1931 Hoover appointed Nannie Burroughs to serve as chair of the Committee on Negro Housing at the President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership.²³

²² "To the Women of the National Association of Colored Women," *National Notes*, 33 (March 1930), 6, pt. 1: Minutes of National Conventions, Publications, and President's Office Correspondence, Lillian Serece Williams and Randolph Boehm, eds., *Records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs 1895-1992* (microfilm, 41 reels, University Publications of America, 1993-1994), reel 24. For the Michigan clubwoman's query, see Margaret Williams to Sallie W. Stewart, March 19, 1930, States' Correspondence—Michigan, pt. 1: Minutes of National Conventions, Publications, and President's Office Correspondence, Williams and Boehm, eds., *Records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs 1895-1992*, reel 8. Proceedings of the Seventeenth Biennial Session of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc., July 11-18, 1930, pt. 1: Minutes of National Conventions, Publications, and President's Office Correspondence, *ibid.*, reel 1. On Addie W. Hunton's offer to accompany the black mothers and widows, see "Get in Touch with General Cheatham," n.d., memo, folder: Gold Star Mothers 1930-32, box 165, Subject File: Presidential Period 1929-33, Hoover Papers; and "General Cheatham telephoned," n.d., memo, *ibid.*

²³ In 1924 a group of black clubwomen, feeling constrained by the officially nonpartisan stance of the NACW, founded the National League of Colored Republican Women (NLCRW). NLCRW members argued that the repeal of Prohibition would threaten racial uplift and establish a precedent that could endanger the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. For illuminating accounts of the NLCRW, see Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*; and Higginbotham, "In Politics to Stay," 199-220. "Pres. Hoover Names Eleven on Memorial Commission," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 26, 1929. Because Congress refused to provide federal seed money, the memorial project floundered during the depression and is only now being realized, with the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Washington Mall slated for 2016. National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission, *The Time Has Come: Report to the President and to the Congress* (Washington, 2003), 7-8. On Nannie Burroughs's appointment, see "Woman Appointed to Housing Body," *Washington Post*, April 17, 1931, p. 15. For background on Burroughs, who served as the NLCRW's first president, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); and Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 185-227.

This gender-inflected partisanship helps explain why Terrell and Burroughs defended the conduct of the pilgrimage program during the 1932 election season. Dismissing “the so-called segregation of Gold Star Mothers,” Terrell (truthfully) argued, “The mothers of those gallant black soldiers . . . themselves will bear testimony that they were accorded every courtesy,” before (falsely) claiming, “They were given the same accommodations that the white mothers received.” Similarly, after conducting her own investigation and interviewing a number of pilgrims, Burroughs wrote an exculpatory article that claimed the women did not lack for “comfort” or “courtesy” and “were most happy and appreciative of the trip.” Even Bethune—who had served on the committee that drafted the NACW statement condemning the segregated pilgrimages, and who would later become the most powerful African American woman in President Roosevelt’s administration—apparently refrained from becoming further involved in the protests. Here again, political affiliation probably played a role: Bethune served on the Board of Counselors of the Women’s Division of the Republican National Committee and remained active in Republican party politics through the 1932 election.²⁴

Finally, leading clubwomen’s distance from the pilgrimages may have reflected discomfort with criticism that male commentators directed at the pilgrims, which at times descended into scapegoating and mother blaming. The *Chicago Defender* assumed a particularly unforgiving stance. When Party L disembarked in New York City, the newspaper printed the pilgrims’ names and hometowns on its front page, prefaced with the stinging rebuke: “Their Sons Died for Segregation.” The paper even singled out specific individuals, as in the following photograph caption: “Had these four [pilgrims] come from the rural districts of Georgia, Alabama, or Florida where opportunities of education had been denied them all their lives there might be some excuse. But from New York with all the freedom there can be none these four can offer. . . . The mothers haven’t the courage and the pride that . . . carried their sons so nobly to their graves.” In fact, census data reveal that none of the four women had actually grown up in New York, and their occupational histories suggest that none had enjoyed extensive educational opportunities. Thus, even as the *Chicago Defender* acknowledged that a woman’s regional and educational background might inform her decision, it misrepresented—and cruelly attacked—these particular working-class women. Yet the paper refrained from criticizing comparatively affluent men such as Colonel Davis and the black civil servants who helped run the segregated pilgrimages.²⁵

²⁴ By the time Mary Church Terrell gave her speech, the black and white pilgrims were, in fact, traveling on the same kinds of ships and staying at the same hotels in Paris, but their hotel accommodations in New York still differed. Mary Church Terrell, “In Defense of the Republican Ticket, 1932,” Series 6: Speeches and Writings 1866–1953, *The Papers of Mary Church Terrell, 1851–1962* (microfilm, 34 reels, Library of Congress, 1977), reel 22. Nannie Helen Burroughs, “Nannie Burroughs Gets Inside Information about Treatment of Colored Gold Star Mothers,” n.d., box 46: Speeches and Writings 1916–1960, Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers 1900–1963 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.). In 1930, however, Burroughs had publically condemned the government’s segregation of the gold star mothers. Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 168. In October 1932, Mary McLeod Bethune wrote to Terrell that she was “doing all that I possibly can for our party. I am using my influence in every section I touch.” Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism* (Columbia, Mo., 2003), 124.

²⁵ On racially inflected mother blaming, see Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965* (New York, 2000). “Gold Star Mothers Sail for France on Freight Steamer,” *Chicago Defender*, July 19, 1930, p. 1. On the photograph caption, see “Setting Us Back Fifty Years,” *ibid.*, July 19, 1930, p. 3. Mary Johnson was born in Connecticut. By 1910, she had given birth to ten children, only five of whom still survived; in 1920 her husband, aged 69, was working as a porter. U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, *Compendium of the Thirteenth Census, 1910*, pt. I: *Population* (Washington, 1913), 1; and U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, *Compendium of the Fourteenth Census, 1920*, pt. I: *Population* (Washington, 1921), New York,

In contrast, black communists—most notably, Cyril Briggs—vehemently condemned the “Negro petty bourgeoisie” for abetting the government’s “campaign of insult and degradation” against the “mothers of victims of the last imperialist war.” The *Liberator*, the organ of the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC), lambasted Colonel Davis in particular, charging that he lacked the “manhood” to refuse “the dirty job assigned him by the government.” Communists objected to the entire idea of government-funded pilgrimages to European gravesites for war mothers and widows, viewing the program as an attempt to “‘whoop it up’ for another imperialist war by making it seem glorious to die for capitalism.” Yet in hopes of attracting new African American recruits, they downplayed this more fundamental opposition and focused instead on the issue of segregation. During a ceremony at city hall to welcome the first African American party to New York City, ANLC representatives staged a protest outside, at which they carried placards and distributed literature condemning “the segregation of the Gold Star mothers by the United States Government.”²⁶

And what of the women who found themselves at the center of the controversy? The majority concluded that, in this instance, the cost of taking a stand against segregation was simply too high a price to pay. For some, the choice was clear. “Ever since I lost my son in 1918 I have been wanting to come,” one mother explained. “I would have come over on a cattle-boat. I would have swam over if possible. I love my race as strongly as any other but when I heard that the United States was going to send us over I could not refuse.” But other women felt deeply ambivalent, torn between their desire to protest segregation and their yearning to properly mourn their loved ones. For instance, Bessie Strawther of Urbana, Ohio, who arranged to sail with the first group, experienced serious misgivings once she had arrived in New York, perhaps after conversing with individuals who supported the boycott. “I am not going to France,” she wrote to Drew, three days before the ship sailed without her. “I did except the invitation not knowing what I do now[.] under no circum would I go now[.] I do not want to be a disgrace to my son and the race.” Yet four years later, Strawther sailed with

Kings County, 5. Born in North Carolina, Fannie Shamley was working as a charwoman in Washington, D.C., in 1920. *Ibid.*, 1. Mathilda Vassall, an immigrant from the British West Indies, was widowed and running a hairdressing business from her home in 1930. U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, *Compendium of the Fifteenth Census, 1930*, pt. I: *Population* (Washington, D.C., 1934), Manhattan, New York, 34A. In 1930, Cora Jones, from North Carolina, lived with her husband, who worked as a hotel waiter. U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, *Compendium of the Fifteenth Census, 1930*, pt. I: *Population*, Queens, New York, 1934, 3A. Col. Benjamin Davis had lobbied to be assigned the leadership position. Marvin E. Fletcher, *America’s First Black General: Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., 1880–1970* (Lawrence, 1989), 70–75.

²⁶ Cyril Briggs, “Negro Petty Bourgeoisie Gave Support to Government’s Insult to Gold Star Mothers, Says Cyril Briggs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 19, 1930, p. 6. Born in the West Indies, Cyril Briggs founded the pro-Bolshevik African Blood Brotherhood in 1919, which was later subsumed into the American Negro Labor Congress. Williams, “Vanguards of the New Negro.” On black communists in the 1920s and 1930s, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1917–1950* (New York, 2008), esp. 15–105; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill, 2011); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson, 1998); and Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana, 2005). “Government Jim-Crows Gold Star Mothers,” *Liberator*, June 6, 1931, p. 5. For the “whoop it up” quotation, see Grace Hutchins, “Negro War Mothers Jim Crowed by Government,” *New York Daily Worker*, July 21, 1930, p. 4. Testifying before a U.S. House of Representatives Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States soon after the first group of black pilgrims sailed, A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Pullman Porters, described “the recent matter of the gold-star mothers” as a factor that had allowed communists to make inroads among African Americans. Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, vol. 6: *The Era of Post-war Prosperity and the Great Depression, 1920–1936* (Philadelphia, 1981), 477. On the New York City Hall protest, see “Harlem Leaders Hit U.S. Jim Crow: Government Policy Slammed Here as Gold Star Mothers Receive Tribute,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 16, 1930, p. 2; and “Government Jim Crows War Mothers,” *New York Daily Worker*, July 12, 1930, p. 1.



Bessie Strawther's son, Pvt. Henry Strawther of the 372nd Infantry, was killed in action on October 6, 1918. In the mid-1920s, black veterans from his hometown of Urbana, Ohio, honored his memory when they organized and named the Henry Strawther American Legion post. Mrs. Strawther, shown here in the early 1930s, signed up for the first pilgrimage and traveled from Urbana to New York, but she experienced misgivings once she arrived. Government records indicate that Strawther failed to board the ship due to a miscommunication, but a letter she sent to one of the boycott's main organizers, John Mott Drew, reveals otherwise. "i am not going to France. i did exopt the invitation not knowing what I do now," she wrote. "under no circum would I go now[,] I do not want to be a disgrace to my son and the race." Ultimately, however, Strawther sailed with the last group of black pilgrims in 1933. Her wavering is indicative of the internal struggles that many eligible black women experienced as they debated whether or not to accept the government's terms. Strawther's letter reprinted in "Gold Star Mothers' Bitterly Attack Uncle Sam's Segregation," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 22, 1931, p. 15. *Photo courtesy National Archives, St. Louis, Mo.*

the very last African American party. In her company was Carrie Brown of Eatonton, Georgia, who in 1930 had written to Drew, "Its enough to go there to see the last of my son with a weeping heart then the segregation combined is dreadful. As Mr. Patrick Henry said: 'Give me Liberty or give me death.'" Before traveling to Europe, Brown had twice made and then canceled a reservation. Indeed, the fact that the final group was by far the largest of the black parties is surely telling; other women, too, may have agonized over the decision for years, yielding to the government's terms only at the last possible moment.²⁷

²⁷ For the mother's quotation, see J. A. Rogers, "Second Group of Gold Star Mothers Will Sail for France August 16," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Aug. 16, 1930, p. 7. Bessie Strawther to John Mott Drew, July 9, 1930, reprinted in "Gold Star Mothers' Bitterly Attack Uncle Sam's Segregation." Carrie G. Brown to Drew, May 27, 1930, *ibid.* Of all the pilgrims, over half sailed during the first year, but this included only about one-third of the African American pilgrims. And whereas only 10% of all pilgrims waited until 1933 to sail, this included 37% of the black pilgrims. Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s*, 11.

Approximately twenty to twenty-five women never yielded. Despite “an intense desire to visit the grave of my beloved husband,” the Philadelphian Mabel Johnson informed the War Department that she would “not be a party to this conspiracy against the dead.” Grace F. Taylor, a seamstress from Cambridge, Massachusetts, was similarly emphatic. She took umbrage upon receiving a letter from a gold star widow who had already made the pilgrimage and implored Taylor to reconsider. “I wish to say right here that I need no urging from anyone pertaining to making the pilgrimage to France, as my mind was completely settled when I cancelled my invitation last summer,” she sharply replied. “I am a Massachusetts born woman and my parents before me and I strongly resent any such stand as the United States government has taken. I feel they have grossly insulted our race and that they can never make amends.”²⁸

To stalwarts such as Johnson and Taylor, the boycott must have seemed like an unambiguous failure. Yet if it fell far short of its goal, the campaign nonetheless had significant ramifications. Alarmed by the political fallout and already anticipating a difficult election in 1932, the Hoover administration made clear to those running the program that the black pilgrims should be given no further cause for complaint. Explaining the “very delicate situation” they faced, Major General DeWitt asked Col. Richard T. Ellis, who oversaw the program in France, to ensure that the women were treated with “the utmost care and circumspection while in Europe.” Ellis pledged to “bend backward in our efforts to do even more for them than the white pilgrims, if such a thing is possible.” In the end, the War Department did not live up to its threadbare promise that “there will be segregation but not discrimination.” But it came closer than any prior experience involving state-sanctioned segregation would have led one to expect.²⁹

“Wonderfully Cared for in Every Way”: The Pilgrims’ Experiences

Lora Lee Cannon of Athens, Alabama, knew she wanted to make the pilgrimage from the moment she learned of the program. She also hoped to bring her fourteen-year-old son, who had been just an infant when his father died at the front. “We both do want to go so very bad,” she wrote to the War Department. As in all such cases, officials replied that relatives could accompany pilgrims only at their own expense. Disappointed, Cannon still intended to make the journey until she learned that the pilgrimages would be segregated. In May 1930 she canceled her reservation and sent two letters of protest to Washington, D.C. She declined again the following year. However, when she changed her mind and made the pilgrimage in 1932, it proved to be a decision she would not regret. “There isn’t words to express my gratitude to you for the most wonderful trip you have given me to Europe,” she wrote upon her return. “I was wonderfully cared for in every way. . . . I’ve enjoyed every minute I was on the trip and wish I could express

²⁸ Mrs. Mabel Johnson to Secretary of War, May 3, 1930, Johnson, Russell folder, box 2351, Records of the Graves Registration Service, Records of Graves Registration Organizations 1917–54, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Personnel Records Center, National Archives). Mrs. Grace F. Taylor to Mrs. Harriet Lee Elliott, Feb. 5, 1931, Taylor, Isaac Wilson folder, box 4822, *ibid.*

²⁹ For Col. Richard T. Ellis’s statement, see Serrano, “Poignant Protest.” Elizabeth May Craig, “War Department Studies Minutest Needs of Gold Star Mothers’ Pilgrimages,” n.d., Newspaper Clippings notebook, box 1: American Pilgrimage: Gold Star Mothers and Widows, New York, 1930–33, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774–1962: General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives).

how much I appreciate this valueable gift witch will be a Life Time remembrance. I had everything [my] heart could wish: I can only say I thank you.”³⁰

How did the War Department manage to win over so many of the black pilgrims, including some who adamantly opposed segregation? Accounts of the pilgrimages that initially appeared in the black press provide little explanation. Journalists repeatedly pointed to disparities in accommodations and transportation, focusing especially on the types of ships that transported the women. In 1930 the much larger white parties sailed on top-tier ocean liners while the African American parties traveled on second-tier vessels originally built to transport freight but refitted to accommodate passengers. Differences in lodging also drew scrutiny. In Manhattan, the white women stayed in some of the city’s most exclusive hotels, whereas the black women were housed at the Harlem Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and smaller black-owned hotels. And in Paris, the hotel where the black parties stayed during 1930 was farther removed from the city center than the hotels where the white women stayed.³¹

Nevertheless, many pilgrims disputed the notion that they had been subjected to substandard service and accommodations. In 1931 Florence Della Cochrane thanked the War Department for a “wonderful” trip, noting that she and her group had enjoyed “all the best comforts of life.” Rosa Cook of Philadelphia, who traveled in 1932, also expressed appreciation for the “wonderful time,” emphasizing that the women had been “treated real nice and had good service and a nice place to stay.” That same year, sixteen pilgrims signed a letter in which they attested, “We had the very best care[.] everything was did for our comfort and pleasure.” Even if readers view these letters with great skepticism, assuming they had been solicited by government officials, other evidence suggests that the women’s testimony should not be dismissed. In 1930 Lucy Johnson of Pittsburgh told J. A. Rogers, an ardent foe of segregation and racism who served in France as a foreign correspondent throughout the pilgrimages, “Uncle Sam is doing his best for us. Why, I had a private French maid all to myself on the ship. Nothing more could be done for us unless they presented us with a sack of gold.” Reporting on the final party to sail in 1933, Rogers described the women as “100 per cent satisfied with the treatment they received” from American officials and their French hosts. However “justified” the protests against segregated pilgrimages, he conceded that “there is no cause for complaint on this side of the Atlantic.”³²

A closer look at the pilgrims’ experiences helps explain why they returned with such glowing reports. The Hoover administration clearly had its own reasons for attempting to appease African Americans and for attempting to conceal the true nature of segregation, which drew critical commentary in the French press. It is unlikely, however, that the pilgrimage directors could have fulfilled this mission so well without the assistance

³⁰ Mrs. Lora Lee Cannon to the War Department, n.d., Cannon, Dan folder, box 778, Records of the Graves Registration Service, Records of Graves Registration Organizations 1917–54, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Personnel Records Center). Cannon to the War Department, May 8, 22, 1930, *ibid.* Cannon to the Quartermaster General, July 21, 1932, *ibid.*

³¹ Graham, *Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s*, 118; Budreau, *Bodies of War*, 213. The Emma Ransom House of the Young Women’s Christian Association was the “preferred temporary and long-term residence” for African American women visiting New York City. Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 168. On the accommodations for white and black gold star mothers in Paris, see J. A. Rogers, “Second Group of Gold Star Mothers Will Sail for France August 16,” 7.

³² Mrs. Rosa Cook to the War Department, July 26, 1932, Cook, George folder, box 1027, Records of the Graves Registration Service, Records of Graves Registration Organizations 1917–54, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Personnel Records Center). Mrs. Sarah J. Butler et al., “A Letter of Appreciation to the War Department,” Aug. 16, 1932, Butler, Thomas A. folder, box 730, *ibid.* J. A. Rogers, “Gold Star War Mothers Talk for the *Afro*,” 1, 17. J. A. Rogers, “Ruminations,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 26, 1933, p. 6.



Gen. Henri Gouraud, Col. Richard T. Ellis, and Cap. M. J. Conway watch as Mrs. Laura Newton of Party L signs the Gold Book at the Arc de Triomphe. The sixty-six-year-old woman was elected by her fellow pilgrims to represent the group. She came from Bennettsville, South Carolina, where she lived with her sister and three daughters, all of whom worked as laundresses. *Courtesy National Archives, College Park, Md., photo no. 92-GS-1-91.*

of Colonel Davis, who oversaw the parties on their Atlantic voyages, and the African American civil servants, nurses, and hostesses who contributed much to the pilgrimages' day-to-day operations. Three long-term civil servants employed by the Quartermaster Corps—Robert T. Browne, Archibald Runner, and William H. Lewis Jr.—played especially critical roles. Operating out of an office at the Harlem YWCA, these men oversaw all stateside logistical issues from the time the pilgrims left their homes until the moment they returned. Their official reports, which detail extensive efforts to meet the women's material and emotional needs, suggest that they were determined to take advantage of the unusual circumstances the pilgrimages presented to ensure that, for once, the government did right by its African American citizens. They saw that proper suitcases were purchased for women who arrived without them; they had broken eyeglasses and worn shoes repaired and arranged for women with acute medical conditions to receive proper care, paid for with government funds. And all the while, they sought to make the women—most of whom had little experience with long-distance travel—feel at ease. For instance, Runner noted that the pilgrims in one of the 1931 parties appeared “more or less timid” upon first arriving in New York City and exhibited “considerable . . . embarrassment.” The nurses' solicitousness eventually assured them they were among “kindly disposed and sympathetic friends.” Soon, they cast aside their “reserve” and fell into “discussing the

welfare of the children left at home, arrangements made to take care of the farm, its livestock,” and “how sons and daughters had made special trips to bid them adieu.” By the time they sailed, the party had become “a jubilant group, apparently as much at home as at a local church meeting.”³³

It is impossible to read these bureaucratic yet sometimes quite moving documents without reflecting on what the pilgrimages meant not only to the women but also to the African Americans who helped conduct them. As white-collar federal workers, Browne, Runner, and Lewis held better-paying and more secure jobs than the vast majority of African Americans; the latter two owned their homes and sent their children to college. Yet they had almost certainly been affected by the spread of segregation and the foreclosing of opportunities that had previously allowed a small number of talented African Americans to advance within the civil service. Moreover, they carried the burden of being representatives of a state that seemed intent on excluding and oppressing those of their race. In view of this larger context, certain passages in their reports leap out as particularly poignant. “To sum up the apparent feeling of the pilgrims,” Runner reported in reference to a party that sailed in 1931, “they were accorded treatment and accommodations far beyond anything they had dreamed of. As one of them stated it, they return home with a view that their sacrifices of sons and husbands was for *their country*.”³⁴

The contradictions inherent in a program that segregated yet sought to honor its beneficiaries—and one that enlisted white-collar African American officials while attempting to enforce a color line designed to restrict blacks to menial positions—are most clearly evident in officials’ notes regarding the pilgrims’ railway travel in the United States. While segregating the women on their transatlantic voyages, pilgrimage officials also attempted—albeit less publicly and successfully—to enforce a temporary and highly selective loosening of segregation’s strictures on the nation’s railways. All pilgrims scheduled to arrive in New York City by train received first-class Pullman tickets in the mail, but in the South most train companies would not admit black passengers to Pullman sleeping cars. As a result, conflict over segregation played out on a case-by-case basis, as southern

³³ Robert T. Browne, Archibald Runner, and William H. Lewis Jr. had begun working for the federal government prior to Woodrow Wilson’s presidency. For Runner and Lewis, see U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, *Compendium of the Thirteenth Census, 1910*, pt. I: *Population* (Washington, 1913). For Browne’s military enlistment, see U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918, Kings County, New York, available at *Ancestry.com*. Mrs. W. H. Lewis, Jr., “Memorandum of Duties Performed,” n.d., Hotel Liaison Report—Party E folder, box 36, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General 1774–1962: General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives). In the second year of the pilgrimage, a white U.S. Army physician who traveled with Party E disapprovingly noted that there had been an “unusual demand for dental work and glasses” from the pilgrims. He determined that the women “had been told in New York that work of that sort would be accomplished” during the crossing, presumably by the African American men and women who helped run the pilgrimage office. A. W. Kenner, “Memorandum to the Executive Officer: Medical Report Party E,” Paris—Party E—1931 folder, box 89, *ibid.* Archibald Runner to Chief, Pilgrimage, War Mothers and Widows, June 2, 1931, Hotel Liaison Report—Party E—Eastbound folder, box 36, American Pilgrimage: Gold Star Mothers and Widows, New York, 1930–33, *ibid.*

³⁴ On Runner and Lewis, respectively, see U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, *Compendium of the Fifteenth Census, 1930*, pt. I: *Population* (Washington, 1932), 10A, 16A. On the foreclosing of opportunities for blacks in the civil service, see Yellin, *Racism in the Nation’s Service*. Kelly Miller of Howard University had previously noted that “Under the present policy of the civil service machinery of the government, the Negro clerk will soon pass away with the Buffalo and the dodo.” Kelly Miller, “Kelly Miller Says,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 22, 1927, p. 6. Archibald Runner to the Officer in Charge, Pilgrimage, American War Mothers and Widows, July 1, 1931, Hotel Liaison Report—Party E—Westbound folder, box 36, American Pilgrimage: Gold Star Mothers and Widows, New York, 1930–33, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General: General Correspondence, Records of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives). Emphasis in original.



Pilgrims of Party K traveling by train from Cherbourg to Paris on June 7, 1931. That the women are sitting in an elegant car specially designated for gold star pilgrims, while being attended by white servers, illustrates how the pilgrimage program at times unwittingly challenged American racial norms, even as it reinforced white supremacy. Ironically, in the United States, pilgrimage officials attempted to ensure that train companies honored black pilgrims' first-class Pullman tickets to and from New York, even as they enforced segregation by sending the black women in separate parties. However, in a number of cases, railroad personnel in southern states refused the federal government's orders to seat black women in the cars to which their tickets entitled them. *Courtesy National Archives, College Park, Md., photo no. 92-GS-2-186.*

railway employees apparently debated whether to honor the tickets. Did the woman's sacrifices entitle her, in this one instance, to be recognized and treated as an American war mother rather than a black woman? On this question, there was apparently no consensus. Queried by the pilgrim officials upon their arrival in New York City, the women "in most instances" testified that "exceptional and unusual courtesies" had been "freely given." But there were notable exceptions. One pilgrim was ejected from her Pullman car when her train stopped at a small town in Georgia, only to be transferred back upon reaching Atlanta. Another woman, who boarded a train in Greenwood, South Carolina, was not properly seated until a new crew took over in Monroe, South Carolina. Other women did not even attempt to use their Pullman tickets until they had crossed the Mason-Dixon line.³⁵

³⁵ W. H. Lewis, Runner, and Robert T. Browne to the Officer in Charge, July 11, 1931, Hotel Liaison Report—Party K—East folder, box 41, *ibid.* Burroughs, "Nannie Burroughs Gets Inside Information about Treatment of Colored Gold Star Mothers"; and Arnold J. Funk, "Liaison Report, YWCA," July 15, 1931, Hotel Liaison Report—Party K—East folder, box 4, American Pilgrimage: Gold Star Mothers and Widows, New York, 1930–33, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General 1774–1962: General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives).



Pilgrims from Party L viewing a ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris. *Courtesy National Archives, College Park, Md., photo no. 92-GS-1-88.*

The pilgrims did not face such dilemmas in Europe. When the first group arrived in Paris at the Gare des Invalides, they were “wildly greeted” by a large and enthusiastic crowd. The jazz musician and World War I veteran Noble Sissle—who during the war had helped James Reese form his famous 369th regimental band in Europe—had arranged to have his orchestra outside the station to welcome the women. Ada “Brick Top” Smith and other prominent black performers also turned out, as did hundreds of Parisians. “Paris Fetes War Mothers,” a headline in the *Baltimore Afro-American* boasted, “France Seeks to Make Up for U.S. Jim Crow.” “I know how they are treated in America, and I have tried to treat them better than anyone who has come to this hotel,” explained the proprietor of the Hotel Emperor, where the women stayed in Paris. “I want to show them that France appreciates all that the colored Americans have done for her.” Needless to say, the pilgrims were deeply grateful for the efforts made on their behalf. Rosetta James, who spoke with the *Chicago Defender* in 1932, had “high praise for the treatment accorded Race mothers by the French people and officials” and wished only that “America was half as fair.”³⁶

³⁶ “Gold Star Mothers Wildly Greeted on Arrival in Paris,” *Chicago Defender*, July 26, 1930, p. 4; Richard T. Ellis, “Report on Party L,” Aug. 22, 1930, Party L folder, box 88, American Pilgrimage: Gold Star Mothers and Widows, Paris, France, 1930–33, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774–1962: General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives). On Ada “Brick Top” Smith, see *ibid.* On African American expatriates in Paris, see Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston, 1996); and William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story between the Great Wars* (Berkeley, 2001). “Paris Fetes War Mothers,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 26, 1930, p. 1. The proprietor of the Hotel Emperor is quoted in J. A. Rogers, “War Mothers in France Got First Taste of Liberty,” *ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1930, p. 5. “Mrs. James, Gold Star Mother, Home,” *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 6, 1932, p. 15.

Twelve Years Later



Fifty-five Gold Star mothers refused to accept the war department's proposal to send them to France to visit the graves of their war dead because these mothers feared they were to be segregated. They wrote to President Hoover, but their efforts brought them nothing. On the eve of sailing eight more canceled their reservations.

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This editorial cartoon shows African American gold star mothers refusing the government's insulting offer of segregated pilgrimages and lamenting the apparent meaninglessness of their sons' deaths. The *Chicago Defender*, which urged all black women to boycott the program, published this illustration on its front page soon after the first group of black pilgrims departed for France. Henry Brown, "Twelve Years Later," *Chicago Defender*, July 19, 1930, p. 1. Courtesy Chicago Defender.

Like their white counterparts, the pilgrims stayed in Europe a full two weeks, shepherded through detailed itineraries that included sightseeing and shopping excursions, as well as trips to the battlefields and cemeteries. After their arrival, they spent several days in Paris and the surrounding area visiting popular tourist destinations such as the Louvre, Versailles, Fontainebleau, Napoleon's Tomb, and the Sacré-Coeur, before breaking into smaller groups and departing for the cemeteries. Following their pilgrimages to the gravesites, the women returned to Paris for several more days. One evening, Brick Top and other black entertainers staged a special show for them at their hotel. On another night, they dined at Morgan's Chicago Inn, a well-known American restaurant run by a former Pullman dining car steward. "If any Gold Star Mother had reason to feel resentful of the jim crow treatment given her by the War Department," Rogers wrote in reference to the first party, "she must have forgotten it before she sailed back from this port Sunday."³⁷

³⁷ Ellis noted that the entertainment had been "personally selected by the leading colored Vaudeville and music-hall entertainers of Paris" and was thus "of a very high order, the talent being undoubtedly the very best obtainable." Ellis, "Report on Party 'L,'" Aug. 22, 1930, Party L folder, box 88, American Pilgrimage: Gold Star Mothers and Widows, Paris, France, 1930-33, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774-1962: General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives). "Paris Fetes War Mothers," 1.

Given their treatment in Paris, it is hardly surprising that many black gold star mothers voiced enthusiasm and gratitude upon returning home. A few women, concerned that other gold star mothers might miss out on the opportunity of a lifetime, launched their own countercampaign by writing to black newspapers and to eligible women who had yet to make a reservation. Pilgrimage officials facilitated these efforts by providing the women with rosters of names and addresses. Willie D. Rush wrote ninety-four letters and accepted invitations to speak at numerous black churches in Atlanta and nearby towns. "Most of these gatherings had heard or read horrible tales of how we were treated, and were anxious to hear from me," she reported to Colonel Ellis. "Their ignorance and mistrust is amazing." Officials noted the positive impact of these efforts; according to Runner, many of the women who sailed in Party E in 1931 had been "deterred" by negative press coverage until they received letters "telling of the wonderful experiences of the previous groups."³⁸

Though the pilgrims' voices remained largely overshadowed in the black press, the majority of critics eventually softened their tone, most likely in response to the women's almost uniformly positive reports. While continuing to support the boycott, after 1930, the *Chicago Defender* no longer harshly condemned the pilgrims as traitors to the race but instead depicted them as victims forced to suffer indignities to satisfy their maternal longings. In this instance, however, the majority of the mothers and widows did not view themselves as victims. Contesting their representation in the black press, they sought to reframe the issue, not by defending the government's policy but by emphasizing the excellent service and care they had been shown—themes to which they returned again and again. For women so often denied "the little courtesies . . . that make traveling a pleasure," the larger political significance of such treatment was clear. By insisting that they had been treated like ladies—that their status as particularly deserving citizens had been recognized and honored in essentially the same gendered manner as their white counterparts—the mothers and widows emphatically repudiated charges that they had "set back the race."³⁹

The Cattle Boat Rumor: Party Politics, Propaganda, and Collective Memory

If the pilgrims treasured personal memories of sumptuous meals and solicitous French maids, most African Americans would remember the gold star pilgrimages in altogether different terms. Because the mothers' experiences in Europe fell so far outside the norm and because no level of service could atone for the decision to impose segregation, Democratic politicians and commentators had little trouble convincing black audiences that the mothers and widows had been horribly treated. Specifically, they charged that the women had been forced to cross the Atlantic in the most abject of conditions—as passengers on cattle ships. Dirty, smelly, and devoid of creature comforts, cattle ships were understood to be masculine spaces wholly unfit for women—

³⁸ Willie D. Rush to Col. A. E. Williams, n.d., Rush, Mallalieu W. folder, box 4232, Records of the Graves Registration Service, Records of Graves Registration Organizations 1917–54, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Personnel Records Center). Runner to the Officer in Charge, June 29, 1931, Hotel Liaison Report—Party E folder, box 17, American Pilgrimage: Gold Star Mothers and Widows, New York, 1930–33, General Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774–1962: General Correspondence, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Archives).

³⁹ "40 Gold Star Mothers Sail for France," *Chicago Defender*, June 4, 1931, p. 4. Burroughs, "Nannie Burroughs Gets Inside Information about Treatment of Colored Gold Star Mothers."

not unlike smoking cars on trains, to which black women, much to their dismay, were frequently consigned.⁴⁰

The first references to “cattle boats” that surfaced in the black press were not literal, but rather aimed to lend opinion pieces rhetorical punch. A July 1930 editorial in the *Kansas City Call*, “Why Not on a Cattle Boat?” sarcastically concluded: “The brilliant tactician of the war department . . . narrowly missed a master stroke. He might have sent them over in a cattle boat and saved a few dollars more.” But such references quickly morphed into direct assertions, resulting in a widely shared belief that the black women had actually been consigned to cattle ships. As one Mississippi resident noted in response to a political questionnaire, “[a]ccording to all reports,” the women had traveled “in a cattle ship.”⁴¹

The rumor probably originated with, and was definitely stoked by, Democratic politicians and operatives who recognized how deep emotions ran when it came to the gold star mothers and widows. The prominent black Democrat and former New York City alderman James C. Thomas made the assertion as early as October 1930. By 1932, Republicans on the campaign trail discovered that the rumor had spread far and wide. Denouncing the charge as “pure campaign bunk,” an exasperated Nannie Burroughs complained, “Negroes who are yelling themselves hoarse about the ‘Gold Star Mothers in Cattle-Boats’ (though they were not in them) are urging us to vote for the party that is always responsible for every Jim Crow law on our Statute Books. What consistency!”⁴²

In California, by then the sixth most populous state and a key political battleground, the rumor created a headache for Republicans that registered at the highest echelons of Hoover’s re-election campaign. In April 1932, mining magnate and longtime Hoover confidante Mark Requa, then directing Hoover’s re-election effort in the western states, contacted the White House to request “any facts relative to Gold Star Mothers being sent to Europe in cattle ship.” A few months later, when Congressman DePriest traveled to the state to drum up black votes, disgruntled black voters grilled him on the issue. “What about our Gold Star Mothers?” cried a heckler in Los Angeles. “Have you forgotten that Mr. Hoover sent them to France on cattle ships?”⁴³

Democratic candidates and activists continued to propagate the cattle boat rumor in at least two subsequent election cycles. In 1934 Arthur Wergs Mitchell successfully challenged DePriest for his congressional seat, becoming the first African American

⁴⁰ Immigrant men who wanted to visit or return home often worked their way to Europe on cattle ships, as did cash-strapped college students. On well-educated black women’s experience with segregated railway cars, see Mia Bay, “From the ‘Ladies Car’ to the ‘Colored Car’: Black Female Travelers in the Segregated South,” in *The Folly of Jim Crow: Rethinking the Segregated South*, ed. Stephanie Cole and Natalie J. Ring (Arlington, 2012), 150–175, esp. 151. “Men of All Ranks Crowd Cattle Shippers’ Offices,” *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 1903, p. 28.

⁴¹ “Why Not on a Cattle Boat?” *Kansas City Call*, July 25, 1930, p. 8. F. H. Miller to Claude Barnett, Sept. 17, 1932, box 334, subseries 1: General Files on National Politics, Campaigns, Legislation, Appointees, Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, Judges, etc., series 10: Politics and Law, 1920–1966, Claude A. Barnett Papers (Chicago History Museum, Research Center, Chicago, Ill.).

⁴² “Anti-Hoover Tide Rising,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 18, 1930, p. 1. Burroughs, “Nannie Burroughs Gets Inside Information about Treatment of Colored Gold Star Mothers.” Mary Church Terrell also felt it necessary to address the cattle boat rumor. See Terrell, “In Defense of the Republican Ticket, 1932,” *Papers of Mary Church Terrell 1851–1962*, reel 22.

⁴³ Mark L. Requa to Walter H. Newton, April 28, 1932, summary of telegram, Gold Star Mothers 1930–32, box 165, Subject File: Presidential Period 1929–33, Herbert Hoover Papers. Allowing that he was not “in accord” with all of the administration’s policies, Oscar DePriest sharply retorted, “anyone who said that they were sent over in a cattle boat was telling a lie.” “Heckle DePriest in California Campaign,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 15, 1932, p. 13.

Democrat to serve in the U.S. Congress. During the 1934 campaign, and in a subsequent contest between the two men in 1936, Mitchell made much of the cattle boat rumor, going so far as to circulate a scurrilous cartoon that portrays DePriest declining to intervene as the black pilgrims stand aboard a ship, directly above a deck packed with cattle. "Don't yo' see they are load'n our Gold Star Mothers in a cattle ship? Can't yo' speak?" asks an onlooker. But the congressman remains silent, prompting a woman to complain, "What good is he if he don' know what to say? —No good."⁴⁴

The same cartoon surfaced on a political handbill distributed in 1936 by the veterans' division of the Democratic National Campaign Committee in California. At first glance, this may seem surprising, since the image references politicians from a distant congressional district. As the sole black congressman during their respective terms, however, DePriest and Mitchell were viewed as national representatives of their race and party; thus, to rail against DePriest was also to denounce the Republicans' dismal track record on race. A caption on the handbill drove the point home, describing the Republicans' mistreatment of the pilgrims as haunting the Republican party, just as the ghost of Banquo had haunted Macbeth. "Did any one of our great Republicans from the President on down yield to the cry of humiliation, of discrimination and ingratitude that at that time filled the very atmosphere? No. . . . Is it not time to ask questions and look at the record?" Clearly, political operatives believed that outrage over the notion of pilgrims in cattle boats could be reignited to political effect, even a full six years after the initial protests surrounding the pilgrimage program, and three years after its conclusion.⁴⁵

Partisanship aside, the cattle boat rumor could never have sunk such deep roots had it not rung true to its intended audience. Even if the charge was demonstrably false, it nonetheless accurately captured a larger truth concerning the gendered forms of humiliation and racial persecution that blacks routinely experienced under the shadow of Jim Crow. The rumor's power derived from its ability to evoke major injustices that African American men and women had endured in recent and distant times. Because the pilgrims represented not only themselves but also their fallen husbands and sons, the federal government's ill-treatment of them immediately recalled the injustices meted out to black soldiers during World War I. The vision of black women packed onto cattle boats as black men stood helplessly by also summoned other memories and emotions: women's feelings of outrage and humiliation when denied proper respect; men's feelings of fury and powerlessness when they could neither prevent nor avenge the wrongs their women suffered. Finally, the image resonated so strongly because it evoked the specter of the horrific slave ships that had once transported African Americans' ancestors, like so much livestock, across the Atlantic Ocean. Rarely has a single image packed such a powerful punch.⁴⁶

In the end, despite the government's belated efforts to appease African Americans by treating the pilgrims royally, the constructed memory of the pilgrimages that emerged

⁴⁴ Dennis S. Nordin, *The New Deal's Black Congressman: A Life of Arthur Wergs Mitchell* (Columbia, Mo., 1997), 40–87, 109–10, cartoon on 125. DePriest's political demise symbolized not only the declining fortunes of black Republicans but also the waning influence of black clubwomen, who two decades earlier had helped elect him as Chicago's first black alderman. Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York, 1996), 46–64. DePriest had in fact denounced the policy of segregated pilgrimages quite vigorously. "DePriest Says Hoover Wants Segregation," *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 17, 1930, p. 1.

⁴⁵ "G. O. P. Sends Negro Gold Star Mothers to France in Cattle Ship," 1936, broadside, California Ephemera Collection, *Online Archive of California*, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb0s2006gv/?layout=metadata&cb&and=oac4>.

⁴⁶ For an explicit comparison of the black gold star mothers to Africans on slave ships, see "Discrimination," *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1930, p. 14.

amid partisan strife overwhelmed the women's testimony. Pushed by political operatives, the cattle boat narrative gained credibility simply because, given African Americans' past and present experiences, it *was* credible. That the women's personal accounts were so strikingly at odds with this narrative underscores how anomalous their experience of state-sanctioned Jim Crow had been—so exceptional as to be, quite literally, unbelievable.

Conclusion

In his 1933 autobiography, *Along This Way*, published in the final year of the pilgrimage program, James Weldon Johnson reflected on how disastrous the 1912 election of Woodrow Wilson had been for African Americans. Once Wilson assumed office, it quickly became clear that his administration was determined to “sweep away the remaining vestiges of the Negro's federal citizenship.” Johnson, who had been serving as the American consul in Nicaragua, abandoned hopes for advancement within the U.S. Consular Service and submitted his resignation. For poor African Americans living in the segregated South, far removed from the levers of power, the White House's unabashed embrace of Jim Crow likely did not register as a significant shift. Nonetheless, Johnson believed that it robbed all African Americans of a symbol of the hopes that their ancestors had invested in Washington, D.C., after emancipation:

Going back to the days of Reconstruction, the Negro in the South had always felt, no matter what his local status might be, that he was a citizen of the United States. This feeling was manifest especially when such a Negro entered a federal building. There he felt that he was on some portion, at least, of the ground of common citizenship; that he left the most galling limitations on the outside. This, in reality, was only little more than a feeling; but, at that, it was worth something. The only place in the South where a Negro could pretend to a share in the common rights of citizenship was under the roof of a federal building.⁴⁷

Tarnished as it was, this patina of freedom helps explain the appearance of phrases such as “our Great Government” in letters that African American war mothers and widows sent to Washington. It also helps explain the views of sixty-six-year-old Lavinia Grant, a black pilgrim born soon after the Civil War on South Carolina's Sullivan Island, previously the port of disembarkation for over 40 percent of all slaves transported to British North America. In 1933 a *Baltimore Afro-American* reporter tracked down Grant in Washington, D.C., where she had moved a few years earlier, and found her living in a house almost bare of furniture and caring for her once-enslaved and now-aged and blind mother. Yet despite her straitened circumstances, Grant was glad to be living in the nation's capital. She and her second husband managed to get by on funds disbursed by the federal government—her “little pension” (presumably from her son's wartime service) and the money he earned working for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Appreciative of this modest relief, she also pointed to the ways in which her encounters with federal officials differed from her interactions with whites in South Carolina. “When I left Charleston, I remembered that the white women there called me Lavinia,” she explained. “But the letter that the Government wrote me said ‘Mrs. Grant.’ When I went down to

⁴⁷ Between the end of the Civil War and the 1930s, scores of African Americans served as U.S. consuls in non-European nations. But this tradition of black diplomacy also “came under siege” under Wilson's presidency and “further waned” in the 1920s and 1930s.” Brian Russell Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors: Literary and International Representation of the New Negro Era* (Charlottesville, 2013), 3. Johnson, *Along This Way*, 301.

take my picture to the Government [probably the Passport Division], the elevator made me dizzy, but the folks was fine to me.”⁴⁸

To the men who protested the pilgrimages, the government’s policy of segregation overrode all else, for it signaled the demeaning of black soldiers’ wartime sacrifices and an intolerable affront to black manhood more generally while also underscoring the federal government’s role in legitimizing a racial caste system they hoped to keep quarantined in the South. To a woman such as Grant, however, who grew up in the shadow of slavery, accustomed to southern racial mores, it actually meant something to receive correspondence that dignified her name with an honorific that betokened respectable womanhood. It also meant something to be treated with dignity by officials working in an imposing government building and to be issued a passport that unequivocally declared her a citizen of the United States. It might not have been much—“only little more than a feeling”—but, as Johnson understood, even that was “worth something.”⁴⁹

What the pilgrims’ critics failed to acknowledge was that the women could take pride in their treatment as guests of the U.S. government, segregated though they were, while still harboring dreams of a radically transformed society. For Grant, such a society would have been one that allowed a man like her son to become a leader among men. Shortly before his death, she dreamt of seeing him “marching at the head of a line of troops near walls lined with trailing lilac blooms.” It was a vision far removed from Pvt. Felmon Rembert’s actual military experience. Like thousands of other African American men, he had served as a stevedore, performing the backbreaking labor of unloading and loading supply ships. His death was by no means glorious: he drowned, an all-too-common fate among stevedores, who often worked over sixteen hours a day.⁵⁰

No wonder, then, that Grant needed to overcome an aversion to the idea of “going so far on the water” before she agreed to make the pilgrimage. And no wonder, too, that she would draw upon the nautical imagery that carried such heavy symbolic weight in black culture to convey her hope and conviction that someday the balance of power between the races would shift. “I tell you the day is coming when all these colored people won’t be riding on the bottom of the deck,” she predicted. “They’ll be on the up side.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Mrs. Ella F. Harden to the Quartermaster General, July 19, 1930, Harden, William H. folder, box 2101, Records of the Graves Registration Service, Records of Graves Registration Organizations 1917–54, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, RG 92 (National Personnel Records Center). “Bags Packed, Tickets Ready; Hearts Heavy; D.C. Mothers Ready to Sail,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 24, 1933, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 31.

⁵⁰ Felmon Rembert had sought an exemption by claiming his mother as a dependent, but the draft board denied his request—most likely because, in their eyes, Lavinia Grant’s race made her a laborer rather than a widow entitled to support. For Rembert’s military enlistment, see U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918, Florence County, Charleston, South Carolina, available at *Ancestry.com*. On the harsh working and living conditions stevedores endured and the racist stereotyping to which they were subject, see Williams, *Torchbearers for Democracy*, 111–13.

⁵¹ “Bags Packed, Tickets Ready,” 1–2.