

Limits on Black Sailors in World War II

GRADES 9-12



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 9-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 75 minutes.

When the United States entered World War II, Americans of all kinds were eager to join the armed forces. However, Black sailors were met with menial jobs. It was not until 1942 that they were able to serve at any rate besides steward, and until 1948 that the armed forces were desegregated. Participants will use the oral histories of three Black stewards and demographic information to analyze the experiences of Black sailors.

Content Warning: In this lesson, the term "negro" is used to describe Black Americans. At the time, this term was not considered offensive; however today it is considered inappropriate.

In Theodore Jackson's oral history clip, a racial slur is used to describe Black Americans. It is censored. At the time, this term was offensive, and continues to be inappropriate. Please preview the lesson materials and discuss with your students in advance.



Objective

Participants will be able to discuss the structural and social barriers that prevented Black sailors from accessing the full opportunities afforded the white Navy.



Materials

- Copy of Doris Miller propaganda poster after attack on Pearl Harbor, 1943, National Archives
- Oral history compilation of John Seagraves, Henry Mouzon and Theodore Jackson
- Chart "Negroes Serving in Steward Branch and Other Rating Branches"
- Black Manpower, US Navy, *Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965*
- Percent of Black Sailors Serving as Steward's Mates during World War II; data from *The Negro in the Navy* (1945)

 **Inquiry**

Share the Navy's recruitment poster featuring Doris Miller. Explain that this was a propaganda poster used by the Navy during World War II. Discuss the following questions:

- What is this poster trying to convey or tell the viewer?
- Who is the intended audience of the poster?
- What specific information do you gain from this poster? What are you still missing?

Provide background information on Doris Miller and the context of the poster. Discuss the following questions:

- Knowing who and what it depicts, what is the message of the poster?
- Why might the Navy have chosen Miller as the face of a recruitment poster?

 **Investigation**

Share the charts, "Percent of Black Sailors Serving as Steward's Mates during World War II" and "Negroes Serving in Steward Branch and Other Rating Branches." Provide background information about the status of Black sailors in the Navy during World War II, their duties and the policy change in 1942. Discuss the following questions:

- What do these charts tell us about the status of Black sailors during and after the war?
- Was the change in 1942 successful in getting Black sailors at other rates?
- When does the biggest change in the charts occur?

Listen to or read transcripts of [oral histories](#) from John Seagraves, Henry Mouzon and Theodore Jackson. All three men served as stewards on board Navy vessels during World War II. Discuss the following questions:

- How did serving as a steward impact each man's ability to achieve the things they wanted to during and after their naval service?
- What kinds of discrimination did these men face while serving in the Navy? How did it compare to discrimination that Black Americans were facing in the country as a whole?
- All three of these sailors served after 1942, when Black sailors could formally serve at any rate. What, if any, effect did this have on their experiences in the Navy?
- How did John, Henry and Theodore feel about being stewards?



Activity

Executive Order 9981

Share oral history transcripts and charts used in the Inquiry activity. Provide background information on Executive Order 9981 and its provisions. Display the chart, “Black Manpower, US Navy.” Discuss the following question:

- Was Executive Order 9981 successful at moving Black sailors into occupations other than stewards?

Have participants respond to the following prompt:

- Pretend you were selected to be the Navy representative on the Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. Think about what John, Henry and Theodore expressed in their oral histories, as well as what you have learned about the status of Black sailors in the Navy. Write a report to present to the committee at your first meeting, including your suggestions for specific changes that need to be made to improve the lives of Black sailors.



Lesson Connection

See our lesson, **Fight for Desegregation**, for more content on the advocacy groups and work done that led to Executive Order 9981.



Background

Dorie Miller

Doris “Dorie” Miller was a messman aboard USS West Virginia, which was in port in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. After the Japanese attack, Miller assisted with carrying wounded men, including the commanding officer. Miller then took over an anti-aircraft machine gun, even though he—like other Black sailors—had no training in gunnery. He fired at incoming airplanes

until he ran out of ammunition. Miller was awarded the Navy Cross by Admiral Chester Nimitz, following a months-long campaign by the NAACP and other organizations to recognize Miller's bravery. He was the first Black sailor to be awarded the Navy Cross and quickly became a symbol for civil rights.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor and his eventual recognition, Miller continued to serve during World War II. Despite being a war hero, Miller was kept at the messman rating, eventually called steward's mates. Before 1942, in fact, Black sailors could only serve in the Messmen Branch. His highest rate was cook third class, which he was promoted to shortly before being killed when his carrier was struck by a Japanese torpedo.

Regulations on Black Sailors

Black sailors sometimes joined the Navy with expectations to be engaged in battle and to be equal to their white peers. Many joined after hearing of Dorie Miller's story, inspired to fight for their country. However, disappointment met them when they were kept only as stewards and only allowed to perform duties such as serving food, cleaning officers' bunks and doing laundry.

Navy regulations reflected broader social inequities back at home. The racial segregation laws and practices known as Jim Crow were in effect all across the United States, but most obviously in the South. The military enforced white supremacy by making it easier for white service members to choose a particular branch of service, to become an officer, to be promoted, to win medals, to be discharged honorably and to access the GI Bill. The Navy enforced segregation, especially prior to 1942.

Black sailors, for example, were forced to sit in the "colored" car on train rides while being sent to their training camps. Once there, the Navy kept Black trainees in separate facilities or required them to use certain spaces at different times. Black recruits also faced hostility from civilians in the towns they were stationed in, being barred from restaurants, theaters and other places of business.

Once past training, the Navy assigned Black sailors to the least desirable jobs, although they were often rebranded to make the jobs seem more meaningful. The Messmen Branch was renamed the Steward's Branch, for example, and the insignia was updated to match that of other Navy rates.

The duties, however, which included cleaning and serving officers, remained the same. White officers and enlisted men used racial slurs and the word "boy" to refer to Black sailors as a way of asserting their racial superiority. Physical separation existed on ships as well, with Black sailors being kept on lower decks and using less desirable facilities. Many Black sailors described only being treated equally when they were abroad in places like Ireland and Japan. Black sailors with heroic wartime accomplishments often went unrecognized, or waited several decades for recognition.

U.S. entry into World War II made the activism around Black participation in the military even more pressing. When the war started, the military needed more people. Several groups worked to integrate the armed services and increase opportunity for Black service members within them.

Despite Black sailors being permitted to move into other rates, the Navy remained segregated throughout the war. At the end of the war, the Navy had only sixty-four African American officers, and Black sailors comprised 5.5% of the total naval force, or 187,000. Half of the Black sailors served as messmen, cooks, or stevedores. Groups such as the NAACP and the March on Washington Movement made efforts to encourage integration, but they were not successful until after the war.

Executive Order 9981

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981 integrated the armed forces shortly after World War II, a major advance in civil rights. Using the Executive Order meant that Truman could bypass Congress.

The order stated that "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin." It also stated that there was to be the creation of a Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, which would make sure that the order was carried out. All members and departments of the government were to work with the committee to ensure that their work was carried out to its full extent.



Additional Resources/References

For more primary sources on Jim Crow and segregation:

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/jim-crow-segregation/>

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/race-relations-in-1930s-and-1940s/>

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981#:~:text=Executive%20Order%209981%20stated%20that,Services%20to%20recommend%20revisions%20to>



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Documents and Images



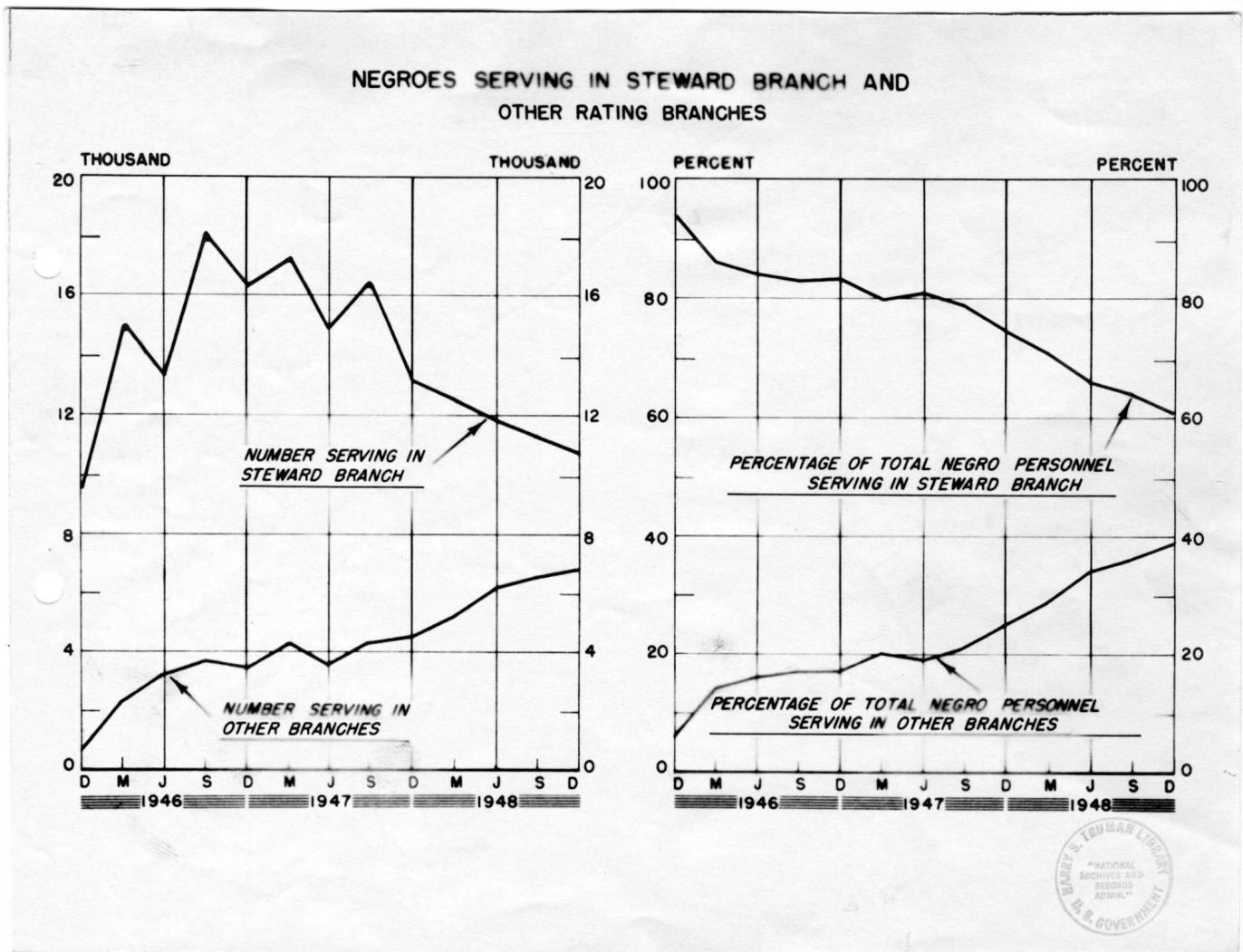
Recruitment poster featuring Dorie Miller

Credit: Library of Congress, [LC-DIG-ppmsca-40819]

Percent of Black Sailors Serving as Steward's Mates during World War II

Date	Total Black Strength	Black Steward's Mates	Black Sailors in Other Rates	Percent of Black Sailors Serving as Steward's Mates
Jun-42	5026	5026	0	100
Feb-43	26909	18227	8682	67
Dec-43	101573	37981	63592	36
Jun-44	142306	48524	93782	33
Dec-44	153199	52994	100205	34
Jun-45	165500	75500	90000	45

Data from *The Negro in the Navy* (1945)



Charts: "Negroes Serving in Steward Branch and other Rating Branches"

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration

TABLE 8—BLACK MANPOWER, U.S. NAVY

A. Enlisted Strength			
<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Strength</i>	<i>Black Strength</i>	<i>Percent Black</i>
1949	363,622	17,051	4.5
1950	329,114	14,858	3.7
1951	656,371	17,604	2.7
1952	728,511	23,010	3.2
1953	698,367	24,734	3.5
1954	635,103	24,236	3.8
1955	574,157	30,623	5.3
1956	586,782	37,308	6.3
1957	593,022	38,222	6.4
1958	558,955	30,978	5.7
1959	547,236	30,098	5.5
1960	544,323	26,760	4.9

B. Percentage of Blacks Enlisted in Steward's and Other Branches		
<i>Year</i>	<i>Steward's Branch</i>	<i>Other Branches</i>
1949	65.12	34.88
1950	57.07	42.93
1951	55.27	44.73
1952	54.95	45.05
1953	51.73	48.27
1954	53.43	48.57
1955	51.19	48.81
1956	25.38	74.62
1957	21.66	78.34
1958	23.35	76.65

C. Officer Strength (Selected Years)		
<i>Year</i>	<i>Black Officers on Active Duty</i>	<i>Total Officers</i>
1949	19	45,464
1951	23	66,323
1953	53	78,095
1955	81	71,591
1960	149	

Source: BuPers, Personnel Statistics Branch. See especially BuPers, "Memo on Discrimination of the Negro," 24 Jan 59, BAF2-014. BuPers Technical Library. All figures represent yearly averages.

Chart: "Black Manpower U.S. Navy"

Credit: Defense Studies: Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1945; 2001. U.S. Army Center of Military History.