

African Americans in Aviation: The 1940s—A Decade of Change

PRACTICING HISTORY WITH PRIMARY SOURCES



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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African Americans in Aviation: The 1940s—A Decade of Change

PRACTICING HISTORY WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

Grade level: 5–12

Time required: 3 class periods

OVERVIEW

Students learn to review primary sources about African Americans in aviation during the 1940s. They use their primary source study to answer two research questions: What obstacles to full participation in aviation did African Americans face? What strategies did they use to overcome these obstacles? Students' primary source study leads to library research. Students then produce an essay or exhibit on the topic.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES AND WORLD HISTORY (GRADES 5–12) ADDRESSED IN THIS ACTIVITY

- ★ Historical Analysis and Interpretation of Primary Source Documents
- ★ Historical Issues Analysis and Decision-Making

OBJECTIVES

- ★ Gather historical information from primary sources
- ★ Interpret primary sources to answer research questions
- ★ Use primary sources to plan secondary source research
- ★ Plan an essay or an exhibit based on research results

BACKGROUND: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN AVIATION

The 1940s was an era of change for black aviators. Although blacks did not attain full participation in aviation during this time, they did reduce or remove several obstacles.

In the 1930s blacks formed flying clubs to train pilots and mechanics and promoted aviation through publications, lectures, and “air circuses.” The long-distance flights of Anderson and Forsythe displayed flyers' skills. William J.

Powell set up the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and wrote *Black Wings*, urging blacks to choose careers in aviation. Cornelius R. Coffey established the Coffey School of Aeronautics, served as the first president of the National Airmen's Association, and built an airstrip in a black community. In 1939 black aviators and civil rights groups spurred the federal government to offer aviation training programs for blacks. For the first time blacks received flight training at federally funded Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program schools, which Congress had established to train pilots for a wartime emergency.

When the U.S. Army Air Corps activated the 99th Fighter Squadron in 1942 during World War II, blacks achieved their first foothold in military aviation, although black cadets who trained at the newly established Tuskegee Army Airfield flew as a segregated unit. The 99th Fighter Squadron belonged to the 332nd Fighter Group, which was commanded by Col. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. Davis stressed professionalism and efficiency, and his leadership helped eliminate hostility toward blacks in aviation. The Tuskegee Airmen shattered the myth that blacks lacked the skills for combat flying. On average, black pilots flew more missions than white pilots and never lost a bomber that they escorted.

Black airmen returned from the war with a sense of accomplishment and impatience with segregation at home. They demanded change. Economic pressure also helped drive change, for the war exposed the cost of maintaining separate black air units. In 1948, three years after the war ended, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which called for equal opportunity in the armed forces. In 1949 the Air Force became the first armed service to integrate.

PREPARATION

Study the primary sources presented with this poster. Read the Background Information and summarize it briefly for students at the beginning of this lesson.

PROCEDURE

1. Begin by having your class examine the 1943 “United We Win” poster. During this activity you will model techniques for examining primary sources and give students group practice with high-level analytical thinking. Take your time on this first step.

Ask your class what the poster’s message is. Who might have created the poster, and when? Ask your students to record any facts they can find about the poster. Be sure they understand the difference between facts (e.g., the poster’s date) and inferences (e.g., that the poster’s purpose was to build acceptance for an integrated military).

Explain that a primary source is a document created by someone who participated in an event or era, and that historians base their analysis on primary sources. Ask why it might be important to study primary, rather than secondary, sources.

2. Explain to your students that they will study a set of primary sources and use what they learn to begin to answer two research questions about blacks in aviation during the 1940s:

- ★ What obstacles to full participation in aviation did African Americans face?
- ★ What strategies did they use to overcome these obstacles?

Post these questions so students can see them throughout the lesson and during the library research that will follow.

3. Have your students examine the primary sources in the same way they examined the poster. They should read or study each one and record such details as date or author. Explain that they may not be able to understand the significance of each primary source, but that they will use questions they might have to direct their library research.
4. Make a copy of each of the following items for each student:
 - ★ 1941 Executive Order 8802 (Figure 1)
 - ★ 1941 photo of black flying cadets at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama (Figure 2)
 - ★ 1942 letter from Johnson, James, and Housen to William H. Hastie (Figure 3)
 - ★ 1942 article “These Men Developed the ‘Double V’ Idea” (Figure 4)
 - ★ 1948 Executive Order 9981, pages 1 and 2 (Figure 5)

5. Group students into threes for the primary source study. Tell them they should *all* examine and discuss *all* the documents within their group, but that each student will complete the Practicing History with Primary Sources handout for just two documents.
6. Allow the groups to study and discuss the primary sources, then assign or have each student choose two documents for which he or she will be responsible.
7. Distribute the Practicing History with Primary Sources handout. Explain that group members should help each other complete the handouts.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the documents as a class. Choose one or two students to discuss what they observed about each document. Record questions the documents raised, then summarize the questions on a handout and distribute it. Students may use this handout to direct their library research.
2. Distribute copies of the Primary Source Information Sheet, which has facts (dates, correct spellings, titles) about each primary source. Students will need these facts when they do their library research. Also, alert your students to the name of the archives and the identification number listed with each primary source. They could use this information to find the original document.
3. Conclude your discussion by answering the two research questions together. Record students’ answers on the board or chart paper.
4. Explain to the class that their research on black aviators in the 1940s will continue in the school or local library, where they will use secondary sources.
5. Students will then write an essay or develop a small tabletop or bulletin board exhibit on the topic they have studied. The essay should describe obstacles black aviators faced in the 1940s and how they overcame those obstacles. Copies of the primary sources may be used to illustrate the essay. The exhibit should include the primary sources with captions and should have a title. Tell students that their essay or exhibit will be successful if people who examine it can then answer the two research questions.

Use these descriptions of the primary sources you studied to help answer the two research questions about African Americans in aviation in the 1940s:

- ★ What obstacles to full participation in aviation did African Americans face?
- ★ What strategies did they use to overcome these obstacles?

1943 poster “United We Win” (Right)

The Office of War Information (OWI) sponsored this poster, which shows factory workers at an integrated aircraft plant during World War II. The OWI was created in 1942 and served as an important U.S. government propaganda agency during the war.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION (NARA), PHOTO BY HOWARD LIBERMAN, NEGATIVE ID# 259



Executive Order 8802, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in June 1941 (Figure 1)

Executive Order 8802 provided for full participation in defense programs regardless of race. Executive orders are official documents, numbered consecutively, through which the president directs the operations of the federal government.

NARA, ID# 44-PA-743

1941 photo of first class of black flying cadets at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama (Figure 2)

Maj. James Ellison, base commander, returns the salute of Mac Ross as he reviews the first class of Tuskegee cadets on the flight line. Ellison did not support the Tuskegee program, which trained black aviators, and was replaced by Lt. Col. Noel F. Parrish. As base commander from 1942 to 1946, Parrish worked hard to alleviate the harsh impact of segregation within the Army Air Forces.

NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, ID# 99-15437

1942 letter to William H. Hastie, an aide to the Secretary of War (Figure 3)

Black soldiers Rufus R. Johnson, Emory A. James, and Jack Housen wrote to Hastie, a black civilian aide to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, asking him to transfer them to the Air Corps. On January 15, 1943, Hastie resigned his position to protest the policies of segregation and discrimination in America’s armed forces.

NARA, RECORD GROUP 107

1942 article “These Men Developed the ‘Double V’ Idea,” published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* (Figure 4)

In a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black newspaper, James G. Thompson called for a “Double V” campaign to achieve two victories: over the Axis powers overseas and over racial prejudice at home.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, NEWSPAPER AND PERIODICALS DIVISION, *PITTSBURGH COURIER*

Executive Order 9981, signed by President Harry S. Truman in 1948 (Figure 5)

Executive Order 9981 established the Fahey Committee, which was charged with developing procedures for integrating the U.S. armed forces.

NARA, DIVISION OF FEDERAL REGISTER

NOTE

Additional primary source materials on this topic can be found on the National Air and Space Museum web site at www.nasm.si.edu/blackwings. Look at the following four in particular: “Three-Minute Egg Club” (photo), “Charles B. Hall” (photo), “Two Down, One to Go” (painting), and “Lucky” Lester (personal account). Use the site’s search function to locate these items by title.

Use this handout to guide your examination of a primary source. Try to answer as many of the questions as you can.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT A PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

Document type

Document date

Document creator or author

Document title

Any unique physical qualities of the document.

___ Letterhead or plain paper?

___ Handwritten or typed?

___ Official seal, stamps, or record numbers?

___ Notations?

___ Symbols?

___ Damage or signs of use?

Observing Photographs

List separately the people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

People

Objects

Activities

What is happening in this picture?

INFERENCES (YOUR OWN CONCLUSIONS) ABOUT A PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

- ★ Can you tell who was meant to read or see this document?
- ★ What does the existence of this document say about black participation in aviation in the 1940s?
- ★ Why do you think this document was written or this photograph taken?
- ★ List two things this document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.
- ★ What can you infer from people's expressions or posture in this photo?

YOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT OR ABOUT AFRICAN AMERICANS IN AVIATION IN THE 1940s

- ★ What information do you need to fully understand this document?
- ★ Does it contain words or concepts that you need explained?
- ★ Write a question that you have about it to the author or photographer.
- ★ What further research will you need to do in the library or on the Internet?



EXECUTIVE ORDER 8802

FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE
IN DEFENSE INDUSTRIES

. I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations, in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin*

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Franklin D. Roosevelt".

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THE WHITE HOUSE
June 25, 1941

**Excerpt from Executive Order 8802*

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1941 O 54721

FIGURE 2

1941 photo of black flying cadets at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama



3475th Q. M. Trk Co.
Fort Ord Calif.

November 10, 1942

Mr. William H. Hastie

Dear Sir:

It has been several months since we have passed the necessary examination and approval of the Cadet Examining Board to qualify as an aviation Cadet.

During the Course of our examination we were stationed at Fort Sill, Okla, at which time several other soldiers took the examinations and have since then received their transfers to the Air Corp; but for some unknown reason we have not received ours.

Sir, we are college men and have had Senior R.O.T.C. training. We were also members of the Enlisted Reserve Corp. Since completing our basic training in Field Artillery we have been transferred to Fort Ord California to do basic training in the Quartermaster Corp. It seems, sir, as if we are going from one basic training to another and getting no nearer to the Air Corp. We are writing you hoping you may be able to give us either and or information so as to hasten our transfer to the Air Corp. It seems with aviation playing the vital part it is we should have hardly any trouble getting in. Our papers are in Washington awaiting disposition, as is the case of all Negro applicants. We hope you can help us. We close now awaiting your answer.

Respectfully,

Pvt. Rufus R. Johnson 15317492

Pvt. Emory A. James 15317509

Pvt. Jack Housen 15317527

These Men Developed The "Double V" Idea

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Pittsburgh Courier's "Double V" idea, created in the mind of James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kansas, and brought to glowing light through the brilliant pen of Wilbert L. Holloway, Courier staff artist, has swept the nation like wildfire.

January 31, is reprinted here, because of its over all significance and because of its gem-like literary value.

The editors of The Pittsburgh Courier suggest that everyone who reads this letter, clip it out and place it in a conspicuous place... where all may see AND read!

The letter of Mr. Thompson, which appeared first in our issue of

DEAR EDITOR:

Like all true Americans, my greatest desire at this time, this crucial point of our history; is a desire for a complete victory over the forces of evil, which threaten our existence today. Behind that desire is also a desire to serve, this, my country, in the most advantageous way. Most of our leaders are suggesting that we sacrifice every other ambition to the paramount one, victory. With this I agree; but I also wonder if another victory could not be achieved at the same time.

After all, the things that beset the world now are basically the same things which upset the equilibrium of nations-internally, states, counties, cities, homes and even the individual.

Being an American of dark complexion and some 26 years, these questions flash through my mind:

"Should I sacrifice my life to live half American?"

"Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow?"

"Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life."

"Is the kind of America I know worth defending?"

"Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war?"

"Will colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past?"

These and other questions need answering; I want to know, and I believe every colored American, who is thinking, wants to know.

This may be the wrong time to broach such subjects, but haven't all good things obtained by men been secured through sacrifice during just such times of strife?"

I suggest that while we keep defense and victory in the forefront that we don't lose sight of our fight for true democracy at home.

In conclusion let me say that though these questions often permeate my mind, I love American and am willing to die for the America I know will someday become a reality.



The "V for Victory" sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict then let colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory...The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies within. For surely those who perpetrate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces.

This should not and would not lessen our efforts to bring this conflict to a successful conclusion; but should and would make us stronger to resist these evil forces which threaten us. America could become united as never before and become truly the home of democracy.

In way of an answer to the foregoing questions in a preceding paragraph, I might say that there is no doubt that this country is worth defending; things will be different for the next generation; colored Americans will come into their own, and America will eventually become the true democracy it was designed to be. These things will become a reality in time; but not through any relaxation of the efforts to secure them.

JAMES G. THOMPSON.

Please note: This newspaper article has been re-typeset to improve readability. No wording, punctuation, or layout has been altered in the process. The original article appeared on page 5 of the Courier. It was centered on the page and was surrounded with photos related to Mr. Thompson receiving an award for his effort.

EXECUTIVE ORDER

- 2 -

ESTABLISHING THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON
EQUALITY OF TREATMENT AND OPPORTUNITY IN
THE ARMED SERVICES

WHEREAS it is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense:

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, by the Constitution and the statutes of the United States, and as Commander in Chief of the armed services, it is hereby ordered as follows:

1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President 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. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.

2. There shall be created in the National Military Establishment an advisory committee to be known as the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, which shall be composed of seven members to be designated by the President.

3. The Committee is authorized on behalf of the President to examine into the rules, procedures and practices of the armed services in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carrying out the policy of this order. The Committee shall confer and advise with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary

of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of the Air Force, and shall make such recommendations to the President and to said Secretaries as in the judgment of the Committee will effectuate the policy hereof.

4. All executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government are authorized and directed to cooperate with the Committee in its work, and to furnish the Committee such information or the services of such persons as the Committee may require in the performance of its duties.

5. When requested by the Committee to do so, persons in the armed services or in any of the executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government shall testify before the Committee and shall make available for the use of the Committee such documents and other information as the Committee may require.

6. The Committee shall continue to exist until such time as the President shall terminate its existence by Executive order.



THE WHITE HOUSE,
July 26, 1948.

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