

Black GIs Timeline, by Crystal Carter, Community Researcher, Telling Our Stories, finding our Roots; Exeter's Multi-Coloured History

August 1942 The Visiting Forces Bill was passed by Parliament in August 1942, giving American armed forces sole criminal jurisdiction over their soldiers (Gray 165). This allowed the US Army to mete out justice on the actions of US troops with regards to their conflicts with each other and with British civilians. Under this bill, the US Army ran their own prisons, tried hundreds of soldiers and executed 20 people between 1943 and 1945. Amongst the hangable offences were murder and also rape - which was not a hangable offence for British civilians ([Guardian](#)).

September 1942 Devon's Chief Constable received instructions that British police were not to enforce any American 'order to prohibit certain places out of bounds to coloured troops' (Gray 157).

January 1943 Walter White, Secretary of the leading African-American civil rights group the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) covered 1700 miles in a tour of the UK. In his visit, he met with Officials from the US and British armed forces, black and white American soldiers, as well as British civilians. In his book on the experience, 'A Rising Wind' (1945), he explains how the black soldiers found it stressful working in an environment that saw them treated worse than German POWs by their own country, but he explains that the troops did find a connection with the British Public:

‘Almost without exception, the brightest note in the stories of all Negro soldiers I talked with that afternoon was the story of friendships they had formed with the British people. At first alarmed by the tales about Negroes, the British common man had reacted in favor of those who he believed had been maligned and against those who had told stories about Negroes which the British had found to be fantastic and untrue.

There are interesting facets in the reasons for these friendships. Away from the sophistication of cities such as London, Liverpool, and Edinburgh, the British in the smaller towns are a simple, friendly people with a passion for fair play. But the bond between them and American Negroes was not based on abstract principle or indignation against an injustice. The overwhelming majority of American soldiers, white and Negro, are also decent human beings, not given to flamboyant boasting or rowdy behavior. But some soldiers made no attempt to conceal their contempt for towns and people which did not have all of the mechanical gadgets which are commonplace in the United States.

The absence of telephones and radios, electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners to most soldiers of this type, denoted an inferior civilization and a backward people. When such opinions were loudly and frequently expressed within earshot of the British, they made no contribution to Anglo-American amity. The average weekly income of more than 60 per cent of the British people [was] three pounds, ten shillings or about fourteen dollars at the rate of exchange during the war. More than three fourths of the Negro troops in England early in 1944 came from the South another area of depressed income. They, like the British, were not so accustomed to highly mechanized gadgets. Therefore they were not so prone to derogatory comments upon

British living as were some of their white fellow Americans. So, too, did somewhat better manners restrain them from giving offense. Learning this in time, the British developed respect and friendship for Negro soldiers which they, in turn, cherished. For many of the Negroes it was their first experience in being treated as normal human beings and friends by white people'.

Walter White

October 1943 An Exeter City Council Representative attended a meeting in Bristol with representatives of the United States Army to work out arrangements for American troops in Exeter. One of the agreements was there was to be no billeting of 'coloured troops' (Gray 157).

From 30 Sept 1943 to 30 June 1944 A number of African-American US troop battalions were based at Country Ground during WW2. They were part of the overall US military presence in Exeter which included billeted troops and those based in Topsham Barracks. During this time the US Army had a policy of segregating black and white troops which applied in the US and throughout the European and Pacific Theatres of war. In Exeter this meant that Black troops were based in tents at County Ground, St Thomas, and white soldiers were based soldiers quarters at Topsham Barracks.

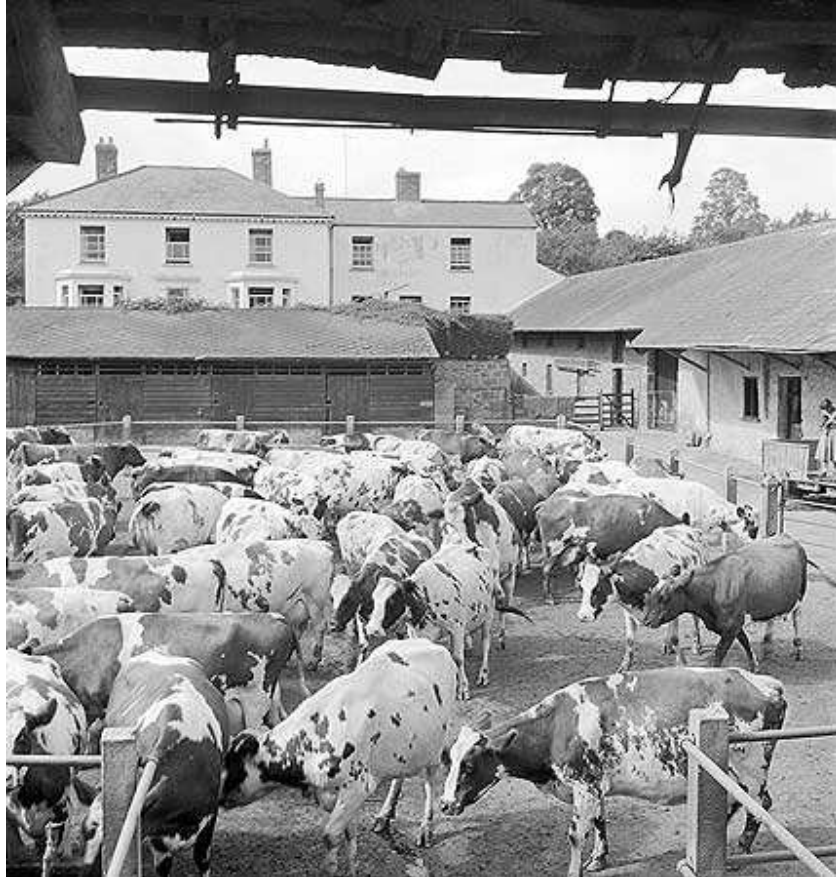
This level of segregation was common practice throughout England where the US Army on an 'Off Limits' policy that kept black and white soldiers separated, both on base and in off duty social settings. In some towns this meant that 'commanding officers would declare town "X" as out of bounds for Negro soldiers and town "Y" for white soldiers. In sparsely settled regions, where there were few towns, and most of them small, recreational facilities consisting usually of only a pub or two and a moving picture theater, a system would be set up for whites on "odd" nights and Negroes on "even" nights' ([White 19](#)). In Exeter, the 'off limits' rule meant that the city was essentially divided in two. Black soldiers were allowed in St Thomas and West Exe. White soldiers were allowed in the city centre. While US soldiers were stationed in Exeter, the US Army placed MPs, 1 black and 1 white, on either side of Exe Bridges to ensure that black and white soldiers did not cross to the other side. They coordinated patrols around the city to collect anyone who had strayed (Gray).

Black American Army Troops base in Exeter included the following battalions:

- 36 Station Hospital, Detachment of Patients
- 519 Quartermaster Truck Regiment HQ & HQ Detachment
- 595 Quartermaster Laundry Company
- 519 Quartermaster Group, HQ & HQ Detachment
- 595 Quartermaster Laundry Company, 2 & 3 Platoons
- 963 Quartermaster Service Company

Exeter's 'colored troops' as they were known, were quite typical of the types of the assignments that were given to Black Americans in the war. Despite the promises of recruitment films like 'The Negro Soldier' which promised opportunities of frontline glory and officer training, almost 40% of the nearly 1 million Black American servicemen and women who contributed to the war effort were working these

'Quartermaster' groups, doing unglamorous but necessary work of moving troops supplies, providing food, managing transportation, fuel and clothing for black and white troops. In Exeter this included running the US Food Depot at the Cattle Market in Marsh Barton.



Exeter Cattle Market circa 1959.
© English Heritage NMR no AA079498

Hilda May Eastley of Exmouth remembered "Yanks also took over the Cattle Market in Exeter. Father was very shocked at these huge dark men, the first he had ever seen, and he touched his cap very respectfully, much to the amusement of the young G.I's. Never had they such respect! It seemed an unreal time, we would never be the same again." ([BBC](#))

April 1944 As part of a moral boosting tour throughout the European Theatre of War, then Heavyweight boxing champion of the world Joe Louis, came to Exeter to fight an exhibition match at Topsham Barracks. It is likely that this took place in [April](#). It is unclear how long he stayed in Exeter but, during his stay, he was ' given permission to go to parts of the city that other black men were refused' ([Gray](#) 159). Local cartoonist George 'Stil' Stillings immortalised his encounter with Louis and another black GI, in [a comic strip](#). It is unknown as to whether Black GI's were able to attend the exhibition match or not.



July 1945 Sylvia McNeill of the British civil rights group, the League of Coloured Peoples, began an investigation into the reality of children fathered by Black GIs. Her 18 page report showed 83 of 553 (15%) known children born of mixed Black American and White English heritage were born in Devon. By 1948, the LCP had revise their figures to a total of 775 children. (Smith 209)

In '[Local Black History: A Beginning in Devon](#)' a child of a black GI and white Devon woman speaks of her experiences growing up in Devon after the war.

Jane, a black Devonian

(Jane is a pseudonym).

I was born in Devon, went to school in Devon, was brought up in Devon and have lived for the better part of my life in Devon.

When people ask me, 'Where do you come from?' I always reply, 'I come from Devon.'

'Yes, but where do you *really* come from?'

I was born in a small village about eight miles from Exeter. My parents met in 1945. My Mother had lived all of her life in the village. From what I have been told, my father was a Black American who had been serving in Britain with the American Navy, to fight against fascism with the allies in the Second World War. As I understand, he was a military policeman during the night and worked in a naval supply store during the day.

When my Grandmother found out that my mother was pregnant, she went to the naval base intent on informing my father. The naval authority told her that he had gone home to America - and that she should go away. My Father never saw me, his daughter; perhaps he never even knew my mother was pregnant.

My two young parents, just like other young couples of the time, didn't have the opportunity to make an informed choice about their child conceived outside marriage. Racism against Afro-Americans was added to the prejudices of the time.

There was an uncle (my mother's brother) who left the family once I was born. That split in the family has lasted to this day. I was raised as my grandmother's 'daughter', my mother was my 'sister'. No one ever talked about my father. They denied knowing him. There was one

photograph of him but my aunt destroyed it. She 'felt it was best.' She was doing her best to hide the image of my father because he was black.

So I never even had a photograph of my father.

I met my husband when I was still at school, we married when I was twenty-one and have lived happily together ever since. We have two grown up children and grandchildren.

As a parent myself, I know that my children have experienced racism, both at school and later when refused a college place, even though their qualifications were as good as other applicants who got places. No reasonable explanation was given at the time for the refusal. It later became apparent that racism was indeed an issue but no action was taken. That was part of us not acknowledging our black history in the family. It feels to me like there was a 'death' before my birth. It was a death of the knowledge of my parentage. It was a contrived and purposeful death, a denial of love and of the memory of an intimacy which should have been cherished. It has made it difficult for me to acknowledge that I am a Black Devonian.

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