

THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN AMNESIA

STUDYING PENNSYLVANIA'S GREAT WAR, PART 2

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ABSTRACT: This is an introduction to *Pennsylvania History's* second special edition on Pennsylvania in World War I. While it is uncertain how much residents of the Keystone State remember about the Great War, these volumes hope to remind them of this seminal moment in world history and Pennsylvania's place in it. This second edition highlights important historical issues in this period, including military history, medical history, and women's history. In addition to introducing the following fine articles, this introduction highlights ways we might commemorate the service, suffering, and sacrifices of Pennsylvanians, including use of digital archives in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: Pennsylvania, World War I, Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division, teaching with digital archives, military nurses, Spanish influenza

If you switched one letter in a name, Pierce to Peirce, you have a very different story about World War I in Pennsylvania. Officials of the Peirce Business School (Philadelphia) struggled to keep the institution alive during the war with so many potential students in the army; Corporal Harold W. Pierce fought to remain alive and sane as he served with the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division (Pennsylvania National Guard) in France. In many ways, these two stories represent the diversity of Pennsylvanians' experiences in World War I.

In part 1, I left readers with a cliffhanger at the Eastern Penitentiary. In this edition, you will learn about efforts to redeem convicts whose crimes Bobby Wintermute described in the previous volume. In addition, I decried the state of World War I memory without providing any solution. This introduction to part 2 offers a way forward for Pennsylvanians, particularly in the classroom, to commemorate the centennial of Pennsylvania's involvement in

the Great War. Moreover, these volumes and their fine articles will hopefully influence scholarly agendas. A wide range of research interests can be satisfied using World War I—era studies as demonstrated by the articles in this edition, including women’s history and medical history. In addition to traditional research, public historians and public history remain central to Great War studies as demonstrated by contributions from the Pennsylvania Military Museum, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Erie Maritime Museum. While the reader might be impressed by the subject matter diversity, these articles demonstrate how World War I disrupted the lives of all of Pennsylvanians; some more than others. Soldiers on the frontlines sacrificed a great deal. Daniel Keifer, an undergraduate at Penn State, discovered Corporal Harold W. Pierce’s diary during his internship at the Pennsylvania Military Museum. Keifer’s study of the diary underscores the kind of physical and emotional torment experienced by Pennsylvanians in combat. Pierce, who seemed extraordinarily self-aware, honestly conveyed his observations, even if his entries did not always portray him in a flattering light. The diary is as valuable as better-known reflections on the World War I experience.¹

Ironically, a notion that Paul Fussell claimed World War I invented, the greatest casualties occurred at home. The outbreak of influenza in the last months of the war sickened and killed Pennsylvanians, particularly in Philadelphia: more Philadelphians died at home of disease than Pennsylvanians were killed in combat overseas. Christina Stetler’s enthralling story of this home-front catastrophe explains that this epidemic’s toll was exacerbated by the number of doctors and nurses overseas and unavailable to provide medical services. To deal with this shortfall, many Philadelphians stepped up to nurse the sick and dying. Religious orders, notably nuns, filled in for medical professionals and cared for, among others, the African American population of the city. Flu may have known no color line, but the hospitals did, making their involvement even more critical. Perhaps we need a memorial to these women and all the unsung heroes of this epidemic, some of whom died nursing others.²

Michelle Moravec collaborated with a group of undergraduates to chronicle nurses’ wartime experiences overseas in a short article. Her team examined three nurses’ wartime scrapbooks to assess the extent to which these women were heroes in their own mind. Were they able to embrace an understanding of their wartime sacrifice usually reserved for men? Some images suggest that they saw themselves in this way, others indicate that gendered ideas of women as caretakers shaped their understanding of their experiences.

Men also left scrapbooks, and Richard Saylor examines Pennsylvania governor and senator Edward Martin's World War I scrapbooks. Martin, who received the Distinguished Service Cross twice and commanded the Twenty-Eighth Division, collected powerful images illustrating his, and therefore Pennsylvania's, involvement in the war.

Bart Everts describes the conundrum facing the Peirce School of Business when men like Martin went overseas. To meet the shortfall of potential applicants, officials focused on recruiting women: encouraging them to matriculate and highlighting female alumni who did important jobs overseas. Despite the challenge of fewer potential students, the school survived by training the clerks needed to run a modern war. After the war, the school stood ready to provide rehabilitative training to injured service members. In some ways, it thrived during this difficult period.

While these articles seem disparate, they are not, and it is not just about varying levels of sacrifice. All, to one extent or another, talk about gender. In earlier times, wars were the province of men; women were often its victims. Modern, total, war mobilizes entire societies and requires men and women to serve. Women performed vital functions in the Great War, becoming nurses and stenographers as part of the total mobilization of society. Looking at the totality of these articles prompts a critical question: was a woman who served at the front as a nurse "manlier" than a man who served as a clerk at home? The answer is no, they cannot be in this era or perhaps any other; gendered conventions invariably diminish a woman's role. The Peirce school's wartime alumni reports demonstrated one way this gender crisis was handled; these missives emphasized the military service of their male graduates. Because some male graduates did their duty, others need not. It will be interesting to see how this plays out in our contemporary society that allows women to serve in the infantry.³

The last contribution, a collection profile, demonstrates a way ahead that rejects Great War amnesia. Linda August highlights the Great War collection at the Library Company of Philadelphia. This repository, closely identified with early Pennsylvania history, also houses an outstanding World War I graphics collection with hundreds of images. In addition, a collaborative effort entitled *Home before the Leaves Fall: The Great War 1914–1918* digitally features these images, podcasts, and articles related to Pennsylvania's World War I. Among the links on this site, *Greater Philadelphia in the Great War* represents an effort to document this city's war effort.⁴

Given the availability of these resources, there would seem to be little reason for the one-hundredth anniversary of this seminal event to be ignored; however, it will require an effort to take these from cyberspace into public consciousness. This endeavor cannot remain the province of historians; just as Pennsylvanians mobilized in World War I, the broader population needs to be involved in the centennial. One way forward might be to engage K-12 education and Pennsylvania's colleges and universities. This commemoration effort can serve many purposes, the most obvious being to increase awareness of this state's involvement in a pivotal world event through its youngest citizens. A less evident purpose: using the plethora of primary sources documenting this critical period to introduce students to historical thinking.

Newspapers provide a wealth of information on this conflict. The Library of Congress's, online "Chronicling America" website introduces students to a vast cache of primary source material. Using the drop-down menu on this site (specify Pennsylvania, 1917–1918; search, for example, "nurses"), a teacher or a student will find pages upon pages of news articles. One page discussing nurses, the *Harrisburg Telegraph* of July 29, 1918, also headlines, "Largest Quota of Colored Men Called to Army." While looking for nurses, students also find African Americans.⁵ The University of Pennsylvania provided a great deal of medical capability to the war effort and has an extensive archive on its own involvement in World War I. It also hosts an online guide to primary and secondary sources including over 400 pamphlets that have been digitized, and links to many other sources.⁶

Other digital and paper archives offer information. The Pennsylvania State Archives has a trove of military records series relating to the citizen-soldiers of the commonwealth, much of it online either free at the Archives website or for a fee at Ancestry.com. Veterans who served or their surviving families could apply for a state bonus compensation, a monetary award. World War I service medals were also available. The original applications in these two records series have been digitized and are now available online. Another useful State Archives series covering all wars are the Pennsylvania Veterans Burial Cards, 1777–2012, also available through Ancestry.com.⁷ To find Pennsylvanians who never came home (those I discussed in part 1 commemorated at the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery) go to the American Battle Monuments Commission website and search these terms: World War I, Pennsylvania. The result documents the overseas dead from the Keystone State.⁸

While these materials seem scattered, I would like to recommend something we are doing in Florida to bring disparate sources together. The

University of Central Florida History Department has created a “Florida in World War I” website. This student-led effort does not have the sophistication of other projects, but it has been a tremendous opportunity for our students to learn both traditional research-skills and cutting-edge digital methods. Students have written encyclopedia articles, documented and mapped memorials, and created a database of all Floridians who served in the Great War. In addition, students focused on African Americans soldiers in World War I Orlando to examine a historically black neighborhood as one way of understanding their local community.⁹

While these represent local efforts, UCF students have written biographies of Floridians buried at home and overseas. Class projects documented the lives of Floridians who died in wartime and rest at World War II—era Epinal American Cemetery in France. The same could be done for a World War I cemetery. Other students researched and composed biographies of veterans buried who survived American’s wars and came home and rest at the Florida National Cemetery. The latter program is part of the Veterans Legacy Program that encourages use of our national cemeteries to teach American history. It is sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs’ National Cemetery Administration.¹⁰

Placing Pennsylvania’s World War I experience into the broader context of American history requires secondary sources. While there is no specific book on Pennsylvania in World War I, there are many books that will aid in interpreting the state’s experience. Among the classics that remain relevant are Edward M. Coffman, *The War to End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I* (1968); it remains the best single volume on this topic. On the homefront, David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (1980), and John W. Chambers II, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America*, document these difficult times. I have already extolled the virtues of Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*. While some have challenged this classic—Fussell remembered a great war singularly lacking any women—it remains indispensable as an introduction to the effect of the war on society and culture. This study also provides a marvelous introduction to the Great War’s literature and poetry.¹¹

More recent studies include marginalized groups neglected in previous research. Chad L. Williams in *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* records the story of black soldiers and civilians both during and after the war. Richard Slotkin’s *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* investigates both

African American and immigrant soldiers by examining an all-black unit and a largely immigrant army regiment. Their service represented a demand for inclusion and citizenship; in the aftermath of war both groups were disappointed. Segregation did not end and a summer of race riots left many African Americans, including veterans, dead. Immigrants' postwar "rewards" included laws restricting immigration from their birthplaces. Jennifer D. Keene, in her study *Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America*, assesses how the war changed American soldiers of all races and ethnicities and, in turn, how they transformed America.¹²

Much of what we remember or forget about World War I has to do with its aftermath. Two books examining memory and the war are Lisa M. Budreau's *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919–1933*, and Steven Trout, *On the Battlefield of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919–1941*. It is not surprising that Trout ends his study in 1941, the first year of the next great war, perhaps the last year that the Great War dominated memory.¹³

In some ways, we remain on a battlefield for this war's memory. We refuse to forgive the generation that fought the war for not ending all wars. Instead, we remember a war that did not end all wars either—World War II. Ironically, Americans' memory of that particular event has given them a warped view of war. They keep looking for decisive victories against great evils that modern wars cannot replicate. Perhaps, modern wars are more like the first world war than the second; remembering World War I may be a needed antidote to Americans' unrealistic expectations. Beyond all considerations of a useful memory, the men and women who served and sacrificed, at home or overseas, deserve to be commemorated. Otherwise, what would prompt us to ever imagine a world without war?

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NOTES

1. A member of the Twenty-Eighth division wrote one of the best memoirs of an American soldier in World War I combat: Hervey Allen, *Toward the Flame: A Memoir of World War I* (1926; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,

- 2003). See also John Lewis Barkley, *Scarlet Fields: The Combat Memoir of a World War I Medal of Honor Hero* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).
2. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 9. For more on the influenza epidemic see John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
 3. For a detailed discussion on women's combat roles, see US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Women in Combat: Issues for Congress* by Kristy N. Kamark, R42075 (2016).
 4. Villanova University website, *Home before the Leaves Fall: The Great War 1914–1918*, <https://wwionline.org/> (accessed June 12, 2017). Historiscope, "Greater Philadelphia in the Great War," <http://gpgw.historiscope.org/> (accessed June 12, 2017).
 5. US Library of Congress, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed June 12, 2017); "Largest Quota of Colored Men Called to the Army," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, July 29, 1918, 3.
 6. University of Pennsylvania, *University of Pennsylvania in World War I*, <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/faids/subguides/wwi/> (accessed June 12, 2017).
 7. Pennsylvania State Archives, "World War I Service Medal Application Card Indexes," <http://www.digitalarchives.state.pa.us/archive.asp?view=ArchiveIndexes&ArchiveID=6&FL=K> (accessed June 12, 2017); Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg Pennsylvania, World War I Veterans Service and Compensation File, 1934–1948. RG 19, Series 19.91; Ancestry.com, "Pennsylvania, WWI Veterans Service and Compensation Files, 1917–1919, 1934–1948" (Provo, UT, 2015). Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Bureau of Archives and History. *Pennsylvania Veterans Burial Cards, 1777–2012*, accessible through Pennsylvania Ancestry, <http://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Ancestry-PA.aspx> (accessed August 16, 2017); Ancestry.com., "Pennsylvania, Veterans Burial Cards, 1777–2012" (Provo, UT; 2010).
 8. For Pennsylvanians interred overseas use this website, American Battle Monuments Commission, "Search ABMC Burials and Memorials," <https://www.abmc.gov/database-search> (accessed June 12, 2017).
 9. University of Central Florida, College of Arts and Humanities, "Florida in World War I," <https://floridawwi.cah.ucf.edu/> (accessed June 12, 2017).
 10. For a student's explanation of this project see, Karen Kelly, "The Florida Epinal Project," <https://epinalprojectflorida.wordpress.com/2017/01/> (accessed June 12, 2017). For the cemetery itself, see American Battle Monuments Commission, "Epinal American Cemetery, France," <https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/europe/epinal-american-cemetery#.WT7zJGeGOJf> (accessed June 12, 2017). For information on the Veterans Legacy Program, see US Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration,

“Veterans Legacy Program,” <https://www.cem.va.gov/cem/legacy/> (accessed June 12, 2017).

11. Edward M. Coffman, *The War to End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); John W. Chambers, II, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America* (New York: The Free Press of Macmillan, 1987); Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.
12. Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
13. Lisa M. Budreau, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919–1933* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Steven Trout, *On the Battlefield of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919–1941* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011).