

NAACP Julius E. Williams Distinguished Community Service Awardee 2010

They Came to Fight: African Americans and the Great World War Exhibition, Website and Educational Outreach Program

The Negro in the Great War for freedom and democracy had proven to be a notable and inspiring figure. The record and achievements of this racial group, as brave soldiers and loyal citizens furnish one of the brightest chapters in American history.

– Emmet J. Scott, *American Negro in the World War*, 1919.

Any historical representation of the first World War must account for the participation of African Americans and their direct contribution to the victory that the “associated forces” achieved by the war’s end. Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case. There are relatively few museums or permanent exhibitions dedicated to the memories of those African American men and women who served, fought and died in defense of democracy, while simultaneously seeking to satisfy their desires for full-citizenship within the imagined borders of the United States.

Indeed, by the beginning of the twentieth century, African Americans had been forced to live under the harsh conditions of segregation after the advances made during reconstruction were annulled by those committed to continuing the subjugation of the “race” by turning back opportunities for economic, educational, and social development. Yet, African Americans remained steadfast and continued to strive to define themselves against debasing images projected to signify their position in American society as inferior second-class citizens. From Plessy versus Ferguson to the founding of the Niagara movement, and the first great Migration, African Americans challenged notions related to their so-called inferiority by choosing to pursue that which had traditionally eluded them in America: true freedom.

They Came to Fight: African Americans and the Great World War Exhibition, Website and Educational Outreach Program serves to account for the intersecting historical, social, political and economic contexts that African Americans found themselves in leading up to World War I and the outcomes of their participation. As soldiers, administrators, officers and volunteers in the defense of the United States and its claims to democracy, African Americans served with pride. Furthermore, this project accounts for the contributions that black Kansas Citians made to the outcome of the great World War. Indeed, these men and women served with honor and distinction to achieve the designated outcomes their country sought to secure, and in doing so claimed the citizenship of an entire race.

Accepting the Julius E. Williams Distinguished Community Service Award for the *They Came to Fight* project, which commemorates the contributions of black soldiers in World War I, is the exhibit's founder and curator Pellom McDaniels III, Ph.D. Dr. McDaniels is an Assistant Professor of History and American Studies at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

