"Gold Star Mothers" Bitterly Attack Uncle Sam's Sergregation: Letters ...
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"Gold Star Mothers" Bitterly Attack Uncle Sam's Segregation

Letters Rejecting Trip Portray Depth Of "Mothers" Fury

The Man Behind The Gun, A Mother And The Author



Left to right: John Drew, sponsor of nationwide opposition, Mrs. Emma Houston, Thomas Wallace Swann, author of this article.

The sudden death during the Christmas holidays of Congressman David J. O'Connell of Brooklyn recalls the author of the bill which enabled Gold Star War Mothers and Widows to make the pilgrimage to the battlefields of France. This legislation was hailed by all groups at its passage as a splendid gesture of a grateful nation to show its sincere appreciation of the heroic dead who had given their lives in defense of its ideals.

But to the 219 Black Mothers and widows this proposed pilgrimage early assumed the aspect of a hideous attempt to humiliate them. The War Department under whose direction the trip to France was to be arranged decided that Negro War Mothers and widows should be conveyed on different vessels, sailing on different dates, from the ships carrying the white War Mothers and widows. Thus when 151 Negro Mothers indicated their desire to visit France in 1930, they were politely informed that they would be Jim Crowed.

The announcement of this proposed ignoble experiment caused bewilderment. In the stress of the emergency of War the government had called all men to its colors as brothers in a common cause. In an ecstasy of patriotism and common idealism these sable sons had made the supreme sacrifice—had shed their life's blood in the gore-drenched soil of France! Stunned and amazed these black mothers and widows, these neglected benefactors of the nation knew not what to do.

MOTHERS URGED TO FOREGO TRIP

At this juncture John Mott Drew, a public-spirited business man of Darby, Pennsylvania, took up the cudgels in an endeavor to persuade the mothers to decline the invitation unless they could make the journey under the same conditions as the white mothers. On May 10, 1930 Mr. Drew sent out the following circular letter:

Darby, Pa., May 10, 1930.

Dear Gold Star Mother or Widow:

I am writing to state that the order issued by the War Department segregating the Gold Star Mothers in the pilgrimage to France is regarded by many as un-American.

We hope that you will decline to accept this humiliation, and protest against the injustice to the living and insult to the dead.

To expedite matters, get your best friend to help file your written protest, over your own signature with the proper authorities.

Please forward me a copy for our files. Attached hereto is a facsimile copy of letter written by Gold Star Mother Houston.

Yours very truly,
(Signed)
John Mott Drew.

TWENTY-FIVE DECLINE INVITATION

The response to this letter was instantaneous. From fifteen States replies poured into Darby, blessing and extolling Mr. Drew for the excellent advice which his letter contained. From Massachusetts to Florida, and from New York to California rushed these written declinations to visit the graves of their loved ones on a Jim Crow vessel. In all, twenty-five Negro Mothers and Widows heeded the advice of the Darby man. Together they united in protests to the President and those in command to cancel the ill-conceived expedition.

LETTERS PORTRAY DEEP FEELING

The letters of these worn women reveal their deep feeling of humiliation and resentment at the brazen determination of their government to uphold segregation and to haunt it before the world. Mrs. Carrie G. Brown, Gold Star Mother of Eatonton, Ga. called it "a shame upon the United States Government," in a cryptic letter addressed to the Secretary of War:

Eatonton, Ga. May 27, 1930.

The Hon Sec'y of War,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

The segregation of Gold Star Mothers on our trip to our sons' graves is what I should call a shame on the U. S. Government. During the War there were no separation and I feel there should be none in this case. Its enough to go there to see the last of my son with a weeping heart then the segregation combined is dreadful and upon you principals and the cause for which my son died would be humiliating to make the trip under these terms. As. Mr. Fatrick Henry said: "Give me Liberty" or give me death. I hope Pres. Hoover will see this in like manner and not allow segregation on so Solemn an occasion.

Respectfully yours,
Mrs. Carrie G. Brown.
Mother of Jessie M. Simmons
1232 N. American Merchant 7-12

NOT GOING AT ALL

Gold Star Mother Baker of Chicago registered her refusal in the following terse and tart style:

Chicago, Ill., July 15, 1930

John M. Drew,
137 N. 10th Street,
Darby, Pa.,

Dear Sir:

I received your letter a few weeks ago, but at the time I was unable to write.

As far is the trip is concerned I am not going at all.

Very truly yours,
Mrs. Letha Baker.

"AMERICA WILL NEED US AGAIN!"

From St. Louis, Gold Star Mother Beatrice Langon wrote:

1618 Morgan St.,
St. Louis, Mo.
June 30, 1930.

Mr. John M. Drew,
Darby, Pa.

I refused the government's invitation to go to Europe in segregated ships this year—and also next year.

Yours Truly,
Mrs. Beatrice Langon

From Sedalia, in the same, "The Show-Me" State, came this letter from another Gold Star War Widow uttering the prophetic cry that, "AMERICA WILL NEED US. AGAIN!" Superfluous to add that Widow Taylor was one of the twenty-five who declined to accept the insulting bid. Her letter follows:

317 E. Jefferson St.,
Sedalia, Mo.
May 19, 1930.

Honorable Sec'y of War,
Army and Navy Bldg.,
Washington, D. C.

I learn that it is no longer a rumor but a definite fact that the U. S. A. will send its Gold Star Mothers to the graves of their dead heroes in France aboard "JIM CROW" ships.

This is what the U. S. A. thinks of the great sacrifices black men and women have made in its behalf.

"Jim Crowism" then, is what black women, bowed in grief will have to bear if they accept the invitation of the U. S. A. government, which has become an insult. But! we will NOT do it.

We as a race have too much pride, too much respect for those of our men now lying beneath the sod of Noble France, to dishonor them by accepting this latest evidence of America's inhumanity and ingratitude.

I am writing in memory of my husband who gave up his life in defence of his country and mine.

As a Gold Star widow, I emphatically protest the insult and will not board a JIM CROW ship to visit the grave of a soldier, of a race of people who stands for right and is not afraid to fight for its country.

We as widows and mothers will remember this crowning disgrace of THIS AMERICA: for:—It will need us again.

Very respectfully,
Mrs. Clara B. Taylor,
Widow of George Estill Taylor, Private, Co. M., 806 Pioneer Infantry.

Urbana, Ohio.
July 9, 1930

Mr. John M. Drew:
Dear Sir:

Your letter received. I am not going to France. I did except the invitation not knowing what I do now under no circum would I go now I do not want to be a disgrace to my son and the race.

Yours,
Bessie Strawthorn.

FROM TEXAS

Port Arthur, Texas.
July 10, 1930.

Mr. John M. Drew Dear Sir in reply to your letter of June the 28.30 asking weather I am going to accept the trip to Europe under the Jim-Crow invitation I am giveing you my word I haveing accept it and I am not going to accept it and you can count on me for one. Will not accept under the present Jim-Crow segregated invitation I thank you for the information and I am in hopes to here from you again I still remain as ever

Mrs. Rose Blair
401 W. Thomas Blvd.
Port Arthur, Texas.

FROM NEW JERSEY

South Bound Brook, N. J.,
June 30, 1930.

Mr. John Mott Drew
Darby, Pa.
Dear Sir:

I am refusing the Government's invitation to go to Europe in the segregated ships as I don't think I want to make the trip.

Yours truly,
Mrs. Callie Mines

DON'T LIKE NEW YORK COLORED SOCIETY

Two interesting letters were received from Virginia, which bring out contrasting reactions over making the trip in segregated units. One of the writers got the impression that New York colored Society was trying to dictate her private affairs. Her letter reads:

July 2

Dear Sir:

In reply to your letter I will say that I am all ready to make this trip they have sent me the star and also a check I have nothing to do with New York Colored Society.

Very truly,
Sallie E. dustin
Fairfield, Va.

OTHER VIRGINIAN RETUNES BADGE

In contrast to the attitude of the first Virginian Gold Star Widow Poyner returned her passport and badge to War officials, and left the matter of her further action to the guidance of Mr. Drew. In her bewilderment she wrote:

Norfolk, Va.,
July 1, 1930.

Dear Mr. Drew:

I received your letter. I had accepted going, but I can refuse if I am not going to get good service. If you think it best for me to go write and tell me. If you think it best for me not to go say so.

Yes I think the colored ought to be treated the same as the whites. I highly apreciate your writing me.

Very truly yours,
Mary Poyner (Widow)

GRAVES TO VISIT GRAVE OF DEAD SON

Gold Star Mother Margaret King resides in the district represented by the late Congressman O'Connell. She was enthusiastic to learn that her Congressman was interested in the War Mothers but chagrined when she realize the demonical uses to which the measure had been put. Her letter though expressed in words which are an epitome of politeness carry a sting which gets under the skin of the most iron-hearted official.

105 St. Marks Ave.,
Brooklyn, N. Y.
July 27, 1930.

Dear Mr. Drew:

I received your kind and most sympathetic letter of June 28th, but because of illness was not able to answer sooner. Trust you will pardon my delay.

In regards to the trip abroad I feel exactly as you do, and have felt so from the beginning.

So far as I have been able to hear the government has ignored all protests. We Negro Mothers and Widows may accept The Jim-Crow invitation or remain in the United States. I, for one, will not accept such an invitation this year nor the succeeding years, as much as I long to visit the last resting place of my one and only beloved son, who lost his life during action in the last battle of the war.

Thanking you again for your kind interest, I am,

Very truly yours,
(Mrs.) Margaret King.



MRS. MABEL JOHNSON, A "GOLD STAR MOTHER"

"A CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE DEAD!"

Two Negro women are listed in the Gold Star Roster from Philadelphia. Promptly and without hesitation these women went on record declining to insult their heroic dead. Mrs. Mabel Johnson, a Gold Star Widow, wrote as follows:

954 N. Percy St.,
Philadelphia, Pa.
April 24, 1930.

The Honorable Secretary of War,
Army and Navy Building,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

I am the Gold Star Widow of Russell Johnson, who served as Sergeant, Company F 813 Pioneer Infantry, and who died in France while in service. I am colored, and am therefore affected by an order of the War Department to the effect that the Colored Gold Star Mothers and Widows are to make the pilgrimage to France at a different time and on a different ship from the white Gold Star Mothers.

My only information that such an order has been made comes from the public press; but if it is true that there is such an order. I wish to most emphatically state that despite my intense desire to visit the grave of my beloved husband, I should feel that I would be offering an insult to his memory and the great sacrifice that he has made for his country and his race if I were to accept such a Jim-Crow invitation.

If my country and his is so devoid of any feeling of appreciation and gratitude for the noble service that Negroes gave and were willing to give in the World War, as to repay these sacrifices by heralding to the world that even among the honored dead, there must be with Americans, a discrimination, a difference, then I will not be a party to this conspiracy against the dead, nor do I think any other self-respecting War Mother or Widow shall accept such an invitation.

Most respectfully yours,
Mrs. Mabel Johnson.

DREW CARRIES PROTESTS TO WHITE HOUSE

Despite the chirography or spelling, these missives hit the transparent wrongs—hit them at the very heart center. These women saw clearly that the President and his servants were inflicting grievous injury upon these innocent victims of War.

The letters from these black Mothers and Widows constitute an eloquent tribute to the lofty sentiments and purpose of Mr. Drew. He was fighting against the surrender of the cardinal principles of justice and equality of all citizens of these United States irrespective of the color of their skins. He carried his fight to the very presence of President Hoover. Vehemently protesting this unwarranted and unprecedented humiliation, Mr. Drew warned the President that "This iniquity would come home to plague his conscience and the conscience of his country!" The letter in full reads:

Darby, Pa.,
July 8, 1930.

His Excellency, Herbert Hoover,
President of the United States,
White House,
Washington, D. C.

Your Excellency:

I am taking the liberty of carrying my protest against the unwarranted discrimination and humiliation of Colored War Mothers and Widows to you.

I am not writing with any illusions that this condition would be remedied immediately,—since all preparations for the trip have been made by the War Department, but I am insisting that you be fully informed of the attitude of a large part of the Negro population, towards you and your administration, for this act of governmental segregation that must necessarily attract the notice of the whole civilized world.

Mr. President, nothing that you could possibly do against the Negro people could give such aid and comfort to the enemies of harmonious race relation; and all persons interested in seeing discriminations and differences between the racial groups quickly abolished, as to put your stamp of approval as President of the United States, on segregation against the most honored and respected group of citizens: namely, the mothers and widows of our heroic dead. In comparison to the far-reaching effect of such an act, the fuming and storming of some of the Senators and Governors of Negro-hating Southern States in their vilest diatribes against the Negro, is but as a gentle breeze to a hurricane.

The War Department's action, Mr. President, is all the more difficult to understand when we know that the pilgrimage of the War Mothers and Widows is to France, the fairest nation in the world to all races, colors and creeds. Such conduct then cannot be considered necessary or expedient as a compromise or a surrender to the sensibilities of the nation that is to play host to these honored pilgrims.

It has been argued by the defenders of this segregation plan, that it was necessary to insult and humiliate the Negro War Mothers to satisfy the sensitive feelings of the Southern white War Mothers. If this is true, it would have been better that the government had never committed itself to such an undertaking, as laudable as it is. For, Mr. President, if you, as the representative of this Nation are to sustain that spiritual leadership that has been ours among nations since the World War, you cannot substitute expediency for justice.

Mr. President, when the black War Mothers and Widows arrive on the shores of France as the guests of the country for whom their sons and husbands gave their lives, the French nation and the nations of the whole civilized world can come to but one conclusion: namely, that there is a group of citizens that this country will accept their lives as defenders in time of war, but who are unfit to associate with the Caucasian element of the country in time of peace.

And doubtless, the thought expressed by a famous author of the past shall come to the minds of most of these that behold that spectacle: "A nation which insults its own heroes is a disgrace to the map of the world."

Respectfully yours,
John Mott Drew

HOOVER PASSES THE BUCK

Running true to form, President Hoover dodged the issue and "passed the buck" on to the War Department. On July 21, exactly 12 days after receipt of the Drew letter the following reply came to Darby. It should be noted that during this interim the first ship carrying the Negro Gold Star Mothers had sailed and had actually arrived in France. The correspondence follows:

The White House
Washington.
July 10, 1930.

My dear Mr. Drew:

This will acknowledge the receipt of your letter of July 9th. By the President's direction it is being brought to the attention of the Secretary of War.

Sincerely yours,
Lawrence Richey,
Secretary to the President.

Mr. John Mott Drew,
Darby, Lansdowne and 69th St. Bus Line,
137 North 10th Street,
Darby, Pennsylvania.

War Department
Washington
July 21, 1930.

Mr. John Mott Drew,
137 North Tenth St.,
Darby, Pennsylvania.

Dear Mr. Drew;

Your letter of July 9, 1930, addressed to the President, relative to the pilgrimage authorized by Congress in the Act approved March 2, 1929, has been referred to me for consideration and reply.

I regret that you protest against that part of the pilgrimage regulations of the War Department which provides for the formation of groups of colored gold star mothers and widows. The large number of mothers and widows who will make the pilgrimage, together with the necessity of providing suitable accommodations for all, made impracticable the sending of the pilgrims in one body, and made the organization of groups necessary.

The War Department was confronted with many perplexing problems during the development of the detailed plans for this pilgrimage. After thorough study, the conclusion was reached that the formation of white and colored groups of mothers and widows would best assure the contentment and comfort of the pilgrims themselves. No discrimination as between the various groups is contemplated. All groups will receive like accommodations at hotels and on steamships, and the representatives of the War Department will, at all times, be solicitous of the welfare of the colored mothers and widows as they will be of the welfare of those of the white race.

The journey will be a severe tax on those making it as it will take them into strange surroundings and away from families and friends for a period of about six weeks. The War Department has been motivated by the desire to relieve this strain insofar as possible by not disturbing the normal contacts of individual pilgrims. It would seem natural to asume that these mothers and widows would prefer to seek solace in their grief from companions of their own race.

No plan for conducting the pilgrimage has been proposed which, after careful analysis, gives the same assurance of success as does the plan of the War Department. The War Department is already in receipt of many letters from pilgrims who have completed the trip, all commending the present plan and full of praise for the manner in which it is being executed.

Sincerely yours,
F. H. Payne,
Acting Secretary of War

SECRETARY PERVERTS HUMAN QUALITIES

The reasons adduced by the Acting Secretary of War are too weak and apparent to merit discussion. The number of pilgrims making the trip could not possibly render segregation of passengers imperative. It would only make additional space desirable and necessary. That such discrimination had the voluntary support of the groups concerned is a dastardly untruth. The only pilgrims whose desire were consulted were the whites. The most ridiculous and reprehensible reason given for the silly action was he thought that Negro women could find greater solace in their grief among their own race. This is plainly a subterfuge. For human experience proves that of all forces in the cveiling of common sorrows, and prejudices and hates, the most powerful is grief and common suffering.

All the efforts made to change the President's cruel decision proved futile. No more pathetic plea was ever uttered than the petition of Philadelphia Gold Star Mother Houston, who through the efforts of Hon. Harry A. Mackey, Mayor of Philadelphia, and Congressman Oscar DePriest, of Illinois filed her protest at the White House. Mother Houston tearfully reminded the President that his action was "cruelly wounding the bleeding hearts of mothers whose sons had given their all for freedom's cause!" The concluding paragraph of her letter is a classic that should be preserved in the archives of our government. It follows:

"I am writing in memory of my son who gave his life in defense of American democracy. Answering the draft on the verge of his graduation at Union College, actually enlisting on July 1st, 1918) and rushed through preliminary preparation for Over-seas service, he fell a victim of the "flu" October 18th (1918) and his body is buried at Brest, France. As a Gold Star Mother, I earnestly protest the insult to the living as a wanton and unnecessary act. It is inconceivable that a government founded upon the principles of fraternity, equality and even-handed justice, could so cruelly wound the bleeding hearts of mothers, whose sons have given their all for freedom's cause.

"Surely our great President, himself a father, and a patriot, who is the supreme head of the Army, together with enlightened public opinion, will not suffer this order of the War Department to stand."

Very respectfully yours,
(Mrs.) Emma Houston
(Mother of Leopold Houston, Pvt. 1st Co. cp. Hancock SHD In.)

Protest Sponsor Sees Many Snubbing Trip

DEFEATED BUT UNDISMAYED

Despite the fact that the efforts of Mr. Drew and others were unable to prevent the humiliation of the Negro Mothers and Widows on this mournful journey his far sighted utterances and his persistent activity cannot fail to fire the imagination of all thoughtful Negro citizens. He is fighting for a foundation American principle, which if discarded now will set a dangerous precedent and doom the race in America to such segregation and discrimination as the government cares to foist upon it.

A CLARION CALL FOR ACTION

He is thrice armed who hath his quarrel just. Here is a clarion call for all Negroes to think and consider. They must not even for a seemingly, momentary, advantage relinquish the principles of equality and justice, for which they and their forbears have contended since Emancipation. Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that the plaintive letters of these courageous women will yet penetrate the hearts of the officials at Washington, who are momentarily in power.

HELPLESS HEROINES DESERVE TO BE HONORED

All honor to these helpless heroines of an ill-advised officialdom, for their refusal to journey to France, under conditions insulting to womanhood and violative of the principles of our government! And most heartily do we toast John Drew of Darby! He is fighting an intrenched enemy whose minions dominate the citadel of power at Washington. Without ego or thought of personal vantage he unflinchingly girds his armor for the remaining task. He must not be permitted to carry on alone. For this is everybody's fight. Let every agency that can be effective mobilize its forces and convince the president of this monumental crime against progressive humanity. The pulpit and the press should be vitally energized in this impending crisis.

LOFTIER HEIGHTS OF MORAL

It is reported that sixty-eight Negro Mothers and Widows plan to make the trip in 1931. They should be canvassed in season and made conversant of the possible hurt they will do themselves and their race. Perhaps the example set by the immortal twenty-five Negro mothers and widows, who declined to go on the 1930 Jim Crow pilgrimage may inspire them to like conduct.

Such conduct will lift them to loftier heights of moral grandeur. Surely they would not venture on such a quest, even to visit the graves of their loved ones, bowed down not only with their own grief, but stigmatized and humiliated by their own government with civilized humanity looking on!

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