

Left: US Navy photographer Guy O. Cox of Wilson, stationed on the edge of the flight deck of the navy aircraft carrier USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), behind a Mitchell 35mm motion picture camera shooting imagery of the ship's aircraft in 1944 during World War II. Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

Below: This small metal pin, manufactured in 1942, is painted in traditional patriotic colors of red, white, and blue. Its message—"Remember Pearl Harbor"—offered a way for the wearer to show support for the war effort. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.



## From Posters to Photographs: How Objects Show North Carolinians' Experience in World War II

by Matthew M. Peek

Work as an archivist. That's a person who becomes an expert in preserving original historic materials kept and used by people in the past and present—such as letters, photographs, maps, old films, diaries, posters, and other everyday items. Archivists work to arrange, describe, and make these artifacts available so people can see and touch the past in person.

As an archivist, my main job is not to tell stories. I work to preserve the experiences of military veterans and those on the home front, and the connections those experiences have with their physical materials: A diary carried all through Europe in World War II in a coat pocket. A letter with a lipstick kiss from a sweetheart. Or a map with handwritten notations on it used for a major military operation. The objects tell their own stories—as

long as they are saved and preserved for future generations.

These items speak to struggles, survival, and resilience in trying times that many North Carolinians thought would never end. Yet, they either came through the tough times or are remembered for their fight in the face of adversity. I would like to show you what I mean by spotlighting several collections of historic materials held by the Military Collection at the State Archives. Let's see how the items connect to the resilience of the people who used and created them in times of war.

Most wars have a start and end point. I like to look at how people involved in military service were affected and changed from the start of the war to its end. Some of these individuals do not have happy out-

comes, and many do not survive war. Those who do make it through are forever affected by their experiences in it, and it guides their postwar lives.

### Attack at Pearl Harbor

The United States entered military action in World War II on December 7, 1941, when the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service launched a sneak attack on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. It was a quiet Sunday morning, and Weldon C. Burlison, from Yancey County, was there at Hickam Field when Japanese aircraft began bombing and shooting buildings, planes, and people on the ground. Burlison died in the attack, becoming one of the first North Carolinians to die during World War II.

What survives of original items created by Burlison is a postcard—the last-known correspondence he sent before his death to his friend Elsie Edward and her husband, Ed. (See below.) The two grew up together in Yancey County, but the Edwards moved to New Jersey during the war. On the postcard, he asked Elsie to give his address to some of her female friends. He hoped some would write, to help keep his spirits up during his military service. The postcard is evidence of happy times for Burlison before war changed everything.

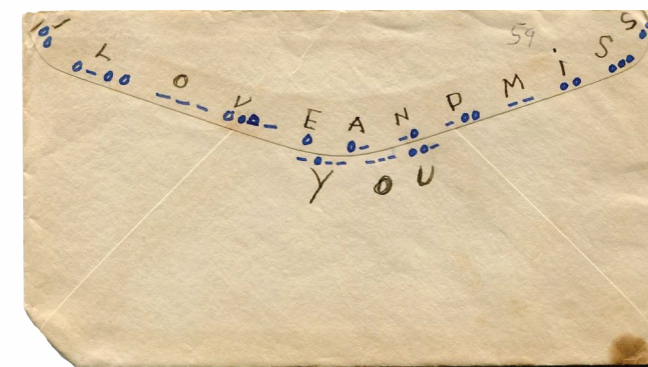
### Photographing the War

One North Carolina man who served throughout World War II was Guy O. Cox of Wilson. A photographer for local newspapers before the war, he enlisted in the US Navy on June 13, 1942. Cox went through photographer's training at the US Naval School of Photography at the US Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida, in 1942. He was appointed as a photographer's mate to the USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) when it was commissioned on May 25, 1943. The carrier served in the Pacific theater from late 1943 through May 1945.

Cox documented life aboard the ship, including the activities and service of the men. After the war, he became a longtime, beloved photographer, taking photographs of generations of North Carolinians in Wilson County. Despite some of the tough times he saw in service, the training and experience he received during World War II gave him the skills to thrive after the war.

### Women on the Home Front

World War II was a challenge not just for those in the military but also for those back home on "the home front"—particularly women. Society had strict standards about how women should behave, what jobs they could do, and what education they could have. Most women worked at home, as wives and mothers, taking care of their families. But that began to change



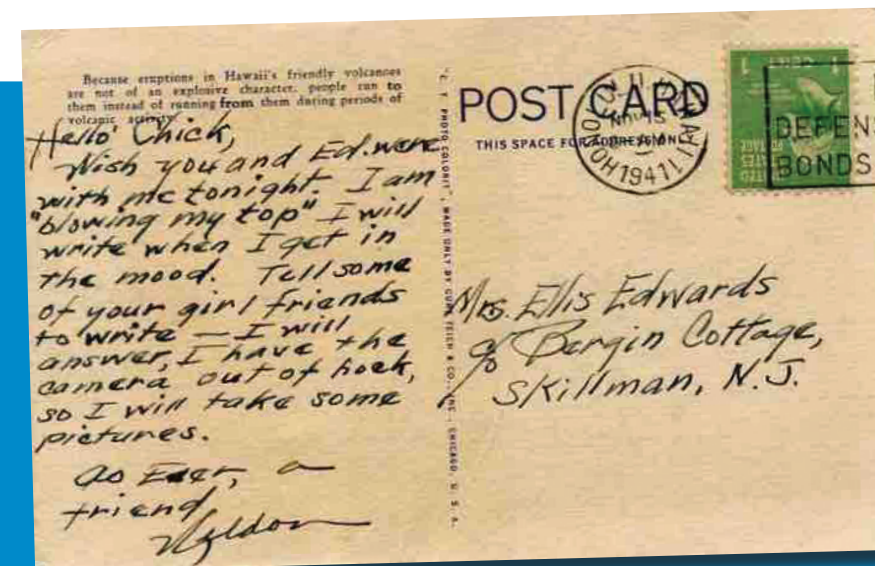
as men were drafted for active military service. That left shortages in the number of men available to work for businesses or in local government positions. Women were needed to fill those jobs.

Women also struggled with having romantic relationships during these changing times. Many women were left home alone to struggle with supporting family members, working long shifts at wartime production factories, and dealing with rising prices.

The changing roles of women in society meant a lot of women found a new independence to be themselves and to control their own lives and careers. One such woman was Geraldine Mayo of Pamlico County. She had studied to become a teacher of home economics and science education at what is now East Carolina University in Greenville, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1939. During World War II, Mayo became a vocational home economics teacher at Lee Woodard Public Schools in the town of Black Creek, south of Wilson.

Mayo was very involved with her career, her community, and her students. The last thing she wanted was to fall in love with a man in the military. However, sometime around mid- to late 1944, Mayo met US Coast Guard Reserve officer David L. Beveridge of Beaufort.

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Top of page: Back of envelope from letter postmarked on March 21, 1945, that Geraldine Mayo sent to her boyfriend, David L. Beveridge, who was serving in the US Coast Guard Reserve during World War II. Mayo used Morse code to write a secret message (blue ink)—which Beveridge worked to decode. Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

Left: Last known piece of correspondence from Weldon C. Burlison in November 1941, before he was killed at Hickam Field on December 7, 1941. Image, from the Weldon C. Burlison Papers, WWII 58, courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.





This poster was created by Elizabeth Baker, an eighth-grade student at the Waughton School in Winston-Salem. Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

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David Beveridge came from a sailing family, and he joined the Coast Guard Reserve on June 6, 1942. He would be stationed from 1944 to 1945 at Fort Macon, and Norfolk, Virginia. As of November 1944, he was Chief Boatswain's Mate of the deadrise cruiser CGR 1261 stationed at Fort Macon. Soon David decided he wanted to propose to Geraldine, but her parents did not think they had known each other long enough.

In the meantime, the two wrote letters to each other to stay in touch. Geraldine taught herself Morse code, which was the communication system using dots and dashes to send messages by telegraph. (Think of a wire-based version of email.) Then she used it to write short, coded messages on the back of the envelopes of the letters she sent him. To read them, David had to write out the letters for each set of dots and dashes.

Geraldine and David wed on June 15, 1945, in her hometown of Bear Creek while David was still in the Coast Guard. After the war, Geraldine became a teacher at

Beaufort High School, and David became a ferryboat captain of the Ocracoke Island to Cedar Island ferry. They were married for 32 years before David passed away. Geraldine Beveridge still had her career and independence, showing that women could have it all during World War II despite the challenges in the world and society.

### Kids on the Home Front

Children in North Carolina also faced challenges during World War II. Often, one parent was away serving in the US Armed Forces while the parent remaining at home had to work or support home-front war efforts like war-bond drives. Many children were sent to live with aunts, uncles, grandparents, or other relatives during the war. School became one place where children had support from friends and teachers. There, many became involved in school wartime classes and programs.

Students collected scrap metal or other materials to be used to manufacture items needed for the military. Many children sold war bonds and war saving stamps, which raised money for the US government to fund the war. As part of these school wartime programs, many young people created posters on topics related to the war.

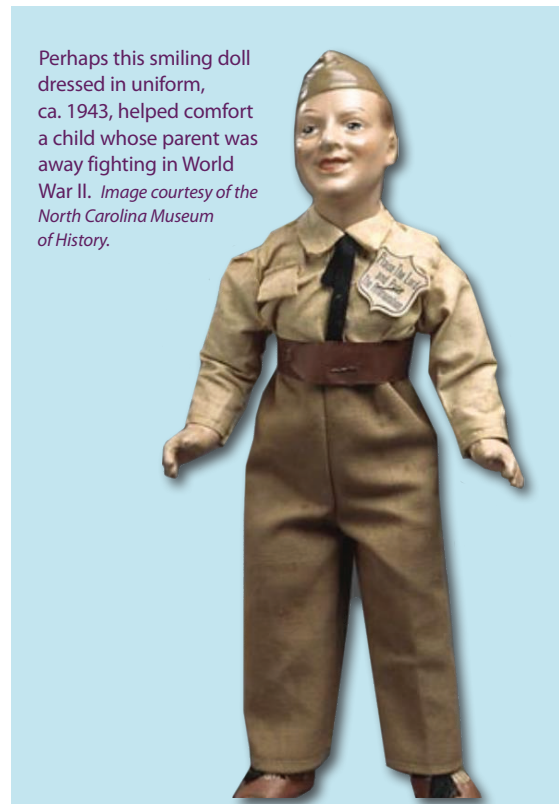
One such poster was drawn by student Elizabeth Baker, an eighth grader at the Waughton School in Winston-Salem (*above left*). The poster features a young person wearing a patriotic Uncle Sam hat and promoting the purchase of war savings stamps to support the war effort. Children all over North Carolina made drawings and paintings for posters like these.

### Integration of the Military

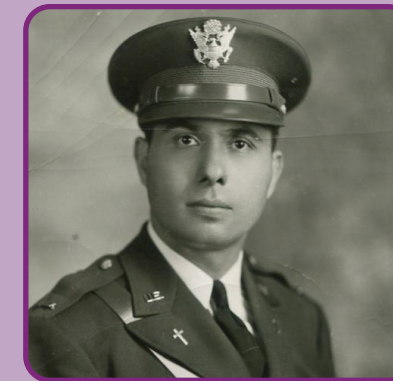
World War II showed the resilience of Black North Carolinians, who were still forced to use segregated

facilities, face daily racism, and endure work and financial hardships. Many hoped that if they volunteered to serve their country, it would push America to integrate White and Black service individuals in the US Armed Forces. However, the great majority of Black Americans entering military service were forced into segregated units, with White officers commanding them. These Black men and women were given some of the worst living and service conditions in the war.

One man who chose to fight through this was the Reverend Elmer P. Gibson of Greensboro, and later Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Gibson was the son of another reverend—Lewis B. Gibson—who had been born into slavery in 1835. Elmer Gibson went on to earn a degree at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where he became friends with African American poet Langston Hughes. Gibson earned a bachelor of divinity degree in 1930 at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, becoming the first Black graduate of the seminary that Martin Luther King Jr. would later attend. Gibson



Perhaps this smiling doll dressed in uniform, ca. 1943, helped comfort a child whose parent was away fighting in World War II. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.



Above: Elmer P. Gibson, ca. 1941. Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

Left: An integrated chapel service held in the Post Chapel on the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, on August 12, 1945, during World War II. Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

would fight racism within the Methodist Church Conference in which he served as a minister from 1929 through 1941.

Gibson was called into active military service in the US Army, commissioned as a 1st lieutenant in the Chaplain Corps, on February 10, 1941. Due to age restrictions and racism, Gibson was not allowed to serve as an officer in the regular army. Instead, he was given an officer's rank in the reserves despite his serving in an active army unit. Captain Gibson became the chaplain for the segregated 364th Infantry Regiment (Colored), 92nd Infantry Division, US Army, which was sent in 1943 to be stationed on the remote and cold Adak Island in the Aleutian Islands, Alaska. The US government was worried about a Japanese attack of these islands, which did happen at one point. Segregated Black units were often sent to be stationed in isolation from White units or in some of the worst living conditions overseas.

At the time, chapel services for army units were segregated. However, Chaplain Gibson was a longtime proponent for the end of segregation. He took advantage of several opportunities—the isolated island; the limited number of men stationed there; and his status as “island chaplain” for both White and Black US military units—to do something dramatic: He introduced integrated chapel services. This makes Elmer Gibson one of the earliest military officers to attempt some level of integration of regular, combat-ready White and Black service individuals in the US Army. For his dedicated service as a chaplain and his service to all of the troops regardless of color, Elmer Gibson was awarded the Legion of Merit award.

At the end of World War II, the US Army wanted to keep Gibson as a chaplain but would not give him rank or admittance into the regular army—just

the Army Reserves. Gibson wanted the rights that came with his service history and the role being asked of him. After some time, Gibson chose to remain a career officer in the US Army, but only if he could pass an army examination and be accepted into the regular army. After passing his test in March 1946, Gibson was appointed to the regular US Army with the permanent rank of major by President Harry S. Truman. Gibson became one of the highest-ranking African Americans in the US Army.

With Gibson's appointment in 1946, President Truman chose him to be an adviser on plans to enact a complete desegregation of the US Armed Forces. Gibson would continue to serve in this capacity during Truman's entire presidency, according to Gibson's family. Gibson's views and opinions were key in leading Truman to issue Executive Order 9981 in July 1948, establishing equality of treatment and opportunity in the US military regardless of race. Still, integration of the US Armed Forces had to be done from the ground up, which took time.

Gibson is one of the most unsung heroes for the integration of the US Armed Forces, and his drive to persevere despite the racism he faced in World War II led to a major positive change for people of color in the United States. 🌸

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