

The Golden Thirteen

Teacher's Guide

The Woodson Center's lesson on the first class of African American Navy officers, known today as the Golden Thirteen, affords the educator a great deal of flexibility in its implementation. The resources featured may be used to implement a lesson that is appropriate for a full or partial class session. Students will explore the life and accomplishments of the Golden Thirteen through primary and secondary source documents, analyze and discuss essential questions, and have opportunities to reflect on the lesson through persuasive writing prompts, multiple choice questions, as well as collaborative project extension activities.

The materials in this lesson can be cut down and rearranged to suit classroom conditions, timeframe, student comfort level, or to connect with other material from an established syllabus or textbook. As either an introduction to, or an extension of, this lesson, teachers and/or students can check out the collection or oral histories assembled by Paul Stillwell, *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers* (1993), and the popular history *The Golden Thirteen: How Black Men Won the Right to Wear Navy Gold* by Dan C. Goldberg (2021).

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lessons, students will be able to describe the:

- Social and political forces that kept the US armed services segregated until the 1950s;
- Historical structure and culture of the United States Navy;
- Role of Black Americans in the armed services, especially during WWII;
- Challenges faced by the Golden 13 as sailors, during indoctrination, and as officers;
- Individual achievements of members of the Golden 13 after their discharge;
- Motivations for the US Navy in using the Golden 13 during later recruitment efforts;
- Legacy of the Golden 13 for today's integrated, diverse US armed forces.

Full Class Session Instruction (2 class days, approximately 50 – 75 minutes each):

1. A “bell ringer” or lesson hook is always a great way to stimulate student thinking and introduce a topic for the day's lesson. Suggested bell ringers to ask students:
 - “Have you or anyone in your family served in the Navy? What qualities does the Navy value in its sailors?”
 - “What does it mean to be an officer in the armed services, as opposed to enlisted?”
 - “How have Black Americans served their country in uniform since WWII? During the war? What do you know about the history of Black soldiers, sailors, and marines?”
2. The teacher should have the bell ringer displayed on the board and allow the students a few minutes to think independently about it. Next, students may turn to a peer next to them to discuss their thoughts on the opening prompt. Finally, the teacher may ask for any students to volunteer to share their thoughts with the entire class.
3. Before moving into the Golden Thirteen lesson, ensure that students have some background about the wider context for World War II-era America: the ordeal of the Great Depression and

the contemporary Great Migration of Black Americans from the South to the North; the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal; the American experience of WWII at home and abroad. The Library of Congress has an [exhibit on the Great Depression and WWII, 1929-1945](#).

4. The teacher may want to take a few minutes to discuss the history of Black Americans in the armed services, including racial segregation in the War for Independence, the role of United States Colored Troops in the Union victory in the Civil War, and the influence of World War I and its aftermath on the "Red Summer" of 1919 and Black liberation movements of the early twentieth century. (Related Woodson Center curriculum lessons on these topics are suggested below.)
5. At this point, the teacher may open the Golden Thirteen Slide Deck and introduce students to the story of these officers' life both in and out of uniform, and their legacy to today's Navy.
6. After reading the background story on the Golden Thirteen and their collective and individual accomplishments, the teacher may pause and ask students the following questions:
 - "Why did Black Americans volunteer to serve in WWII? What were they fighting for?"
 - "Which other historical figures or groups do the Golden Thirteen remind you of?"
 - "Why do you think the Navy celebrated the Golden Thirteen in the 1970s and 80s?"
7. The next part of the lesson allows the teacher flexibility to group students together to read and discuss the Golden Thirteen Case Studies and/or Documents-Based Questions (DBQs) supplements (linked below). Each group may be assigned a particular supplement to read and then to complete the accompanying questions. Groups may read more than one if time allows.
8. At this point, the teacher may want to connect the Golden Thirteen's experience to current events. Discussion questions can help students understand the relevance of the Golden Thirteen for today's modern, integrated Navy and other armed services. Questions could include:
 - "How well integrated are the Armed Services today? What is their reputation as an opportunity for education and upward mobility for Americans of any background?"
 - "What were the names of Black men and women who integrated the Army, Air Force, and Marines? After serving in the armed forces, what opportunities became available?"
 - "What percentage of today's military is Black? What percentage of them are officers? Do candidates receive the same officer training as given to the Golden Thirteen?"
9. Lesson may conclude with students writing a brief reflection on the groundbreaking achievements of the Golden Thirteen in small groups. Possible extensions of the lesson include answering further Case Study questions, further responses to the Documents Based Questions (DBQs), and/or the creation of a digital trifold on the Golden Thirteen's legacy.



[Download DBQs](#)



[Download Slide Deck \(printable PDF\)](#)



[Download Case Study](#)

Students will define the following vocabulary words, drawn from the Slide Deck:

amiable	brass	chafed	chow
ensign	indoctrination	inertia	machinist
Morse code	quartermaster	Semaphore	

Additional Resources

Books & Articles

"The Golden Thirteen." Very helpful, bite-sized biographies of each of the sixteen officers who trained, as well as some useful background information about their situation in the Navy.

"FDR Stayed Silent, Too." In this excerpt, Golden Thirteen historian Dan C. Goldberg critiques President Roosevelt's response to racial violence on the home front during World War II.

"The Forgotten Story of How 13 Black Men Broke the Navy's Toughest Color Barrier." Excellent long-form treatment of the Golden Thirteen by historian Dan C. Goldberg in *Politico*.

"During WWII, the Black press campaigned for a double victory." Book excerpt from Dan C. Goldberg looks at how efforts by groups like the NAACP set the stage for the Golden Thirteen.

"Meet the 13 Officers Who Were the Navy's Jackie Robinsons." Book excerpt from Dan C. Goldberg includes great information on organizing the reunions of the Golden Thirteen.

"Navigating the Seven Seas: Leadership Lessons of the First African American Father and Son to Serve at the Top in the U.S. Navy." Book from two generations of Black American leadership in the Navy. Great for extensions beyond the lessons and / or independent book reports.

Videos

The Golden 13: The Story of The First African American Naval Officers. Short video (under 5 minutes) that provides an overview of the story, with a focus on its legacy for today's Navy.

"The Golden Thirteen." 10-minute documentary created by high school students. Film was awarded the 2014 Ken Coskey Naval History Prize at National History Day in College Park, MD.

Websites

The Naval History and Heritage Command (NHCC). The institutional memory of the United States Navy, NHHC contains a wealth of information on all aspects of American naval history.

U.S. Naval Institute: Oral Histories. Summaries of complete oral histories from a variety of Navy veterans, including those collected from surviving members of the Golden Thirteen.



Woodson Center Lessons

Paul Cuffe: Likely the wealthiest Black man in the early American republic, this mariner, merchant, and fervent abolitionist built the first Back-to-Africa movement with his own wealth.

Robert Smalls: Famous for his heroic seizure of the Confederate gunship *Planter* during the Civil War, Smalls escaped slavery and fought for freedom as a political leader during Reconstruction.

54th Massachusetts: Black American soldiers played a crucial role in the Civil War. Discover the true story of the all-Black regiment restored to public memory by the film *Glory* (1989).

Bass Reeves: Trailblazing lawman who became a legend in his own lifetime, Reeves was the first Black American to wear the star of the US Marshals. Throughout his incredible life and career, he opened up new opportunities for Black law enforcement officers after the Civil War.

Marcus Garvey: Prophetic and controversial Black liberation leader whose organization, the United Negro Improvement Association, flourished in America during and after World War I.

Standards & Learning Objectives

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

CIVICS

D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2.Civ.6.9-12. Critique relationships among governments, civil societies, and economic markets.

D2.Civ.8.9-12. Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.

D2.Civ.10.9-12. Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

GEOGRAPHY

D2.Geo.5.9-12. Evaluate how political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics of various places and regions.

D2.Geo.7.9-12. Analyze the reciprocal nature of how historical events and the spatial diffusion of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices have influenced migration patterns and the distribution of human population.

D2.Geo.8.9-12. Evaluate the impact of economic activities and political decisions on spatial patterns within and among urban, suburban, and rural regions.

HISTORY

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.



D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

D2.His.15.9-12. Distinguish between long-term causes and triggering events in developing a historical argument.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

ELA

D4.1.9-12. Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

D4.2.9-12. Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose (e.g., cause and effect, chronological, procedural, technical).

D4.6.9-12. Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.

D4.7.9-12. Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.

AP U.S. HISTORY

Theme 1: American and National Identity NAT

Theme 2: Work, Exchange and Technology (WXT)

Theme 4: Migration and Settlement (MIG)

Theme 5: Politics and Power PCE

Theme 7: American and Regional Culture ARC

Theme 8: Social Structures SOC



4.B Explain how a specific historical development or process is situated within a broader historical context.

KC-6.1.II.C

Labor and management battled over wages and working conditions, with workers organizing local and national unions and/or directly confronting business leaders.

KC-6.1.II.B.ii

The industrial workforce expanded and became more diverse through internal and international migration.

KC-6.2.I.B

Urban neighborhoods based on particular ethnicities, races, and classes provided new cultural opportunities for city dwellers.

KC-6.3.I.C

A number of artists and critics, including agrarians, utopians, socialists, and advocates of the Social Gospel, championed alternative visions for the economy and U.S. society.

KC-6.2

The migrations that accompanied industrialization transformed both urban and rural areas of the United States and caused dramatic social and cultural change.

KC-6.2.I

International and internal migration increased urban populations and fostered the growth of a new urban culture.

KC-7.1.I

The United States continued its transition from a rural, agricultural economy to an urban, industrial economy led by large companies.

KC-7.2.I.C

Official restrictions on freedom of speech grew during World War I, as increased anxiety about radicalism led to a Red Scare and attacks on labor activism and immigrant culture.

KC-7.2.II.C

In the Great Migration during and after World War I, African Americans escaping segregation, racial violence, and limited economic opportunity in the South moved to the North and West, where they found new opportunities but still encountered discrimination.

KC-7.2.I.B

Migration gave rise to new forms of art and literature that expressed ethnic and regional identities, such as the Harlem Renaissance movement.

KC-7.2.I.D

In the 1920s, cultural and political controversies emerged as Americans debated gender roles, modernism, science, religion, and issues related to race and immigration.

KC-7.3.II

World War I and its aftermath intensified ongoing debates about the nation's role in the world and how best to achieve national security and pursue American interests.

KC-7.3.III

U.S. participation in World War II transformed American society, while the victory of the United States and its allies over the Axis powers vaulted the U.S. into a position of global, political, and military leadership.

KC-7.3.III.C.ii

Military service provided opportunities for women and minorities to improve their socioeconomic positions for the war's duration, while also leading to debates over racial segregation.

KC-8.1

The United States responded to an uncertain and unstable postwar world by asserting and working to maintain a position of global leadership, with far-reaching domestic and international consequences.

KC-8.2

New movements for civil rights and liberal efforts to expand the role of government generated a range of political and cultural responses.

KC-8.2.I

Seeking to fulfill Reconstruction-era promises, civil rights activists and political leaders achieved some legal and political successes in ending segregation, although progress toward racial equality was slow.



AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION

- 4.A Develop a paragraph that includes a claim and evidence supporting the claim.
- 4.B Write a thesis statement that requires proof or defense and that may preview the structure.
- 4.C Qualify a claim using modifiers, counterarguments, or alternative perspectives
- 6.A Develop a line of reasoning and commentary that explains it throughout an argument.
- 6.B Use transitional elements to guide the reader through the line of reasoning of an argument.
- 6.C Use appropriate methods of development to advance an argument.
- 8.B Write sentences that clearly convey ideas and arguments.
- 8.C Use established conventions of grammar and mechanics to communicate clearly and effectively.