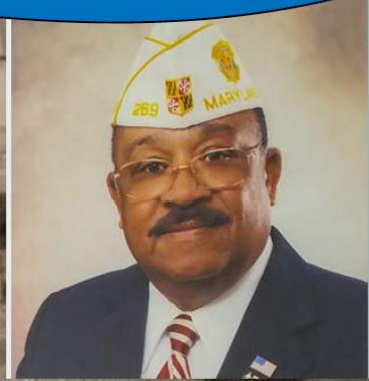


**THE AMERICAN LEGION ,DEPARTMENT OF MARYLAND
HONORING OUR VETERANS - BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

FEBRUARY 2020



The American Legion, Department of Maryland
Black History Month – Honoring our Historically Black Posts and Department Leaders

By: Russell W. Myers Jr
Department Adjutant
February 7, 2020

I was approached to consider presenting some historical context and information in remembrance of Black History Month in 2020. There is a deep history and record of service of the Posts and Veterans in Maryland, the Black communities, and at the Department level within The American Legion.

Maryland is unique in one respect: It was a state split over the issue of slavery during the Civil War, but at the same time, Baltimore in 1860 had the largest free Black population of any city in United States. This freedom allowed a robust community to grow in Baltimore after the Civil War and in the years leading up to World War I, and the creation of The American Legion. Nonetheless, the experiences at the time were characterized amidst a segregated existence for most Blacks in Maryland and much of the country.

With some cursory research and collecting of recollections of some Legion members, I am attempting to start what I hope grows into a continuation of the efforts of some of the Historically Black Post's efforts to highlight their history and service to The American Legion.

Let us start with the question I get most often. Why does the Department of Maryland have Historically Black Posts in Maryland? I know when I became active in the organization at the District level the existence of two Posts in some towns bothered me. The research and reading over the years have led me to different conclusions on the matter. The existence and continued service of these Posts goes back to the very beginning of the organization in the Department of Maryland. In 1919 the country was 23 years into the era of "separate but equal" ushered in by the Supreme Court case of Plessy v. Ferguson. Life, including social clubs and most churches were segregated at the time, and the last vestiges of official Jim Crow policies did not finally collapse until over 40-50 years later. While The American Legion from its conception allowed membership of women and minority Veterans, and discrimination was banned in its Constitution. However, like many other associations of the time as Posts formed some began to carry on the "separate but equal" doctrine common in that era. Among the Black Veterans the missions of The American Legion, the sense of comradeship, and the need for Veteran assistance in the communities where African-American Veterans were just as strong, and the close knit communities of Baltimore were perfect enclaves for Veterans continuing service. However, being denied membership in one Post didn't deter them as they formed Posts of their own. The founders of these Posts saw the need in their communities and they acted. Their actions sowed the seeds of a proud history that carries on until today.

The first Post founded by Black Veterans was named Walter Green Post #14. The Post took the name of a comrade that had died of influenza during World War I. This Post established on July 21, 1919 (see charter at end of article) is one of only 12 Posts within the Department of Maryland to hold a continuous charter for the entirety of The American Legion's existence. While few records for Post 14 are available for the research, a few members of Post 14 that worked for the Federal Government (mostly as Postmen) decided to form another Post limited to employees of the Government. This is how Federal Post #19 was formed.

Federal Post #19 received their temporary charter on March 22, 1930, making them the 3rd oldest currently operating Historically Black Post in Maryland. (*Corporal Herman Hughes Post #87 in Cambridge received their temporary charter on March 13, 1929*) Post 19 eventually removed the employment requirement from their eligibility. The Post has a great collection of history and the historical research done in support of the Posts property's landmark designation report is available online by [clicking here](#), and more information is available at the [Post website](#) as well. The highlighting of the Post's traditions and history is a story of veterans continuing their service to the community, State, and Nation. Please take the time to look over the web resources as there is no way to do full justice to the historical significance in this article. By highlighting a few of the Post's accomplishments and a few short excerpts from the history serve to show the early service of African-American Veterans in the Department of Maryland.

The Landmark Designation Report lays out many accomplishments. The report elaborates that although the Jim Crow era placed barriers and challenges to the members of Post 19 they served in membership roles in the larger state and national structure, continuously fighting for equal opportunities for African-American veterans both in the organization and in society at-large. The report details the leadership roles when it states,

*"In 1935, Clarence Tydings was elected to serve as one of eleven State delegates to the National American Legion Convention. **In 1940, Percy S. Smith was elected State vice-commander-at-large.** In 1944, John Stewart, commander of Federal Post No. 19, was elected to the State executive committee of the American Legion. They were involved in state and national conferences of the American Legion, and helped vote for important resolutions, such as the 1934 Federal Anti-lynching bill, and the 1935 Federal American Legion resolution disapproving the discrimination practiced against "colored ex-service men by white posts in several southern states"*

The Department, starting in the late 1930's, did include the veterans of the Historically Black Posts in leadership roles. Percy Smith's service as a Department Vice-Commander in 1940 is one example. While these early leaders' service and drive for inclusion is remarkable, it took 55 more years until the first African-American Veteran was elected as Department Commander. More on that later.

Another source of pride for Post #19 was the Blue Hat Drum and Bugle Corps founded in 1932 by Post 14 and Post 19. The Landmark Designation Report details this accomplishment,

"In 1932, the Blue Helmet Drum and Bugle Corps was organized by efforts of both the Federal Post No. 19 and Walter Green Post No. 14. This was the first black American Legion drum and bugle corps in the state. William Brady served as drum major. Brass marching bands played a significant role in African American culture in the early 20th century. As stated by William Pleasant "They were usually the only organized social vehicles that permitted the full participation of Black artists as both performers and as leader/composers."

"The Blue Helmet Drum and Bugle Corps was embraced by the City government as an excellent ambassador of the City. Over several years, the Corps received funding from the city to partially finance their attendance at annual nation American Legion conventions. The Blue Helmet Corps won a number of awards at state and national levels and participated in countless conventions, parades, and competitions. The Blue Helmet Drum and Bugle Corps was a tremendous source of pride for the neighborhood."

Reading the Landmark Designation Report and the Post history offers many more accomplishments and experiences from the Post's perspective, and it is recommended reading to understand fully the pride that exists within the Historically Black Posts in Baltimore, and the State of Maryland.

In July 1995, a man respected for his quiet graceful influence, and his steadfast ethics was elected as the first African-American Department Commander for the Department of Maryland. Robert M. Johnson, a Veteran and member of Randolph Furey Post #170 in Charles County was elected that July, and his achievement was no small accomplishment. Bob, as we all knew him, was a role model and rock within our Department. Melvin Smullen, the Department's 3rd African-American elected to be Department Commander said of Bob, *"Bob was a very supportive Legionnaire and never gave up his drive reach the top and persevere. I am a witness that he experienced some extreme racism within our department to become one of our successful commanders, despite the barriers he was confronted with. He held many positions throughout his tenure within this department and was successful in all. In addition, barriers were even removed to seek his nomination to National American Legion Vice-Commander. He was the first and only Black Legionnaire in the department that was elected to National Vice Commander in which he served with honor representing this department with distinction."* Bob served as the Department Chaplain near the end of his life, and served with his convictions and provided compassionate counsel to everyone in need. His legacy of breaking down the final barriers will live on forever.

In July 2002 Leroy Thornton of Northeastern Post 285 in the Baltimore District was elected as Department Commander. Leroy was the 2nd African-American elected to serve in the highest position within

the Department. Leroy also was elected as National Executive Committeeman and served a two-year term in that office. His long time leadership and tireless efforts in the City and throughout Maryland reflect great credit on himself and all of The American Legion.

There are many more personal stories, and Post histories, one could highlight in this article. My hope is to spark the efforts to save these memories for posterity and promote a celebration of a part of our history that is not as familiar as many other aspects. The elevation of these stories and history shows the proud traditions, and clearly answers the question of why the members would want to maintain their heritage. While many of these Historically Black Posts have integrated membership over the years their early segregated existence served also as a positive place for community organizing for Veteran needs in the community, civil rights and other issues, as well as offering a respite for Black Veterans from the racism which they faced in segregated society. Just as Black Churches served the needs of their members and communities, so these Posts served in a similar manner. Asking why they still exist ignores the proud traditions, and in many respects is not a fully informed frame of reference.

The Department of Maryland has benefitted from the strong advocacy of these leaders and Posts. They have served with distinction on our governing committees, and among the officer ranks for most of the organization's history. While racial barriers and bias clouded some progression and opportunity, the perseverance of these Veterans paved the way to a better, more inclusive organization today. When one looks around the Department Executive Committee meetings today they see a diverse group of Veterans that benefit from the history of many of our forbearers.

It is past time to make this a constant effort to promote all Veterans' contributions, and share the history, good and bad, in order to highlight the proud history of the African-American Veterans and the accomplishments shared with the Department of Maryland. The way ahead is lit brightly by their deeds and the inclusion of all Veterans is solid foundation for the future!

APPLICATION FOR POST OF AMERICAN LEGION

Provisions of Constitution Adopted at St. Louis, Missouri, May 8-10, 1919

ARTICLE II.
MEMBERSHIP.
All persons shall be eligible to become members who were in the military or naval service of the United States during the period between April 6, 1917, and November 11, 1918, and who were honorably discharged from the service of the United States during the World War period. No application can be considered unless properly executed by at least fifteen men. Applications must be made in triplicate, one original and two copies. All three will be forwarded to the State Chairman. The original application will be returned by indorsement to the local Post with the charter. One copy of application will be retained by State Headquarters, and the other by National Headquarters.

ARTICLE VI.
THE LOCAL POST.
The Local Post shall be formed into a minimum membership of fifteen. No Post shall be received into this organization until it shall have received a charter from the National Executive Committee. The National Executive Committee shall be formed by the National Executive Committee. The National Executive Committee shall have the same powers and authority as the National Executive Committee of the American Legion.

INSTRUCTIONS (Read carefully).—Each local group will designate a representative to sign the certificate at the foot of this application and to receive the charter when issued. No application can be considered unless properly executed by at least fifteen men. Applications must be made in triplicate, one original and two copies. All three will be forwarded to the State Chairman. The original application will be returned by indorsement to the local Post with the charter. One copy of application will be retained by State Headquarters, and the other by National Headquarters.

To: Mr. James A. Gatz, Jr.
State Chairman of the American Legion (State of Maryland)
United States between April 6, 1917, and November 11, 1918, and are hereby requested to issue a charter for the formation of a Post at Baltimore on the instance of William B. Bennett Post, State of Maryland No. 14 known as William B. Bennett Post, State of Maryland No. 14 with a minimum membership of fifteen. We hereby further agree to uphold the principles of THE AMERICAN LEGION and to comply with all rules and regulations prescribed by the State and National Organizations of the Legion.

NAMES	ADDRESSES
<u>John J. Bennett</u>	<u>5757 Fennell St.</u>
<u>Langdon Bennett</u>	<u>610 D. D. Street</u>
<u>James A. Bennett</u>	<u>1111 State Street</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>408 N. Calver St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>1011 Maryland St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>630 N. Goodland St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>774 Pennsylvania</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>108 N. Pointe St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>1302 N. Pointe St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>1100 Broad Hill Ave.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>112 Broad Hill Ave.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>935 McClellan St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>408 Broad Hill St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>959 Broad Hill St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>1319 N. Pointe St.</u>
<u>William B. Bennett</u>	<u>July 2, 1919</u>

I hereby certify to the accuracy and good faith of the above application. The charter when issued is to be mailed to me at the address below.

John J. Bennett
(Signature)

5757 Fennell St.
(Address)

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N. B.—This copy will be retained for review by the National Executive Committee.