Underneath North Carolina: The Buried Legacies of Puerto Rican War Workers

Senior Project

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By

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Abstract

In 1918, the U.S. Department of Labor hired 13,233 Puerto Ricans to work on war-related projects to fulfill the labor shortage caused by America's entry into World War I. Recruiters promised laborers a living wage, free housing accommodations, meals, and hospitable conditions during their contracted period. Between the months of September and November 1918, the federal government shipped 3,809 newly recruited laborers from Puerto Rico to North Carolina with the task of constructing the military base Camp Bragg. However, due to the lack of basic resources, the influenza epidemic, unequal access to medical services, racial discrimination, and poor government planning, many Puerto Ricans died with a short amount of time on American soil. Despite their U.S. citizenship and government-sponsored labor recruitment, Puerto Rican war workers experienced exploitative conditions that led to an innumerable number of deaths largely unexplored until now—a century later.
Underneath North Carolina: The Buried Legacies of Puerto Rican War Workers

In perfectly spaced-out rows and columns lies a bevy of life experience, consolidated into one place for eternity. Evidence of tender visitations accompany the most recent stones through the vibrancy of flower blossoms, but no lively hues occupy the desolate corner where the oldest inhabitants lie. Before thousands of white headstones overwhelmed the expansive, dry pasture of Fort Bragg Main Post Cemetery, a crew of Puerto Rican men marked its first interment with their deceased coworker in October 1918. Local resident Mrs. Ethel Mae Kivett Brown recalled witnessing the frequent burials of Puerto Ricans:

There was frequently now the sound of graves being dug near the front yard, where no cemetery had existed before. Sometimes they would come with the bodies late at night...They [the Puerto Rican men] were dying fast and being buried night and day. There was often more than one person and sometimes several, buried in a single grave. When they came bringing them at night, there were the low lantern lights, dimly outlining the figures of the grave diggers, the brushing and swishing sound of shovels against the sandy soil...There was never any ceremony at the burials.¹

The Puerto Ricans dug their makeshift cemetery into the former Kivett family’s property, which became one of the earliest developments of the Camp Bragg military installation, now known as Fort Bragg.

With their recently acquired American citizenship, the Puerto Rican men came to North Carolina under federal labor contracts with the assignment of constructing a new military base. The U.S. Department of Labor hired 13,233 Puerto Ricans to work on war-related projects to fulfill the labor shortage caused by America’s entry into World War I. Between the months of September and November

1918, the federal government shipped newly recruited Puerto Rican laborers to North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Many Puerto Ricans would return to their island burdened with their traumatic experiences as war workers while others did not have the opportunity of returning to their families at all. The short-term labor project ended as a mutual failure for both the federal government and Puerto Rican laborers, yet it reflected another shortcoming: the vulnerability of American citizenship.

**The Federal Call for Puerto Rican Labor**

Following the conclusion of the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898, the U.S. colonial rule of Puerto Rico began and initiated the island’s economic transformation. Policymakers legislated avenues to capitalize from Puerto Rico’s recent territorial status under the United States by marking the island as a source of exploitable raw materials and cheap labor. The U.S. Congress implemented the Organic Act of 1900, also known as the Foraker Act, which included provisions that effectively made the Puerto Rican economy dependent upon the U.S. trade network.²

Under Puerto Rico’s shifting economy, American corporations monopolized the island’s agricultural industries. The decline of the coffee industry gave rise to the tobacco and sugar industries as coffee growers abandoned their farms for higher wages on corporate plantations. However, sugar plantations on the coast could not accommodate all the jobless islanders looking for work. Puerto Ricans who secured

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² The Organic Act of 1900, or the Foraker Act, prohibited Puerto Rico from waging treaties with other nations and developing its own tariffs. The act also required all Puerto Rican exports and imports to be shipped through U.S. transports. Without external trade agreements or legal commerce transportation, the Foraker Act restricted Puerto Rico to trading exclusively with the United States. Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vásquez-Hernández, *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 6-7.
jobs with the sugar industry worked a six-month season under harsh conditions for low wages. Additionally, American corporations accumulated large concentrations of land from small farm owners, preventing islanders from gaining supplemental income from animal husbandry or small-scale farming during the off-season.\(^3\)

To make matters worse, natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis rendered labor opportunities on the island to be even more dismal. These catastrophic events devastated communities as they wrecked towns, uprooted families, and at worst, killed people.\(^4\) Families impacted desperately sought opportunities to rebuild their lives and communities. Hence, the bleak job market on the island in combination with the turmoil wrought by natural disasters produced an insurmountable demand for substantial jobs.

The Free Federation of Workers (La Federación Libre de Trabajadores), a Puerto Rican labor union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, promoted the migration of laborers to the United States with the impression that Puerto Rican workers would benefit from mainland labor opportunities protected by the federal government.\(^5\) In 1917, Santiago Iglesias, the leader of the Free Federation of Workers, collaborated with the U.S. Department of Labor and Puerto

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\(^3\) Whalen and Vásquez-Hernández, *Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, 16-17.


\(^5\) Prudencio Rivera Martínez, "Resolution No. 8 upon emigration, October 12, 1918," in *Sources for the Study of Puerto Rican Migration, 1879-1930*, ed. Center for Puerto Rican Studies, History Task Force, (New York: Research Foundation of the City University of New York, 1982), 119-120.
Rican Governor Arthur Yager to organize the sending of 30,000 Puerto Ricans to the United States with government-sponsored jobs. The union endorsed the proposed labor program under the condition Puerto Rican workers would be "fully and amply protected."  

The U.S. Department of Labor set the project in motion in October 1917 when they sent special representative F.C. Roberts to Puerto Rico. Roberts conducted a labor census on the island in which he marked an approximate 75,000 Puerto Ricans as available for work. By the next month, Roberts established his recruitment office in the federal building at San Juan and began marketing an attractive job opportunity to the locals.

On May 21, 1918, the U.S. Department of Labor publicized their intention to arrange the recruitment of over 10,000 Puerto Ricans for their work on war-related projects to fulfill the labor shortage caused by America's entry into World War I. The U.S. Department of Labor promised laborers a living wage of 35 cents an hour with overtime pay, an affordable meal plan costing 25 cents per meal, and free housing accommodations for the construction of military bases and war weapons. Recruiters advertised war work to skilled laborers and promised employment in their respective trade with the right to change their job assignment if it surpassed their

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skill range. They also assured climate and general living conditions would be similar to the island since Puerto Ricans would only be sent to job assignments in the southern region of the United States.8 A news article captured the islanders’ immediate support: “The response to Commissioner Roberts’ call for laborers in San Juan was all that could be expected, and then some. He asked for five hundred men, and in a twinkling he had a thousand...So great was the rush that on one day the special commissioner had to call out the San Juan police to protect his office.”9 Regardless of the possibly sensationalized account, the islanders certainly took interest in the call for labor. War worker positions represented an escape from the island’s dreary labor opportunities degraded by corrupt corporations and destructive natural disasters. Thousands of men applied at the San Juan recruitment office hoping to generate enough money in the United States to support their families in Puerto Rico.

During the next couple months, the U.S. Department of Labor worked to coordinate voyages between Puerto Rico and the U.S. work destinations in the name of aiding the war effort. Puerto Ricans continued to apply for war worker positions trusting the Free Federation of Workers’ endorsement of the program and the United States’ promise of protection.

The First Voyage to North Carolina and the Reception of Workers

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Launched in 1907, the *S.S. City of Savannah* measured 381.5 feet in length and 49 feet in width with a gross tonnage of about 5,900 tons. The steel steamship contained a passenger deck separate from its cargo deck capable of accommodating a maximum of 289 passengers. In June 1917, the U.S. Army chartered the passenger-cargo steamship from the Ocean Steamship Company to transport military cargo during World War I. The *S.S. City of Savannah* became the primary government transport for Puerto Rican war workers assigned to construct a new military base named Camp Bragg at Fayetteville, North Carolina.

On September 23, 1918, the first voyage left San Juan, Puerto Rico en route to North Carolina with approximately 1,800 war workers aboard the *S.S. City of Savannah*. Accustomed to the year-round tropical weather of their Caribbean homeland, many of the foreign passengers dressed too scantily for the biting coastal winds. The military officials in charge of the transport permitted the laborers to sail without proper attire knowing the cold weather conditions they would have to endure, yet the barefooted Puerto Rican laborers confidently embarked the ship in

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crowds trusting the officials onboard would care for them properly. A later report by Iglesias would further reveal the conditions aboard government ships transporting Puerto Rican war workers: "[O]n the transports part of the [military] personnel thereof treated them [the Puerto Rican laborers] like cattle, and the result was they fell into a miserable moral condition. They say they were treated as if they were beggars, if not worse." With enough passengers to surpass its carrying capacity six times over, the S.S. City of Savannah became the first indication of the tremendous disappointment awaiting laborers on the mainland. After nearly a week at sea, the steamship docked at Wilmington, North Carolina.

Many of the laborers disembarked the vessel to a foreign land with little knowledge of the language, except for Rafael F. Marchán who was no stranger to the mainland. Less than a year before Marchán's voyage aboard the passenger-cargo vessel, Marchán wrote his passport application letter in Chicago requesting a six-month visit to Puerto Rico before returning to his permanent residence in Illinois. He hoped the U.S. Department of War would have no objection to his proposed absence as he assured the local board an interference with the Selective Service Law would be unlikely considering his fourth-class status under draft law. After six rigorous years at Dixon Law College, Marchán anticipated returning to his native country with his newly acquired degree to practice law. Although he would be away

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from the mainland, he took the pledge of any respectable American citizen: "I always will be alert to answer the call of my nation."\textsuperscript{15}

On April 27, 1918, Marchán departed New York onboard the \textit{S.S. Carolina} to arrive at San Juan, Puerto Rico.\textsuperscript{16} At some point following his arrival home, his intended six-month stay and plan to practice law fell short. Perhaps in an effort to answer the call of his nation, Marchán applied for one of the war worker positions in the United States. Did patriotism fully embody the trained lawyer's intention to work a comparatively humble job in construction? Or did Marchán return to his island frustrated with the lack of law opportunities and resort to taking advantage of a free ride back to the mainland where his established professional network awaited him? Regardless of his intent, within five months Marchán was back in the United States amongst the first voyage of Puerto Rican war workers disembarking the \textit{S.S. City of Savannah} at Wilmington, North Carolina.

Upon arrival, the transports' military officials turned over Marchán and the other Puerto Rican war workers to representatives from James Stewart & Company, the corporation contracted by the federal government to oversee the construction of Camp Bragg.\textsuperscript{17} Three trains transported the approximate 1,800 war workers from Wilmington directly to the military establishment.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} "Rafael Marchan Statement," para. 2; Charles L. Heath, \textit{The Fort Bragg Main Post Cemetery: A History in Context, 1918-2010} (Ft Bragg Cultural Resources Management Program, 2010), 2.
The Puerto Rican laborers immediately encountered the discrepancies between the promises made by the U.S. Department of Labor and the reality of their reception at Camp Bragg. By October 24, 1918, Marchán produced an extensive deposition exposing the inhumane conditions at the base with accusations of inappropriate job assignments, unsafe housing accommodations, inadequate medical treatment, limited access to food, and forced labor. Marchán spoke on behalf of himself and the other 136 laborers who choose him as their representative to petition the Commissioner of Puerto Rico for a “proper remedy” for their plights.\(^1\)

Within his deposition, Marchán criticized James Stewart & Company for assigning Puerto Rican laborers to jobs without regard to their respective trades listed in their applications. In fact, the contractors expected the foreigners to be common laborers instead of skilled laborers. When laborers came prepared with tools to work in their trade, the contractors still instructed them to clear timber and brush while an exceptional few were assigned to hospitals and offices.\(^2\)

Additionally, Marchán claimed Puerto Rican laborers “were housed in improperly constructed barracks” since their arrival at the military base. Camp Bragg segregated facilities for black and white soldiers and construction workers; thus, Puerto Ricans also lived in segregated quarters. Due to the lack of base infrastructure, the free housing accommodations reserved for the Puerto Rican

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\(^1\) "Rafael Marchan Statement," para. 1-6; Mónica Alexandra Jiménez, "'American' State of Exception: Reimagining the Puerto Rican Colony and the Nationalist Enemy under United States Rule, 1900-1940," PhD diss., (University of Texas at Austin, 2015), 129.

workers took the forms of tents, local farmhouses, and dependency buildings.

Several Puerto Rican crews lived in local barns from the former Mont View Vineyard property originally owned by the Henry Jackson Kivett family. The laborers, who were accustomed to a climate that rarely dropped below seventy-five degrees, had to withstand cold weather without proper attire or insulated housing, which exacerbated their health concerns.

A major health concern Puerto Rican laborers could not escape was the influenza epidemic. The first recorded North Carolina case of influenza occurred a mere ten days before the arrival of the workers. The disease quickly spread throughout the state with high mortality rates across all communities. When infected, the illness caused chills, high fever, upset stomach, and pneumonia, which filled lungs with fluid commonly to the point of suffocation. Influenza spread through close contact, increasing rate of infection within congregated living facilities, such as Camp Bragg.

With little to no protection from the virus, the Puerto Rican workers at the base were amongst the earliest North Carolina populations to fall fatally ill from the virus. In October 1918, thirty-five Puerto Rican war workers died. For eight out of ten workers, influenza and pneumonia were the causes of death. Five of the laborers

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22 "Rafael Marchan Statement," para. 2; “Emigrants from Porto Rico,” Sources for the Study of Puerto Rican Migration, 132.
died from unknown causes. Marchán attributed many of their deaths not to the virus alone, but to the “utter lack of proper care and medical attention” at the hospital. The contagion of illnesses grew rampant as hospital staff passed along the same drinking glasses and other utensils to patients without disinfection. He also reported hospital staff gave all hospitalized war workers “white tablets” as “a sort of omnipresent cure-all” for ailments ranging from sore feet to pneumonia. Marchán recited two infamous cases of hospital abuse:

...there was a case of such apparent neglect and criminal negligence as to permit a man to die from a wound on his foot which was infected and aggravated by the first aid bandage which was put on it and never removed for about a week until he passed away; and that there was a notorious case of abuse of a sick man in the hospital who was ordered from his bed by the attending physician and when he would not do it as quickly as ordered, the said attending physician took him by the arm and violently threw him out of bed upon the floor.

Sick Puerto Rican laborers often evaded hospital visits fearing cruel hospital treatment. Some ill men were threatened to go to work or get locked up “under the pretext of their being lazy.”

Marchán identified the inaccessibility of food as another evident injustice experienced by Puerto Rican laborers. To receive meal tickets, laborers had to sign mess books at an office that was far from where some men worked. The man operating the office often barred Puerto Rican workers from collecting meal tickets after their workday so he could close the office and leave work earlier. After the

24 In October 1918, thirty-five Puerto Rican war workers died from the following causes: twenty-eight from influenza and pneumonia, five from unknown causes, one from asthma, and one from blood poisoning. These figures are based on the cause of death listed on their death certificates, however about three laborers had grave markers without accompanying death certificates. North Carolina, U.S., Death Certificates, 1909-1976, images 231-233, 236-239, 241-247, 249-267, Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2007, accessed April 2022.

25 "Rafael Marchan Statement," para. 3.
latter scenario occurred one day, a group of workers went to another food hall instead of the regular mess hall but were threatened at gunpoint to accept inferior food. The laborers who resisted the forceful imposition were “violently pushed about and abused,” resulting with one of the men getting seriously injured. At the regular mess halls, Puerto Rican construction workers could only receive one type of meal while those who worked in offices could have anything they wanted for the same price.  

Hence, the war workers did not have sufficient or equal access to food, which contributed to their diminished condition of health.

Marchán also spoke to the general mistreatment of foreign workers at Camp Bragg, including discriminatory acts of violence:

...even the Fire Chief, who evidently is a regular bully at the Camp has gone so far outside the scope of his authority at different occasions that the men under him are wont to look upon him as the terror of the place, the bulldog of the Camp, who has no hesitation in striking men with his fist or brandish his revolver in their faces...

In another case, Marchán recounted:

...a poor old man...was inhumanely knocked down and made to cry by one of these fiendish individuals who afterwards, finding him asleep near the same spot where he was knocked down, set fire to the dried leaves and twigs around his helpless form in order to frighten the old man, making him believe that he was to be burned alive.

Violent confrontations as such provoked some of the foreign workers to announce their intention of quitting their job at Camp Bragg to which military officials forcefully denied their resignation, keeping those laborers in “a state of involuntary servitude.”

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27 "Rafael Marchan Statement," para. 5.
Marchán’s deposition reflects the disillusionment Puerto Rican war workers experienced towards the United States. The Puerto Ricans’ recent status as American citizens convinced them to believe the principles of liberty and equality would be upheld in the mainland. Back in Puerto Rico, the men trusted a labor opportunity sponsored by the United States would protect them from the inhumane conditions rampant on the island, yet it did not. Instead, the discrimination and appalling conditions at Camp Bragg brought about a loss of hope in the American ideals that they believed would become a reality.

The End of World War I and the Mess that Ensued

The contract labor program officially became a failure when World War I ended with the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, canceling all war work projects in less than two months since they began. To their greatest inconvenience, the second voyage of Puerto Rican war workers aboard the S.S. City of Savannah arrived at the Wilmington, North Carolina port on the following day. Upon arrival, a military official from the Capitol ordered the captain of the transport with 2,009 Puerto Rican laborers to return to Puerto Rico.28 However, the harshness of the second voyage yielded passengers who were too sick to return.

Three days before the arrival of the ship, a sea storm overwhelmed the passengers. Many of the war workers contracted colds, pneumonia, and three Puerto Rican laborers died. As the medical officer in charge of the S.S. City of

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Savannah, Lieutenant Black ordered the transport to drop off sick passengers at a nearby military post for medical treatment. He also asked the National Special Aid Society of Wilmington women to provide 100 quarts of soup, 12 tin buckets, 50 cups, and 200 mustard plasters (a home remedy for colds). By six in the morning on November 14, 1918, the local aid society delivered supplies to the vessel. By noon, the S.S. City of Savannah left approximately 200 laborers at Fort Caswell’s hospital.29

Before leaving with the rest of the passengers to Puerto Rico, the commander of the transport bought about 2,000 new army blankets for the return trip. Colonel Chase, the commander of Fort Caswell, reported the following to the Surgeon General of the Army after an inspection of the ship:

I regret to state that these natives were put aboard this transport (at Porto Rico), many of them barefooted and all of them insufficiently clad in scanty garments and without a single blanket or a single mattress, or any reasonable preparation made for their protection on the journey to the United States. The conditions on board this vessel when I inspected it on its arrival at Southport (post office for Fort Caswell) from Wilmington, N.C., could not have been worse.30

In a letter written to Colonel Chase on November 15, 1918, an unknown author thanked the commander for helping the "unfortunate Porto Ricans" who were brought to Wilmington "under conditions disgraceful to our Government." The author proceeded to criticize the authorities responsible for the circumstances Puerto Ricans endured on the S.S. City of Savannah:

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29 "Porto Ricans are Pneumonia Victims. Many Have Become Ill During Past Few Days. Cause is Attributed to Sudden Change in Temperature—Fifty Will Be Removed to the Marine Hospital Today," The Wilmington Morning Star, November 14, 1918, page 5; "Porto Ricans Off For Island Homes. Decided Not to Open Marine Hospital. Pneumonia Victims on Board the City of Savannah Will be Cared For at Fort Caswell While Ship is Being Coaled," The Wilmington Morning Star, November 15, 1918, page 5; "Busy Wednesday," The Wilmington Morning Star, November 17, 1918, page 12.
...they were packed like cattle upon a transport disgracefully unsanitary, many insufficiently clad, many barefooted, many sick, without proper food for which those in authority should be held strictly accountable.31

As a result, Puerto Ricans and mainland citizens alike recognized the shortcomings of the federal government's accommodations for the foreign workers.

Not long after the departure of the S.S. City of Savannah, the sick Puerto Rican men at Fort Caswell began to die. Within a two-week period, 31 Puerto Rican laborers suffered from influenza-related deaths at the post hospital. Fort Caswell military officials in collaboration with the local Red Cross chapter hosted five military funerals for the workers. On the day of each funeral, a Fort Caswell military authority transported the bodies of Puerto Rican laborers aboard a steamship to Wilmington. At the port, the military officials met with several committees of the local Red Cross chapter to escort the bodies to the Wilmington National Cemetery.

At the cemetery, Reverend C. Dennen conducted the funeral service, reading a solemn requiem. The military band played the hymns "Onward, Christian Soldiers," "Rock of Ages," "Nearer My God to Thee," and the Spanish national anthem. The Red Cross contributed wreaths and floral arrangements for each casket. A Red Cross photographer took pictures of the flower-laden graves intended for the families of the Puerto Ricans. Along with the image, they composed a personal letter describing each death and the funeral proceeding.32

31 Letter to Colonel Chase on November 15, 1918, Box 9, Folder 30, North Carolina County War Records, WWI 2, WWI Papers, Military Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.
32 Although the military personnel and special aid organizations had good intentions playing the Spanish national anthem at the Puerto Ricans' funerals, the irony of their choice reflects their minimal knowledge of Puerto Rican history. Although Puerto Ricans spoke Spanish, they were no longer under the colonial rule of Spain, thus making the song largely inappropriate for the occasion. "Military Funeral For Porto Ricans. Ten Islanders Interred in the National Cemetery. Bodies Accompanied From Fort Caswell by Military Escort--Red Cross Directs Funeral Arrangements--
families in Puerto Rico received these items is uncertain; however, the military personnel and Red Cross committees present at the funerals took extra measures to honor the sacrifices of the Puerto Rican war workers who died at Fort Caswell.

Simultaneously, hundreds of Puerto Rican laborers remained displaced throughout North Carolina (Fayetteville, Wilmington, and Fort Caswell) awaiting transportation back to their homes on the island. By late December 1918, the War department arranged the final voyage back to Puerto Rico. On December 24, the S.S. City of Savannah docked at Fort Caswell to pick up approximately 101 Puerto Rican laborers initially sent to the fort hospital. Three days later, twelve railroad cars carried Puerto Rican laborers from Fayetteville to the Wilmington port to board the ship that would return to Puerto Rico.33 Aboard the S.S. City of Savannah for the last time, the Puerto Rican workers would soon return to their island with changed perceptions about their nation than when they first arrived.

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Underneath America

Underneath the American story are forgotten legacies waiting to be excavated—the narratives of the Puerto Rican war workers are amongst them. Between September and November 1918, a total of 13,233 Puerto Rican laborers traveled to the Southeastern region of the United States for war-related labor projects. Many Puerto Ricans died within a short amount of time on American soil due to the lack of basic resources, the influenza epidemic, unequal access to medical services, racial discrimination, and poor government planning.

The federal labor program that employed Puerto Rican war workers was a mutual failure. Puerto Rican laborers came to the South to contribute to the war effort and provide for their families in Puerto Rico, yet they did not receive the full payment or accommodations guaranteed. The federal government did not benefit from the labor of Puerto Ricans considering their constant state of illness and the unexpected cancellation of all projects less than two months after their initiation. Instead, the results of the labor program reflect the fragility of American citizenship when posed against the exploitative colonial desires of the United States empire. The U.S. Department of Labor resorted to Puerto Ricans as expendable war workers and this mentality emanated throughout their institutional hierarchy—from the Commissioner of Labor to the military personnel on the S.S. City of Savannah. Puerto Ricans struggled to maintain their dignity under the U.S. capitalistic system that valued their labor over their lives.

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34 "Donde se encuentran los trabajadores portorriqueños que han ido a los EE.UU," Sources for the Study of Puerto Rican Migration, 127-128.
35 "Emigrants from Porto Rico," Sources for the Study of Puerto Rican Migration, 133.
The historical erasure of Puerto Rican war workers at Camp Bragg contributes to the trauma of silence experienced by Puerto Rican communities today. As Puerto Ricans continue to navigate an ambiguous status bordering “full American citizen” and “alien,” institutional racism represses histories that reveal the deeply-rooted sacrifices made by Puerto Ricans since their relationship with the United States began. For the Puerto Rican war workers, American citizenship fell short of the ideals they hoped to uphold as they aided the war effort. Since 1917, the Jones Act granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans. Yet despite their citizenship and government-sponsored labor recruitment, Puerto Rican war workers experienced exploitative conditions that led to an innumerable number of deaths largely unexplored until now—a century later. At Camp Bragg, Puerto Rican laborers interred their deceased coworkers at night into a makeshift cemetery without ceremony. In Picron, Arkansas, one gravestone marks the mass burial of 176 Puerto Rican war workers. What should citizenship have meant for the discreetly buried men who died working for their country’s unfulfilled promises?

There are no official figures reporting the number of laborers who died. I have located 355 marked and unmarked graves of Puerto Rican war workers across five states so far. In North Carolina, there are 42 graves of Puerto Rican war workers at Fort Bragg’s Main Post Cemetery and 31 graves of Puerto Rican war workers at

36 The 31 Puerto Rican men who were buried at the Wilmington National Cemetery with military honors received the sympathy of local special aid organizations and military personnel. However, most accounts of Puerto Rican burials do not indicate any funeral proceedings occurred. Harvell, Employee U.S.A.,18; Evin Demirel, "Arkansas mystery: Marker dedicated to Puerto Rican immigrants sparks a historical rediscovery," Arkansas Democrat Gazette, July 10, 2012, https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2012/jul/10/arkansas-mystery/.
the Wilmington National Cemetery—a total of 73 identified graves. Neither of the cemeteries contextualize the headstones of the laborers with a monument or memorial. Nor has a formal archaeological investigation been conducted over the areas Puerto Ricans occupied at Fort Bragg.

The Main Post Cemetery originated with Puerto Rican laborers burying their coworkers into land nearby the barn they lived in for convenience. There were at least two other barns on the Mont View Vineyard property where Puerto Ricans may have also lived within and created additional makeshift cemeteries. If Puerto Ricans were housed within the barn closest to the Kivett home, Mrs. Ethel Mae Kivett Brown’s statement about hearing “the sound of graves being dug near the front yard” could be referring to a makeshift cemetery closer to the home as opposed to that at the site of the current Main Post Cemetery. The possibility of uncovered cemeteries at Fort Bragg has not been explored, but based on the decentralized housing locations for Puerto Ricans and their urgent need to bury the dead without an established cemetery for laborers, it is likely separated labor crews

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38 In 2001, the Fort Bragg Cultural Resources Management Program conducted an informal archeological investigation of the Kivett family property, which eventually became Camp Bragg. According to the archeological report, the site would “likely yield historically significant archeological data when formally surveyed and/or tested;” however, a formal investigation has not been conducted due to the program’s lack of funding. North Carolina Archaeological Site Form VI, September 22, 2005, Fort Bragg Cultural Resources Management Program, 1-4.

39 Harvell, Employee U.S.A., 18; 1919 Camp Bragg topographic map showing the Mont View Vineyard property and suspected locations of various landscape features based on archeological evidence and elements described in family papers and photographs, Dolores W. S. Harvell Collection, Fort Bragg Cultural Resources Management Program.
simultaneously created makeshift cemeteries near their living facilities at Camp Bragg. Further archeological investigation would be required to confirm or deny the existence of additional cemeteries.

Before this essay, no comprehensive narrative of the Puerto Rican war workers at North Carolina existed. Currently, no comprehensive narrative of the Puerto Rican war workers at the other four states exists. Therefore, their stories remain largely untold. I intend to continue excavating the legacies of Puerto Rican war workers buried throughout the Southeastern region of the United States. By locating their graves and uncovering their experiences, I hope to reclaim their memory for descendants and preserve the value of human life.
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