



INEZ HOLMES, NURSE AND VETERAN

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Circulating Now welcomes guest bloggers Kiana Wilkerson, Katherine Randall, PhD, and E. Thomas Ewing, PhD to share their research on World War II veteran and nurse Inez Holmes, who trained at the Piedmont Tuberculosis Sanatorium for the treatment of African American patients in Virginia. Learn more about their History of Catawba and Piedmont Tuberculosis Sanatoria project and explore source materials on the [project website](#).

A photograph of 2nd Lt. Inez E. Holmes, dated November 29, 1943, depicts a young woman in uniform, smiling, at her desk at the 286th Station Hospital in the South Pacific. This [photograph](#), available in the National Library of Medicine's Digital Collections, captures a moment in the life of one person as well as representing broader themes in the history of army medicine in the second world war, the role of African American nurses, and the impact of the Piedmont Tuberculosis Nurse Training Program.



SWPA-SC-43-11996

Nov. 29, 1943.

2ND LT. INEZ E. HOLMES, ONE OF 15 COLORED
NURSES RECENTLY ARRIVED IN AUSTRALIA, AT
HER DESK IN (268TH STATION HOSPITAL.)

2nd Lt. Inez E. Holmes, Army Nurse, 1943

[National Library of Medicine #101443518](#)

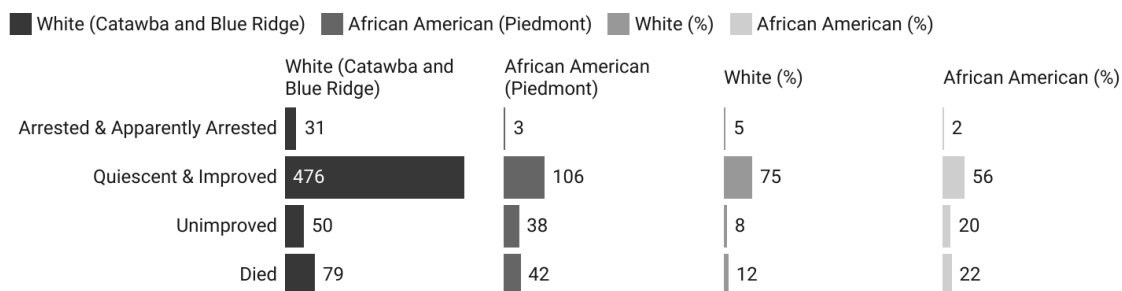
Prior to entering military service, Holmes pursued the educational opportunities available to an African American woman living in segregated

Virginia. Born in 1915 in Norfolk, Holmes was the daughter of William, a drayman, and Pattie, who raised five children. At age fifteen, Holmes worked as a seamstress in a factory, according to the 1930 Census. After completing high school, Holmes received advanced training at the Piedmont Tuberculosis Sanatorium in Burkeville, established by the Virginia Department of Health in 1918 for the treatment of African American patients.

The Piedmont Tuberculosis Sanatorium program in advanced tuberculosis nursing began in 1920 and trained more than three hundred and fifty women in the next four decades. Holmes and her classmates spent two years at Piedmont Sanatorium, receiving advanced training while also caring for patients. In a ceremony during their first year of training, Holmes and four others were “capped” by the senior nurses and “welcomed into the nursing field.” Piedmont nurses engaged in various kinds of social activities, including bridge parties, plays at the chapel, and a procession of carol singers on Christmas morning, as reported in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*.

The experiences of nurses enrolled in the Piedmont training program were shaped by both the severity of the disease and the conditions of a segregated health system. Although death rates from tuberculosis decreased from 1918 to 1935, the gap in death rates for the two races did not diminish. The Virginia Health Department [Annual Report](#) issued in June 1935 reported more deaths in Virginia from pulmonary tuberculosis among African Americans (946) than whites (817), even though African Americans made up only one-third of the total population.

Patient Outcomes, 1935 Annual Report



The impact of a racially segregated society was evident in the outcomes reported in the Virginia Health Department Annual Report for patients discharged from three tuberculosis sanatoria. The proportion of discharged patients reported to have positive outcomes, including arrested and improved, was 80% for the white sanatoria, Catawba and Blue Ridge, compared to 58% for Piedmont. By contrast, the proportion of patients reporting no improvement (20%) or dying (22%) was twice as high for Piedmont, compared to the two white sanatoria.

During the year that ended in June 1935, Holmes' second year of training, Piedmont cared for 346 patients, with an average number of nearly 150 patients at a time. Piedmont reported 54 patient deaths from tuberculosis, an average of one death each week. By contrast, Catawba, a Virginia sanatorium founded in 1908 for white patients, recorded only 39 deaths while treating more than twice as many patients, a discrepancy that resulted in part from the higher proportion of admitted patients in moderately or far advanced condition (70% at Catawba and 80% at Piedmont).



At their graduation ceremony in May 1935, six women, including Holmes, received diplomas awarded by Dr. I. C. Riggins, Virginia's state health commissioner, and pins awarded by Dr. J. B. Woodson, medical director of Piedmont. Lawyer T. C. Walker, one of the most prominent leaders of Virginia's African American organizations, delivered the commencement address.



Inez Holmes,
1942

*Norfolk Journal
and Guide*

Holmes enlisted as an army nurse in May 1941, almost six months before the United States entered the war. Soon after Holmes enlisted, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* described her education at [Booker T Washington High School](#), Piedmont Sanatorium, [St. Philip School of Nursing](#), and New York University. At the time she entered military service, Holmes had worked at Seaview Hospital, Staten Island, New York, for four years, “making an outstanding record.” On May 9, 1942, an article in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, under the headline, “Modern Florence Nightingale,” described Holmes as the only African American nurse from Norfolk in the military and the first head nurse in a surgical ward for an African American division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

The 268th Station Hospital was the first African American medical unit deployed to the Pacific theater to care for wounded soldiers and sailors. An article published in several Black newspapers praised “a group of 15 of our nurses,” including Holmes, deployed to the South Pacific to treat casualties of the campaign. A [photograph](#) available from the US National Archives, which was first published in Black newspapers including the [Jackson Advocate](#) (December 11, 1943) listed Holmes among the nurses of the 268th Station

Hospital in Australia who “received their first batch of home mail at their station.”

The medical services provided by the 268th Station Hospital must be understood in terms of the broader history of African American veterans who served in the US military that perpetuated the segregation characteristic of the Jim Crow era. The 268th Station Hospital was a medical unit of African American physicians, nurses, and enlisted soldiers. Although these units were established to staff segregated facilities, in practice these units cared for the sick and wounded regardless of race. According to a report quoted in the [official history](#) of the Medical Department, “no case was found where a white patient objected to a colored nurse taking care of him.” (p. 322) The 268th Station Hospital operated in the Pacific theatre for two years, with assignments in New Guinea and then the Philippines.



Nurses in New Guinea, 1943

"A contingent of 15 nurses,...arrive in the southwest Pacific area, received their first batch of home mail at their station." 268th Station Hospital, Australia. Three of the nurses are Lts. Prudence L. Burns, Inez Holmes, and Birdie E. Brown

[Courtesy National Archives](#)

In both the sanatorium and the military, Holmes worked in a role defined by gender (nursing) and race (segregation). She was highly successful—she acquired advanced medical training and earned promotions. Piedmont Sanatorium and the 268th Station Hospital illustrated the potential for

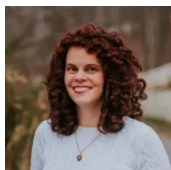
institutions to support African American medical professionals, even as both programs were constrained by unequal and oppressive systems of racial segregation.

During the war, African American physicians and nurses were enlisted in the [Double Victory Campaign](#), for Victory Abroad over fascism and Victory at Home for racial equality. This sentiment is clearly articulated in a Philadelphia Tribune headline (August 26, 1944) praising African American nurses (presumably from the 268th Station Hospital) who cared for wounded soldiers regardless of their race: “Jim Crow Kicked in Pants by Nurses in New Guinea.”

Holmes spent twenty years in the US Army, earning promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel during her period of service. After leaving the military, she worked as a nurse for the Staten Island Medical Center and the Camden Public Schools in New Jersey. Her husband, Edward Booker, a retired major in the US Army and a teacher at Philadelphia Public Schools, died in May 1995. Less than one month later, on June 22, 1995, Holmes died at Chesapeake General Hospital in Virginia. Holmes is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Chesapeake, with a grave marker commemorating her record of military service: “Inez Holmes Booker, Lt. Col., US Army, World War II, 1915–1995.”



Kiana Wilkerson is a 2018 graduate from the College of William and Mary, where she received a BA in History and Anthropology. She is currently pursuing a MA in History with a certificate in public history at Virginia Tech. Her research interests include 20th-century African American history and representation specifically in comic books.



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