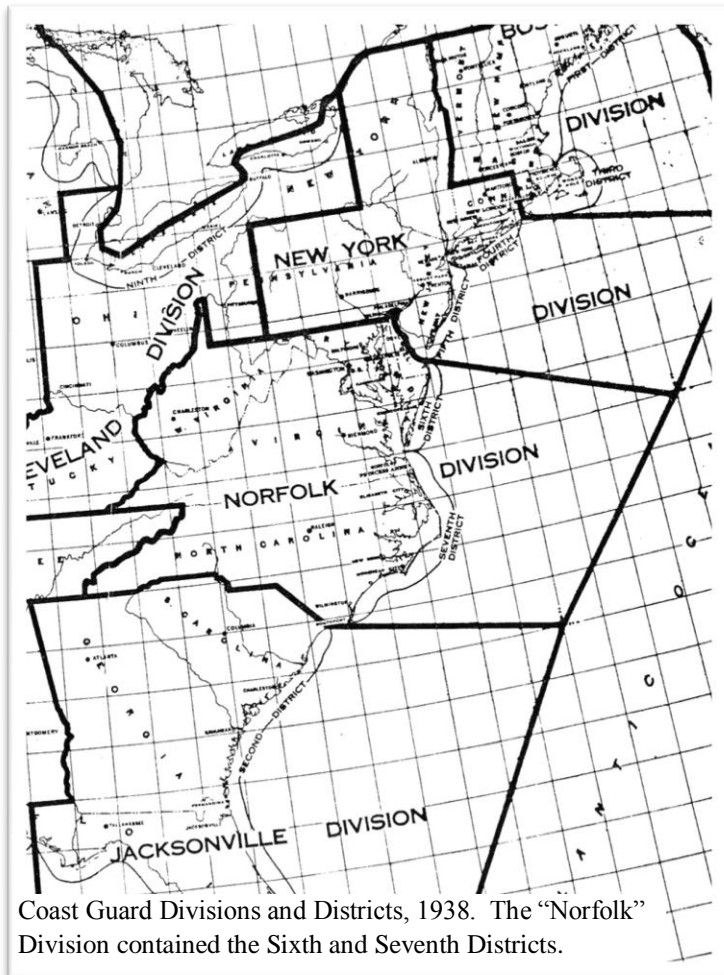


“A Blot Against Their Good Name.”

William R. Wells, II © 2010

On June 3, 1937, Roy Wilkins, Assistant Secretary of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), wrote NAACP President Joel Elias Spingarn about a letter from the editor of the Norfolk, Virginia, *Journal and Guide*.¹

Editors Plummer Bernard Young, Jr., and his brother Thomas White Young, informed Wilkins of supposed U. S. Coast Guard plans “to break tradition of 58 years” at “America’s only Negro Coast Guard Station.”² Wilkins outlined the problem that the “Coast Guard ordered a



white man to take charge of Pea Island Station by June 10th. The nine man station, including the “captain,” had but “5 Negro commanders” in all its existence and all had been held in “high regard” in the local community. The *Journal and Guide* editors emphasized their point by including a clipping from an August 1936 issue of the newspaper that “tells the thoroughly gripping story” of the station. For the Coast Guard to now place a white man in charge was unfair, a “danger to the morale of the crew,” was probably racially motivated and an affront to the past keepers of the station.

The *Journal and Guide* editors wrote in their letter claimed the demotion of “Captain [George E.] Pruden” was motivated by several causes and put in place not at the local district or division level but “worked from higher up.” They

added that Pruden had local support and a petition signed by the mayor of Manteo, N. C., the county sheriff, the clerk of court, professional and business men and others from “other classes” wanted to retain Pruden at the station.³

The Young’s letter added this was not the first attempt to replace the black officer-in-charge. The claimed, offering no sources, knowledge of two other attempts in 1915 and 1920,

but the recent attempt was from the closure of thirteen stations in the then 7th District. They did not mention that stations had been closed throughout the nation because of the changes in technology especially boats and communications.

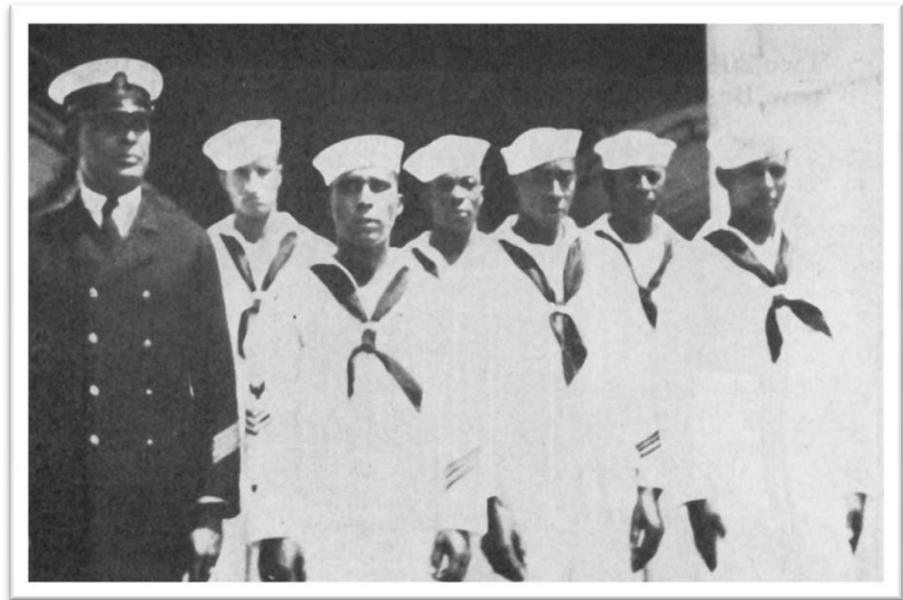
The man selected to take command was Boatswain(L) P . S. Midgett [the ‘L’ was a designation of

‘Lifesaving’ to differentiate between the seagoing boatswains] who had family ties by “blood and marriage” and wanted to “get back home.”⁴ If the transfer was not stopped there would be a “distinct racial loss” and when a white man takes charge he will eventually replace personnel and “the Negro will be entirely out of the Coast Guard shore foothold.”

At an unspecified point, Pruden like many other in the Depression Era Coast Guard, claimed the Young’s letter, lost the rate of Chief Boatswain’s Mate (L) under the Economy Act that forced reductions in civilian and military personnel, slashed pay, including that of Congress, removed promotions and cut Veteran’s Benefits by 50%. During the Depression, being reduced in grade was better than no job at all, as 1500 temporary Coast Guard warrant and chief petty officers found out. In the intervening years, Pruden passed the examination for Boatswain (L) and since the Coast Guard recently changed the rating requirement of station officers-in-charge to Boatswain (L) the *Journal and Guide* editors concluded was no reason why Pruden could not be given the grade and the command. Besides, the officer-in-charge of the near-by at Oregon Inlet was about to retire and if Midgett wanted to “get back home” he could be assigned there.

Pruden also pursued political assistance. He went to see his congressman, Lindsay C. Warren, who had been “a guest for fishing etc. at the station many times.” With the stage set, P. Bernard Young prepared to begin a newspaper campaign against the Coast Guard’s decision to replace Pruden. It was his duty as an editor. In 1944, he established his “Credo for the Negro Press,” his code of personal and professional ideals,

“I shall be a Crusader. I shall be an Advocate. I shall be heard. I shall be a Mirror and a Record.”⁵



"The only all-colored surf station crew in the U.S. Coast Guard. Reading left to right, they are: Chief Boatswain's Mate George E. Pruden, in charge; Cleon C. Tillett, B.M.1c.; Maxie M. Berry, Lonnie C. Gary [sic; Gray], Norphlet P. Meekins, John A. Mackey and Maloyd L. Scarborough." Official Coast Guard Photo published in the *U. S. Coast Guard Magazine*, Volume 2, No. 2, December, 1928.

In the meantime, a petition to keep Pruden at the station circulated Manteo, N. C., and thirty-five people signed in approval. The petition cited the officers of the station have been, “without except(sic) men of a high type” and the station for 50 years has been a credit to the “Negro race.” Any removal would be “a blot against their good name, and a discouragement of their efforts to do something for racial betterment.” There was also no small perception of racism on the part of the Coast Guard. Mr. F. C. Cooke of Elizabeth City, N. C., wrote NAACP Secretary Walter White protesting Pruden’s removal. Cooke noted that Pruden’s replacement “is a Southern man. I am of the opinion that that(sic) [he] would not work so well with an all colored crew.”⁶

The fires were fueled by the *Journal and Guide* that had a reputation of being the best written, edited and only moderately militant in its content compared to other like newspapers. It was also very well circulated with a national readership.

On June 3, 1937, Spingarn, sent letters to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau and received a reply on June 7th.

Morgenthau understanding the political ramifications, opened his letter with the pride the Coast Guard held for the men and the work done at Pea Island Station in the past, but, “Unfortunately, Pruden has not measured up to his responsibilities to the same degree as his predecessors” and there was no “colored man” with the training and skills to take charge. This was why Midgett was assigned. Morgenthau noted the assignment was temporary “probably for a year” until “one of the colored surfmen is found qualified” then added there were four “very good men” and one of these would probably take command.⁷



Pea Island Station circa 1942. U. S. Coast Guard Photo. It is easy to imagine the two “tough” women sitting in the two chairs on the porch.

The issue was discipline at the station. Although gave no details or how long the reports of misconduct and a lack of discipline had reached Coast Guard Headquarters, he did state that an investigation had been undertaken. The Coast Guard sent an unnamed inspector, incognito, to the Pea Island station and he spent two days, May 15-16, recording his observations. The

inspector reported the condition of the station as he approached, “the front porch was littered with miscellaneous fishing gear; clothing, and three empty cartons, marked ‘Balentine’s Scotch Whisky’”. In addition, there were also two “very tough women” sitting in chairs on the front porch. Within minutes of his arrival, the inspector noted that four civilians, said to be from New York, returned from the station’s boat landing in the station’s truck. The men claimed they had been there since the previous Wednesday [May 12] and the inspector observed these men had their respective suitcases under their beds in the station’s quarters. The watch stander that day, Surfman John A. Mackey, had one of those bottles of “Balentine scotch, three quarters full, on the log desk.”

About 1:30 p. m. on May 15th all the “guests” left the station in a surfman’s car. In departing they presented Pruden with a “package” of Balentine’s. With beds now empty, Pruden turned to the inspector and asked he wanted to stay the night. Pruden stated he had no clean linens, but if a bed without was satisfactory one was available. The entire lodging system was something of an honor system with no set prices.

Saturday, the next day, the inspector continued his observations. There was little activity at the station and the two women had “disappeared.” On Saturday afternoon, a Mr. Levin and J. Howard Schuster arrived from the Associate Engineer’s Office in Elizabeth City, N. C., and stayed the night. By late that evening or in the next morning a station wagon with four men and a Studebaker with two men arrived. The inspector in Morgenthau’s letter did not note if clean linens were available for this group. However, the latter six men had breakfast the next morning and left the station. Levin and Schuster also had breakfast and left after taking five gallons of gasoline from the station’s storage tank.

The inspector noted he was asked “who I was” but had no reason to reveal his identity did not say and the station crew did not press the issue. The report mentioned the station was being “operated as wide open fishing lodge for the convenience of anyone who desires accommodation.”

The most discouraging observation there were no Coast Guard duties being performed. No patrols, no lookout, and the time clock used on patrol was walked out to the beach were the turn key hung from a pole in the sand. The station logs were falsified or in Coast Guard jargon, “gundecked.”

Pruden was also observed. His record showed him in poor health, he had 21 years of service, a record of bad debts and his restoration to Chief Boatswain’s Mate (L) was vigorously opposed by Captain William J. Wheeler, USCG.

It was not a appropriate image of a station with such an outstanding record of service. Morgenthau repeated in his letter to allay any further criticism there was no “colored man” qualified to yet take over the officer-in-charge position.

Roy Wilkins sent P. Bernard Young a copy of Morgenthau's letter for comment but emphasized the letter was not for publication. Wilkins sought Young's help in reaching some solution so their "objectives" of putting a "colored man" in charge may be maintained. Young's opinion coincided with Wilkins' that there was little they could do. Young wrote he had not been aware of the charges against Pruden. He conceded, "We cannot, therefore, in good graces fight too strongly the case of an individual who has permitted complaints to arise regarding his work." They would have to accept the temporary placement of a "white man" with the promise of Morgenthau to assign a "colored man" to be the officer-in-charge. With this Boatswain (L) P. S. Midgett (L) became the first Coast Guard officer to command an all black unit and Pruden became the first black officer-in-charge relieved of command.

On June 25, 1937, the NAACP formerly protested placing a white officer-in-charge at Pea Island Station. This was to prevent more protest. They did recognize that "Captain George F(sic) Pruden was retired for "health and other reasons" and agreed that as soon as possible a black man would assume command. The incident ended as quickly as it had begun. Pea Island station existed for another decade but it too ended as had others with the advent of newer technologies and racial integration in the Coast Guard during World War II. According to *The Crisis* by the end of March 1944 some 4,000 blacks serviced in the Coast Guard with about 1,000 making the ranks of commissioned, warrant and petty officer.

The pronounced factor of this incident was the leadership and thought put into the reactions by the U. S. Coast Guard and the NAACP. The Coast Guard conducted a fair investigation before relieving the officer-in-charge and the NAACP did its duty to seek out answers before making the incident into what could have been an embarrassing situation for both organizations.

Nevertheless, to the present, the 19th century heroics of Pea Island station stand alone as the model for all time, but that was one event in a long history. The heroics of any station are told in honorable daily performance so to not blot the names of the men serving there or those of the past.

¹ NAACP Administration File. Discrimination. Pea Island, 1937. Microfilm edition Part 10 Reel 7. Frame 0265. Peonage, Labor, and the New Deal, 1913 -1939. (Hereafter Pea Island) Letter from Roy Wilkins to J. E. Spingarn June 3, 1937.

² Pea Island. Frame 0269. Peonage. Letter from Thomas W. Young and E. Bernard Young, June 3, 1937.

³ Pea Island Frame 0278. Peonage. Undated petition from citizens of Manteo, N. C., in support of George E. Pruden.

⁴ Pea Island. Frame 0267. Peonage. Copy of letter from the T. G. Crapster, Chief Personnel Officer, U. S. Coast Guard to Boatswain Midgett at Fire Island, N. Y., dated May 28, 1937.

⁵ *The Crisis*, August 1944, p. 271.

⁶ Pea Island. Frame 0282. Peonage. Letter from F. C. Cooke, The Pasquotank Better Health Organization to Walter White, June 4, 1937.

⁷ Pea Island. Frame 0273. Peonage. Henry Morgenthau, Treasury Department to J. E. Spingarn, NAACP, New York City, NY. June 7, 1937.