

CONTRIBUTION TRACK

A. Philip Randolph & the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

A Two Americas Companion Document

ERA:	ERA V — World Wars, Migration & Segregation
YEAR:	1925
TRACK:	Contribution
LENS:	Secular & Political
250 BADGE:	Yes — event postdates 1776

*"The Brotherhood was built on the idea that Black men
deserved what every worker deserved: dignity and a fair wage."*

— A. Philip Randolph

A. Philip Randolph & the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (1925)

ERA V

CONTRIBUTION

SECULAR & POLITICAL

250 BADGE

In 1925, A. Philip Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters — the first Black-led labor union to win a contract with a major American corporation. The Pullman Company signed twelve years later. What Randolph built was not just a union: it was the organizational backbone of the civil rights movement, the distribution network for the Black press, and the strategic infrastructure that made the 1963 March on Washington possible.

THE MOST DANGEROUS BLACK MAN IN AMERICA

The Bureau of Investigation called Asa Philip Randolph the most dangerous Black man in America. His offense was editing *The Messenger* — a socialist Black newspaper named in J. Edgar Hoover's 1919 radicalism report — and telling Black workers the truth: that they were being exploited, that they deserved better, and that organized labor was the mechanism for getting it. In 1925, Randolph turned his attention to the Pullman porters — the largest single employer of Black men in the United States. The Pullman Company had employed Black men as sleeping car porters since 1867, calculating that formerly enslaved men would perform domestic service with deference and without complaint. They were paid poverty wages, required to tip-share, forbidden to organize, and called 'George' by every white passenger regardless of their name — a reference to George Pullman, as if the men were his property. Randolph looked at 20,000 such men and saw an army.

TWELVE YEARS AND A CONTRACT

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was founded on August 25, 1925, in Harlem. The Pullman Company fought back with every tool available to a corporation that earned more than the GDP of several states: spies, firings, blacklists, company unions, and the quiet cooperation of white labor federations who refused to seat Black workers. Randolph's organizers were fired. His members lost wages and housing. The fight lasted twelve years. On August 25, 1937 — exactly twelve years after the Brotherhood's founding — the Pullman Company signed the first contract ever negotiated between a major American corporation and a Black labor union. The porters won a two-million-dollar wage increase, a reduction in working hours from 400 hours per month to 240, and official recognition of their union. What that contract represented went far beyond the Pullman railcar: it was proof that organized Black political and economic power could force institutional concessions from even the most entrenched American corporation.

THE BACKBONE OF THE MOVEMENT

The Brotherhood's significance to the civil rights movement is structural, not metaphorical. The porters traveled the entire rail network of the United States and carried Black newspapers — the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Carolina Times* — into the Jim Crow South where those papers could not be openly distributed. They brought information, organizing strategies, and northern political energy into communities that had no other conduit. Randolph used the Brotherhood's credibility to build the March on Washington Movement in 1941, threatening a mass demonstration of 100,000 Black people in the capital unless President Franklin D. Roosevelt desegregated the defense industry. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802. No march was necessary. Twenty-two years later, Randolph organized the actual March on Washington — the one where Dr. King spoke — and it was the porters' organizational infrastructure, their networks, and their decades of discipline that made that march logistically possible. The Brotherhood did not just win a contract. It built the architecture of Black political mobilization for the next forty years.

Location / Connection	Detail
Fayetteville / Atlantic Coast Line Depot	The ACL ran major sleeping car routes through NC. Fayetteville's depot was a crew-change node where Brotherhood members rotated, newspapers changed hands, and organizing intelligence moved across the state.
Seaboard Air Line Railroad (NC)	Second major NC rail corridor employing Black porters. Routes connected Raleigh, Durham, and eastern NC communities to the national Brotherhood network.
Carolina Times (Durham, est. 1921)	Founded by Louis Austin. The Brotherhood porter network was the primary distribution channel for the Carolina Times into Cumberland County and surrounding rural communities where the paper could not be openly sold.
NC NAACP Chapters	The 1937 contract victory energized NAACP organizing in NC. Fayetteville-area chapters grew in membership through the late 1930s and 1940s, drawing from the same networks the Brotherhood sustained.
Executive Order 8802 (1941)	Randolph's March on Washington threat forced Roosevelt to desegregate the defense industry. Fort Bragg (Fayetteville) was a major defense installation — NC Black workers in defense plants directly benefited from EO 8802.

BROTHERHOOD TIMELINE

Year	Event
1919	Red Summer. Hoover names Randolph's Messenger 'most dangerous Negro publication.' Randolph accelerates labor organizing.
1925	Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters founded, August 25, Harlem. 20,000 porters targeted.
1926–1936	Twelve years of Pullman resistance: firings, blacklists, company unions, AFL exclusion. Brotherhood survives.
1937	Contract signed. \$2M wage increase. Hours reduced from 400 to 240/month. First Black-led union contract with a major U.S. corporation.
1941	March on Washington Movement. Randolph threatens 100,000-person march. FDR signs Executive Order 8802 — desegregates defense industry.
1963	Randolph organizes the March on Washington. Porter networks provide organizational infrastructure. Dr. King speaks.

CHICAGO-STYLE CITATIONS

[1] Randolph, A. Philip. 'The Case of the Pullman Porter.' *The Messenger* 7, no. 9 (September 1925): 296–298. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

TYPE: Primary Source · Schomburg Center

[2] Brazeal, Brailsford R. *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: Its Origin and Development*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[3] Santino, Jack. *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[4] Perata, David D. *Those Pullman Blues: An Oral History of the African American Railroad Attendant*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[5] Executive Order 8802, 'Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry,' June 25, 1941. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/ExecutiveOrder8802.pdf>

TYPE: Primary Source · FDR Presidential Library

[6] Watson, Alan D. *Wilmington: Port of North Carolina*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992. (Atlantic Coast Line Railroad history and NC rail network.)

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary · NC Context

PAIRED PERSECUTION ENTRY

V-P1

Red Summer 1919: When America Came Home Swinging · ERA V · Persecution — The political ferment and BOI surveillance of Randolph's Messenger in the aftermath of Red Summer directly preceded the Brotherhood's founding. The pair documents both the attack and the organized response.

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