

Roach, Madeleine Coleman papers

Madeleine Coleman Roach papers

1942-1945



Title Statement

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Profile Description

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Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

MSS 16869

Unit ID

[Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID

/repositories/3/resources/1733

Unit Date

1942-1945

Language

English

Creator

Coleman, Madeleine, 1920-

source

Langdon Manor Books

Extent

.58 Cubic Feet 1 legal document box, 1 Oversize Folder (Small, OS S)

Repository

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

The collection is open for research use.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

This collection was a purchase from Langdon Manor to the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia Library on 18 September 2024

Preferred Citation

MSS 16869, Madeleine Coleman papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

Biographical / Historical

Corporal Madeleine Coleman Roach, a South Ozone Park resident of Queens, New York and a member of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion — an all-female and predominantly African-American women in the Army Corps — during World War II. Coleman enlisted in the Army at age twenty-three on January 1, 1943, began active service in September 1943. She was trained in Fort Des Moines, Iowa, and moved around the country to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and Camp Sibert, Alabama, before heading overseas in 1945 and becoming one of the 855 women in the Triple Six Eight.

Madeleine Coleman was originally from a farm in Milstead, Alabama but was sent to New York by one of her aunts from South Carolina, who moved to Harlem. Prior to enlisting, she met John Roach, in the late 1930s at the Harlem Evening High School. He signed up for the armed services, as a Technical Sergeant and stenographer in the 67th regiment stationed in England and France. She decided to sign up as well. While Madeleine had an active social life in the Service Club and dated a lot, she knew that he would be the one man for her. They were married in Rouen, France in 1945 after the mail was cleared and she had sailed on the [RMS] Queens Elizabeth to Le Havre France where the 6888 cleared up more backlogs of mail.

The 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion was tasked with catching up a two-year backlog of 17 million pieces of mail, which left people in the military with low morale. The battalion consisted of stenographers, postal clerks and others who tracked, redirected and investigated mail in cold, dark and rat-infested warehouses with a six-month deadline. They encountered both racism and sexism from fellow American service members, according to multiple historical reports. However they created a mailing system and completed the task in half the time.

Her journey began on the SS Ile de France where there were air raids. According to historical accounts, the women felt hoodwinked when they initially joined up to serve their country only to be tasked with manual labor.

Once civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune got the support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the women were shipped off on February 3, 1945 and took a train to Birmingham, England, where they fixed the dilapidated former King Edward's School, which became their base, as seen in "The Six Triple Eight" war drama directed by Tyler Perry and streamed on Netflix.

Madeleine Coleman Roach became a secretary at the Woodrow Wilson Vocational School, which is called August Martin High School, and John Roach was employed at the Post office. Madeleine Roach also graduated with honors as an African-American Studies major in the early 1980s at York College.

Source: Rose, Naeisha. "Remembering a 6888 Veteran". Queens Chronicle. Queens New York. 13 February 2025. Accessed 2/25/25 https://www.qchron.com/editions/queenswide/remembering-a-6888-veteran/article_0ef47078-4275-5df5-ae74-4fb5f9c1e9f3.html

Content Description

This material contains references to offensive and harmful language and crimes involving racism. The purpose of this note is to give users the opportunity to decide whether they need or want to view these materials, or at least, to mentally or emotionally prepare themselves to view the materials.

This collection contains photographs, diaries, a memory book, a prayer book, witness reports, scrapbook pages, photographs, certificates, newsletters, telegrams, menus, and ephemera belonging to Madeleine

Coleman Roach during her service in the U.S. Women's Army Corps in the Second World War.

Of historical significance, Coleman was among the 855 Black women who served overseas in the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion in England and France who were hired to clear up the backlog of mail to the World War II soldiers and officers.

Coleman was from New York City and enlisted in the Army at age twenty-three on January 1, 1943. She entered active service in September 1943 and was promoted to Corporal. She was trained in Fort Des Moines, Iowa, and moved around the country to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and Camp Sibert, Alabama, before heading overseas in 1945. Included is her Separation Qualification Record proving that she served overseas in England and France with the 6888th Postal Directory Service. Included is a photograph of her commanding officer Colonel Charity Adams.

Her wartime diary features excerpts from her daily life in training, office and field work in the Army from 1943-1944. She writes about her exhaustion from overworking, her anxieties about army inspections, her private thoughts on the harsh treatment of Black women in the Corps, most especially during her time in Alabama. She also writes about her boyfriend, John Roach who was also in the Army. In addition to her duties, she describes her social life of dates and dances in the Service Club. The diary does not describe her work overseas in England and France in the 6888th Postal Service Directory. She would marry her boyfriend and fellow soldier, John Roach, while abroad in Roen, France.

She also describes her experiences with racism in the southern culture at Camp Sibert, Alabama, particularly from white women or as she called them, Southern crackers. She also describes the discrimination against women in the service. She encourages herself with endearing sayings such as "what's next for you little girl".

Of interest is an entry in her diary where she mentions that she had witnessed girls in the army who were in love with each other. She recorded that she never would have known about women having intimate relationships with women if it had not been for the army.

There are about thirty-five photos depicting Madeleine's service, showing women in uniform, many in Rouen and the French Riviera, and an identification photograph from her time as a hostess for the Harlem Defense Recreation Center. There are also documents of John Roach's military service in Texas, Italy, and at army bases in the South Pacific.

Coleman's "Memory Book" discusses the locations of her army service and her thoughts on the various places she lived and worked during her war. It includes signatures and messages from fellow soldiers.

Of particular note are three leaves of typescript, two of which are signed by WAC members. They contain the witness statements of Privates Roberta McKenzie and Gladys Blackmon and detail the abuse suffered at the hands of the police when they refused to give up their seats at the back of the bus for white people. The incident was referenced in a 1947 United States Senate hearing on the treatment of Black military members.

There are two complete and four partial issues of the camp newsletter "Special Delivery", which was created by the women of the 6888th Central Post Battalion in France. There are two 6888th church services programs, and a 1944 Thanksgiving menu from Camp Sibert, Alabama. Under miscellaneous there are some shorthand exams that Madeleine Coleman passed. She and her husband were stenographers during the war.

Keywords

African American women

African American soldiers

United States. Army -- History -- World War, 1939-1945

Langdon Manor Books

United States. Army. Women's Army Auxiliary Corps

Description of Subordinate Components

Series 1. Madeleine Coleman Roach

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265344

Photographs

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265343

Unit Date 1942-1945

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 1 (folder)

Language English

Madeleine Coleman Roach diary during army service in the United States

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265341

Unit Date 1943-1944

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 2 (folder)

Language English

Army certificates

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265350

Unit Date 1943-1945

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 3 (folder)

Language English

Newspapers including issues of Special Delivery

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265346

Unit Date 1943-1945

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 4 (folder)

Telegrams and christmas card

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265351

Unit Date 1943-1944

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 5 (folder)

Language English

Testimony about racist police assault

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265349

Unit Date 1944

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 6 (folder)

Language English

Miscellaneous

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265352

Unit Date 1944-1945

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 7 (Folder)

Language English, Old (ca.450-1100)

Scope and Contents

Shorthand exams; Church program; menu

Madeleine Coleman Roach memory autograph book

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265342

Unit Date 1945

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 8 (folder)

Language English

Dealer description of collection

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265340

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 9 (Folder)

Language English

Series 2. John Roach papers

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265345

Army certificates

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265348

Unit Date 1941-1942

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 10 (Folder)

Language English

Photo album (France)

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265347

Unit Date 1943

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 11 (Folder)

Prayer book

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265353

Mixed Materials [X032784887] 1 (box)

Container 12 (Folder)

Oversize photograph of John Roach with his regiment

Unit ID [Archival Resource Key](#)

Unit ID /repositories/3/archival_objects/265354

Unit Date 1942

Mixed Materials [X032784888] 1 (Oversize_Folder(Within_an_OSBox))

Scope and Contents

World War II 67th Regiment of African American men (Texas) including Corporal John Roach