

The Student Perspective:

Discovering Black Female  
Collective Agency in the  
Connecticut Tobacco Farms of  
Hartford County

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## Background Info:

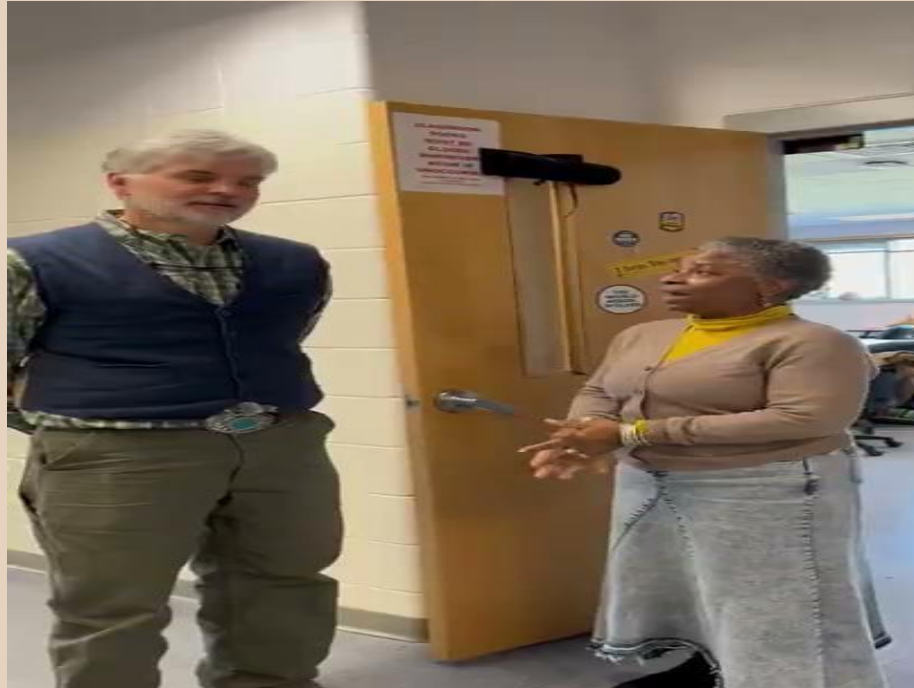
What is the economic importance of tobacco farming to the Connecticut Economy?

- ❑ CT tobacco is globally prized for its superiority in wrapping cigars
- ❑ While there are over 50 varieties of tobacco wrappers/leaves, there are four primary varieties: Connecticut, Corojo, Habanero, and Maduro.
- ❑ The only significant tobacco export in America comes from Connecticut
- ❑ Tobacco is a leading agricultural export of the state (NYT, 2007)
  - ❑ Worth ~\$30million in 2007; ~\$60million today (doubled in 15 years)
- ❑ the introduction of such a labor-intensive crop to CT's economy drew migrant labor from the South + Caribbean

As a student, what education skills do we learn from taking this deeper dive?

- ❑ **The complexity of the texts:** This allows us to familiarize ourselves with the use of Primary Source Documents to support our understanding of civic engagement.
- ❑ **Through evidence:** Primary Source Documents demonstrate factual evidence to support the space and time component of community engagement to be discussed and analyzed. Through close examination of the documents we begin understand the context (constructed environment i.e., setting) in which individual advocacy and agency occurs.
- ❑ **Through Knowledge:** By utilizing Shifts (1) and (2) the students are exposed to texts that convey a depth of meaning that provides social commentary, individual advocacy and a demonstration of “personal /collective agency” through coalition groups.

# Tim Martin - Department Head



Agri Science Westhill

# Creation of Black Female Agency in Hartford County

**Mary Townsend Seymour - Early Black Activist in the Niagara Movement with W.E.B. DuBois**

**Was a member of the Hartford Black middle class as both she and her husband were gainfully employed (Civil and federal servants)**

**Known as a Hartford community activist through her recruitment efforts of the emerging National Association of Colored People (NAACP)**

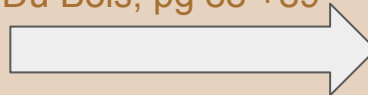


**Mary Townsend Seymour  
(1873-1957); Hartford CT**

# Hartford County; Haven from Southern Violence

- Shifting demographic composition of the tobacco farm workforce
- Northern employers recruit southern black people to work their tobacco farms
- Black women (most uneducated) comprise the majority of jobs
  - Quickly exploited by the farming establishment
  - Unjust and unpredictable wages
- Mary Townsend Seymour goes undercover

Du Bois, pg 88 +89



It was among the women in the tobacco factories or warehouses, that Hartford's most interesting work was done. White women in great numbers left the tobacco industry to get more money at munitions works, and their places were filled by colored women from the South, many of them uneducated and wholly unfamiliar with their new conditions. That these colored workers were being defrauded of their just wage was soon evident from the stories

There was no regularity regarding payment. Payment was made in such fashion that no one could tell how much she could make a week. One woman, a widow of a soldier with four children, made \$3.90; another \$1.62; another as low as 40 cents. They were worked irregularly and cheated in many little ways. The weighing was often unfair, the foreman taking advantage of the fact that most of his employees could not read the scales. But those who could read them were unable to get proper pay for their work, the foremen either making all manner of fun of the one who protested, successfully jollying her, or driving her to anger so that she left. Then, again, the tobacco would be weighed dry when the proper price was for tobacco weighed wet. It was evident to Mrs. Seymour as she worked by the side of these newcomers, wholly unversed in their tasks, that they needed the protection of organization.

# Black Expose of Working Conditions Publicized in *The Crisis*

- Seymour goes undercover as a tobacco farm worker
  - Confirms maltreatment
- Writes + publishes her experiences in “*The Crisis*”
  - National magazine of NAACP
  - Gains recognition for her work
- The workers unite

wage was soon evident from the stories they told at an N. A. A. C. P. meeting to which they were invited; but to understand exactly their condition, Mrs. Mary Townsend Seymour, Vice-president of the Branch, herself donned working clothes, entered the factory and for a time worked at tobacco stripping and stemming. The stories that had been brought to her by the women, she found were all too true.

*The Crisis Magazine*

Du Bois, pg 89



*The Crisis Magazine*

(Cover Page)

Editor: W. E. B. Du Bois

# Creating A Coalition of Women Laborers

- **Community Forums**
  - **Churches: Faith Congregational Church**
  - **Local chapter NAACP meetings**
- **Collective Bargaining Unit**
  - **Protect their labor rights**
- **Mary Townsend Seymour**
  - **First Tobacco Workers Union in Hartford County**
  - **Gains a chair at the Central Union Labor Committee of Hartford**
  - **Begins coalition building whites to improve working conditions for tobacco workers**



Talcott/Faith Congregational Church



# Takeaway

- Empowerment through civic engagement comes from the least likely places.
- As we discovered through our research, marginalized groups will always find a way to effect positive community and social change.
- Never underestimate the power of collective voices, coalition building and community cornerstones such as Black Church and grassroots organizations such as the Niagara Movement (NAACP)
- We never thought that looking at Shade Tobacco Farming could teach us about important Black Historical Actors right here in CT let alone Hartford County, but it did.

# Resources:

<https://www.cwhf.org/inductees/mary-townsend-seymour>

<https://faithmatterstoday.org/visitors/oldest-black-church-in-hartford/>

<https://connecticuthistory.org/reverend-james-pennington-a-voice-for-freedom/>

<https://connecticuthistory.org/mary-townsend-seymour-hartfords-organizer-activist-and-suffragist/>

<https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr513049/#>

<https://connecticuthistory.org/laboring-in-the-shade/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/23mainct.html>