The Student Perspective:

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

Kayla Williamson and Lily Hardman
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 ~$30 million in 2007; ~$60 million 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.
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

"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

*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
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://modjourn.org/issue/bdr513049/#

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