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John J. Pershing: A Teacher's Guide

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John J. Pershing in the Standards	2
Biographical Summary	3
Interpretations over Time	7
Recommendations for Teachers	10
Select Annotated Bibliography	12
About the Author	14

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John J. Pershing in the Standards

[\[Back to contents\]](#)

§113.32. United States History Studies Since Reconstruction

History. The student understands the *emergence of the United States as a world power* between 1898 and 1920. The student is expected to: analyze significant events such as the battle of Argonne Forest and the *impact of significant individuals* including **John J. Pershing** during World War I.

Biographical Summary

[\[Back to contents\]](#)

Why John J. Pershing's nickname is "Black Jack," remains a source of confusion. Most pictures portray Pershing in uniform as stern, composed, and imposing man. Pershing's nickname came not because of any blackjacking activities (as his directness and simplicity would hint) but rather traces to his days as a commander of the "Buffalo Soldiers" in the 10th Cavalry, an all African American regiment. But the source of the nickname varies by the telling. Some authors attribute the nickname to the students at the University of Nebraska during Pershing's days as professor of military science. "Black" is the sanitized version of the word they used. Wherever it came from the nickname has found favor among Pershing's biographies and it resonates very much with Pershing's protagonist role as a "significant individual in the emergence of the United States as a world power."¹

Like most American hero stories, Pershing's begins with the immigration of his great grandfather to the "new world" in 1749. Upon arrival the surname Pfoerschin became Pershing. The Pershing roots trace to a French province by the name of Alsace; John J. descends from Anglo-Saxon mother and German father. By September 13, 1860, Pershing's official birth date, his parents had settled in a farm on the outskirts of Laclede, Missouri. The fact that the Pershing home raised a Union flag in Missouri during those days is questionable, yet some of Pershing's biographies insist on reiterating the fact that in the Pershing home there was no Civil War strife.

He grew up during the Civil War under the occupation of Union soldiers in an extremely Confederate context learning to admire what he could from the uniformed men. When Pershing's father found himself in financial trouble during the Panic of 1873, the boy's prospects for a good education dwindled rapidly. He would have to do some farm work and postpone if not give up his dream of studying law. Pershing became a school teacher at the age of eighteen and perhaps in accordance with his home environment, "became involved with educating local African American children," and students who were his seniors in age.² How much involvement is really not described as most sources limit to a mere sentence stating the fact, but it is true that Pershing eventually became commander of the Buffalo Soldiers upon graduation from West Point in 1886. How much he seemed to intercede for the Buffalo Soldiers' full participation in forces and not just limit them to behind the action services as it was common is also not mentioned with great detail. It is recorded that Buffalo Soldiers were always involved in most commissions from his times in the Old West to WWI.

It is little known that prior to his West Point studies from 1882 to 1886 and days at the University of Nebraska in the 1890s, Pershing obtained a Bachelor of Scientific Didactics in 1880 while he taught at the Prairie Mound School. It was not until two years later that he would

¹ Texas Education Agency, "Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills," <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113c.html>.

² Wikipedia, "John J. Pershing," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_J._Pershing.

learn of the news that changed the course of his life with entry to West Point. The local congressman had announced in the newspaper that there would be a competitive examination for the appointment of a cadet. Pershing “insistent of his arduous studies not by natural intellect,” made it to West Point that year against better prepared and educated individuals.³ It was not until after his years at West Point that Pershing obtained a law degree in 1893 from the University of Nebraska where at the same time he was a professor of military science. It is suggested that Pershing was never really interested in the army life and looked towards West Point only as a source for good education just as many do so today.

For our purposes, the most important section of his biography begins with his West Point years. Pershing soon rose to leadership and distinguished himself among the most lustrous of the class of 1886 becoming First Captain by his fourth year, the highest cadet rank in the West Point institute. Upon graduation he was commissioned second lieutenant and sent, as one author put it, “to suppress one of the last Indian uprisings in the west.”⁴

Pershing’s career as an active participant in the emergence of the U.S. as world power begins with this commission and subsequent days at Fort Bayard, New Mexico in the effort of “taming the west.” Friend or foe to the Indians, accounts exist in which Pershing “always acting justly” promised the Indians he would catch and punish those who had stolen two of their horses.⁵ Another version relates that Zunis captured three white cattle rustlers killing three of the “red men” before finally putting them in a cabin. Upon notice, Pershing directly approached the Zuni chief and asked the chief to leave the punishment to the government of the United States. The Indians, both versions say, took his word. He would later participate in the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890 and in repatriating the Cree Indians in Montana to Canada in 1895. General Nelson A. Miles captured Geronimo, the leader of the Chiricahua Apache, but not before noticing John J. Pershing because of his superb skills in the raiding games the general had instituted. It was indeed an accomplishment to be praised as a second lieutenant by a commanding general.

During the Spanish-America War, Pershing once again found himself carrying out the desire for expansion the United States desired so much at the time. In 1898 during the charge up Kettle Hills San Juan Heights, the most famous Spanish-American War battle, it is said that Pershing, with his 10th Cavalry, met the Rough Riders and their leader and future President Theodore Roosevelt. San Juan Hill is remembered as the most important of the Rough Rider’s victory. By the time Roosevelt became president in 1901, Pershing had already been assigned to the next effort towards the rise of the United States as a world power, occupation of the Philippines. The occupation was mostly designed to suppress the Moro people of the Philippines, the Muslim natives of the land.

Whether he requested transfer or was simply sent, Pershing arrived in the Philippines in 1898 only to be interrupted by two other affairs. One of these events occurred during the

³ Frederick Palmer, *John J. Pershing, General of the Armies; A Biography* (Harrisburg: Military Service Pub. Company, 1948), 32.

⁴ Frederick Palmer, *John J. Pershing*, 38.

⁵ Frederick Palmer, *John J. Pershing*, 37.

Russo-Japanese War in 1904, to which he was sent as an observer to gain further military experience. Second, he married Helen Frances Warren in 1905. As an earlier acquaintance of President Roosevelt, Pershing was invited to a dinner dance in honor of Alice Roosevelt, the President's daughter. It was here where at the age of 43 and already a captain of the U.S. Army, Pershing met the 23 year old daughter of U.S. senator Frances E. Warren. A year later in 1906, President Roosevelt changed Pershing's title from Captain to Brigadier General as he fought to alter the mechanics of the spoils system.

Pershing returned to the Philippines in 1909 where he was appointed military governor of the Moro Province until 1913. Pershing learned the Moro dialect and tried to keep peace with the "Mohammedans."⁶ Although Pershing and his U.S. counterpart tried to keep friendly relations with the Moros and were encouraged to mix with them while their stay at Camp Vicar, the situation escalated into armed conflict. As one source accounts, Pershing earned the respect of the Moros after his deadly attack on one of the main opponents of U.S. rule, Datu (tribal chief) Uali of Butig. This brought peace to Camp Vicar.

Next on Pershing's professional record is the Mexican Expedition from 1916 to 1917, otherwise known as the Punitive Expedition. Since 1914 he had been stationed at Fort Bliss to patrol the Mexican border. On orders from President Woodrow Wilson in 1916, Pershing arrived to the Chihuahua and Fort Bliss area once again where his goal was to capture Francisco Villa in retaliation to the raid at Columbus, New Mexico. The expedition was declared a success, and earlier sources cite that Pershing accomplished his goal "preventing him (Villa) from attacking American soil again."⁷

It is always related in all accounts that during his stay at Fort Bliss in 1915, Pershing received news of a fire in the Presidio of San Francisco where his wife, three daughters, and son lived. His wife and three daughters died and the son Warren was the only survivor. His family's death "hardened him" even more, and those close to him during his next and most important phase of his life claim that his character was always plagued by this tragedy.

The same year the Punitive Expedition came to an end, Pershing was assigned to command the American Expeditionary Forces in 1917 on the western front during WWI. Received in France with parade or as the "eleventh-hour" soldiers, Pershing made history with the Meuse-Argonne battle.⁸ Refusing to use his soldiers as a replacement for the British and French forces, Pershing remained inflexible in his decision to keep his unit together and fight only as a unit, although the fact is that American soldiers did join British and French units. Skirmishes with the French and British commanders were common, and it is said that they could really not agree on much. French Commander Marshal Foch one day told Pershing he could carry out his plans at St. Mihiel (a battle always mentioned as a prelude to Argonne) if only he would have his forces ready in less than two weeks for the Argonne Forest assault. Pershing designed the offensive and his main goal was to capture the railroad in order to cut the supply line for the Germans. After forty days of non stop fighting in the Argonne Forest

⁶ Richard O'Connor, *Black Jack Pershing* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), 88.

⁷ John T. Foster, *John J. Pershing, World War I Hero* (Champaign: Garrard Pub. Company, 1970), 57.

⁸ Foster, *John J. Pershing*, 80.

Pershing declared victory. Germany surrendered on November 11, 1918 (therefore the famous the 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month quote) and so Pershing's relentless spirit, always on the offensive when the French and British forces had hesitated, and with extreme attention to detail contributed to the victory of the Allies. For this he was promoted to a four star general.

Pershing's inspections are frequently mentioned down to the careful scrutiny with which he checked for buttons. Pershing's first Chief of Staff James G. Harbord once wrote in his diary that "stupidity and vagueness irritate him [Pershing] more than anything else."⁹ A year after WWII came to an end Eisenhower wrote a letter to Pershing thanking him for the "magnificent military educational system, a system that was completely organized and expanded under your wise leadership."¹⁰ Eisenhower thought that Pershing had much to do with the excellent preparation this new generation of soldiers came with, something that only helped in the WWII victory. Pershing is credited with three accomplishments: as a pioneer of American colonialism, the eventual victory of the ALLIED forces in World War I, and the institution of the old and new military training system and code of conduct for the U.S. Pershing lived to be 88 when he died in 1848, but his legacy is still very much alive.

⁹ O'Connor, *Black Jack Pershing*, 183.

¹⁰ Frederick Palmer, *John J. Pershing*, viii.

Interpretations Over Time

[\[Back to contents\]](#)

Perhaps the best way to begin the story of John Joseph Pershing is by recording the sentiment of the Pershing Park Memorial Association in 2009. "His name must be known by all Americans - every veteran, every school child. We are the generation that will insure his name is firmly planted in the hearts, minds and history of our country. The Pershing name must not be lost to history."¹¹ Indeed those in the public school system in the state of Texas concede that John J. Pershing must be understood in relation to the emergence of the United States as a world power and his significance in the Argonne Forest battle during World War I. Pershing became the exemplar of valor, "the quintessential American soldier," and the true American citizen in the "glorious crusade for the freedom of the world," beginning specifically with Allied victory in WWI.¹²

Generally speaking, John J. Pershing's scholarship concentrates on two periods of his life heavily: World War I and the Mexican (Punitive) Expedition. Surveying Pershing literature from 1918 to 2008, we can understand how Pershing became the hero he is today and hint at the difficult times his reputation may experience in the future. Most works relating his story embark on a quest to very briefly tell the story of his childhood as a prelude and explanation for his accomplishments as a military member. Even before his death, Pershing was subject of biographical books and elusive narratives already. The earliest of those was published the same year of Allied victory in 1918 in a book that seemed to be reformatted from a play titled *Incidents in the Life of General John J. Pershing* by Cullom Holmes Farrell. The book includes pictures of purely fictional actors in almost each of the book's chapters. It is a book written specifically to be used as for a play. Each chapter tells the story, as the title suggest, of incidents in Pershing's life based and purposely written for entertainment purposes and glorification of Pershing. It seems that this book is a source for successive "incidents" detailing his struggles yet competence with which Pershing first dealt with as a teacher, with the Indians, and the Moros. As stated before, this book appeared to create a story based on the actual events of Pershing's life, but lacks accuracy as it was written with the exaggerations and heroicism of a play. As it is a book merely for entertainment it seems, no scholarly or citation work was necessary.

From 1920 up until about 1940s, mostly influenced by the rising of the United States as a world power, and a second world war, a body of literature was produced detailing the struggles of American soldiers during WWI. It also seems to be literature with the purpose of bringing together the events of the Great War. During this time colonels and scholar worried about a thorough analysis or just exposure to that type of literature. It was 1931 when Pershing published *My Experiences in the World War*.¹³ A major theme was as one book's title

¹¹ Pershing Museum and Leadership Archives, "John J. Pershing General of the Armies of the United States of America"; Pershing Park Memorial Association, <http://www.pershingmuseum.com/>

¹² Richard Goldhurst, *Pipe Clay and Drill: John J. Pershing, the Classic American Soldier* (New York : Reader's Digest Press , 1977), 1; Cullom Farrell, *Incidents in the Life of John J. Pershing* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co. 1918), 3.

¹³ John J. Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1931).

suggests *it might have been lost! : A Chronicle From alien Sources of the Struggle to Preserve the National Identity of the A.E.F.*¹⁴ Many primary accounts become available, specifically coming from those holding high military ranks during WWI.

A bit of a shift on emphasis started during the 1940's from events to people in the war. American journalist Frederick Palmer, who personally knew Pershing and who was assigned the task of recording his offensive during WWI on the western front between 1917 and 1918, was the first to publish Pershing's biography in 1948, as a true scholarly biography. In his biographical account of Pershing, Palmer compares Pershing with Washington, Grant, Lee, and just as Palmer's book was being published, with Eisenhower. Palmer writes briefly on Pershing's experience as a "conquistador" in the "old west," the Moro struggle in the Philippines, and the chaos in Mexico and dwells mostly in the pinnacle years of World War I. Palmer's admiration for Pershing is apparent throughout the book. Two melancholic final chapters in which he prefers to remember Pershing not the way he looked during his last days but still as the "athletic Captain Pershing with whom I had tramped over the Manchurian hills and as he grew to his task in France," finish the book.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Pershing was still on his way to becoming an American hero for future generations.

It is during this time that many other scholars begin to write the Pershing biographies spanning between 1940 and 1970. Authors such as Richard O'Connor with *Black Jack Pershing* in 1961 and Frank Everson Vandiver with *Black Jack: the Life and Times of John J. Pershing* in 1977 published their books.¹⁶ These authors were using pieces and bits of the "incidents" in his life as a boy but primarily focusing on all the published literature about the war that preceded them and put Pershing's role in the war in perspective. Since the topic of primary interest was that of his time in WWI, some sources that begin with the boyhood account have contrasting and sometimes even contradicting stories on his early character. Some describe him as an idle boy lacking any sense of time up until the age of fourteen when his father, as many did, lost the farm in the Panic of 1873 and at which point Pershing dad had to tell the boy to "stand on your feet and go straight."¹⁷ As a young boy Pershing was not really given to the farm duties anyways. Other sources present a young Pershing more responsible and self-composed but rough enough to learn and ride a horse without a saddle.

The victory of the Allies in the Second World War led to additional Pershing literature. Eisenhower writes to Pershing crediting and thanking him for the exemplary readiness with which the soldiers of World War II were trained.¹⁸ Of course, thanks to the stern and disciplined mentality that Pershing instituted as a teacher and designer of the military arts before his years in World War I and after. Some claim that Pershing, just as much as

¹⁴ Thomas Clement Lonergan, *It might have been lost! : A Chronicle From Alien Sources of the Struggle to Preserve the National Identity of the A.E.F.* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1929).

¹⁵ Frederick Palmer, *John J. Pershing, General of the Armies; A Biography* (Harrisburg: Military Service Pub. Company, 1948), 370.

¹⁶ O'Connor, *Black Jack Pershing*; Frank Everson Vandiver, *Black Jack: The Life and Times of John J. Pershing* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Palmer, *John J. Pershing*, 8.

¹⁸ Palmer, *John J. Pershing*, viii.

Eisenhower and all the other military personnel highlights of the second world war, was instrumental if not crucial to the success of the American forces during second war as much as the first one although no actual field presence ever existed.

In the 1960s Pershing's chasing of Villa began to receive the spotlight, creating not a new but focused point of interest for future scholars. Previous American literature had declared the expedition a success although the primary goal of capturing Villa was never met. The goal seemed to have changed from capturing Villa to completely stopping his attacks to the United States after the Columbus, New Mexico raid. Villa becomes the villain perhaps for the purpose of upholding Pershing's status as the American hero he had already become. The Mexican Expedition, as it is officially known in the United States history records, changed into the Punitive Expedition. With the change in goals perhaps came the change in the title of the expedition. Scholarship during this time make the Pershing-Villa story one of great pursuit and declare it mission accomplished.¹⁹

During the 1970s and with a revived interest in militarism and soldiering due to the Vietnam War, Pershing becomes the focus of interest once again. This period of time seems to still provide us today with the portrayal of the Pershing we are supposed to teach in the classrooms. One just needs to read the title to Pershing's books during this era to understand the Pershing literature being published. In his 1977 *Pipe Clay and Drill : John J. Pershing, The Classic American Soldier*, Goldhurst describes "an American military mind in its purest personification."²⁰

John J. Pershing's story is the story of the American dream and American virility. Pershing seems to be most popular with those involved in the military history because soldiering is what he did. Pershing's literature, as compared to other subjects in history, is not very popular and generally does not attract too much attention. Upon surveying the table of contents to the latest Pershing biographies it is all too familiar. The way Pershing is explained and portrayed is the same one his confidant Palmer first wrote and without serious signs of new Pershing course it just looks like we will have the glorified General of the Armies for generations to come.

¹⁹ Haldeen Braddy, *Myths of Pershing's Mexican campaign* (Gainesvill: University of Florida, 1963).

²⁰ Richard Goldhurst, *Pipe clay and drill*, 3.

Recommendations for Teachers

[\[Back to contents\]](#)

Lesson Plans

Martinez-Fernandez, Luis, "[The Birth of the American Empire as Seen Through Political Cartoons \(1896-1905\)](#)," *OAH Magazine of History* 12, no. 3 (Spring, 1998).

This pdf documents contains six large political cartoons printed between 1896 and 1905. These can be used to break students up into six different groups and asked to analyze to present their finding to the class.

Ohio State University College of Humanities, "[World War I](#)"

This is a 1-2 week lesson plan that ranges from life in the trenches to propaganda to soldier poetry.

Places to Visit

Pershing Museum and Leadership Archives. "[John J. Pershing General of the Armies of the United States of America.](#)" Pershing Park Memorial Association.

The Pershing Park Association in Missouri describes the park and talk about upcoming events to be held in the Park. The website contains pictures of the park, among those is the Prairie Mound School, and Pershing's boyhood home.

Websites

[Gallery of World War I Speakers](#) (Library of Congress)

This website includes recordings and text of various World War I generals.

[Lesson ideas for World War I](#) (*Easy Fun School*)

This website lists many ideas on different ways to approach World War I.

Additional Resources

Mentzer, Ray, "[Photos of the Great War](#)"

This website contains a gallery of photos of World War I from weapons, battlefields, to commanders, if it is images you are looking for they are here.

The Library of Congress. "[Stars and Stripes Newspaper: the American Soldier's Newspaper of World War I 1918-1919.](#)"

Digitized Stars and Stripes newspaper for American soldiers fighting in the western front during World War I.

[America Becomes a World Power: The Twentieth Century](#) (How Stuff Works Video Center)

These two websites contain short videos much like the ones in YouTube except this website has videos more related to educational purposes.

Select Annotated Bibliography

[\[Back to contents\]](#)

Primary Sources

Pershing, John J. *My Experiences in the World War*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1931.

This is a two volume book written by Pershing in a journal format about WWI. There are some maps and photographs.

The Library of Congress, "[Stars and Stripes Newspaper](#): the American Soldier's Newspaper of World War I 1918-1919." (accessed June 18, 2009).

This website has all the Stars and Stripes issues digitized for viewing. The newspaper was originally published in France between 1918 and 1919. It is an interesting source to get a glimpse of the soldier's experience while in the western front.

"[Teaching with Primary Sources](#)," Eastern Illinois University (accessed June 20, 2009).

This website has links that lead to the Library of Congress by periods in U.S. History. It is a great source for primary documents from pictures to newspapers. There is specifically a section on the Spanish-American War containing the charge up San Juan Hill propaganda.

Full Length Biographies

O'Connor, Richard. *Black Jack Pershing*. Garden City: Doubleday. 1961.

A Great resource to find interesting and little known facts not talked about in other biographies about Pershing. The author goes beyond the highlights in Pershing's life and talks about the more obscure facts and scandals in Pershing's career.

Palmer, Frederick. *John J. Pershing, General of the Armies; a Biography*. Harrisburg: Military Service Pub. Company. 1948.

The author of this book had a personal relationship with Pershing until the day of his death. The manuscript for this book was in progress well before Pershing's death and was published that same year after his death. The book was never read or authorized by any of the Pershings but presents an admiring portrait, including a letter from Eisenhower to Pershing upon Allied victory in WWII.

Vandiver, Frank Everson. *Black Jack : The Life and Times of John J. Pershing*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press. 1977.

This is a two volume account of Pershing's life that deals very little with Pershing's childhood and early career and dwells in his pinnacle years as a member of the military.

Article and Chapter-Length Biographies

Pershing Museum and Leadership Archives. "[John J. Pershing General of the Armies of the United States of America](#)." Pershing Park Memorial Association. (accessed June 18, 2009).

This website gives a very brief biography of Pershing and deals with upcoming events honoring Pershing. It talks about the Pershing State Park and its features.

"[Pershing's Biography](#)." Pershing's Rifles C-12. (accessed June 18, 2009).

This is a compressed version of Pershing's biography books. It is a good source ranging from his days as a boy until his death in very few sentences.

"[John Joseph Pershing](#)." Pershing Rifles Company B-9.(accessed June 19, 2009).

This website has information dealing strictly with Pershing's military ranking history. It contains a list of all of Pershing's honorary degrees, decorations, awards, and medals.

"[Romance of Frances Warren Pershing](#)." Cheyenne Regional Medical Center (accessed June 21, 2009).

As the title suggest, this website deals strictly with the Pershing's meeting and marriage.

Beede, Benjamin R, editor. *The War of 1898 and U.S. interventions, 1898-1934: an encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1994.

This is a great source for studying the emergence of United States as a world power where Pershing is definitely mentioned throughout. It is very complete and includes all the topics of interest on between the given dates.

Juvenile Biographies

Foster, John T. *John J. Pershing, World War I Hero*. Champaign: Garrard Pub. Company. 1970.

This is a children's book with illustrations. It is a very romanticized version of Pershing's life written as in a single story format.

McNeese, Tim. *John J. Pershing*. New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2004.

This is a 116-page book that reviews the life of John J. Pershing in the field from his action in Cuba to Argonne Forest.

About the Author

[\[Back to contents\]](#)

Julietta Rojas was born in El Paso, Texas but lived in Juarez until she was ten years old. She graduated from The University of Texas at El Paso in 2008 with a History major and minor in Education. She now lives in Sunland Park and teaches at San Elizario High School. She is currently attending UTEP as a graduate student.